Transgressive Embodied Writings of KAribbean Bodies in Pain

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Chapter 5

Transgressive Embodied Writings of KAribbean Bodies in Pain

Gladys M. Francis

INTRODUCTION

For two centuries, the island of Guadeloupe was a colony in which a forced encounter took place between Europeans and Africans. While it is irrefutable that this “new land” revealed a process of Creolization through the myriad hybrids that emerged from each part, what is perhaps utmost remarkable is that new human products of Creolization took on a life of their own. Creolization is doubtlessly rooted in the traumatic experience of colonialism that will affect enslaved Africans and their descendants culturally, economically, socially, and politically for many generations to come. Caribbean performers and writers have upstretched the intensities of human emotions and possibilities through productions of bodily movements, music, and words. When we examine the works of authors from the French Caribbean who try to capture the dance and music traditions of their island, we do find elements of creolization in the rhythmical aesthetics they nurture as well as in the complex matters they foster (issues of deculturation, assimilation, alienation, conflict, adaptation, survival). The two novels selected for this study offer unique critical inter-relations of scattered-localities/scattered-bodies through an original aesthetic of movement calling forth embodied haptic1 and tactile experiences.

Published in 2012, Gerty Dambury’s novel Les rétifs [A Restive People] and Gisèle Pineau’s Cent vies et des poussières [Hundreds of Lives and Dust] create and disclose cartographies of bodily pain within the context of Guadeloupe. Dambury invites us to revisit historical events that took place in the city of Pointe-à-Pitre in 1967. Though a Department of France since

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1946, Guadeloupe revealed in various aspects, at that time, the crude realities of Rue Cases-Nègres. It was a plea against salary discrepancies that led construction workers to strike in May 1967, querying for parity on wages and working rights similar to that of their French counterparts based in the France Métropolitaine. The strike led to military brutality when the French authorities sanctioned mobile police units to discharge their firearms at protesters fighting back with bottles and conch shells. Although the diegesis of Cent vies et des poussières takes place more than four decades later, it is however a similar framework of grueling conditions that persist in the text. A modern Guadeloupe is unveiled through the portrayal of a young woman named Gina Bovoir, whose life in the ghetto is punctuated by eight pregnancies and the various challenges that such arduous conditions entail. Both texts unequivocally defy the silencing of suffering. De facto, Les rétifs recalls to light painful passé historical events that have been obscured and disremembered through classified “top-secret defense” status. Analogously, Pineau chooses to dualize Gina’s story with that of a pregnant fugitive slave woman who once lived free in what is now Gina’s decadent slum. The author divulges how heroic Maroons’ stories have been divested, forgotten, or replaced by their descendants’ snippets of speculation; descendants who have now become sufferers of a consumerist society. Through a process that I call “corpomemorial tracing,” both texts render representations of the body in pain at the intersection of orality, corporeality, cultural discourses, and institutions.

While contrasting Dambury and Pineau’s approach to representations of bodily pain, I will first examine the roles of rhythm, dance, and music central to the mapping of bodily pain exposed in these texts. I will then analyze the Afra-writing’s transgressive use of orality; and finally conjointly scrutinize wherewith these paroxysmal displays of pain generate a counter discourse to Western paradigms that anchor representations of the island as erotic, exotic, and ecstatic. I argue that through a process of corpomemorial tracing, these transgressive texts capture the marginalized performing body in pain to historicize a collective space of testimonial and female agency. The texts’ movements, rhythms, and sensorial and tactile aesthetics also give opacity and conscientiously subversive subjectivities to the represented bodies in pain. Indeed, their corporeal realm disrupts the voyeuristic gaze and re-conceives spectatorship. The texts unearth the resisting KArribbean bodies of Guadeloupeans in movement—similar to the ka drum, still a major symbol of resistance in Guadeloupe.

SPACES OF CORPOREAL FRAGMENTATIONS

Interstitionality, Amnesia, and Reverted Esotericism

Dimensions of time and space are utterly disjointed and jumbled in both texts. The amalgamation of past, present, and future is combined with the
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maroonage of living bodies and spirits that pervade the main protagonists’ voice and physical space. The main protagonist of Dambury’s novel is a schoolgirl Emiliennè, who lingers in the courtyard of her Pointe-à-Pitre house as she expects the return of her father who has not been home for a few days. The text is organized within a three-dimensional space; headmost, the interior private space of Emiliennè’s house, then the public space represented by descriptions of the urban city of Pointe-à-Pitre, particularly La Place de la Victoire (where the conflicts and killings will occur) and Emiliennè’s school. These public and private spaces swivel on the courtyard of Emiliennè’s house that serves as a central paradigm of the three-dimensional structure that it completes. Cent vies et des poussières is constructed on a similar ternary structure with the exception that the private space encloses Gina’s belly (her pregnancies), her private home, and particularly the ghetto of La Ravine claire given as a bubble, an extended symbol of the belly. The public space is l’ailleurs—everything that is exterior to La Ravine claire. The unknown free Maroons’ mass grave located right under Gina’s house rounds off the ternary structure. Dambury’s public space mirrors a prison, a repressive and oppressive locus where workers or pupils who resist unjust conditions are silenced. In opposition, it is the private space that constitutes a prison in Pineau’s text. Indeed, the “belly” swallows plights relative to the ghetto and “births” children that will soon be unwanted, unloved by Gina and left to nurture the degeneration of that space.

Both novels make the same innovative use of their centrum axis that is the embodied lieu of the collective. In Les rétifs, we observe a wandering (errance) of souls haunting Emiliennè’s courtyard. The spirits are characters presented as authoritative figures leading the “movements” that will unfold the truth, put light on forgotten events, and disinter the unknown. We witness an aesthetic of the haptic and tactile that blurs the boundaries of material and immaterial worlds. The spirits can for instance feel the pain of lost limbs, or they give account to tangible stories such as that of a successful suicide by hanging. This process nourishes their corporeal presence in Emiliennè’s physical space. Furthermore, the author deepens the dead’s amorphous nature, making the spirits the main performers of a quadrille square dance, with their voices soon transforming into instruments (violin, chacha, siyak, tambour d’bas). Hence, testimonies from the living and the dead are ubiquitous in creating a unique collective voice that mimics the behemothic mystery surrounding the tragic events of Mé 67.

Life and death are synthesized in the texts as the Afra-writings plunge us into the blending of material and immaterial worlds. The multi-vocal story becomes ambiguous, similar to the improvised chanting and dancing that pace the text. Under Gina’s house lays the skeleton of Théophée (and her toddler); a pregnant enslaved woman who ran away to La Ravine claire to save her unborn baby from being sold and forced into slavery on a béké plantation.
The reader is later made aware that the soil of *La Ravine claire* is in fact the grave of all the Maroons who once lived there free until colonialists found and murdered them all. Akin to Dambury’s embodied spirits, Théophée’s soul wanders with her voice comparable to a chorus pacing the text. Like chanting incantation, her voicing gives rhythm to the diegesis and serves as a heterodiegetic narrator (speaking overtly about Gina’s endeavors, expressing premonitions or obviations, commenting on feelings, actions, characters, or speaking directly to the reader). This atemporal framework bares the depth of the loss of memory from locals across gender, class, and age.

Additionally, the authors construct and pervert traditional use of esotericism (through the unveiling of secrecy) in order to initiate the public on rare and unusual events taking place in Guadeloupe. Blending the visible and invisible, they create an alternative textual cosmos. In that fashion, Emilienne and Gina are guided by the presence of spirits, voices, and visions that affect their knowledge, experiences, and their possible transmutation. Within these corporeal and embodied experiences, the voices transmit knowledge and initiate the main protagonists and readers. The atemporal structures actualize a cosmogonal setting while also serving as the creation of a point of origin (the myth of Théophée in Pineau’s case). The atemporal chanting creates cosmic cycles, the writing becomes a chain of initiation, and the text becomes terrain, the locus of secrets. But unlike esoteric practices that keep secret writings from the majority, our authors open these symbolic spaces that testify to the value and tenacity of the peoples of Guadeloupe across centuries.

The timeless intervals distort the distance between then and now, as now becomes then and then now. This spatiotemporal *errance* allows a deconstruction of past events that have been neglected by the mainstream or surmised by historians. The displacement of bodies is necessary, for recalling can only be done through the investment of those who lived, died, witnessed, or were victims of these events. In fact, it generates authenticity to the piecing of voices that were displaced in history. These *paroles* [words] are now *ancrées/encrées* [anchored/inked] and participate in the construction of a visibility of noncanonical heroes:

The present of postcoloniality can be formulated as a moment of going beyond through a return to the present. Interstitiality can be understood as a temporal paradox in which looking to the future necessarily entails a return. The present, the past, and the future do not keep to their proper places, whether in the continuum or rupture, but haunt each other; making for what Bhabha calls “the unhomely condition of the modern world.”

Nonetheless, in both texts, this interstitiality also unveils a troubling account of unchanging conditions for Guadeloupeans who seem to endure the same colonialist and imperialist powers from Théophée, to Emilienne, to Gina.
Pineau’s text demonstrates this point quite explicitly through the linkage of Théophée and Gina; just as it is unmistakable that Dambury’s 1967 diegesis alludes to the violent forty-four days of striking that took place in Guadeloupe in 2009.

**EMBODIED IMPROVISATIONS AND FEMININE DIGENÈSE**

Chaos and Maroonage of Movements, Rhythms, and Voices

As previously stated, the courtyard in *Les rétifs* constitutes a space of maroonage of spirits whose words are paced by music and dancing. Their parole is also filled with linguistic stereotypies that are metaphoric or stereotyped. These paremic forms (proverbs, sayings, apothegms) are fixed forms used to symbolically reinforce the characters’ affiliation to the cultural community of Guadeloupe as seen through the characters of Nono and Marga. The stereotyped parole gives an account to the chain of ancestral memory in the feminine. In *Les rétifs*, Nono, the spirit of an elderly woman who died two years ago, speaks to recall memories “one must start [telling the story] from the beginning.”8 In *Cent vies et des poussières*, it is a woman (Marga Despine) who transmits historical facts dating back from 1840, about Théophée, her son Théodor, and Judor the Maroon who finds her in the woods and welcomes her to *La Ravine claire*—then a “paradise”(30). In *Cent vies et des poussières*, the transmission of oral histories is always done within the femme-conteur [woman storyteller] figure. Likewise, as a woman, Théophée ruptures with the super-male archetypal figure of the heroic Maroon. If Théophée meets Judor who becomes her companion (and the father of the child she will not live to give birth to), Pineau does not detail their love affair, nor does she focus on a female Maroon figure that would respond to a femme-matador archetype. In fact, Théophée is never envisioned in a weak/strong binary to justify a feminist/masculinist binary. The Afra-writing entails a unique creative potential because the body/text mirrors the hybridity of its sociocultural context. Homi Bhabha considers these nonbinary oppositions to be a strategy that opens new ways to negotiate cultural meaning:

The hybrid strategy of discourse opens up a space of negotiation where power is unequal but its articulation may be equivocal. Such negotiation [...] makes possible the emergence of an “interstitial” agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside; the part in the whole.9
This process contrives rhythmic dissonances that mirror the amplitude of displacement of levels of consciousness, knowledge, and discernment of the islanders with regard to their local history because as Maryse Condé states in *La Civilisation du bossale*, there is no memory in the Caribbean: “No foundation myth, no genealogy of heroes or semi-legendary kings.” In this manner, in Pineau’s text, it is Gina’s mother (not a younger protagonist) who links the Guadeloupean ancestry line to that of “the Egyptians, our ancestors,” disrupting the false dominant paradigm of “our ancestors the Gauls”—providing a process of historical reparation vocalized by the older generation (the grandmother).

Renée Larrier in “‘Crier/Ecrire/Cahier’: Anagrammatic Configurations of Voice in Francophone Caribbean Narratives” examines the importance of the storyteller within the colonial era and its ramification within the writing of French West Indian authors. Larrier makes a correlation between cri/écriture—conteur/écriture [shout/writing—storyteller/writing] and explores accounts given by the authors of the Créolité movement and Édouard Glissant. She goes on to explain that the conteur uses a parole that hides the camouflaged shout of “protests that surged among the many cries of pain and agony from the hold of the slave ships.” In the plantation, the conteur functions as the holder of the collective memory and is a medium that transmits the collective cri, as well as stories of survival and resistance to the slaves: “the conteur’s heir is the écrivain who inscribes the collective Caribbean voice in order to counter the distortions and erasures of official history.” The text, as a result, becomes the voicing of the voiceless (the dead, spirits, Maroons). The authors become the portes-paroles [spokes persons] that inscribe the pain and testimonies of the silenced collective. Through this creative process that Glissant calls digenèse Dambury and Pineau go back to “the trace” and use the conteur to deliver the paroles of bodies in pain. If the storyteller and marqueur de paroles figures have been represented, praised, and theorized by the creolists, it nonetheless remains a male-gendered space through their lens. Les rétifs and *Cent vies et des poussières* decentralize this masculinist transmission of oral culture by incorporating the voice of marginalized groups such as children, homosexuals, and prostitutes. In both novels “the desire to speak [and] create history is undeniable” while bringing to the center marginalized voices.

Yvonne Daniel’s ethnographic research on Caribbean quadrilles posits that quadrille was a dance creolized by Africans and their descendants to assert their human dignity. Africans [. . .] replaced the African performance that was abhorred by Europeans with imitations, parodies, and creative extensions of the [European] colonial performances that they could observe [. . .] Across the Caribbean, African
descendants perfected their versions of European body orientation, dance steps, and dance sequences, stating nonverbally that they, too, could dance socially esteemed dances. They took from the dominant group what the dominant group valued most: their elaborate dance practices. [...] African-descended performers signaled good manners and impressive social standing through a variety of contredanse-related performances. Over time, African descendants appropriated European contredanse-derived performance across the entire Caribbean region.17

The courtyard illustrated in Les rétifs is the locus of circles of quadrille performances (transfused with storytelling performances). A brief enumeration of chapter’s titles illustrate the quadrille’s vocabulary or dance formations: “1ère figure pantalon,”18 “2ème figure l’été,”19 “3ème figure la poule,”20 “4ème figure Pastourelle.”21 Dambury does not select the Guadeloupean gwo ka dance or music forms derived solely from African-style performances, in fact, selecting the quadrille as the central axis of her novel merits close attention. Described as a set of dances in line, circles, and square formations, quadrille is the essence of creole creations and stylizations.22 Dambury chooses the quadrille, which is unquestionably the most hybrid dance found in Guadeloupe that links European France to the Creole mien of Guadeloupe. It is this transcultural performance that Dambury uses in the diegesis to voice a conflict that involved France and Guadeloupe; an island that is not quite French from the dominant motherland’s perspective (despite its official and legal status of “French Department”).

Most Caribbean quadrilles are European dances performed by African-descended performers according to European dance values, i.e., “Africanized European” dances or more properly European dance variations. [In] this particular category, Caribbean quadrilles, does not routinely comprise “new” dance creations, which are generally recognized as veritable Creole dances: [...] Jamaica’s reggae; Trinidad’s calypso; Guadeloupe’s gwoka; or the French Caribbean’s zouk. The dance forms just named are neither African nor European, but new Caribbean creations or Creole dances; they are not variations.23

In Les rétifs’ courtyard, the spirits perform a quadrille that first seems to follow the rules of the traditional quadrille dance. But as the truths are being contées [recounted], embodied, and performed, the traditional quadrille rules are deviated from when the spirits begin to rupture the essential rule of one lead singer/parolier (formally called commandeur). The quadrille seems to transpose itself into a gwo ka performance as the voices simultaneously ask to enter the circle to lead the rhythm, lead the dance, lead the chanting, lead history, perform disobedience. In quadrille, the European violins and accordions usually carry the song line; Dambury respects the tradition by making each
parolier an instrument and setting rules for a parolier-lead (je-commandeur). While each je testimony performs, they each become the singularity of a collective space “Nous” [us] that will be transformed into a voix/voie dis-sidente [dissident voice/path]. I argue that the chaos of rhythm, the unmapping of rules, and the hybrid creole space of encounter between the “other” and “Nous” (in the embodied piecing of truths) symbolize an occupied and rebellious space. Just as the Guadeloupeans on strike, the text becomes body/text—it rebels. The bodies in movement undertake a maroonage on the page through a visible fragmentation of paragraphs, missing punctuation, and unusual tabs. The writing is in-between genres; it is a hybridization of poetry, prose, and drama. The interstice created by the improvised quadrille corresponds to the storyteller/respondent interaction. It also corresponds to the musical polyrhythm of the quadrille that puts in place, in song form, a call and response structure. Yet, in the novel, the corporeal interplay is plural; it is textual, musical, and physical.

These aesthetics of polyphony and polyvocality echo the collective voices in creation of new sets of apparatuses as they are recalling and once more facing the immensities of the conflict generated by la rencontre de l’autre [meeting the other]. Similarly, the aesthetic of improvisation echoes the state of chaos of a constructing space of consciousness. Accordingly, in Pineau’s novel, Gina is portrayed as a talented baker and this exact space of creation prefigures improvisation. She tests new recipes, new ingredients, and remains anxious and excited to uncover the outcome. Pineau pushes the analogy further as both the process of making and discovering the mysterious outcome of the creation, are central to Gina’s pregnancies. Thus, even if she does not have the space and the means to welcome new children into her home and life, each pregnancy provides the thrill similar to the one felt for a new baking recipe. She never knows how the child will “turn out” and when she is unsatisfied with the outcome, she goes on to enjoy the improvising of a new recipe (new pregnancy) with the hopes that this time it will “come out perfect.” The belly (the oven) is the only space in which Gina produces in opposition to her consumerist dispositions. The maroonage is in this instance, articulated in-between l’en-dedans/l’en-dehors [inside/outside] inside the aller/venir [going/coming]. If Dambury’s music and dance embody a creative zone of passage to the “other” state, in Cent vies et des poussières, alienation dominates that zone.

BODY-LANDSCAPE CARTOGRAPHIES OF PAIN

L’État français, Commodification, and Politics of Negation

Bigotry constantly overhangs Pineau’s text. Indeed, eighty percent of La Ravine claire’s habitants are “femmes seules” [low-income single women with children], a reference to the parent isolé law established in 1976.
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providing financial assistance to temporary widowed, divorced, separated, abandoned, or single individuals who are left alone to bear the responsibility of at least one child (this social service is also open to single women who are pregnant). The law obligates that the single parent must live alone. Gisèle Pineau raises serious concerns with regard to fathers wanting to be present in their children’s lives but find themselves outcast from their children’s household due to such social welfare constituencies. Marital/companionship relations are represented in the text as penalized under governmental guidelines if a man lives in the household; and love as a consequence, is decimated by materialistic needs and relegated to an exchange value. Textually, the more children a woman has, the more money she gets.25 “Neediness” becomes a valuable asset (and by extension “scarce cities”). The “femme seule” status is described as more appealing to the female protagonists who prioritize a guaranteed welfare check from the government. The boyfriends are portrayed sneaking into their own house, or forced out by the mothers of their children fearing that neighbors will report them to the welfare bureau. The “parent isolé” status is demonized through Gina’s pregnancies and love is supplanted by sexual intercourse with men who serve as breeders26 and perform as fathers or husbands. Gina herself continuously performs the unsatisfied wife to get rid of every single one of her breeders. State money has replaced fathers and everything is “sans pères, sans repères/without fathers, without bearings.”27 Analogously, it is the plantation that has been replaced by the State (l’État).

We witness undeclared civil wars: single status for CAF money, out of wedlock births, marriages being called off because of pernicious jealousies, or else the suicides of women like Vivi who still believe in real love and marriage.

Cent vies et des poussières explicitly discloses a scandalous vision of transgressive bodies and situations:

[An] exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects” but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. . . . The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.28

Presented as endangered, women’s bodies evolve in extreme conditions of pain. This is the case of Phyllis, a mother of one, whose spouse attempts to make her a sex slave. The reader also discovers that her motherhood is the result of rape29 in the midst of thirteen abortions.30 Social and sexual economics are paired. Another female character Dollis, described as prostituting herself to survive, reaches financial success that many in La Ravine claire envy. Textually constructed on hyperbolic descriptions, Dollis’ success is tempered since the château she builds at the heart of La Ravine claire31 becomes home
to her hanged body (possibly the result of a murder), and through time the headquarters of the slum’s bad boys. The text fosters descriptions of many young mothers and “kids loving kids.” Compared to a machine, Gina’s heart can be turned on or off, a procedure that she extensively and effortlessly employs when it comes to loving her children. She is also presented not taking responsibility for her children’s slips through life. For instance, when Steeve receives an eight-year prison sentence, disappointed, Gina wishes he had gotten twenty years instead. She stops loving Steeve, declares him dead, hopes that he dies in prison, and does not answer his letters. She also “erases Mona” from her heart; Mona started taking crack at the age of 14. Finally, Gina comes to the conclusion that she loves babies, not children and chooses to love them as long as they are babies.

Dambury’s textual presentation of women’s struggles differs sizably from that of Pineau. Whereas, the hyper-strong matrifocal Matronne/Super Madres images of indestructible and unbreakable women are not present in Pineau’s text, they are however transposed by oppressive structural violence causing women to have no sense of self-determination. This dilatation of stories on pain and suffering stresses a construction of a shared fate of misery and abandonment antipodal to Dambury’s standpoints. Les rétifs places every voice/dancer/parolier at the center, challenging the dichotomist power relations of the “have” and “have nots” seen in Pineau’s novel. Conflict is therefore explored within different strategies; Pineau’s writing focuses on states of homelessness while Dambury explores conflict within agency. In fact, the locals living déparrenance, in-between appartenance [belonging] and its opposite—are subjects (not objects). Dambury’s agency configuration shows a sense of pride within the Guadeloupean cultural identity, while also expressing gestures of departures from repressive neocolonialist strata (strikes and fights for equality and fairness). Women in Les rétifs are not super strong black female heroes or women doomed by structural violence; they are presented as a web of sisters, neighbors, mothers with their personal share of happiness and trials.

Cent vies et des poussières offers forthright accounts of sexuality in the feminine, sex being talked about among women without taboo. For instance, Vivi’s friend masturbates, Vivi expresses her jouissance [orgasm] with sexual intercourse with men, Gina claims loving when a man ejaculates inside her (which probably correlates to her desire to become pregnant), and her young daughter Sharon masturbates. However, the vivid traces of orality visible in these testimonials do not correspond to traditional contexts of teller-respondent. Whereas these are only done among women in Pineau’s text, Dambury for her part includes the voice of a gay man: Hilaire. In fact, Les rétifs disrupts the storyteller’s traditional heteronormative and phallocentric crux by giving presence to a homosexual man in the collective voice. Constituting an integral part of the spirits serving as storytellers, Hilaire voices the taboos surrounding his
gender, sexual inclinations, and death. Giving him agency, Dambury expresses his cross-dressing rebellious act to provoke his homophobic neighbor and the long bullying and hate that led him to end his life.

Issues of complex rapport between inequality/hierarchy, domination/subalternity, mastery/servitude, and control/resistance are central to both texts, and it is the collective voice that raises questions on morality and power issues. In *Les rétifs*, the sociopolitical conflicts reach beyond black/white/mulatto oppositions as exploitation concerns also black leadership toward “les petits travailleurs noirs” [little black workers] or else the “petit bourgeois” [petty bourgeoisie] vis-à-vis “les petits travailleurs noirs.” This is what we discover through Guy Albert’s description of Emilienne’s father (his boss) presented as a greedy employer. *Cent vies et des poussières* stands as a hysteria taking place in *La Ravine claire* once a land of “valiant Maroons” and now that of a different lineage;41 it is a ghetto filled with firearms, gun-trafficking pimps, rapes, sex trade activities, gangs, drugs, poverty, and prostitutes. The inhabitants seem possessed and trapped as seen through (Gina’s sister) Vivi who is financially challenged to purchase daily necessities but compulsively unable to stop buying new pumps regularly. Also, the described high-ceiling buildings have nothing modern or impressive to them but serve merely as suicide sites. This is illustrated when Vivi jumps from the fifteenth floor of La Tour Schoelcher and is compared to the victims of 9/11, trapped in smoke and fire, throwing themselves from the Manhattan World Trade Center out of hopelessness. Underprivileged islanders are also compared to robots pushing their shopping carts that they fill “de manière compulsive” [compulsively].42 Likewise, Gina is also described taking the bus to make her way toward *l’ailleurs* in order to do the body performance of the wealthy woman who can afford groceries. She is portrayed filling her cart during three long hours “to act rich,” then leaves, abandoning the stuffed cart somewhere in the supermarket.

The same cacotopia is visible inside Gina’s household. For example, Steeve (in his early 20’s) gets an eight-year prison sentence for an armed robbery at a gas station; her daughter Mona addicted to crack, wanders in the ghetto, finds herself pregnant, delivers Katy, a crack-baby “with one eye looking toward the left and the other toward the right.”43 Her other daughter Sharon becomes obsessed with her possible “falling in life” when she hears her sister Mona tell their mother that she called evil upon Sharon’s soul by naming her “Sharon”—exactly pronounced “Charongn” in Creole meaning “carrion” [charogne in French]. None of Gina’s children provide her with any sense of pride, which is illustrated with Junior’s stuttering that becomes a sufficient reason to push him away. Gina’s rationale for not loving her children once they are no longer toddlers (and teething) becomes dubious when she rejects Billy for being an “ugly” kid.44 Likewise, it is only shame that Gina
feels when she looks at Billy limping after getting shot in the knee when he attempted to take over his brother’s (Steeve) drug empire. To use Françoise Lionnet’s expression, the text is a “phenomenology of pain.” Chaotic and dystopian settings are similar to a fast spreading plague just as is Pineau’s mention of violence, consumerism, gambling, *Allocations Familiales*, and *CAF* in one same sentence.\(^4\)\(^5\) The sense of the community is broken, there is no comprehensive rehabilitation, no system (familial or governmental) to help increase the educational level of the youth, young men are held in jail, and schools presented as ghettoized milieu “with kids affected based on their zip codes.”\(^4\)\(^6\) The children of *La Ravine claire* are proliferating “pullulaient” [proliferated]\(^4\)\(^7\) and appear condemned from the start. The anaphora “passer de vie à trépas” [to move from life to death] is articulated seven times in the novel and reinforces the dystopia of the ghetto.

*Cent vies et des poussières* illustrates modern challenges that poor families face on a daily basis. The island is not an isolated and protected space; it is rather a sponge that absorbs everything that surrounds it. Subsequently, we encounter negrophobia of women toward their black skin, exemplified by Dolly bleaching her skin. Pop stars have replaced the island’s Christian figures, a matter that Pineau stresses when depicting Steeve (the famed “bad boy”) looking at his Bob Marley’s poster as a source of protection, and, when he senses that he would soon be seized by the police and kept away for a while, he reassures Sharon that Bob will always shield her from evil. Another example is Gina’s addiction to sitcoms, Telenovelas, and American soap operas. As a matter of fact, most of her children’s names are American ones: Steeve, Sharon, Billy, and Junior. At times the stories give into a Jerry Springer effect, as Gina appears to wear blinders put in place by a consumerist society. We witness a profound sense of loss in *Cent vies et des poussières*, extreme behaviors, abusive relationships, children dropping out of school, children under the age of eight selling drugs, young men going to jail, pimps, drinking, etc. The children are in front of the TV watching “séries policières” [police series]\(^4\)\(^8\) and reproduce the same havoc in real life. Pineau decisively incriminates the media for reinforcing negative images and pernicious stereotypes for the black youth.

**TRANSGRESSION AS RESISTANCE**

**Writing the Contact Zones of the KAribbean Body in Pain**

After a long frenzied dystopia, Pineau attempts to display a filigree of hope at the end of the novel. When referring for the first time to the novel’s title, she gives emphasis to two women’s testimonies; first, that of Gina’s late
sister Vivi insisting that she believes in reincarnation and, then, Théophée’s revelations on Gina’s eighth pregnancy. It is therefore Théophée, the novel’s omniscient narrator who discloses to the reader that Gina’s eighth pregnancy is “different” and that this child will “save and heal all of Gina’s children.”

In opposition, Dambury’s voicing of resistance is a most momentous statement. Les rétifs’ multiple stories create a human web symbolizing solidarity and cultural identity through Creole words, Caribbean music and rhythms, the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, the traditional home decor, and the everyday runarounds of the population.

The leitmotiv of wandering bodies in pain in Dambury’s courtyard recalls that of Abderrahmane Sissako’s movie Bamako. It is in this space that all sociopolitical events are narrated and where the margins put the West on trial. The courtyard allows the voicing of the dominés [dominated] who have never been heard. Their discourse counter-balances Western imageries through which the dominés are constructed as passive and lacking desires to fight for their rights so as to reach better economic stability. In Pineau’s novel, television replaced the courtyard and American TV shows ousted storytellers. This is the exact illustration of Occidentalism that we find in Sissako’s movie: children, their parents, and other family members gathering at night, not to listen to the traditional griot, but to watch an American Western on TV. Like Bamako the novels are similar to a cinéma vérité [true cinema], a style of documentary moviemaking with long takes, and little or no directorial or editing control exerted over the finished product—which is transmitted in writing through the atemporal, the three-dimensional structures, the improvised rhythms, as well as the plurivocal and polyphonic voices.

It is quite important to stress that Les rétifs mirrors Dambury’s strong refusal to give into canonical and damaging representations of the subaltern. Indeed, Les rétifs makes a clear attempt to represent the subaltern as an agent of change without falling into disfigurations of gender spaces (hyper-sexual women, defeminized women, hyper-masculine men, heteronormative relationships, poto-mitan women) or disfigurations of geographical spaces (ghettoized island, stereotyped lazy/happy/poor islanders). To achieve a counter-canonical discourse, Dambury’s restive characters are represented within private/intimate spaces, everyday life and conversations. There is a poignant refusal by Gerty Dambury to adorn pain and to instead recognize what comprises beauty on the island. The cartography of pain is therefore balanced with tangible humanizing of everyday people and their characters: passive personalities (Emilienne’s dad is described as a coward at times), leadership advocacies (the instructor for instance), personal and professional challenges, and neighboring dynamics. The events of May 1967 are portrayed in their inhumanity without taking away from what makes the
peoples “A Restive People” (within their singularity). The conflict zone is un désordre non-subordonné, a resisting-body that is unified within its differences and challenges. The author finds the term “rétifs” [restive] to be very representative. For Gerty Dambury, the term “restive” used to describe a horse that refuses to move forward is testament to the animality found during slavery. Unlike Pineau’s text, structural violence is not inflated, instead, the restive people are placed right at the center of the circle, they are at the core of the transcultural space of the quadrille, they are non-homogeneous people creating resistance.

In both novels, Guadeloupe is a hybrid place caught between tradition and modernization, and overpowered by France. Indeed, we observe the difficult position of the subaltern between alienation and affiliation, and départenance [wanting to belong, to affiliate with the representation of power], evolving (to paraphrase Bhabha) in a third space that remains a space of differentiation. Similarly, Pineau’s novel is almost a Manichean mythology in which there are no rules. La Ravine claire is the metaphoric savage space (re)presenting the practices of globalization. Gina’s family watches violent “séries policières” as they are trapped in between mimicry and mockery. This metatextual presentation is quite powerful, since the Guadeloupean family watches on TV its mimetic condition. Observed is the difficult vision of mimicry in between resemblance and menace, the locals’ identity in between assimilation and alienation. The third space is a rhizomic space in which the body in pain seeks identity. The body in pain passes through l’autre [other] in order to “be” itself and (re)passes back through itself in order to be “other” than itself. This process reveals the suffering body as a rhizome. It is through the pain, the utterance of violence that the contact between moi [me] and l’autre [other] becomes possible. Therefore, the suffering body is more than a zone of passage; it is most importantly a zone of contact. Given this characteristic, it transgresses the norms of the mainstream to maintain “it” within boundaries and to separate “it”, alienate “it.” The origin root of the rhizomic suffering conditions the in-between characteristic of the body. The in-between is a point of origin. Consequently, the body in pain (re)presents and (con)textualizes rhizomic strategies and procedures within the end and the beginning (which is the characteristic of the origin). To paraphrase Daniel Sibony, there is more than one origin in a same origin, and identity is a state of shared origin. Following this rhizomic distinctiveness, the voicing of Dambury and Pineau uses transgression, the pain is not hidden; psychological, physical, and societal sufferings are expressed also in the reality of their violence. The voicing of the rebellious rhizomic body becomes a transgressional (con)text. Such writing is a mirror to the continuous negotiations of the body in pain.
CONCLUSION

The corporeality of bodies and embodied experiences found in these novels are unique. We explored how these representations of the performing body in pain use oral aesthetics paradigms that are richly infused in French Caribbean societies. Dambury’s text establishes the significance of intangible traditions that continue to participate in Caribbean people’s resistance in the face of psychological and physical traumas produced by colonization. Dambury’s “innovation” is to find a dominant voix [voice] for the story that is to be told similar to a quadrille au commandement in which all voices become a unique dominant lead. In both novels, the island of Guadeloupe is not conceptualized as feminized terrain, rather opinions and beliefs surrounding silenced portions of history are exposed, dissected, and clarified for and by the collective within their singularities (which is why the capitalized “Nous” voiced in Dambury’s courtyard is highly symbolic). There is a sense of solidarity in the construction of history. But most importantly, we explored how the Afra-writing bends (masculinist) traditional oral conventions. The inscription of the femmes-conteurs [women storytellers] defies the phallogocentric conteur/marqueur de parole discourse and theories presented by the creolists, Glissant, or Césaire’s Négritude. Indeed, the music lead is no longer male centered in Dambury’s novel as Nono reverts the norms by playing the accordion, a role traditionally played by men. By decentralizing the woman’s desire from that of men, Gisèle Pineau’s main character is a mother who does not seek to be a man’s lover, nor is she defeminized; she is not in the masculine. When Dambury gives voice to Hilaire, a gay man, he does not fit the male-less, cross-dressing makoumè figure found in various works of the creolists. The makoumè is renamed “ma-commère,” meaning my gossiping neighbor, which reinstates the marginalized homosexual into the collective space. Indeed, Hilaire is neither passive nor invisible; he has his own share of dissidence. The texts are resistance; they incorporate the voices of the silenced (the women, the prostitutes, the elderly, the homosexual, the children, the disabled) to a historiography that has tended to be exclusively masculine.

The body in pain and in movement fosters a narrative of the tangible that provides unique sensory contexts. These aesthetics of tactility and corpomemorial tracing create cartographies of bodily pain, reimage and problematize history, while convoking innovative, sensitive, and cognitive feelings to the reader. Bodily decorums can sometimes paradoxically occlude the paroxysmal acts they are engaged in. The embodied movements, rhythms, sensorial and tactile aesthetics employed to present the KAribbean transgressive bodies, give them opacity and consciously subversive subjectivities. Pineau’s poetics of negation serves a productive purpose in...
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terms of ethics and epistemology. The text stimulates a new methodology of reading, de-commodifies sexuality and the body, does not seek consolatory distractions, and destroy the regimentation of the “ideal” body. Her Afra-writing works therefore to sabotage the voyeuristic gaze and the sexualized pleasures, it maintains a mechanism of deferral. As they write through the visual, the haptic, the tactile, both authors create alternative ways of seeing/reading the body, and imagining/imaging the (textual) body. In fact, through their aesthetics of negation, sensation, and corpomemorial tracing, profusions of tropes of infringement, intrusion, disturbance, and invasion—test the endurance of the readers and intrude their subjectivity. The reading of these transgressive bodies re-conceptualizes spectatorship/readership and nourishes an existential burden for the readers who are faced with the possible insufficiency of their own politics.

NOTES

1. The term “haptic” derives from the Greek word *haptikós* meaning “able to grasp or perceive.” Therefore an aesthetic of the haptic designates a process of embodied writing through the visual that convokes the tactile, the sense of touch, the perception and manipulation of entities (objects, bodies for instance) using the senses of touch or proprioception (the sense of body position).

2. The dossier containing documents related to the tragic riots of May 67 (or *Mé 67* in Creole) has been classified *top secret defence* until 2017. Destructions of municipal archives and hospitalization records have also contributed to the distorting count of victims (between 8 and 200). As a result, seeking justice from the French government has been extremely difficult for families of victims.

3. Orality is the oral characteristic of language, of the discourse, of a culture. See also Lilyan Kesteloot (1993), Ndiaye (1996), Relouzat (1998).


5. *Ka* is a major part of Guadeloupe’s culture. The term refers to hand drums, the music created with them, and the dances they accompany. There are seven major rhythms in *gwo ka* played with two types of drums; the larger, the *boula*, plays the central rhythm and the smaller, the *makè*, is used by the drummer to embellish the *boula* rhythm through interplays with the dancer or the singer.

6. The term *béké* is a Creole word used to describe a descendant of the early European (French) settlers in the French Antilles. Nowadays, the *békés* represent a small minority in the French Caribbean but they control much of the local industry. The class difference that exists between the *békés* and the predominantly black majority population of French Caribbean societies is paramount.


13. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


19. Ibid., 65.

20. Ibid., 137.

21. Ibid., 207.


25. Ibid., 47.

26. Ibid., 32.

27. Ibid., 26.


30. Ibid., 49.

31. Ibid., 48.

32. Ibid., 273.

33. Ibid., 43.

34. Ibid., 24.

35. Ibid., 80.

36. Ibid., 84.

37. Ibid., 171.

38. Ibid., 169.

39. Ibid., 171.

40. Ibid., 224.

41. Ibid., 23.

42. Ibid., 44.

43. Ibid., 92.

44. Ibid., 159.

45. Ibid., 44.
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