COLLOQUE

LA RECHERCHE SUR LES ESCLAVAGES DANS LE MONDE : UN ÉTAT DES LIEUX

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« La patrimonialisation de *Bimbia*, lieu d'esclavage et de la traite négrière dans le Cameroun anglophone : approches et enjeux communicationnels » [texte en anglais]

INTRODUCTION

"Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History."
–Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History"

"Like Glissant, I believe that the hold of the slave ship is a major and original site of fermentation, transformation, creolization, dilution, and exchange.
The ship's hold is this overflowing body, full of zombies.
The transatlantic journey represents the transition from life to death, and then to survival, since most of the captives on board will live on.
As a novelist, I need this enclosed space where everything is possible, where nothing is yet fixed."
Fabienne Kanor, "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor, 'l'Ante-llaise par excellence'"
(Glady Francis 2016, 277)

Fabienne Kanor opens her novel *Humus* with her personal realization of the scarce, incomplete, and objectifying historical accounts about the lives of the enslaved. During a visit to the Archives Départementales of the city of Nantes in France, Kanor read about an incident in 1774 aboard the slave ship, *Le Soleil*: fourteen unnamed African women escaped the ship's hold and leaped overboard, all together, to resist their enslavement. Only six of them survived while the others drowned or were killed by sharks. The report of the incident in the logbook of the ship's captain, Louis Mosnier, reads as follows:

> On the 23rd of March last, fourteen black women apparently leaped overboard, from the poop deck into the sea, all together in and in one movement. Despite all possible diligence, with the sea extremely choppy and the wind blowing a gale, sharks had already eaten several of them before any could be hauled back on board, yet seven were saved, one of whom died that evening at seven o'clock, being in very bad shape when rescued, so in the end, eight were lost in the incident. (Translation by Lynn E. Palermo, 7)

The captain's technical discourse abounds in lifeless numbers, stressing economic loss while silencing these women's collective (in the sense of all at the same time) act of "suicidal resistance" (Calhoun 2021, 132). "How to tell, how to retell this story told by men?" Kanor asks (9). How, indeed? Kanor simultaneously grapples with the limitations, the historical lacunae of traditional archives produced within an ideological system where constructed racial hierarchy places the captive Africans in the category of human merchandise and labor force, while also challenging such ordering of human lives. Motivated by "a desire to swap", "to trade away technical discourse for the spoken word", Kanor's writing makes us reflect on ways to inflate the flattened, disembodied experiences of individual women by, at the same time, spurring awareness of the historical plundering of individual identities and making visible the lasting impact of that oppression. Kanor exposes at once the materiality of the archive (Louis Mosnier's report), while also exposing its fallibility, making space for frustration, shock, pain, and disbelief to be expressed and prompting the disavowal of the authority of the traditional archive. I wish, then, to demonstrate the possibility of transmuting, through the fictional, "archival obscurity" into productive opacity, the unified and consigned into the incomplete and ruptured. Ultimately, I am interested in exploring the tension between the act of

repairing, of caregiving and our responsibility in the act of reckoning with the historically obscured, silenced, and abused lives of the colonized.

Through the etymological investigation of the word 'archive', Jacques Derrida highlights that the term comes from the Greek *Arkhé* which means both 'origin' (*le commencement*) and 'rule' (*le commandement*). The archive, then, is historically constructed as a center of power, serving a crucial function of recording and organizing what has been admitted as archival materials by archivists (*archontes*). Anything, at first, is archivable, but cultural objects and texts become *archives* following the archival processing they undergo in a totalizing gesture. Archivists, in this configuration, are record managers and keepers, "gather[ing] the functions of unification, of identification, of classification" paired with "the power of consignation" (1995, 10). Consignation is here defined by Derrida in terms of "*gathering together signs*" in the written form, aiming to "coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration". The ordering principle specific to the traditional archive is for instance what we see expressed in the Captain's original report. Instead, Kanor's narrative strategy in *Humus* challenges the material realities and limitations of this document by fabricating twelve narratives told in the first person by successive female speakers designated by a definite noun that captures only a piece of who they were: "La muette", "La vieille", "L'esclave", L'amazone", "La blanche", "Les jumelles" (two distinct voices in the text), "L'employée", "La petite", "La reine", "La volante", "La mère", and "L'héritière". The organization of the novel in titled sections, then, swaps the indefinite, numerical plural of the captain's anecdotal report for the singular plural (the group of women act collectively to resist their enslavement, but the text makes their individual experiences and subjectivities perfectly visible). In *Humus*, the production of individual, though relational, experiences utilizes the opacity and unavailability of memory around these fourteen anonymous captives, equipping "the gap…between the archival document and the writer's imagination" ["le décalage…entre le document d'archive et l'imagination de l'écrivain" (Lionnet, qt'd in Jean-François) with the capacity to construct "an alternative archival fragment" (Francis, 70). The fictional is, here, driven by the responsibility to care, inciting forms of attention to silenced voices.

What does it mean, then, to give care in literature? The intersection of literature and care allows us to investigate the literary attempts that "provide witness to a suppressed historical presence" (Chancy 1997, 13). "Littératures de témoignage" (Gefen 2017, 162) or "testimonial literatures" is in fact the term Alexandre Gefen uses to examine the intersection between literature and care, attesting to how the literary attempts to construct memory ("*faire mémoire*"), to make voices heard. Examining caregiving in literature might mean, then, to extract aesthetic and narrative strategies rooted in relations of care, sympathy and attentiveness as opposed to historically constituted forms of domination based on race, class, and gender. In the context of a colloquium organized at Sorbonne Université on the theme of a "caring lit'" in October 2021, participants explored the relations between literature and the practice of caring. Can we give meaning to the act of caring through literature, through the fictional like in the case of *Humus*? Can literature redress the damage, attend to the missing voices, and how? By the end of the colloquium, the exploration for what a 'caring lit'' would look like remains open-ended, decisively changing depending on who receives care as well as how care is given. In that sense, care is advantageously generic, non-sectarian–it concerns

"*everything* we do to continue to repair and maintain our world so that we can live in it as well as possible", to borrow the words of Joan Tronto (emphasis mine).

It might appear surprising, though, that Tronto's discourse bars literature ("creative active" 1995, 105) from constituting a gesture of care, alongside "the pursuit of pleasure, … production, destruction … to play, to fulfill a desire, to market a new product". Because, for Tronto, caring seems to involve "taking the concerns and needs of the other as *the basis for action*" (105), to create a work of art might, following her reasoning, have a limited political impact in real life. However, the "care (re)turn" (Bourdeau, Edwards, Wilson, 2005) in literature invites us to probe into the formulation of caring practices for interrogating hegemonic power structures and, at times, fostering alternatives. For instance, Marjolaine Deschênes, unlike Tronto, coins the term "littérature *care*" (2015) or "caring literature" positing the role of literature in shaping, representing and imagining the gestures of care.

> Ce que j'appellerai au final la "littérature care", aussi bien du côté de la poétique des auteur.e.s que de celui de la critique littéraire, présenterait par ailleurs l'un ou l'autre de ces critères plus spécifiques: 1) les attitudes éthiques et temporelles qu'elle dépeint relèvent d'une égale attention à l'autre et à soi-même; 2) les personnages qu'elle figure rendent justice à la vulnérabilité et à la fragilité humaines; 3) un souci d'égalité entre les sexes ou les différentes identités y est présent, par exemple à travers une exigence de *mémoire* et de *promesse* (Ricœur, 1990, 2004) pour le groupe social "femmes" ou d'autres groupes historiquement minorisés; 4) elle critique le patriarcat et déboulonne les codes de genre.

The prescriptive (and optimistic) tone of Deschênes's definition here charges literary production with a predetermined political agenda and the expression of moral claims (Hétu and Snauwaert, 2018). This definition is for the most part focused on the achievement of acts of caring, and less so on what complicates care giving. I am interested, then, in questioning the meanings and gestures of care that emerge at the intersection of caregiving and historical acts of colonial erasure in light of Kanor's treatment of the voices of the fourteen captives.

In her analysis of *Humus* in *Odious Women*, Gladys M. Francis places the emphasis on the writing of the body, the "process of writing that literally–gives *body* to; *embodies*; gives presence to–a *body*" (xvi). While it is true that Kanor's counter response to her encounter with objectified bodies in the archives is to "give presence" to the captives, the condition of their "embodied corporeality" is, I will argue, to claim a voice, to speak again (69). At the beginning of the narrative, Kanor insists on the act of listening, the commitment to hearing that befalls us: "Like these shadowy figures put in chains long ago, the reader is condemned not to move from this moment on. Just *listen* with no other distraction to this chorus of women. At the risk of losing your bearings, *hear* once more these hearts beating" (9, emphasis mine). Their coming into existence, then, occurs in language, through voice. In her philosophical exploration of subjecthood, Sandra Laugier argues that voice is what defines the subject–having, using voice is about "*being alive*" (2015, 74). In effect, then, the suppression of voice negates the foundation of the individual as a subject. Thus, with no voice to claim, the subject is made absent–becoming a voiceless body. What we see challenged in *Humus* is the historical making of voicelessness, and also expressed is the reclaiming of a voice to listen to and to reckon with.

Describing the writing of *Humus*, Kanor points to the reinsertion of voice, "*les voix d'autrefois [qui] n'ont pas fini de nous parler*" (Herbeck, 967). For indeed, Kanor adds, "*il n'y a pas un mot de ce roman qui n'ait été chanté, murmuré ou répété à haute voix plusieurs fois*" (Herbeck, 968). In the face of "*la mort de la parole*" (*Humus*, 14), the fictional takes over for these fourteen women to regain voice and to speak again, for the writer to bring them into the conversation, and for us to listen to voices that have been denied existence. The fictional, then, creates space for speaking and listening to take place, plural-mindedly but not necessarily cohesively or in a linear manner. These very different women's voices, as Calhoun observes, "have forgotten names, places, dates"; "they fail to remember, choose not to remember, or remember imperfectly. They try to forget. They fabricate, invent, and lie" (134). The figure of "La muette", who opens the narrative, is a potent indicator of the difficulty of excavating the voice, the challenge of finding what to say in the face of absence, of telling the made absent and the made invisible. "The mute woman", then, opens the novel with the recognition that she, along with the other women captives, was denied a voice and is grappling with what it is she wants to say. "I saw everything. Don't ask me what. Lost words are lost forever" (13)–the possibility to alert to the historical circumstances of erasure ("I saw everything") is here immediately contained by the silencing of voices under colonial rule ("Lost words are lost forever"). These women voices are, then, presented struggling, hesitant, at times rambling and cryptic. Throughout, the language of the text is, in effect, interrogative ("Ohé ! Has anyone seen my name? "The mute woman", 17); stammered ("Moldy, me vomited, spoiled, thrown away. Me rancid. Dirty. Salty. Without. Alone." "La blanche", 90); discontinued both temporally (before their capture, aboard the ship, and the times after that) and spatially (where they come from, where they are and for some, where they will be).

In the process, these voices, long held in silence, recover, *via* the fictional, the ability to speak for themselves, while also challenging the limitations on the enslaved body. In fact, these women captives occasionally evidence the necessary parting away from the materiality of their bodies. In this instance, the material body is what ties their existence to gendered and hypersexualized assumptions, as well as to the numerical rationality of the slave system, the dehumanizing archival practices that the Captain of *Le Soleil*'s report exemplifies. "La Blanche" who loses her mind after having survived the leap into the sea ("After that, I went mad" 85), tells of her own suicide on the plantation–as she recounts her body being found, her voice becomes spectral as though emanating from beyond corporeality: "They found me at dawn. In the back of the workshop, in the big room where they wring juice from the cane. They say it wasn't a pretty sight, all that blood on the workbench … I was galloping, I-blanche, the body ravaged. A dress without ruffle or thread. Vast. Finally free" (121). Such an imaginary flight from corporeal enslavement both resists the ideological rationalization that produces commodified black bodies as part of the slave system, and releases the voice.

> My intent was neither to idealize nor to 'amplify' my characters to turn them into symbols, bearers of history. I have not written this novel to denounce slavery, that would have been naive and completely useless. I simply wanted to tell the story of African women put in chains, but who continue to be women, they grow old, they have their period, they bicker, they tell each other stories, they reminisce, they think of their man, they fall sick, into madness, or in love.
> –Fabienne Kanor, "Entretien avec Fabienne Kanor" (Jason Herbeck 2013, 970)

Kanor's writing, in contrast, disrupts the continuum of colonial time by challenging the *order of things* and flirting with the possibility of disruption, the possibility for things to get messy. For in fact, throughout *Humus*, the women's voices talk over each other, dialog with each other, and quibble. For instance, La Blanche reacts disapprovingly to the name she was given by the other captives: "La Blanche. That's what they call me. What they say when they think I can't hear them. La Blanche and a lot of other names, too. Words that soil, ruin my name …" (73). She might have got this nickname because she had lighter skin, we learn from the twins (98), or maybe because she consented to sexual relations with a sailor to win him over (though he eventually turns away from her after she tells him she is pregnant). La Blanche, though she maintains "[she] couldn't care less what they think", clearly hears her fellow captives' critical voices and cares enough to engage with them, even if it means to disagree (73). In any case, instances of La Blanche's self-expression challenge the ways in which she is perceived by the others, insisting that she is guided by her own sense of self-preservation. "For me, I believe there are days when you just don't have the choice… And I, La Blanche, have decided not to die" (73). While her attitude may be perceived as treacherous or submissive, the character reinserts her own voice ("I, La Blanche"), speaks for herself. The Little One adds a contrasting perspective on La Blanche as she lacks an understanding about the meaning of the nickname. Instead, she calls her "the Grown-up" reflecting the bond that has grown between the two: La Blanche performs the different roles within the Little One's vision of a family structure–"She's happy to be my sister, the Grown-up. Or father, or mother. Whatever I wish" (116). The Slave similarly equates self-expression with solipsism as the subject is claimed through the use of voice. The character's section of the narrative is punctuated with the words "I, daughter of Nupe, I" followed by an active verb, like in "I, small daughter of Nupe, I love" (50) when she tells of her love for another woman also held captive in the barracoons. To express her love for this woman is to act against the dominant order, "the Law" (50). This means of self-assertion is a sign of her nascent expressivity.

I now want to turn back to Laugier's definition of the subject as voice. In redefining the subject through the subjectivity of language defined by voice, Laugier explains that to have a voice means to lose it to an Other because "expression itself as life form" is "a life that is not mine anymore" (78). In other words, in a situation where I speak to someone, I consent to being heard–my voice being realized when someone engages with what is expressed. As such, Kanor creates a fictional space where voices of the enslaved can exist. Within that space, expressions of agreement or disagreement between the different characters are, then, the sign that self-expressivity and attention to that expressiveness is made possible. Given the emphasis on the first person, the path towards self-expressivity for the women characters who populate the text is, thus, focused on the individual and their particular circumstances. For instance, Kanor writes the character of "the employee", "une captive à demi" (Herbeck, 969). Her father was a boatman and she works as guard on *Le Soleil*. Tasked to watch the prisoners, when she sees "the thirteen rebels" getting ready to jump, "something broke inside [her]. [She] wanted to be like them. They were so beautiful. With no hesitation, she jumped" (111). The way the female characters of *Humus* are voiced, then, steers clear of a narrative of undifferentiated collective resistance where they would act towards a common goal (i.e. freedom from slavery). Instead, the characters are not always squarely oppositional, like the Amazon who rallies the women and will later join a maroon community–for example, the Employee joins them spontaneously before going back to work on a Portuguese ship; the Queen allies herself with the rebels after

the Amazon has promised her that she will help her conquer her kingdom again; and the list goes on.

In an interview with Emily A. Owens to discuss her book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (2016), Marisa Fuentes signals the problematic of agency in relation to binaristic models where the enslaved are either portrayed as victims or fighters. "The historiography of slavery," Fuentes contends, "ha[s] been influenced by the political project of telling heroic (and often masculinist) narratives of resistance and triumph". Rather, her scholarly project offers methodological examples–such as "incomplete narratives, non-conforming structures, and different modes of writing"–to challenge historical linearity and make visible, instead, "the complicated forms of representation" of enslaved women's experiences and Caribbean slavery in general. This being said, Fuentes makes her intervention clear: she is not creating fiction. In the case of Kanor, by contrast, incompleteness is what spurs fictional creation.

By giving shape to the character of "the Heiress", Kanor endows the act of fictional creation with the responsibility to excavate voices from the damaged form in which these enslaved women appear in archival records. As Kanor writes herself into the heiress, her writing practice interrogates absence and questions what language to use to represent these women's complicated forms of existence, what means of expression with which to equip these voices retrieved from forced silence. For example, when the heiress describes her trip to Badagry and the Door of No Return in Nigeria, she frustratingly demands answers to a landscape of historical silencing. Studying fading footprints in the sand, she asks, "Where did they lead? Back to the days of hunters and Black-captive-eating-sharks, two centuries ago? … Had I done the right thing, coming here? Would this beach tell me any more than the blank page?" (174)–and yet questions hang in the air, entrusting the heiress with the responsibility to imagine, through fiction, the different voices that may emanate from the violence of historical erasure. Such a writing practice means to be attentive to the limits of historical representation, while capturing the voices long silenced, bringing them into focus.

In fact, by naming herself the heiress, the writer, the first-person narrator, first accepts as true the inheritance passed on to her, and then, only after that, accepts what is inherited (i.e. the violence of the archive, the process of erasure that characterizes it). The generic definition of the substantive "heir" or "heiress" includes a focus on the act of receiving something–tangible or intangible *assets*: an heir or heiress is "one who receives property from an ancestor, one who is entitled to inherit property" or, "one who inherits or is entitled to succeed to a hereditary rank, title, or office" (Merriam-Webster). From this definition we understand that, through the process of inheritance, there may be something to be "gained", in the economic or social sense of added "value". As for debt, in a Western context and in the financial sense, what is owed generally does not fall under the responsibility of surviving relatives–as such, one is, unless in special circumstances, not held accountable for what is absent, what remains incomplete. Thus, such understanding of the distribution of inheritance admits first that the heir or heiress has no responsibility towards the debt, and then that what has not been settled is just lost. The heiress in *Humus* contrasts with the standard configuration of inheritance in that she accepts responsibility towards the absent. Are we not to speak, the heiress asks, for the lasting impact of the silenced into the present?

By grappling with the heritability of historical erasure, the heiress confronts not only the past lives of the enslaved steeped in silence, but also the persistence of that silence (/silencing) in the present. "Je regrette d'être venue, r'grette d'être venue, gret'd'v'nue" (240)–the language of the *papa-feuilles*, the healer, is disorderly, fragmented, in difficulty, just like the voices that come into existence throughout the text, alerting to the devastating effect of erasure, but also battling to imagine what forms of care to give in order to move forwards. In the English translation of the novel by Lynn E. Palermo, the term "papa-feuilles" is, in fact, annotated–when the narrator visits the studio of her artist friend, Pietr-Pedro-Pierre-Peter (his name changes each time), she finds herself surrounded by "her papers"–or perhaps, "where they the leaves of the tree [of forgetfulness]"[1] that the men captives had to go around nine times and the women captives, seven times, as this would supposedly make them forget where they came from (186)? The novel-to-be, the paralyzing blank pages are in the beginning soaked in silence, that of the archives but also that of the sea, and then, after that, there are words, that is voice–"the cry, too long contained, muffled by the song of the seas and all the discourse of men" (187). In the studio space, Peter then whispers to the heiress in the concluding moments of the novel: "Nous sommes des papas-feuilles" (247, as the narrator-writer attempts to attend to the dispersed leaves of the Tree.

While there is no direct equivalent to capture the cultural specificity of the "*papa-feuilles*", Palermo's annotation conveys the particularities of reparative practices rooted in the knowledge of medicinal plants passed on from generation to generation in African-Caribbean contexts. "In the Caribbean as well as in Africa", Renée Larrier explains, "certain roots–as in plants, bark and leaves–are prescribed for therapeutic purposes … in Caribbean literature [in turn] 'racines-médecine' and its practitioners are an essential weapon against illness and disease" (1998: 87). Clearly here, we steer clear of any derogatory interpretation of healing practices which were feared, Larrier reminds us, by French owners who "were terrified of being poisoned" by Africans deported to the Americas (87). Rather, through her writing, the heiress transforms productively the way in which the *papa-feuilles*'s ability to heal, to repair, manifests itself: as the narrator manipulates humus, the opaque material resulting from the degradation of the lives of the enslaved, she formulates a caring gesture that accounts for the non-elucidated and damaged, the incomplete and fragmented which must inform the narratives around the colonial past and its legacy we tell in the present.

[1] Ouidah in southern Benin was a major slave-trading post from the 17th to the 19th century. It is before the captives would start walking to the ships that they would be made to circle the tree known as "*l'Arbre de l'Oubli*" or the "*Tree of Forgetfulness*". As they were becoming dizzy, the captives were believed to forget everything about their past so as to annihilate their rebellious thoughts. Today a statue marks the site where the tree stood, and the commemorative plaque reads as follows: "En ce lieu se trouvait l'arbre de l'oubli. Les esclaves mâles devaient tourner autour de lui neuf fois, les femmes sept fois. Ces tours étant accomplis, les esclaves étaient censés devenir amnésiques. Ils oubliaient complètement leur passé, leurs origines et leur identité culturelle pour devenir des êtres sans aucune volonté de réagir ou de se rebeller".