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Cyclone culture and the paysage pineaulien

Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw

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Abstract
In the opening pages of Gisèle Pineau’s, L’Espérance–macadam, the female narrator’s language is broken, fragmented, as the body of the text itself reflects the passing of a cyclone or, as it is called in the novel, ‘Le passage de La Bête’. There is a direct link between the violence and violation of the woman’s body by the ‘Beast’, which in the novel is both man and cyclone — man as cyclone — and the Guadeloupean landscape. This dual force not only razes the landscape, destroying vegetation and homes, but is used metaphorically to describe analogous acts of violence by men against the physical landscape of the female body. The novel begins and ends with a cyclone and it is within this seasonal, cyclical or what I would like to call cyclonic, structure that Pineau takes us into the community of Savane.
In the opening pages of Gisèle Pineau’s, *L’Espérance–macadam*, the female narrator’s language is broken, fragmented, as the body of the text itself reflects the passing of a cyclone or, as it is called in the novel, ‘Le passage de La Bête’. There is a direct link between the violence and violation of the woman’s body by the ‘Beast’, which in the novel is both man and cyclone — man as cyclone — and the Guadeloupean landscape. This dual force not only razes the landscape, destroying vegetation and homes, but is used metaphorically to describe analogous acts of violence by men against the physical landscape of the female body. The novel begins and ends with a cyclone and it is within this seasonal, cyclical or what I would like to call cyclonic, structure that Pineau takes us into the community of Savane.

Pineau is preoccupied in *L’Espérance-macadam* with the violence and victimisation of the Antillean woman and, with few exceptions, there is a pathological comportment of the Antillean man, as unpredictable, indifferent, destructive and as apocalyptic a force as a cyclone. This is in no way a new theme in Antillean or even Caribbean literature but what sets Pineau apart is the link that she creates between cyclone, culture, metaphor and landscape. Her language both reveals and conceals voices but at the same time continues to suppress. This essay, as part of a longer work examining the treatment of the *paysage antillais* in the works of French Caribbean women writers, explores Pineau’s use of the cyclone metaphor and the manner in which it affects and effects a cultural landscape, creating a cyclone culture.

**SAVANE’S CRIMES**

The reader is taken into the community of Savane through several voices, but Pineau privileges the female voice and in particular that of Eliette. This widow who has survived two hurricanes and two husbands tells the story of Savane from its Edenic beginnings to its present cycle of destruction. A before and after scenario is presented: the natural earthly paradise of Savane in the time of Joab, Eliette’s stepfather, becomes the Savane after Joab — ‘a paradise lost’. Eliette for most of her life has closed herself off from the community in an attempt to block out and protect herself from the chaos and crimes committed in Savane. Pineau uses Eliette to explore and exploit the violent, complicit nature of Savane and its crime of silencing stories of violation.

In the opening pages of Gisèle Pineau’s, *L’Espérance–macadam*, the female narrator’s language is broken, fragmented, as the body of the text itself reflects the passing of a cyclone or, as it is called in the novel, ‘Le passage de La Bête’. There is a direct link between the violence and violation of the woman’s body by the ‘Beast’, which in the novel is both man and cyclone — man as cyclone — and the Guadeloupean landscape. This dual force not only razes the landscape, destroying vegetation and homes, but is used metaphorically to describe analogous acts of violence by men against the physical landscape of the female body. The novel begins and ends with a cyclone and it is within this seasonal, cyclical or what I would like to call cyclonic, structure that Pineau takes us into the community of Savane.

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From the onset Eliette foregrounds natural devastation and Savane’s own violent nature, by exposing the reader to the effects of the brutal forces of the cyclone and to the man made forces of destruction. These atrocities, with multiple authors and victims, are piled like refuse in the opening pages of the novel and are scattered throughout it, along with images of broken tree branches, mattresses and sheets of galvanised iron.


(Blood spread on the grass along the path. A blue tongue pulled from the flowers of the mango tree. Gray eyes tied to the end of a rope. A small mangled body at the bottom of the Nefles bridge. Hortense chopped up with a cutlass. And those children having left for the mountains, never to return. And how many other acts too terrible to mention?)

Each crime will be recalled and listed by Eliette because she is aware of her dual role as both perpetrator and victim in this culture of Rien vu Rien entendu.

Eliette’s first criminal experience was the crime committed against her by her father. At the age of eight during the passing of the famous cyclone of 1928, Eliette was brutally raped by him and her body was so ravaged that her mother literally had her resown by a midwife. The memory of this incident is suppressed until she takes in a neighbour’s daughter, Angela, who has also been raped by her father during hurricane season. Eliette finally gets her wish to become a mother, a substitute mother, as she guides Angela, the way her own mother did, away from Savane to safety. For the first time Eliette engages in actions that set her apart from the community, becoming an agent of change.

The parallels configured by Pineau in the story of Eliette and Angela are crucial to the reading of the text and to the understanding of Savane’s culture. Both Eliette and Angela endure acts of incest and rape at early ages; both occur at the time of a hurricane; both have mothers who are unable to stop the incest; both are urged to suppress la parole; both leave the community to escape the hurricanes; both fathers are described as Beasts; and both Eliette and Angela survive the passing of these Beasts, father and cyclone. Pineau uses these parallels to emphasise the cyclical, insidious nature of the Savane community. Although Eliette has, like the rest of her community refused to help so many other victims of rape, infanticide, murder and abuse, she chooses to act this time primarily because she recognises herself in Angela. By saving Angela there is also an opportunity for Eliette to save a lost self.

THE CASE OF HERMENCIA, GLAWDDS AND OF CREOLE COMPLICITY

The men in the novel are the main perpetrators of these crimes however the women are complicit in the crimes of crime of silence and inaction. This collective
criminal, ritualistic act is best represented in the novel by the rape of Hermanicia and the neglect of her daughter Glawdys. We are told every Friday afternoon seven men would take Hermancia, ‘une simplette’, to the abattoir where they would each takes turns having sex with her.


(Every Friday afternoon, the seven men had barely finished slaughtering the animals when they moved onto Hermancia, with delicate gestures, and her flesh was as tender as the best loin.)

In the novel Pineau makes it clear that the community, particularly the women of Savane, are aware of this crime and yet they try their best to ignore it. This notion is reinforced by the ‘joyous song’ that Hermancia sings for all to hear describing her experience:

La joie tu m’as donnée
La paix sur la terre
Les hommes de bonne volonté
J’ai sourire, j’ai sourire
Et les sept rois mages sont descendus à l’abattoir.
Ils ont fermé les boeufs
Et le sang tigé tout-partout.
Oh Oh Oh Seigneur! (59)

(The joy that you have given me
Peace on earth
Good will to men
A smile on my face, a smile on my face
And the seven Wise Men came from the abattoir
They locked up the animals
And blood spurted everywhere, everywhere
Oh Oh Oh Lord!)

A biblical theme is woven into the story by insisting on the community’s strong religious notions of sin, expiation and redemption, and using names like Joab, and numerous biblical allusions to Judas, God or the devil. Pineau portrays a Savane that combines the notion of Old Testament eye-for-an-eye justice with New Testament hope or espérance of deliverance. The irony in Hermancia’s song is obvious; she re-interprets her situation with a biblical reading, however, the brutality of the sacrifice in the form of a simplette’s song and the context of the abattoir reminds us of Pineau’s insistence on the ritualistic violence of this damned community that undermines any pretense of religious fervor. It is only when Hermancia becomes pregnant that her father brutally avenges his daughter with his cutlass. ‘Nègre, Indien, mulâtre, Blanc, chabin, Caraïbe et bata-coolie — ils étaient sept — pas un ne fut épargné’ (57). (Black, Indian, mulatto, White,
Chabin, Carib, Dougla,1 there were seven of them, not one was spared.)

Through Glawdys, who is the product of Hermancia’s rape by the seven men, Pineau furthers her critique of the complicitous nature of Savane culture by emphasising the multiple origins of Glawdys. She has a strange, ‘merveilleuse beauté’ with the features of every father. She is the product of creepolisation, her race undefinable:

Certsains disaient que les sept rois mages de l’abattoir avait mêlé leur sang pour qu’elle prenne une part égale de chacun, la meilleure. Négresse-noire à yeux verts, nez droit, épaisses lèvres pourpres et grands cheveux jaune paille bouclés, Glawdys dérotaient tous ceux qui cherchaient à définir sa race. (61)

(Some people said that the seven Wise Men from the abattoir had mixed their blood so that she got the best part of each one. A dark skinned Negresse with green eyes, a straight nose, thick crimson lips, and long, curly straw-colored hair. Glawdys confused anyone who tried to define her race.)

The attention paid to the physical and ethnic composition of Glawdys is noteworthy since, for the most part, Pineau seldom emphasises racial features in her work but also because Glawdys is the only representation of racial creepolisation in *L’Espérance-macadam*.

When Hermancia wanders away from Savane, the orphaned Glawdys is adopted by Eloise. ‘La Folle’, as Eloise is called, continues the cycle of abuse. She ties Glawdys inside her house like an animal and although the community, including Eliette, all hear Glawdy’s ‘jappements’, they do nothing to free her. When Glawdys is finally freed from Eloise by a social worker she leaves Savane only to return years later with a baby. She tries to support herself and her child by selling christophines. The people of Savane as a result of their guilty feelings and their desire to make reparations for their earlier treatment of Glawdys buy the christophines, but they soon tire of their christophone dishes and leave Glawdys and her baby once again to fend for themselves. Glawdys, the strange, beautiful creole then commits the monstrous act of infanticide by throwing her baby onto the rocks by the riverbed. Oddly, after Glawdys’ baby and the smashed body is visible for all to see, the inhabitants of Savane feel free to throw fridges, old fans, stoves, even mattresses into a river that is now beyond pollution. Once again Pineau places emphasis on unnatural actions against human nature and against the Antillian landscape. In spite of the community’s reference to their religion, their beliefs remain mere allusions, never materialising into actions.

Through the creation of a Glawdys, Pineau not only reinforces the complicitous nature of Savane but extends her critique to racial, ethnic complicity and accuses every possible race of participating in the collective violence. Glawdys, the offspring of the village ‘simpette’, Hermancia, has been ‘fathered’ by the ‘seven wise men’. Each one represents a different racial identity in Savane’s plural society. By ensuring that each group plays a role in the violation of Hermancia Pineau also emphasises the parenting responsibility of the society to its Creole

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child, Glawdys. By neglecting to assume responsibility for Glawdys they are not only witnesses, but participants in the crime. However, rather than representing the case of Glawdys as a negative reading of creolisation, Pineau is in fact proposing equity in responsibility in this plural societal landscape. No one group can claim innocence and no one group can be blamed. For Pineau the lesson lies in the need for Savane to nurture the symbol of their plurality.

THE CYCLONE METAPHOR AND THE COMMUNITY

The cyclone metaphor is effectively used to further penetrate the cultural landscape of Savane. The two cyclones in the novel are part of Guadeloupe’s history. Both the cyclone of 1928 and of 1981 had devastating effects on the island, and as several writers, including earlier writers like Sylviane Telchid, have examined and included the cyclones in their fiction, they have become historical marqueurs of destruction in francophone Caribbean narratives. Pineau also notes the passing of hurricanes in her earlier novels like La Grande Drive des esprits and Un Papillon dans la Cité, but in her work the cyclone is also a cultural marqueur in so much as it affects and effects cultural behaviour. The synchronic force of man, beast and cyclone embodies destructive, catalytic, and restorative properties. The physical destruction is clearly seen in the dismemberment of the community’s natural landscape and in the dis-memberment of mainly women’s bodies in the novel.

The psychological destruction takes place on several levels. Eliette loses her speech, ‘la parole,’ until Joab helps her to speak again, but the memory is still suppressed until another hurricane, coupled with Angela’s violation, brings back the memory. The suppression of memories and language are another form of self-imprisonment and a self-imposed silencing that is only released and restored by the passing of another hurricane. While the cyclone suppresses and imprisons language it also acts as a catalyst for change. For the people of Savane the cyclone is a real and ever-feared force whose presence brings back another cycle of fear and panic and whose absence still haunts the lives of the community. However the imminent passing of a cyclone, rather than further fragmenting the community, introduces a cycle of expiation and the hope of redemption that will pass only to resurface again with another hurricane season. Their fear and cowardice bring them together, if only temporarily, and foster goodwill and generosity in this time of reckoning. They recall all the crimes committed in Savane and their complicit policy of inaction.

Et ils pensaient aussi à tous les crimes de Savane, à toutes leurs lâchetés, tous ces moments où ils auraient pu témoigner d’un brin de bravoure, juste un brin, Seigneur! Ils songaient à leurs yeux délibérément fermés, à leurs regards détournés. Et toute l’énergie, qu’ils avaient déployée pour la haine, la jalousie, le mépris et la sorcellerie leur revenait aussi. Tant de forces gaspillées…. Et ils se ressavaient à reléver frères et sœurs dans une solidarité nouvelle qui les étonnait, les bouleversait, oui. (262-63)
interrogation of violations of the female body in literature. The trauma of experiencing childhood incest is central to Pineau's also does not shy away from the taboo subject of incest, and in particular incest remains suggestive on these subjects Pineau uses them as primary themes. Pineau tackles questions of female sexuality and sexual violations against the female Guadeloupean writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé, Pineau

THE CYCLONE METAPHOR: BODY AND TEXTUALITY

According to Martinican writer, Raphael Confiant, Gisèle Pineau's vision is ‘intérieure, révélatrice et révolutionnaire’ (qtd in Gyssels 176). Unlike earlier Guadeloupean writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé, Pineau tackles questions of female sexuality and sexual violations against the female body in a more explicit, probing manner. Whereas Schwarz-Bart’s language remains suggestive on these subjects Pineau uses them as primary themes. Pineau also does not shy away from the taboo subject of incest, and in particular incest affecting children, a theme seldom explored or exposed in francophone Caribbean literature. The trauma of experiencing childhood incest is central to Pineau’s interrogation of violations of the female body in L’Espérance-macadam. The cyclone metaphor explores female sexuality, violence and the relationship between the landscape of the female body and the text.

In ‘The Body of the Woman in the Body of the Text: The Novels of Erna Brodber’ Denise deCaires Narain asserts that the body of the text has implications in Brodber’s works for the focus on the body of the woman. Narain also argues that although Western feminists, particularly the French feminists, have been anxious to retrieve the woman’s body from limited roles which confine her with nature and nurture, and to re-metaphorise the female body as a powerful site of multiple possibilities, and stress the woman’s diffuse and unbounded sexuality, black feminists argue differently. Narain cites Barbara Smith as an example:

Black women have traditionally been reluctant to talk about sex with their daughters. ‘Keep your dress down and your drawers up,’ is a homily for this reticence…. Sexual repression, coupled with blatant sexual exploitation has contributed to a complex psychological mix. (qtd in Narain 98–99).

(They also thought about all of Savane’s crimes, about their cowardice, the times when they could have shown an ounce of bravery, just an ounce, My Lord! They thought about their eyes deliberately closed, looking away. And all the energy spent on hatred, jealousy, scorn, and obeah coming back to haunt them. All that wasted energy…. And they were trying to recreate themselves in a new found solidity that surprised them, overwhelmed them, yes)

As the narrator states, Joab would have been proud of the people of Savane on this the 16th of September 1989, because his paradise is at least temporarily revived (263). United, they are emboldened and defiant taunting the cyclone with drums and songs, ‘Cyclone /Tu ne nous fais pas peur’ (264). (Hurricane you don’t scare us.) Eliette, who before this passing never wanted to understand or listen to the drumming or the ‘musique des nègres’, begins to dance like the ‘négresses’ she so despised, letting the music possess her entire body. It is one of the rare occasions where Eliette expresses herself in a sensuous manner. The cyclone releases liberating and restorative forces that temporarily foster a cycle of re-membering a fragmented community.

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There is still very little in francophone Caribbean women’s fiction, according to Narain, that focuses explicitly on woman as a sexual being. This is also true for L’Espérance-macadam. In the novel Pineau uses the landscape of Savane to explore sexual exploitation rather than female sexuality. The natural landscape is feminised, reflecting the brutalised landscape of the female body. Direct identification is made between the female body and the paysage antillais. For example, when Angela describes the painful burning sensation that she endures during one of the rapes by her father she compares her own body to the Savane landscape claiming that her ‘petite coucoune violente’ was burning like ‘Savane en Carême’.

In patriarchal male gender discourse the natural landscape is also associated with that of the female in hegemonic terms. When Rosan tries to intimidate Angela, to silence her, he talks about possession, conquest and right. ‘J’ai le droit d’aller sur ma monture avant les autres! Je suis ton papa…. Alors, j’ouvre le chemin pour les autres’ (223) (I have the right to mount you before the others. I am your father…. I am clearing the path for the others.). Rosan’s words could easily be interpreted by postcolonial feminists as defining a ‘colonising mission’.

Smith’s notion of sexual exploitation coupled with sexual repression is also perpetuated in the female discourse. When Angela gets her period for the first time Rosette sits her down and tells her to be aware of a race of savage, monstrous animals who look like men. Ironically, unbeknownst to Rosette, Angela has met this race many times before, but it not surprising then that the metaphor Angela employs of the cyclone and the metamorphosis of her father as a Beast with long teeth is also part of the cultural definition and expectation of males in the society. The metaphor of man as a demonic force is not only seen in L’Espérance-macadam but also in Pineau’s 1998 novel, L’Ame prête aux oiseaux, where during a sexual encounter the woman sees the man as releasing demons and monsters (193).

However, these metamorphoses of the male figure pose the problematic of what I would like to call description and deflection. Does the cyclone metaphor simply reflect and describe man’s actions or does it in fact deflect from his responsibility for these acts? Consider the troubling scene of Angela’s rape and the multiple metamorphoses of the father: cyclone, Beast, devil. Angela even prays to God for her father to be freed from the evil ‘bête’ that possesses his soul.

‘Non, c’était pas son papa Rosan, un démon, mon Dieu Seigneur, un démon…. De toute la force de sa jeune foi, elle récita un Je crois en Dieu mais la bête ne disparaissait pas …. Elle voulait crier encore une fois, mais elle avait perdu la parole. (214–15)

(No, it wasn’t her papa Rosan, it was a demon, my Lord God, a demon…. With all the force of her young faith she recited an ‘I believe in the father’ but the beast wouldn’t disappear…. She wanted to cry once again but she couldn’t speak.)

As with Hermancia, religious interpretations perpetuate the transference of accountability for the heinous crimes, and promote suppression of speech,
expression and deflection from the metamorphosed perpetrator. Rosan’s transformations effect a distancing of his role in the act. The distancing is en acted by the use of epithets like ‘coucoune’, ‘coco,’ throughout the novel, that reinforce a Caribbean cultural reality in which sexual body parts are designated in a figurative manner.

This system of reflection and deflection in Pineau’s use of the cyclone metaphor underlines the fact that sexual acts in L’Espérance-macadam are not about sexuality but rather about violation and oppression. This is Pineau’s preoccupation in L’Espérance-macadam. However, the manner in which even these very acts of violation are described may reflect a more revealing, explicit approach as compared to earlier writers, but the metaphoric medium at once reflects a Caribbean reality and at the same promotes deflection of accountability.

**METAPHOR AND CYCLONE CULTURE, SOME CONCLUSIONS**

The fathers’ metamorphoses as the cyclone-Beast undermines to a great extent the hope or espérance that is expressed at the end of the novel. In fact both rapes reinforce the cyclical, cyclonic or fragmented structure of uncontrollable forces of man and nature. If the body of the text is itself a metaphor for the destructive forces of man and cyclone which is mirrored in the language, the syntax, and the structure, then the body of the woman in Pineau is more a site of destruction than the more traditional site of rebirth and regeneration. Her language is a reflection as well as a product of this violation.

Kathleen Gyssels, in an article examining Pineau’s use of autobiography and exile, examines the manner in which the Pineaulien heroine attains self-awareness through her body. This privileging of body can be argued only in as far as Eliette experiences a sense of her physicality, through the drums. However, for the most part, Eliette’s self-image and repressed sexuality has not changed from the girl of sixteen who was afraid of everything and everyone, particularly of men and cyclones — ‘de leurs yeux mauvais’. Eliette does not move from a sense of dispossession, to one of self-possession and security. Although she attempts to re-assemble her fragmented narrative the notion of suppression and secrecy still haunt and hinder a complete restoration.

At the end of the novel when she finally arrives at Marraine Anoncia house, with Angela, Eliette is seeking both shelter from the hurricane and confirmation from Anoncia of what she already knows. ‘Eliette voulait entendre, de la bouche de marraine Anoncia, ce qu’elle savait déjà’ (273). (Eliette wanted to hear what she already knew from the mouth of her godmother Anoncia.)

Although Marraine Anoncia tells the story of her brother, (Eliette’s father, known appropriately as ‘ti-cyclone’) and reveals the familial ties between Eliette and Angela, (Angela’s father and Eliette are half-brother and sister), Marraine Anoncia is only able to relate the story in a manner that is déroutante: ‘Anoncia serrait les dents sur son secret, prétait l’oreille au vent, couvrait sa tête du drap, repossait, repoussait le moment des aveux. (296). (Anoncia kept her tightly
guarded secret, listening to the wind, hiding her head underneath the sheets, pushing away, pushing away the moment of confession.) Direct confession and revelation is still too difficult. In fact Marraine Anoncia relies once again on biblical allusions to explain her brother’s actions, he remains metamorphosed as a devil, a demon, a diabolical figure, ‘un homme maudit’.

The threads of secrecy, guilt, denial, shame and complicity intertwine in Marraine Anoncia’s tale and recall defining characteristics of Savane itself, but the poetic phrasing, written in lyrical Pineaulien prose emphasises both the hope and the suffering. The cyclical, as well as the cyclonic, notion of destruction and restoration is reinforced. Cylones cannot be stopped since acts of nature, acts of God, cannot be controlled, only endured. Therefore man as cyclone and the effects on the female landscape must also be endured. There will always be the cycle of cyclones or as Marraine Anoncia says, ‘c’est peut-être le même qui revient toujours’ (199). (It’s perhaps the same one that keeps coming back.) All that can be done is to rebuild and replant hope. Eliette believes that she can reconstruct a personal narrative. However the ability to rebuild and redefine the collective culture caught in a cycle of destruction and restoration seems as elusive as capturing the Beast. The Beast that in the end is Savane itself.

NOTES

1 All translations from Pineau’s texts are mine.

2 In fact, Rosette, Angela’s mother, will accuse her of being a Judas twice: in the first instance, when Rosette visits Sister Beloved in the Rastafarian settlement; and the second, when Angela tells her about the rape. The biblical reference reinforces both the theme of betrayal as well as the desire to suppress and repress la parole.

3 I have translated bata-coolie as Dougla, ‘bata’ is the French Creole for bastard. Dougla designates a person of mixed Indian and African descent.


5 The hurricane is a common trope in several of Pineau’s works. See La Grande Drive des esprits, p. 16; Un Papillon dans la Cité, pp. 27, 38, 45, 68; L’Exil selon Julia, p. 135.

6 According to Narain, ‘post-colonial feminists have also stressed the centrality of the woman’s body as symbolic fodder in inspiring the “colonising mission”, and, later in providing nationalist patriarchs with an eroticised and feminised landscape to “rescue” from the colonisers’ (99).

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