

Locating Belonging in Postcolonial Space

Homeland Narratives in René Philoctète's *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* and Kim Lefèvre's

Retour à la saison des pluies

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Table of Contents

- Introduction - 2
- Part I: *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* - 13
- Part II: *Retour à la saison des pluies* - 32
- Conclusion - 50
- Works Cited - 53

A Note on Translation:

Where not otherwise noted in footnotes, translations are my own.

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Introduction

“Je me sens comme un voyageur des espaces intersidéraux, condamné à errer dans le cosmos,” writes Kim Lefèvre in her autobiography *Retour à la saison des pluies*.¹ In this sentence, Lefèvre positions herself in a placeless place, an in-between space. She has no location; her travel is weighty and violent. The “voyageur des espaces intersidéraux” lives in the absence of homeland, family, location. In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, René Philoctète writes: “Là-bas, de l’autre côté, en terre haïtienne, traîne un débris de soleil. Pedro voudrait le prendre comme un drap de grosse toile. Pour se couvrir. Se cacher. Il allonge le bras. Le débris de soleil, pris de peur, maronne dans les montagnes d’en face.”² The sunlight that Pedro reaches for is earthly—reflected on the ground and in the mountains. Pedro seeks comfort and shelter in this grounded sun but is thwarted; shelter remains just out of reach. The “là-bas” of Pedro’s sunlight reflects an implied “ici”—a “tierra dominicana” in contrast to the “terre haïtienne.” Yet Pedro’s imagined belonging is not restricted by these boundaries. He desires the shelter of the Haitian sun as if it were his own. How can we map the “là-bas” of Pedro’s sunlight? the “espaces intersidéraux” of Lefèvre’s travel?

This thesis seeks to trace the contours of space and movement in *Retour à la saison des*

¹ Lefèvre, *Retour à la saison des pluies*, 135.

“I feel like a traveler of interstitial spaces, condemned to wander the cosmos.”

² Philoctète, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, 62.

Trans. Linda Coverdale: “Over there, on the other side, on Haitian soil, lingers a scrap of sunshine. Pedro would love to take it like a sheet of coarse linen. To cover himself. Hide himself. He reaches out. The scrap of sunlight, as if frightened, goes marooning into the mountains across the way” (99).

pluies and *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*. In both texts, lives are thrown into motion by the instability of homeland. In *Retour*, Lefèvre, who grew up as an outcast in Vietnam because of her mixed French and Vietnamese ethnicity, returns from France to Vietnam for the first time in thirty years. In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, Adèle, a Haitian woman, and Pedro, her Dominican husband, attempt to flee the 1937 massacre of Haitians living in the Dominican borderlands ordered by Rafael Trujillo.³ Simplistic evocations of homeland—as a static, factual place of birth or as a rallying cry to exclusive nationalism—are inaccessible to Lefèvre and Adèle. Though she was born in Vietnam, Lefèvre’s physical appearance and long absence render her an outsider in her place of birth. Adèle was born in Haiti and now lives in the Dominican Republic, where she is targeted for murder because of her black skin and French-Kreyòl speech—markers of *haïtianité*. Together, Adèle and Pedro create a fluid borderland identity and homeland that their governments declare impossible. Lefèvre returns to a past she had planned to forget forever in search of a sense of belonging she never possessed. What, then are the physical demarcations of Lefèvre and Adèle’s personal homelands? In the most simple terms, a homeland is a space. The space of the homeland is constituted of land, ocean, and sky, of configurations of human bodies, of the passing of time. Exclusion from communal homelands deprives Lefèvre and Adèle of preconstructed time-spaces in which to house their bodies. Lefèvre and Philoctète warp relationships between space, time, and body to reconstruct the meaning of human movement and location.

Le Peuple des terres mêlées (1989) recounts the frantic attempts of Adèle and Pedro to

³ Rafael Léonidas Trujillo Molina led the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961. His bloody reign is known as *el trujillato*.

escape the 1937 massacre. The massacre is sometimes known as “the Parsley Massacre,” because Dominican troops would demand that individuals pronounce *perejil* (“parsley” in Spanish) in order to distinguish between Haitians and Dominicans on the basis of pronunciation. The massacre took place over five days in October, 1937. The exact number of people killed is impossible to know, but estimates most frequently hover around 20,000. The violence linked to the word *perejil* courses throughout *Le Peuple*, as Haitians frantically struggle to pronounce the word and Dominicans scramble to teach their Haitian loved ones to roll their r’s. The text is primarily in French, interspersed with Spanish and Haitian Kreyòl. The main plot of *Le Peuple* takes place over a very short span of time, during the massacre itself. The plot is punctuated with flashbacks that tell the story of Adèle and Pedro’s romance, starting with their encounters along the border. By the end of the text, Adèle has been beheaded and Pedro’s fate is uncertain. The two continue to flee the massacre together, despite Adèle’s mutilation, as they seek a location safe for their mixed-nationality relationship. Although the novel’s plot unfolds during a massacre, everything comes alive in Philoctète’s magical realist text—the bus speaks to the wind, the rain speaks to Pedro, and Adèle’s body-less head speaks to the birds.

Retour à la saison des pluies (1990), in contrast, takes place over months rather than days. The autobiographical novel charts Lefèvre’s growing interest in her past, reconnection with her mother and sisters, and eventual return to Vietnam for the first time in thirty years. *Retour* is Lefèvre’s second autobiography, the sequel to *Métisse Blanche* (1989). Lefèvre is the daughter of a Vietnamese woman and a French soldier stationed in Vietnam who abandoned the family soon after Lefèvre’s birth. Lefèvre grew up marked by shame, both for her biracial heritage—the

evidence of colonialism—and for her mother’s unwed status. She travelled between relatives, experiencing abuse and extreme poverty at home and in French-run schools and observing wars waged amongst French, Vietnamese, and U.S. soldiers. As a young woman, Lefèvre left Vietnam for France, expecting never to return. In the first half of *Retour*, “Ire Partie: Le Passé Résurgi” (Part I: The Resurfaced Past), Lefèvre is living in Paris and begins to encounter acquaintances from Vietnam who discovered her presence in France after reading *Métisse Blanche*. Lefèvre begins to explore the connection to Vietnam that she had ignored for years—she visits the Vietnamese neighborhoods, relearns her first language, and contacts her mother. In the second half of the text, “Ile Partie: Le Retour,” (Part II: The Return) Lefèvre returns to Vietnam and her family.

The spaces explored in these texts are postcolonial spaces, and the way that the characters navigate the relationships between themselves and their locations is influenced by postcoloniality. *Francophone Studies: The Essential Glossary* defines postcolonialism as the analysis of “the social, historical and ethnic context in which literature, and other cultural forms, are produced within the former colonial possessions of the European empires.”⁴ “Postcolonial” marks factual chronology—Vietnam, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic are all independent nations that were once colonial territories—but it also marks an experience of space and time that extends to locations beyond former colonies. Lefèvre’s France is a postcolonial space as well. In Lefèvre’s Paris, Vietnam hides around corners and slips into the words of passing strangers. Time is not static in either *Le Peuple* or *Retour*. The past and the present inform each

⁴ Majumdar, *Francophone Studies*, 206.

other in every moment and the colonial past is never entirely over. The spaces in both texts are marked by multiple, shifting identities that reflect the ambiguous experience of postcoloniality.

Kim, Adèle, and Pedro go through experiences—for Kim, the reappearance of Vietnamese acquaintances and return to Vietnam; for Adèle and Pedro, the massacre—that force them to confront the relationship of their bodies to space and time. Before, they may have been able to ignore some of the more painful intersections of body and space. Adèle and Pedro enjoyed an intertwined life before the violence of the massacre imposed itself in their lives. Kim lived in France for thirty years without seeking out connections to her Vietnamese past. As these characters attempt to recuperate lost or unattainable homelands, they renegotiate the relationship between space and time. The past can become a space to find oneself or lose oneself in. For individuals rejected by or absent from their homelands, the past may be perceived as a sort of utopia. This utopia is necessarily a nonexistent location of belonging. The attempt to return to homeland is an attempt to travel through time, because home is constructed out of memories and past experiences of belonging. Homeland exists in the tension between personal and communal pasts. On the one hand, homeland can be remembered personally as the space of childhood, homes, and family. This is particularly relevant for Lefèvre, for whom the return to Vietnam is a return to the location of her childhood. On the other hand, homeland can also be created out of historic memory and national tales. For Philoctète, the communal homeland based on shared history is central.

Homeland can be imagined as a mythic space beyond the reach of borders and political regimes. For Adèle and Pedro, the imagined homeland is a land without political domination and

racist violence. Both *Retour* and *Le Peuple* focus on individuals whose identities and bodies have been indelibly shaped by slavery, colonialism, war, and borders and who strive for a sense of belonging and home that is often rendered impossible by colonial impositions and their aftereffects.

Colonialism haunts *Retour* and *Le Peuple* like a ghost with a subtle but constant presence. Both texts arguably deal with the aftermath of colonialism.⁵ In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the most evident duality is not one of colonizer versus colonized, but of two previously colonized nations—Haiti and the Dominican Republic— against each other. This “postcolonial” conflict and racial dynamic, however, began with slavery and colonialism, when French and Spanish kidnapped and imported Africans en masse and massacred the native population. Trujillo’s reign reflects a new wave of imperialism or neocolonialism, that of the United States. During the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-1924),⁶ Trujillo was trained by U.S. Marines and quickly rose up the military ranks. Even Adèle’s presence in the Dominican Republic can be tied to colonizing forces—the borderland marketplaces are a vital source of income for many Haitians⁷ because of Haiti’s depressed economic state, which is directly connected to the large debt that France imposed on Haiti in exchange for independence.⁸

Colonialism similarly creates the context for *Retour à la saison des pluies*. France

⁵ Though neocolonial forces continue to impact Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam well after the nations gained nominal independence—notably U.S. intervention in all three countries.

⁶ The U.S. also occupied Haiti from 1915-1934.

⁷ For more on the borderland markets, see Ch. 1 of Maria Cristina Fumagalli’s *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic*.

⁸ “Haiti’s current economic crisis and political turmoil have their roots in the ‘odious debt’ of 150 million gold francs (later reduced to 90 million) which France imposed on the newborn republic with gunboats in 1825. The sum was supposed to compensate French planters for their losses of slaves and property during Haiti’s 1791-1804 revolution,” (Ives, “HAITI: Independence debt”).

progressively attacked various parts of modern-day Vietnam before forming French Indochina in 1887 out of modern-day Vietnam and Cambodia (Laos would also be added to French Indochina in 1893). France maintained colonial rule until Vietnam gained independence in 1954. Lefèvre left Vietnam soon after, in 1960. She lived most her childhood in a French colony, but returns to a Vietnam that has experienced a long and grueling war with the United States, before gaining unification and independence in 1975, this time under a Communist structure.⁹ Lefèvre's existence is, moreover, the result of French military presence in Vietnam. She belongs to a generation of mixed race children sired and abandoned by French soldiers.¹⁰ Kim moves to the colonizing nation, France, in order to escape the shame of the colonialism marked on her body.

In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George explores the meaning of homesickness and quests for home in twentieth-century postcolonial literature. To search for a home or homeland means that one has both experienced and lost belonging; in order to seek home, one must know, through existence or intuition, what home is and is not. George employs an expansive definition of postcolonial that includes all individuals whose worlds have been shaped by colonialism—both the colonizers and the colonized. The very term “postcolonial” harks back to a break with the “colonial” and the “precolonial.” Homesickness, for George, is a project in self-definition: "The search for the location in which the self is 'at home' is one of the

⁹ Lefèvre makes distinctions between those who left Vietnam before 1975 and those who left after, who frequently experienced much more violent migration (17, 138).

¹⁰ Lefèvre draws connections between the generation of French-Vietnamese *métis* produced under French colonization and the generation of American-Vietnamese *métis* born during the war: “Les G.I. retourneront chez eux, abandonnant sur le terrain d’autres enfants métisses des Américains [...] De même que pour ceux qui étaient issus de la colonisation française, ces enfants furent rejetés,” (107-8). Both generations faced rejection in Vietnam and fetishization in Europe and the U.S., as exemplified by texts such as the musical “Miss Saigon.”

primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English."¹¹ Searching for the location of home means searching for compatibility between the individual and the community and searching for knowledge of oneself. However, there is a paradox in searching for home. The search implies that home is something to be found anew, yet if home is the location of memories and past then it is never new. The paradox of searching for “a location in which the self is at home” is that one cannot know until years afterwards whether one has reached such a location.

Home and belonging develop through presence in a location over an extended period of time. Home is where one is familiar, where one’s history is woven into the earth. Home cannot be found anew in an instance; it is slowly built or remembered. While small spaces of home can be found in isolation (an individual house or dwelling), *homeland* requires a broader connection to a physical space and community. This need for the memory of the land leads bell hooks to write in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* that her homeland will always be that of her childhood. Far from her home state of Kentucky, hooks finds a fundamental incompatibility with the land: “I could not understand how the earth could be my witness in this strange land if it could not be a mirror into which I could see reflected the world of my ancestors, the landscape of my dreams.”¹² Homes and homelands are rooted. They reflect back to us the memories and experiences that shaped our selves. Home is where our bodies and families are reflected in the land.

Homelands and homes are rooted in the past, but are not stable. Homeland is an imaginative shaping of space and time. Homeland is created through movement and travel. Mayra Santos-Febres cautions that we must avoid the misleading and often Eurocentric binary

¹¹ George, *The Politics of Home*, 3.

¹² Hooks, *Belonging*, 12.

between sedentarism and travel that marks migration as an “aberration, a deviation from ‘the norm.’”¹³ Uncritical labelings of migration as abnormal limit our understanding of the human experience of geography. Homelands can be constructed through one’s experience of moving through geography, of traversing the land. “Traditional literary criticism,” argues Santos-Febres, assumes “sedentarism as the organizational foundation of any literary institution,” and ignores the impact of “de-colonization, neo-colonialism and international market economy” on fundamental modes of existence.¹⁴ A model of literary criticism that ignores these world-altering phenomena cannot hope to accommodate the constant *ir y venir* of Caribbean literature and other literatures shaped by circular migration.¹⁵

Homeland is not only the territory of the past, but also the territory of return. Home is a calling, a magnetic force, the *venir* or *el ir y venir*. The search for homeland charts a spiraling trajectory through space and time. Homelands marked by exclusion and violence both repel and attract. When hooks writes of her search for home that eventually leads to her return to Kentucky, she notes, “[my story] charts a repetitive circular journey, one wherein I move around and around, from place to place, then end at a location I started from—my old Kentucky home.”

¹⁶ Hooks is always drawn back to her childhood home. Philoctète and Lefèvre’s texts also map circular trajectories in search of belonging. Philoctète’s tightly-wound plot takes place in a day full of *ir y venir*, as Adèle and Pedro run around their island in search of each other, in search of

¹³ Santos-Febres, “The Translocal Papers,” 19.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 20.

¹⁵ *Idem*, 22.

Santos-Febres is speaking in particular of Puerto Rican literature in this dissertation.

¹⁶ Hooks, *Belonging*, 3.

safety, and in search of a welcoming homeland. Lefèvre constantly circles Vietnam in her mind and physically before deciding to return—she has travelled ever closer to Vietnam during her thirty years in France, but never dared to complete the return until *Retour*.

Homeland, though rooted in physical experiences of time and space, is essentially a mythic construction. The homelands sought in *Retour* and *Le Peuple* are idealized and impossible places. When Lefèvre returns to Vietnam, she seeks both a homeland thirty years in the past—the memory of her childhood—and a homeland that never existed—one where she is accepted into the community as an insider. Adèle and Pedro unite and imagine together a borderland utopia—a home for “le peuple des terres mêlées”—even as Trujillo’s henchmen swing knives left and right. The text ends with a vision of Adèle, Pedro, and indistinguishable Haitians and Dominicans joining together under “le rêve de créer le peuple des terres mêlées.”¹⁷ This vision is impossible for many reasons, not least of which because Adèle has already been beheaded and Pedro’s fate is unclear. Nevertheless, Philoctète ends his novel with the vision of “un monde à construire”¹⁸—a homeland in the making.

The very different literary genres of *Retour* and *Le Peuple*—respectively, magical realism and autobiography—find common ground in their play between history and fiction. *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* recounts a historical event, the 1937 massacre of Haitians living on the Haiti-Dominican Republic border, and includes historical figures as characters, most prominently Trujillo. However, these accounts are highly fictionalized and magic suffuses the narrative.

¹⁷ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 147.

Trans. Coverdale: “the dream of creating one people from two lands mixed together” (214).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

Trans. Coverdale: “a world to build” (214).

Retour à la saison des pluies is Lefèvre's second autobiographical novel (after *Métisse Blanche*), and both autobiographies embrace the hazy, half-remembered quality of her life story.

Santos-Febres comments on the blurry line between literature and history for authors who “reescribe[n] desde la literatura la historia.”¹⁹ For Santos-Febres, writing between the lines of history and literature allows her to “jugar a imaginar otra historia que la que [le] cuentan los documentos oficiales.”²⁰ We can read Philoctète and Lefèvre in the same vein. By “reescrib[iendo] desde la literatura la historia,” (whether their own personal histories or national histories) both writers flip official narratives on their heads and write frequently ignored voices into history. Magical realism allows Philoctète to root his text in Haiti's literary tradition. Autobiography allows Lefèvre to construct her past communally, in conversation with her readers and the individuals she writes into her story.

Philoctète and Lefèvre articulate homelands in the face of rejection and violence that emphasize the relationship between body, space, and time. While these texts differ in many ways, I believe that these differences provide for an interesting comparison and challenge my previously-held assumptions about space and home. I analyze *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* in Part I and *Retour à la saison des pluies* in Part II.

¹⁹ Santos, “Historia de la imaginación,” 125.

“rewrite history from the perspective of literature.”

²⁰ *Idem*, 126.

“play at imagining a different history than the one that official documents tell [her].”

Part I: *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*: Home in the Borderlands

Home for Pedro and Adèle is the site of romantic reunion, the coupling of two lives despite borders and geopolitics. Pedro searches for Adèle while riding *la guagua*—a personified bus named Chicha Calma—and is tormented by his inability to protect Adèle and the home they built together. His inability to save his wife reflects his failure as a homemaker; the loss of Adèle is also the loss of home. The last two years of Pedro’s life with Adèle is a form of homemaking: “il est devenu la racine d’une vie [...] le refuge de la douleur de cette femme [...] il s’est établi dans la tendresse et dans l’abondance de cette femme.”²¹ Pedro has set up home (“s’est établi”) inside Adèle, and he in turn has become her root and refuge. In their love, they have found not only a fleeting location, but the rooted home that bell hooks evokes when she speaks of the need to see her past reflected in the land.²² Tragically, this profound bond is also what sentences Adèle to her death. Adèle suspects the imminence of her death far earlier than Pedro, and suggests returning to Haiti, cautioning him, “mon homme, les chemins s’éteignent comme des paupières.”²³ Here and elsewhere, Philoctète describes the land in bodily terms. Philoctète writes that Chicha Calma’s driver “s’engouffre sur l’autoroute d’un ventre lisse.”²⁴ Routes of movement flutter like eyelids, rise and fall like a stomach. The land fluctuates like a body, and is described as such.

²¹ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 59.

Trans. Coverdale: “He has been the taproot of a life [...] the refuge of her sorrow [...] he has been supported by the tenderness and abundance of that woman” (96).

However, *s’établir* does not only mean “to support,” but also “to establish oneself, to take up residence, to settle.” Pedro has made his dwelling in the tenderness and abundance of Adèle.

²² Hooks, *Belonging*. See p. 9 of this thesis.

²³ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 20.

Trans. Coverdale: “And yet, paths and roads are closing down like eyelids” (35).

²⁴ *Idem*, 59.

Trans. Coverdale: “plunges down the highway of a sleek belly” (96).

The land and Adèle share this profound bodily vulnerability in the face of the massacre.

The massacre is preceded by the breakdown of the safety of the home that Adèle and Pedro have built together. Adèle, who “a humé l’odeur de la tuerie,” cannot sleep.²⁵ While Pedro sleeps, she fears for the coming violence. The massacre develops as Adèle and Pedro act out the rituals of gendered homemaking—Pedro leaves for work in the sugarcane fields, where he will attempt to incite resistance, and Adèle tends to the home. This division of labor is explored in *The Politics of Home* when George writes, “The word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection.”²⁶ Despite Adèle’s more vulnerable position in the Dominican Republic, it is ultimately Pedro who decides whether or not “la mujer mía” will flee to Haiti.²⁷ Home is shelter and protection for both Adèle and Pedro, but the word connotes different modalities to the two. Pedro will experience the massacre in public spaces—at work, on the bus, in the streets. Adèle will experience the massacre primarily from her home, and it will be her home that is destroyed along with her body.

Adèle’s experience of the massacre takes place in her back-and-forth movement across the threshold of her home. After Pedro leaves, Adèle washes the laundry in her yard. When she sees Trujillo’s soldiers and generals, she retreats to the interior of her home to emerge later:

“Adèle se lève, gagne la barrière de sa maison, jette un regard circulaire dans la rue.”²⁸ Adèle’s

²⁵ *Idem*, 16.

Trans. Coverdale: “Adèle inhaled the odor of slaughter” (29).

²⁶ George, *The Politics of Home*, 1.

²⁷ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 20.

“My woman.”

²⁸ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 30.

Trans. Coverdale: “Adèle rises and goes to the fence around the front yard, to glance up and down the street” (55).

A more literal translation, however, would be: “Adèle rises, reaches the barrier to her house, throws a

home is her personal sphere from which she observes the troubling exterior world. Bell hooks theorizes the front porch as a liminal space in which black women enjoy the safety of the home but retain visual access to the public. For hooks, the front porch is a space from which the black women in her family could see and be seen without exposing themselves to the violence of public space. The occupation of public space is more accessible to men, whether that occupation is the possession of a territory or simply standing on the street without harassment. Because of this, hooks writes: “In cities women have no outdoor territory to occupy. They must be endlessly moving or enclosed. They must have a destination. They cannot loiter or linger.”²⁹ Unlike Pedro, who easily occupies public space throughout the text thanks to his gender and light color, Adèle only leaves her home after her death—her disembodied head circulates the town with a freedom that her living body—dangerously female and dangerously black—never possessed. Adèle is relegated to the interior, gendered sphere of the home, of laundry, of furtive glances cast onto the street. Adèle is murdered in her home and during her border crossings between home and exterior. Thus, through her murder *el trujillato* attempts a total annihilation of her ability to possess space—Adèle is refused belonging in the national space of the Dominican Republic and in the intimate space of her home.

Adèle maps the state of the coming massacre based on what she sees in the street in front of her home. When she notices that the street is unusually empty, and later when she searches for Pedro, she is continually shouting to her neighbors who do not reply. When don Agustin de

circular look into the street.” In the original, Adèle reaches the barrier (or fence) that divides her house from the street in a hasty, linear motion that contrasts with the circular motion of her eyes scanning the street.

²⁹ Hooks, *Belonging*, 143.

Cortoba, the leader of the massacre, arrives to kill Adèle—covered in the body parts of those he has already killed, locusts spilling from his mouth—he stops “juste en face de la maison de Pedro Alvarez Brito.”³⁰ Adèle continues to move back and forth across the threshold of her home as her death approaches. The exact moment of Adèle’s death is unclear, blurred by the back-and-forth movement from yard to interior. With don Agustin outside, Adèle “gagne l’intérieur de la maison”³¹ and lights a candle for the Virgin.³² She is terrified to see that the statue of the Virgin does not smile at her and has no eyes. Adèle runs outside to ask her neighbors what has gone wrong and suddenly seems already to have lost her head. She mourns both loses, crying, “Hé! Voisine! Mira, voisine! La madona n’a plus ses yeux [...] Voisine, dis-moi! Où est ma tête? Ma tête de chiquita haitiana de Belladère.”³³ Adèle’s home is swept up in the warpath of the massacre. The violence has invaded her most intimate living spaces. Adèle’s murder involves the invasion of her home and the separation of Adèle from her voiceless neighbors.

The passage from *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* cited at the beginning of this thesis exemplifies the ambivalence of belonging to a divided land. When Pedro is desperately seeking the help of his fellow cane-fields workers to prevent the massacre, Philoctète writes: “Là-bas, de

³⁰ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 40.

Trans. Coverdale: “right in front of the house of Pedro Alvarez Brito” (68).

³¹ *Idem*, 46.

Trans. Coverdale: “Adèle goes inside the house” (76).

A more literal translation emphasizes the movement from exterior to interior: “Adèle reaches the interior of the house.”

³² *Idem*, 47.

“[...] à Notre-Dame, à la Mater Dolorosa [...] la Vierge.”

³³ *Idem*, 47.

Trans. Coverdale: “Hey! Neighbor! *Mira*, neighbor! Look! The Madonna’s eyes are gone [...] Neighbor, tell me! Where is my head? My *chiquita-haitiana-from-Belladère*’s head” (77).

l'autre côté, en terre haïtienne, traîne un débris de soleil. Pedro voudrait le prendre comme un drap de grosse toile. Pour se couvrir. Se cacher. Il allonge le bras. Le débris de soleil, pris de peur, maronne dans les montagnes d'en face."³⁴ In this moment, though he continues to seek a way to save Adèle, Pedro has already begun to suspect that he has failed. The text shifts between Pedro's desperate attempts to build resistance amongst the other sugarcane workers and his search for Adèle. In the midst of these two panicked movements, the sunlight drifting across Haitian land represents Adèle and their home together for Pedro. This home straddles but cannot erase the border. Pedro sees the sunlight in Haiti as a potential refuge, but it is still explicitly on the other side, over there, "là-bas, de l'autre côté, en terre haïtienne." Pedro and Adèle vacillate between feeling a sense of belonging to a shared land and hyper-awareness of the border that threatens to literally slice them apart—the machetes of *el trujillato* enact the violence of the border as they divide heads from bodies, Pedro from Adèle, and Dominicans from Haitians.

The sunlight fleeing to the mountains reflects a long history of violence and resistance on the island of Hispaniola. The sun that Pedro reaches for is a shard of sun, a "débris de soleil." Moments after seeing this shard, Pedro and the other passengers see the first indications of the massacre that has broken up the sky and produced these shards: "Au loin, au-dessus d'Elías Piña, un pan de ciel s'écroule; des traits de feu se heurtant, se fracassant, rebondissent pêle-mêle. Quelqu'un dit: 'Ya comienza!'"³⁵ The sky is falling apart. The "débris de soleil" that Pedro

³⁴ *Idem*, 62.

See p. 2 of this thesis.

³⁵ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 64.

Trans. Coverdale: "In the distance, over Elías Piña, a section of sky crumbles in a shower of fiery shards that collide, shatter, ricochet pell-mell. Somebody says, '¡Ya comienza! Now it begins!'" (102).

wants to drape over himself for refuge is the debris of an exploding land, a marker of violence. Even the description of the sun's flight to the mountains—"le débris de soleil, comme pris de peur, *marronne* dans les montagnes d'en face [emphasis added]"—evokes the shared history of the island at the same time as it warns of the violence to come. Linda Coverdale explains in a footnote in her English translation of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* that the verb *marronner*, meaning "to run away into the hills" comes from the term for escaped slaves in the West Indies, *maroon*, from the Spanish *cimarrón*.³⁶ Throughout Haitian history after the start of the slave trade, escaped slaves and indigenous Taínos frequently established their own communities in the mountains.³⁷ As the sun "*marronne dans les montagnes*," it follows the ancestral path of the African and indigenous people of the island who fled slavery and violence in search of refuge. The reference to mountains conveys yet another nod to Haitian history—the name Haiti comes from the Taíno name for the island, Ayiti, which means "land of high mountains."³⁸ The sun flees to the mountains—to the refuge of centuries of African and indigenous inhabitants of the island, to Ayiti. Through these nods to the African and indigenous history of the island, Philoctète constructs a history shared between the people of both Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The sun also reflects a more personalized violence, that of Adèle's murder. When Pedro yearns for the shard of sun, he is yearning for Adèle, whose death has already transpired unbeknownst to Pedro. Adèle's murder is not described in detail; as previously noted, she seems

³⁶ Philoctète, *Massacre River*, 99.

³⁷ Fumagalli, *On the Edge*, 16.

³⁸ *Idem*, 16.

to inexplicably lose her head. However, Philoctète fills in the gaps in Adèle’s death through his descriptions of don Agustin murdering a ray of sunlight. In this way, violence against nature and violence against human bodies are again linked. The sunlight first appears as a joyful and free symbol of unity between Haitians and Dominicans: “Le soleil libéré du piège de la Sierra de Neiba³⁹ galope sur les deux terres.”⁴⁰ However, the sunlight next appears at the start of the massacre, just before don Agustin reaches Adèle’s house: “Un rayon de soleil qui passe est poursuivi sans façon par don Agustin. Pris, il est pendu, au faite d’un quénépier.”⁴¹ The death of Adèle, not depicted explicitly, is shown through the metaphor of the *rayon de soleil*. As Adèle continues her laundry, don Agustin buries the carcass of the sunlight outside her house: “Dans la rue, don Agustin est en train d’enterrer la dépouille du rayon de soleil.”⁴² Just after Adèle rushes outside, crying for her lost head and the missing eyes of the virgin, the sunlight’s limp body falls into its grave: “Le corps du rayon de soleil tombe dans la fosse. Mou. Piteux.”⁴³ Adèle, don Agustin, and the sunlight become mingled and confused. Adèle sees the body of the sunlight fall into the ditch and is overwhelmed by a fatigue that seems to force her own body into the dirt: “Sa jambe droite roule dans la poussière [...] Sa jambe gauche se met à sautiller autour de don

³⁹ The Neyba Mountain Range extends across both sides of the border on the southern edge of the province of Elias Piña.

⁴⁰ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 21.

Trans. Coverdale: “Freed from the snare of the Sierra de Nieba, the sun gallops across the two lands” (36).

⁴¹ *Idem*, 40.

Trans. Coverdale: “A passing sunbeam is promptly chased down by Don Agustín and hanged from the top of a Spanish lime tree” (58).

⁴² *Idem*, 44.

Trans. Coverdale: “In the street, Don Agustín is busy burying the remains of the sunbeam” (74).

⁴³ *Idem*, 47.

Trans. Coverdale: “The body of the sunbeam drops into the grave. Limp. Pitiful” (77).

Agustin qui tasse le corps du rayon de soleil dans la terre molle.”⁴⁴ Adèle, now beheaded, continues to call to her unanswering neighbors as a child shouts “Perejil!” and “la pioche jette les dernières mottes de terre sur le cadavre du rayon de soleil.”⁴⁵ The sun stands in for Adèle in death and burial. The sunlight represents Pedro’s desire for refuge and for Adèle, the sunlight traverses the earth in search of freedom in the tradition of Pedro and Adèle’s ancestors, and the sunlight dies a brutal death alongside Adèle.

Despite the immense tragedy and the violence in the text, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* maintains a faith in the power of the people of the borderlands to model a hybrid lifestyle that supersedes national boundaries. It is consistently the poor people, those who work the land side-by-side, who enact this utopia. The political leaders and elites of both the Dominican Republic and Haiti have no role in it. The people of the borderlands are massacred by Trujillo and “subjugué par la ripaille, la saoulerie, la luxure, entretenues par le gouvernement de Vincent”⁴⁶.⁴⁷ Utopia, instead, is found in “deux enfants noirs, une fillette de cinq ans, un garçonnet de quatre, [...] lui, d’une famille haïtienne, les François, elle, d’une famille dominicaine, les Cortez” who fall asleep holding hands and learning to pronounce *perejil*.⁴⁸ When Dominican soldiers find

⁴⁴ *Idem*, 47-48.

Trans. Coverdale: “Her right leg rolls in the dust [...]. Her left leg goes off to frolic around Don Agustín, who is tamping the sunbeam’s body down into the soft ground” (78).

⁴⁵ *Idem*, 49.

Trans. Coverdale: “The pickax plops the last clods of dirt on the corpse of the sunbeam” (79).

⁴⁶ Sténio Joseph Vincent was president of Haiti from 1930 to 1941. He was chosen by a national assembly in 1930 during U.S. occupation.

⁴⁷ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 73.

Trans. Coverdale: “Captivated by the carousal, drunkenness, and lechery served up by the Vincent administration” (113).

⁴⁸ *Idem*, 94.

Trans. Coverdale: “Two black children, a girl of five and a boy of four, [...] They were born in Bahoruco, he to the Haitian François family, and she to the Dominican Cortez family” (145).

the two, they cannot bring themselves to wake and kill either child. These small moments are repeated throughout the text, as Dominicans try to teach their Haitian friends, lovers, coworkers, and neighbors to trill the Dominican “r” that will save them from the massacre.

Through moments of cross-border cooperation, Philoctète demonstrates the artificiality of the border—harsh distinctions between Haitians and Dominicans have been decreed by the rulers and elites of both countries, but are not reflected in the reality of the people. Trujillo declares Dominicans to be *los blancos de la tierra* (the whites of the land), and sets off a “syndrome du miroir.”⁴⁹ Philoctète describes the quasi-schizophrenia of the Dominican who, upon examining their reflection, “se découvrait noir tout entier, à demi, au tiers, au quart.”⁵⁰ Dominicans see in the mirror a narrative diametrically opposed to Trujillo’s narrative of whiteness. Trujillo’s definition of *dominicanismo* creates a frenzy, a “syndrome du miroir” in which Dominicans scramble to buy mirror upon mirror, hoping to see a whiter self-image in each. Philoctète emphasizes that Trujillo’s whiteness narrative in fact oppresses the people of both nations: “le racisme de Trujillo rendit, pendant longtemps, le joyeux peuple dominicain, spectral.”⁵¹ In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the 1937 massacre is not a conflict between Dominicans and Haitians, but between the common people and elites or despotic rulers.

The final scene of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* is a testimony to the strength of the people of the borderlands and the lasting potential of Haitian-Dominican unity. In the end of the text,

⁴⁹ *Idem*, 70.

Trans. Coverdale: “mirror syndrome” (110).

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

Trans. Coverdale: “found he was one-quarter, or one-third, or one-half, or completely black” (110).

⁵¹ *Idem*, 72.

Trans. Coverdale: “Thus did Trujillo’s racism turn joyous Dominicans, for a long time, into ghosts” (112).

Philoctète emphasizes yet again the impossibility of separating out Haitians and Dominicans. In the borderlands, “Ils sont de toutes les couleurs, de toutes les démarches, de toutes les croyances, de toutes les réactions, de toutes les mémoires, de toutes les beautés,” and they come from “tous les coins de la frontière dominicaine” and “tous les coins de la frontière haïtienne.”⁵² These indistinguishable Haitians and Dominicans emerge from hiding after the massacre to rebuild their community. Though everything is in disarray, the land remains constant. The people of the borderlands can only place their faith in the strength of the land: “ils ont clairement conscience que la terre qui est là, devant eux, porte le poids des arbres. Et qu’elle est leur terre.”⁵³ The most fundamental essence of the homeland is the land itself. Despite the violence with which Adèle is thrown from the Dominican Republic, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* ends with an affirmation of her belonging on the island.

Philoctète affirms the importance of rootedness and ancestral homelands through his style of writing as well. The genre of magical realism can be interpreted as a recuperation of homeland and Haitian literary tradition. Alejo Carpentier conceptualizes magical realism as a distinctly American style with roots in Haiti. Carpentier writes that the particular history of the Americas leads to this distinct literary style: “Arrastra el latinoamericano una herencia de treinta siglos, pero [...] debe reconocerse que *su estilo* se va afirmando a través de su historia.”⁵⁴ The particular

⁵² Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 146.

Trans. Coverdale: “They are of every color, every walk of life, every belief, every character, every kind of memory and beauty [...] from every cranny of the Dominican border [...] in every corner of the Haitian border” (213).

⁵³ *Idem*, 147.

Trans. Coverdale: “They clearly know that the land they see before their eyes is real enough to bear the weight of trees. And that it is their land” (214).

⁵⁴ Carpentier, “De lo real maravilloso americano,” 8.

Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora: “Latin Americans drag a legacy of thirty centuries

legacies and histories of the Americas shape a particular literary style. Carpentier's "primera noción de lo real maravilloso"⁵⁵ came to him while visiting the Haitian ruins of Henri Christophe's kingdom and the Citadel La Ferrière (referred to in *Le Peuple* as Citadelle Henry). For Carpentier, magical realism is manifested in the Haitian landscape. Jacques Stéphen Alexis declares magical realism to be a deeply Haitian form of writing in "Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens." Alexis writes, "Faire du réalisme correspond pour les artistes haïtiens à se mettre à parler la même langue que leur peuple."⁵⁶ By writing in the magical realist style, Philoctète embraces the Haitian forms of speech and expression that are the targets of violence in his novel.

In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, the citadel that inspired Carpentier obsesses Trujillo. Trujillo's desire to possess the entire island of Hispaniola is symbolized by his fury over his inability to possess the citadel. Philoctète's Trujillo salivates over this symbol of Haitian historical and literary identity. The Citadelle Henry⁵⁷ is the representation of Haitian mythic history. This perspective on the citadel is not unique to Trujillo—the ruins of the massive citadel and the nearby Palais Sans-Souci loom large in conceptions of Haiti both from within and from outside. The history of the citadel and Christophe's reign is interwoven with myths and ghosts. Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones* similarly focuses on a young Haitian woman

behind them, but [...] we must recognize that *our style* is reaffirmed throughout *our history*" (83).

⁵⁵ Carpentier, "De lo real," 9.

Trans. Huntington, Zamora: "first inkling of the marvelous real" (84).

⁵⁶ Alexis, "Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens," 268.

Trans. Ashcroft: "Creating realism meant that the Haitian artists were setting about speaking the same language as their people" (197).

⁵⁷ I use here Philoctète's spelling of "Henry," though it is also frequently spelled "Henri." Henri Christophe, one of the leaders of the slave rebellion that led to Haitian independence, built the citadel between 1806 and 1820 to protect Haiti from France. The mountaintop fortress is in the north of Haiti, just south of Cap-Haïtien and near Palais Sans-Souci, Christophe's royal residence.

living in the Dominican Republic during the 1937 massacre. Amabelle, Danticat's protagonist, survives the massacre and crosses the border to return to Haiti. Years after, Amabelle lives in Haiti but is still haunted by her trauma and memories of loved ones who perished. She visits the citadel and overhears a tour guide telling a group of Spanish-speaking tourists that the body of the terrifying ruler Christophe may be buried beneath their very feet.⁵⁸ In *The Farming of Bones*, the citadel is a space that recalls both violence and Haitian nation-building.

The citadel is the manifestation of the tragedy and triumph of the Haitian revolution. Aimé Césaire, who wrote about the potent symbolism of the citadel and Haitian revolutionary history in *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, said in an interview: "Haiti represented for me the heroic Antilles, the African Antilles. [...] It is at the same time a country with a marvellous history: the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint l'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines."⁵⁹ Christophe constructed the massive citadel and grand palace to reflect the triumph of the slaves over the masters and the power of the black race, but he also exploited and killed many workers and soldiers in order to construct the building. From the beginning, the citadel has been the expression of the might of rulers over the people. The citadel is the monument of a country saddled with colonial debt and despotic rulers and was never finished—Christophe committed suicide before construction could be completed. When Trujillo hungers for the citadel, he hungers for more despotic might over the people of the island. He continues to ignore what, for Philoctète, is the true strength of the island and the true location of homeland—the everyday intertwining of lives of the poor people of the borderlands

⁵⁸ Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*, 279.

⁵⁹ cited in Logan, "Representing Haiti," 96.

who have been forsaken by the elites of both nations.

Philoctète's Trujillo obsesses over the citadel because it is the missing piece to his construction of a Dominican nation—the citadel is the monumental myth that Trujillo lacks. Trujillo cannot construct the homeland myth he desires without the citadel, and his infatuation with the citadel is a sexual desire and obsession. Trujillo sits atop a horse watching the citadel from Dominican land, hungering for the monument. Philoctète writes, “Il aurait hypothéqué un peuple pour l’avoir dans sa chambre, dans son lit [...] Il la voulait dans son corps, dans ses nuits, dans ses amours. Il la voulait très fort et souffrait cruellement de ne pas la posséder.”⁶⁰ Trujillo is haunted by his inability to possess the citadel, his failure to complete the sexual conquest of the island. Philoctète writes that Trujillo would have given up a people to possess the citadel—and he does. Trujillo massacres Haitians of the borderlands in a quest to construct a white nation that will one day conquer the island and the citadel. When Philoctète's Trujillo declares Dominicans to be *los blancos de la tierra*, he does so out of the need for a national myth—“Il sentit que le monopole du pouvoir exigeait un mythe [...] Un mythe! A défaut de la Citadelle Henry. Un mythe!”⁶¹ Lacking the citadel, the nation needs a myth. Trujillo and the Dominican Republic do not have the epic history that Césaire admires about Haiti. Without a revolutionary nation-building myth, Trujillo constructs his own nation-building myth based on race. Whiteness becomes the national epic of the Dominican Republic under Trujillo.

⁶⁰ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 70.

Trans. Coverdale: “He would have mortgaged the nation to have it in his room, in his bed [...] He wanted it in his body, in his nights, in his amours. He wanted it very, very much and suffered cruelly at not possessing it” (110).

⁶¹ *Idem*, 50-51.

Trans. Coverdale: “He sensed that the monopoly of power demanded a myth [...] A myth! If he couldn't have the Citadel...A myth!” (82).

The massacre is a manifestation of Trujillo's explicit attempts to shape the island according to his vision and, in his own violent way, to reimagine the meaning of home and belonging on a shared island. Áurea María Sotomayor-Miletti writes that the nationalistic Dominican intellectual elite of the 1920s and 30s viewed the borderlands as a threat to Dominican identity. Sotomayor-Miletti describes: "la élite intelectual dominicana [...] se concentró en combatir la llamada desnacionalización de la frontera, lo cual requería definir la nación dominicana en términos monoétnicos y eurocéntricos."⁶² Trujillo and the Dominican elite define their identity as both a nation and a home racially. In *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*, Philoctète imagines Trujillo gathering "des ethnographes, des ethnologues, des sociologues, des historiens, des linguistes, même des statisticiens,"⁶³ in order to declare the true identity of the Dominican people. Unsatisfied with any of their answers, Trujillo himself declares, "Nous sommes les blancs de la tierra!"⁶⁴ Philoctète describes Trujillo's manic behavior with a deft irony. Even in his proclamation of Dominican purity,⁶⁵ Philoctète writes Trujillo's speech in a mixture of French and Spanish—Trujillo cannot escape the intertwining of Dominican and Haitian. In his history of the island, Pedro San Miguel writes that, over time, "the definition of 'Dominican' became 'not Haitian.'"⁶⁶ For Trujillo, the essence of *dominicanismo* is dependent

⁶² Sotomayor-Miletti, "Pronunciar 'perejil' en el río Masacre," 187.

"the Dominican intellectual elite [...] concentrated on fighting the so-called denationalization of the border, which required defining the Dominican nation in monoethnic and Eurocentric terms"

⁶³ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 51.

Trans. Coverdale: "ethnographers, ethnologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, even statisticians" (83).

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

Trans. Coverdale: "We are the *blancos de la tierra!*" (83).

⁶⁵ Trujillo's room of experts then cry out, "Viva los blancos límpidos de la tierra!" (51). White, for Trujillo, means purity and cleanliness (*limpieza*).

⁶⁶ San Miguel, *The Imagined Island: History, Identity, and Utopia in Hispaniola*, 39.

on its negative relationship to *haitianismo*. Trujillo's sense of belonging and construction of home are fragile, as they can exist only in opposition to "the other side," Haiti.

Despite Trujillo's emphasis on whiteness, the body often fails as a marker of difference in the space of the borderlands. As Philoctète made clear in his descriptions of cross-border cooperation and the "syndrome du miroir," skin tone is an unreliable indicator of nationality in the borderlands. Instead, language marks difference. The word *perejil*, in particular, gains a vital importance. Philoctète explains that life and death decisions rest on the pronunciation of this one word: "Suivant qu'on le prononce bien on est Dominicain, blanco de la tierra, les honneurs vous sont rendus: 'Guardia, saludade!' Mais, suivant que l'r a transité dans l'i, que le j a bu l'l, que le p boîte dans l'r, que l'e s'est pris dans le j ou que le p, l'l, l'r se déboitent, s'encastrent, s'agrippent, se desserrent, se bagarrent, se fuient, on est Haïtien, bon pour le poteau: 'Guardia, fusile lo! [sic]'"⁶⁷ Nationality, race, and membership in the community rest on the pronunciation of this word. Language connotes belonging, and the covalent spaces of Haiti and the Dominican Republic are defined and differentiated by the languages that reverberate through them.

El trujillato weaponizes language to defend a nation-building narrative built around *antihaitianismo*. The word *perejil* possesses and murders. Pedro rides the bus next to a young Haitian woman who drones *perejil* over and over, incapable of mimicking the Dominican pronunciation. Philoctète describes the power of the word over the woman as she continues to

⁶⁷ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 76.

Trans. Coverdale: "If you can pronounce it well, you are Dominican, *blanco de la tierra*, and the soldiers present arms: 'Guardia, salud!' But if the *r* wanders into the *i*, if the *j* absorbs the *l*, the *p* limps into the *r*, the *e* gets caught in the *j*, or if the *p*, the *l*, the *r* become dislocated, jam up, grab at one another, come undone, start scrapping, go off in a huff, then you are Haitian and ready for the firing squad: 'Guardia, fusilelo!'" (119).

mumble *perejil* in her sleep: “Le mot l’a investie. Domestiquée. Colonisée.”⁶⁸ Hegemonic language colonizes and domesticates this woman, invades even her dreams. *Perejil* spoken with a Haitian accent⁶⁹ shifts into even more threatening forms—*pénil, périr* (peril, perish). When Adèle first overhears soldiers marching past her house and chanting *perejil*, she cannot understand the words and hears, “Perejil! Périr! Pétrir! Per!”⁷⁰ Moments later, she hears the soldiers again and remarks, “Des têtes de soldats crient: ‘Perejil!’ Cette fois-ci, j’ai bien entendu. ‘Perejil! Périr!’”⁷¹ *Perejil* spoken by Haitians on trial becomes their own sentence: *périr*. Philoctète remarks that Vincent and the Haitian government “méconnut le péril trujillien.”⁷² The *péril trujillien* is *perejil*. The word *perejil* is the means through which Trujillo carries out his terror.

The Haitian woman on the bus is able to continue her rehearsal of *perejil* because the space of the bus is constantly in movement. The Haitian woman is without fixed location, and so cannot be targeted. It is only after she descends from the bus that she will be a body marked as foreign and disposable in the land she occupies. Chicha Calma is *la guagua de la frontière*, the bus of the borderlands. As she drives Dominicans and Haitians throughout the Dominican side of the border, she communicates constantly with nature, the radio, and her riders. Chicha Calma

⁶⁸ *Idem*, 75.

Trans. Coverdale: “[The word] has besieged her. Subdued her. Colonized her” (118).

⁶⁹ “Parsley” is *persil* in French and *pèsi* in Kreyòl.

⁷⁰ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 30.

Trans. Coverdale: “*¡Perejil!* Parsley! Perish! Per!” (55).

⁷¹ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 32.

Trans. Coverdale: “Soldiers stick their heads out, yelling ‘*¡Perejil!*’ This time, I heard it clearly. ‘*¡Perejil!* Parsley! Perish!’” (58).

⁷² *Idem*, 73.

Trans. Coverdale: “underestimated the menace of Trujillo” (113).

mediates the space between the land and humans, carrying both in her wheels. Chicha declares, “je porte les villes et les villages dans mes pneus,”⁷³ and the narrator later reminds her, “tu portes dans tes pneus l’esprit du peuple de la frontière.”⁷⁴ As Chicha bounces over the terrain, she charts her path based on towns, soil, and the people of the borderlands: “Elle doit encore penser à ses kilomètres de kilomètres. De Santiago à la Romana. D’asphalte. De Sanchez à Higuey. De boue. De Monte-Christi à San Pedro. De caillasse. Par tout le pays. De chairs, de chansons.”⁷⁵ Chicha exists through her movement. She has no location other than movement. The 1831 *Diccionario marítimo español* defines “calma chicha” or “calma muerta” as “la absoluta falta de viento, sin percibirse un soplo, y la plena tranquilidad del mar.”⁷⁶ *Calma chicha* is a stillness of ocean so extreme that it approaches death. This term is inverted for the name Chicha Calma.⁷⁷ Chicha Calma is the opposite of *calma chicha*, she is constant movement, wind, tumult. Chicha’s state of motion exemplifies the borderland people and geography. As she speeds through space, nature and the radio update her constantly on the state of the massacre, and Chicha and nature unite in their horror.

The interior of *la guagua* becomes an in-between space where the reality of the massacre

⁷³ *Idem*, 58.

Trans. Coverdale: “I carry the cities and villages on my tires” (95).

⁷⁴ *Idem*, 78.

Trans. Coverdale: “You carry on your tires the spirit of the border people” (121).

⁷⁵ *Idem*, 74.

Trans. Coverdale: “It must still be thinking of its kilometers of kilometers. From Santiago to La Romana. Of asphalt. From Sánchez to Higuey. Of mud. From Monte Cristi to San Pedro. Of road metal. All through the country. Of bodies and songs” (116).

⁷⁶ Fernández de Navarrete, *Diccionario marítimo español*, 131.

“The absolute absence of wind, without feeling a breeze, and the complete tranquility of the sea.”

⁷⁷ Though it is also possible that this inversion is not intentional. As Coverdale notes in her note in the English translation, Philoctète makes multiple mistakes in the Spanish of *Le Peuple des terres mêlées*. Coverdale chose to correct those mistakes in her translation, though she leaves Chicha Calma’s name the same.

is both processed and suspended. As the massacre unfolds, the wind and the radio—once described separately—become a singular *vent-radio* that gives statistics and speaks in the voice of the propaganda of *el trujillato* to Chicha Calma. Chicha cannot believe what she hears (“Chicha feint de ne pas entendre. En somme, elle n’arrive pas à croire ce qu’elle vient d’entendre”⁷⁸) in part because the ecosystem of passengers on board remains constant. Pedro and the other passengers only see signs of the massacre in the distance after they disembark. Inside is suspense, waiting. The Haitian woman onboard practices pronouncing *perejil* desperately and futilely, but her death will not come until she disboards to face the horrors outside. Inside, the mix of Haitians and Dominicans continue to mumble, sleep, tell stories, make noise. Inside *la guagua* is a suspended community without fixed location and temporarily beyond the violence outside.

Chica Calma’s suspended community in motion is reminiscent of that in Luis Rafael Sánchez’s short story “La guagua aérea,” which takes place on board a flight between New York and Puerto Rico.⁷⁹ Suspended above the ocean, the passengers of *la guagua aérea* are neither here nor there—when the narrator asks another passenger what town in Puerto Rico she is from, she responds “con una naturalidad que asusta, [...] *De Nueva York*.”⁸⁰ For these passengers for whom New York is “el eliseo desacreditado” and Puerto Rico is “el edén inhabitable,” to state

⁷⁸ Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 77.

Trans. Coverdale: “Chicha pretends she hasn’t heard. Basically, she cannot believe what she did just hear” (119).

⁷⁹ The short story is the first in Sanchez’s book of the same name that explores the complex meanings of *viaje* (voyage) for Puerto Ricans.

⁸⁰ Sánchez, Luis Rafael. *La guagua aérea*, 21.

“with an astounding ease, [...] From New York.”

one's place of origin as New York, Puerto Rico makes perfect sense.⁸¹ Chicha Calma's passengers occupy a similar dual location, belonging to both sides of the border and to neither. Chicha is not the bus of one side or the other, she is *la guagua de la frontière*, "la guagua des grands marchés de Maribaroux, de Jimani, de Cerca, de Los Posos"⁸²—the borderland markets where Haitians and Dominicans mingle freely and where Adèle and Pedro met.⁸³ The storytelling and raucous noise of Chicha's passengers is mirrored in the passengers of Sánchez's *guagua aérea*. For Sánchez, the anecdotes shared amongst Puerto Ricans in transit in "el idioma español puertorriqueño. Idioma vasto y basto, vivificantamente corrupto," are essential to the creation of a collective identity and sense of belonging.⁸⁴ The stories shared in a pulsating, mixed language are the community of "Puertorriqueños del corazón estrujado por las interrogaciones que suscitan los adverbios *allá y acá*."⁸⁵ Philoctète's *guagua* and Sánchez's *guagua aérea* create in-between sites that foster in-between communities. These vehicles, constantly in motion and without fixed location, become traveling borders. The only truly borderland location that cannot be pinned to one or another side of the line is one that constantly moves; life in the borderlands is life in motion. Home in these spaces is more fluid than a name on a map or a mortgage, it is found in

⁸¹ *Idem*, 15.

"the discredited Elysium," "the inhabitable Eden"

⁸² Philoctète, *Le Peuple*, 78.

Trans. Coverdale: "the *guagua* of the great markets of Maribaroux, Jimaní, Cerca, Los Posos" (121).

⁸³ The markets are "attended by sellers and customers from both sides of the border and [...] take place twice a week in different locations within the Dominican borderland." They have existed variously on either side of the border since the early 16th century. Haitians seeking to migrate across the border sometimes cross through a special migration agreement that permits Haitians to enter the Dominican Republic on market days (Fumagalli, *On the Edge*, 5-8).

⁸⁴ Sánchez, *La guagua aérea*, 15.

"the Puerto Rican Spanish language. A vast and coarse language, vividly corrupt."

⁸⁵ *Idem*, 20.

"Puerto Ricans with hearts wrung out by the interrogations that the adverbs *here* and *there* incite."

movement and fluctuation.

Part II: *Retour à la saison des pluies*: Distant homelands

Kim Lefèvre's dual existence between Vietnam and France is similarly represented through vehicles of travel. When Kim flies from France to Vietnam, the airplane becomes its own location distinct from the origin or the destination. As in Philoctète's *guagua* and in Sánchez's *guagua aérea*, Lefèvre's airplane becomes a site of impromptu community building that would not have been possible in a fixed location. As Lefèvre travels to meet her long-lost mother and sisters, she notices an old woman and thinks, "Je n'ai pas connu ma grand-mère maternelle, morte bien avant ma naissance. Celle-ci me plaît, je la choisis et tout bas je murmure: 'Grand-mère!'"⁸⁶ In the enclosed space of the plane, Lefèvre permits herself to imagine kinships with her fellow passengers. Although Lefèvre's imagined community-building takes place in her own mind and the communities inside Chicha Calma and *la guagua aerea* are constructed out of verbal stories, in all these texts, the liminality of traveling spaces facilitates community construction.

Unlike Chicha Calma's frantic movement, Lefèvre's airplane is marked by extreme stillness of movement through time and space. Lefèvre notes, "Dans l'avion le temps est immobile comme une mer étale."⁸⁷ The airplane is, in fact, much more similar to *una calma chicha* than Chicha Calma is. To describe the stillness of time in the airplane, Lefèvre likens time to a calm ocean. For Lefèvre, time is a space to travel through. To return to Vietnam, she must

⁸⁶ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 136.

"I never knew my maternal grandmother, dead long before my birth. This one pleases me, I chose her and quietly mutter, 'Grandmother!'"

⁸⁷ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 135.

"In the airplane, time is immobile like a flat sea."

not only travel through the land separating France from Vietnam, she must also travel through the thirty years separating her France from her Vietnam. Lefèvre is caught in between two irreconcilable times and locations.

The calm of the airplane and the whirling motion of Chicha Calma both produce spaces separate from any other geographic location. Chicha Calma's constantly changing location cannot be confined to either Haiti or the Dominican Republic. The location of Lefèvre's airplane is suspended between France and Vietnam. However, the liminality of Lefèvre's existence does not imply a utopic hybrid identity. Lefèvre feels that she does not possess any homeland at all. She cannot blend Vietnam and France, perhaps because of the geographic distance between the two. While Haiti and the Dominican Republic are fused by a physical borderland, the metaphorical "borderland" between Vietnam and France is only manifested in temporary, travelling spaces like the airplane. Lefèvre belongs more to "des terres éloignées" (separated, far apart lands) than "des terres mêlées." The passage from *Retour* that began this thesis emphasizes the impact of the airplane's placelessness on Lefèvre's identity: "Je me sens comme un voyageur des espaces intersidéraux, condamné à errer dans le cosmos."⁸⁸ Lefèvre feels condemned to perpetual movement without destination—perpetual wandering—and thus deprived of any substantive location. Caught between France and Vietnam, she is relegated to liminal, interstitial spaces.

Lefèvre's physical return journey is mirrored and preempted by her linguistic journey home as she rediscovers Vietnamese. Lefèvre's mother tongue alternately welcomes and

⁸⁸*Idem*, 135.

"I feel like a traveler of interstitial spaces, condemned to wander the cosmos."

ostracizes her as she begins to relearn the language after decades of disuse. As Lefèvre considers returning to Vietnam, she visits a Vietnamese market in Paris, in the 13th arrondissement. This journey into another arrondissement is a mini-return that prepares Lefèvre for her eventual return to Vietnam. For the majority of her time in Paris, Lefèvre avoided the 13th arrondissement in order to avoid confronting her uncertain identity and traumatic childhood. In the Vietnamese market, Lefèvre marvels at the sights and sounds that she avoided for thirty years in Paris. Faced with a familiar but forgotten fruit, Lefèvre asks a small child for the fruit's name. The girl responds, "Nous, on l'appelle 'Gâc', mais le nom français, on ne le connaît pas."⁸⁹ This "nous" automatically others Lefèvre, forming a community of Vietnamese speakers to which Lefèvre is presumed not to belong. For Lefèvre, this means "je suis donc 'l'autre.'"⁹⁰ Lefèvre's search for home is a search for the location of an inclusive "nous."

Lefèvre begins her return journey while still in Paris as she re-familiarizes herself with Vietnamese and reconnects with Vietnamese friends in Paris. After the experience in the market, she begins to frequent the 13th arrondissement and her native language begins to resurface unannounced: "Je me surprends même à parler tout haut dans ma langue maternelle, éprouvant une certaine volupté à entendre la musique des mots que ma bouche n'avait plus prononcés."⁹¹ Just as the past resurges unexpectedly in Lefèvre's life through the appearance of long-lost Vietnamese friends and reconnection with her family, Lefèvre's Vietnamese bubbles up into the

⁸⁹ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 40.

"Us, we call it 'Gâc,' but the French name, I don't know."

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

"So I am 'the other.'"

⁹¹ *Idem*, 29.

"I surprise myself by even speaking out loud in my mother language, feeling a certain delight at hearing the music of the words that my mouth had long not pronounced."

present of her life. Vietnam and France are not actually as disparate as they appeared; Vietnam emerges into Lefèvre's France.

The return to Lefèvre's mother tongue is not an entirely easy, welcoming one.

Re-learning Vietnamese is often an othering experience for Lefèvre, who devoted thirty years of her life to studiously replacing Vietnamese with French. Lefèvre notes, "Cela fait trente ans que je n'ai plus pratiqué ma langue, trente ans que je n'ai pas ouvert un livre vietnamien. Je pense en français, je rêve en français et il m'arrive souvent, lorsque je parle vietnamien, d'employer des expressions traduites du français."⁹² Lefèvre feels more at home in her second language than her first—an estrangement that recalls past experiences of marginalization in Vietnam. A Vietnamese friend who reconnects with Lefèvre in Paris, "une amie retrouvée," comments on the broken state of Kim's Vietnamese, exclaiming, "Maintenant tu cherches tes mots comme si tu étais une étrangère..."⁹³ This remark sums up Lefèvre's liminal state in relation to her community in Vietnam. She is *comme une étrangère* but not fully *étrange*.⁹⁴ One could describe Lefèvre as *une étrangère de souche*⁹⁵—a rooted stranger in Vietnam. Despite her roots in the land, despite her childhood memories and her ancestors, she has no present in Vietnam—she is a

⁹² Lefèvre, *Retour*, 57.

"It's been thirty years that I haven't practiced my language, thirty years that I haven't opened a Vietnamese book. I think in French, I dream in French, and it often happens, when I speak Vietnamese, that I use expressions translated from French."

⁹³ *Idem*, 116.

"Now you search for your words as if you were a foreigner..."

⁹⁴ She is like a foreigner but not fully strange. I pull "étrange" (strange) out of "étrangère" (foreigner, stranger) to emphasize that her strangeness to Vietnam is not the strangeness of a complete foreigner, but rather more vague. She is unlike those around her (*hors du commun*), difficult to define (*indéfinissable*).

⁹⁵ The term "de souche" used, for example, to describe "français de souche" (lit. French from the stump, meaning native or old-stock French) frequently carries connotations of racial purity and can be used contrastively to otherize immigrants and non-white French. I have these connotations fully in mind as I invert the phrase in this somewhat paradoxical coupling of terms. Adèle and Kim could perhaps both be described as "des étrangères de souche" in a move that purposefully subverts politics of racial purity and homogeneity.

tourist from a different time. When Lefèvre steps off the airplane in Vietnam, she is first confronted by the sounds of Vietnamese: “Première retrouvaille, celle de la langue maternelle.”⁹⁶ Her mother language is the language of home, family, and childhood, but is also unfamiliar and must be retrieved.

Just as language and race function together to mark difference in *Le Peuple*, so they do in *Retour*. In Lefèvre’s childhood, physical difference from other Vietnamese was shameful and marked her as an outcast. The title of her first autobiographical novel, *Métisse Blanche*, proclaims *métissage* as the defining characteristic of its author and protagonist. Lefèvre’s racial identity marks her and her mother (particularly before her mother’s marriage to Lefèvre’s stepfather) as scorned Others. Lefèvre describes her mother’s predicament after being abandoned by Lefèvre’s father: “Elle était seule avec une enfant à charge et pas n’importe quel enfant: une bâtarde, une métisse. Son faux pas était inscrit sur le visage de sa fille. Elle n’avait plus d’honneur, ses compatriotes ne voulaient plus d’elle: pour eux, elle était devenue une ‘femme à soldats.’”⁹⁷ Lefèvre’s birth marks both her and her mother as shameful. Sritlava Ravi writes that *métis* in Vietnam are frequently depicted as “social rejects or ‘the white man’s sin.’”⁹⁸ *Métisse* women and girls in particular, Ravi writes, are frequently hypersexualized and depicted as dangerous “femmes fatales.”⁹⁹ Additionally, during the Vietnamese struggle for independence

⁹⁶ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 139.

“First reunion, that of the mother language.”

⁹⁷ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 85.

“She was alone with a child to take care of, and not just any child: a bastard half-breed, a mixed child. Her transgression was inscribed on her daughter’s face. She had lost her honor, her compatriots wanted nothing to do with her: for them, she had become a ‘soldiers’ woman’.”

⁹⁸ Ravi, “Métis, Métisse, and Métissage,” 311.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

from France, *métis* were viewed suspiciously as potential traitors by both sides.¹⁰⁰ Lefèvre makes very few references to racism in France¹⁰¹ (though she frequently describes the poor treatment of Vietnamese by French in Vietnam), perhaps because her physical difference in France is not connected to childhood trauma and shame in the way that it is in Vietnam. Lefèvre's *métissage* is sexually shameful because it marks her as the daughter of a "femme à soldats," the evidence of a "white man's sin," and a potentially deviant, dangerous woman.

Métissage is a marker of violent nation-building processes, first of the French in Indochina, then of the U.S. in Vietnam. Lefèvre notes the similarities between these two waves of *métissage*: "La guerre prit fin en 1975, Saigon devint Hô Chi Minh-Ville. Les G.I. retournèrent chez eux, abandonnant sur le terrain d'autres enfants métisses des Amérasiens [...] De même que pour ceux qui étaient issus de la colonisation française, ces enfants furent rejetés, [...] des enfants que le Viêt-nam, aujourd'hui comme hier, refuse de regarder en face."¹⁰² The racial proximity of *métis* children to the terror of French colonizers and the U.S. military makes them suspect. In the context of French and U.S. interventions, the sexual and reproductive lives of Vietnamese women are laden with societal and national implications. In *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*, Christina Elizabeth Firpo writes that

¹⁰⁰ Firpo, *The Uprooted: Race, Children, and Imperialism in French Indochina, 1890-1980*, 111.

¹⁰¹ A Vietnamese acquaintance whom Lefèvre reconnects with in France tells her that she left France because of the racism, stating: "Il y avait aussi une discrimination, discrète, mais toujours présente [There was also a discrimination, discreet but always present]." She and Lefèvre do not pursue the topic, however, as Lefèvre notices, "Elle n'aime pas qu'on parle de racisme car ce vocable véhicule une connotation politique qui l'effraie [She doesn't want us to speak of racism because this vocabulary carries a political connotation that scares her]" (33).

¹⁰² Lefèvre, *Retour*, 107-8.

"The war ended in 1975. Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City. The G.I.s returned home, abandoning on the ground other mixed children, the Amerasians [...] The same as for those born from the French colonization, these children were rejected, [...] children whom Vietnam, today as yesterday, refuses to look in the face."

the French colonial government in Indochina viewed able-bodied *métis* children with white French fathers as a means to increase the French colonial population. The strategy of including *métis* in the “French” category was only useful for the French government in the colony, where France was in need of a larger “French” population, and was not employed in France itself:

As the métropole moved towards exclusive biological racial categorizing during [the 1930s and 40s], the colony moved towards a more inclusive approach based on racial blood-typing. Two of the colony’s foremost anthropologist-demographers, Philippe Huard and Đỗ Xuân Hạp, stressed the importance of mixed racial unions as a solution to the French population deficit, arguing that although biracial births ‘do not reach the importance of strictly white births, they are a distinctly fair way to increase’ the white population.¹⁰³

The ambivalence of the *métis* population’s racial status made them a manipulable tool in a colonizing agenda. Firpo explains that the French colonial government sought to separate fatherless *métis* from their mothers to be “‘made Frenchmen’ and educated to form a class of ‘future colonists.’”¹⁰⁴ Lefèvre was born in 1935, in the midst of this move to *franciser* the *métis*.¹⁰⁵ Her childhood spent sporadically in orphanages, French schools, relatives’ homes, and her mother’s homes can be read as a consequence of the disenfranchisement of Vietnamese mothers of *métis* children. For the French colonial class, Lefèvre’s connection to her mother is a dangerous tie to the indigenous population.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 90.

¹⁰⁴ Firpo, *The Uprooted*, 91.

¹⁰⁵ Firpo writes that Japanese invasion of Indochina in 1940 incited the French government and non-governmental organizations to increase efforts to raise fatherless *métis* into a French colonial class, as their position in the colony had become more precarious.

¹⁰⁶ In 1941, the French government declared that the mothers of *métis* children abandoned by their fathers must legally recognize their child or else the *métis* child would become a French citizen and a ward of the Jules Brévié Foundation for *métis* (Firpo 96). Previously, *métis* had needed to bring go to court individually in order to be recognized as French. Motherhood of *métis* children was thus regulated by the state and *métis* children forcibly removed from their Vietnamese mothers. Children were sometimes chosen for removal on the basis of racial characteristics—one official ordered orphanages to “leave Asian-looking Eurasians with their Vietnamese families

Lefèvre's *métissage* is ambivalent, and both connects and divides her from communities. While *métissage* mostly distances Lefèvre from her Vietnamese heritage, she occasionally evokes a *métis* community. As previously noted, Lefèvre feels a camaraderie between her generation of French-Vietnamese *métis* and the generation of American-Vietnamese *métis* born during the war with the U.S. She also dedicates *Retour* to a community of *eurasiennes*. However, these references to community do not constitute a joyous celebration of *métissage* or hybridity. Karl Ashoka Britto writes in *Disorientation: France, Vietnam, and the Ambivalence of Interculturality* that Lefèvre does not offer an optimistic portrayal of *métissage*: “celebratory readings of interculturality, which tend to focus on the postmodern, deconstructive play of postcolonial identities, may obscure the rigid and potentially traumatic conditions under which colonized subjects experienced the tensions and contradictions of intercultural identity.”¹⁰⁷ In this citation, Britto is referring to Lefèvre's first autobiography, *Métisse blanche*, which offers a more singularly traumatic narrative of *métissage* than *Retour à la saison des pluies*. The premise of *Retour* reveals that Lefèvre's perspective on her heritage has shifted. At the end of *Métisse blanche*, Lefèvre expected to never return to Vietnam. With *Retour*, Lefèvre develops a new hope that she may be able to recuperate moments of belonging in Vietnam despite her racial difference, and even begins to hint at *métis* communities.

Once returned to the geography of her childhood, Lefèvre struggles to reconcile the marked difference of her body from those of her family members and other Vietnamese. Even during a joyous reunion with her mother and sisters, Lefèvre is hyper-aware of her body: “Je

to be raised as Vietnamese” (Firpo 103).

¹⁰⁷ Britto, *Disorientation*, 3.

prends brutalement conscience que je suis la plus grande en taille, la mieux habillée, la mieux nourrie. J'ai le sentiment d'être quelqu'un d'étranger, une Occidentale égarée dans une famille du tiers monde. Et j'ai honte."¹⁰⁸ Lefèvre's physical difference separates her from her family and serves as a constant reminder of the different situations of her and her sisters, whose father was Chinese.¹⁰⁹ While Gloria Anzaldúa's identity and context differ greatly from Lefèvre's—I do not hope here to create some impossible, generalized *métisse/mestiza* identity that ignores racial specificity—her foundational text on *mestizaje* still provides a window into Lefèvre's process of homeland creation. Anzaldúa writes, “As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover.”¹¹⁰ Anzaldúa simultaneously acknowledges the dislocation of the *mestiza* and evokes the potential to create one's own home, a strength she finds particularly in her identity as a woman and a lesbian. Anzaldúa belongs everywhere because she can create community through her relationships with other women.

Lefèvre shares Anzaldúa's belief in the importance of female relationships. For Lefèvre, return to homeland is primarily a return to family; the mother and sisters that she lost contact with define and give purpose to her return. This return to family is overwhelmingly a physical return. Upon her arrival at her mother's home, she is enveloped in the embrace of her mother and sisters: “J'enserme la taille de ma sœur Yên, ma sœur Dung saisit l'une de mes mains libres, celle

¹⁰⁸ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 156.

“I become brutally aware that I am the largest in size, the best dressed, the best fed. I feel like a stranger, a Westerner who wandered into a third world family. And I am ashamed.”

¹⁰⁹ One might wonder whether Lefèvre's Chinese-Vietnamese sisters also had complex relationships to their homeland, given that China was also a colonial presence in Vietnam, but this possibility is not raised in *Retour*.

¹¹⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.

qui n'est pas tenue par ma mère, ma sœur Oanh pose sa tête sur mon épaule... Pour l'heure, c'est la reconnaissance des corps. Jamais je n'ai mieux ressenti que nous sommes de la même chair, du même sang. Je regarde ma mère si frêle, si diaphane, dont l'ossature est si délicate, et je m'émerveille à la pensée que quatre filles sont issues de ce corps. Nous sommes les rameaux de cet arbre minuscule."¹¹¹ For Lefèvre, the refuge of female corporeality is her true homeland. In the very bodies of herself, her sisters, and her mother, their shared life and source is evident. This is one of the moments in the text where Lefèvre expresses the most security and sense of belonging. Without her family, she would be adrift and rootless in Vietnam. Lefèvre writes, "ma famille est mon point de repère, le cordon qui m'attache à ce pays où je suis née. Elle est mon passé vivant, le trait d'union entre ce que j'étais et ce que je suis."¹¹² Lefèvre's ability to understand her location in time and in space, to get her bearings is rooted in her family. She travels through time through her family, who maintains her past and brings it into the present.

Outside of the women in her family, Lefèvre has never found belonging or security in Vietnam. The women's reunion takes place surrounded by three altars to dead male family members—Lefèvre's stepfather (the biological father of her three sisters), grandfather, and uncle Tri. More than altars to beloved family members, these are altars to remembered violences. Lefèvre's stepfather beat her and her mother horrifically, and generally ignored his three

¹¹¹ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 146.

"I encircle the waist of my sister Yên, my sister Dung grabs one of my free hands, that which is not held by my mother, my sister Oanh places her head on my shoulder... For the hour, it's the reconnection of bodies. Never have I felt more that we are of the same flesh, the same blood. I watch my mother, so frail, so diaphanous, whose bones are so delicate, and I marvel at the thought that four daughters were produced from this body. We are the branches of this minuscule tree."

¹¹² *Idem*, 221.

"My family is my landmark, the cord that attaches me to this country where I was born. It is my living past, the hyphen between who I was and who I am."

biological daughters. Lefèvre's grandfather, about whom she says little, was executed during "les grandes purges survenues au Nord en 1956."¹¹³ Uncle Tri, who fought for Vietnamese independence, forced Lefèvre's mother to Lefèvre in an orphanage for *métis* children.¹¹⁴ As the women of Lefèvre's family embrace, they are encircled by the violence of men from their pasts. Amongst the bodies of women, Lefèvre finds refuge from the violence of other bodies. The space of the reunion of women is structured by a heritage of male violence and duty to men.

Lefèvre has imagined the space of her mother's house many times before confronting the physical space. The home that Lefèvre "returns" to is in fact entirely unknown; her family has moved many times since she left the country. In her absence, Lefèvre constructed an imaginary home for her family and herself pieced together from her memory. Before she leaves France, Lefèvre imagines her arrival at her mother's house: "Je la reconnais, bien que je ne l'aie jamais vue. C'est la synthèse ou plutôt la quintessence de toutes celles dans lesquelles nous avons habité. A l'étage, un balcon en fer forgé court tout au long de la façade et, dans la cour intérieure, un pied de vigne étend ses ramures, formant un toit qui protège du soleil."¹¹⁵ Lefèvre has constructed a very detailed image of the home she will return to. She imagines her reintegration into her family and life in Vietnam taking place in a both new and known location. In reality, she

¹¹³ *Idem*, 152.

"The great purges experienced in the North in 1956."

The North Vietnamese government instituted strict agrarian and labor reforms in the early 1950s and executed thousands of villagers (exact estimates vary greatly).

¹¹⁴ Firpo cites this moment in *Métisse blanche* to illustrate the pain of Vietnamese mothers forced to give up their *métis* children by either French colonial or Vietnamese revolutionary forces (Firpo 118).

¹¹⁵ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 129.

"I recognize it, even though I've never seen it. It is the synthesis, or rather the quintessence of all those we have lived in. Upstairs, a wrought iron balcony runs along the facade and, in the interior hall, a vine stock extends its branches, forming a roof that protects from the sun."

arrives to an entirely unknown home. The foreignness of home frightens her. Lefèvre does not tell anyone when her airplane will arrive so that no one will come to greet her at the airport. She is afraid she might not recognize her family members and prefers to control the pace of the reunion. When Lefèvre first arrives at her mother's house, she is paralyzed and is so afraid to cross the boundary between the street and the home that she must wait until someone else does first. While Lefèvre stands frozen outside the gate to the house, her sister emerges and rushes into her arms. Only after this barrier has been broken by another can Lefèvre enter the home. Once inside, Lefèvre must reconcile her imagination with reality. In order to fix her mother's actual house in her mind, Lefèvre catalogues the details of the room: "La pièce où nous nous tenons est petite. Une faible ampoule l'éclaire. Il fait très chaud. Au plafond, un ventilateur tourne avec une lenteur désespérante."¹¹⁶ The physical details of the house are crucial for Lefèvre to believe her own existence inside it. At the same time, the physical reality of the house seems to oppress her. The air is thick and hot. The blades of the fan chart desperate, hopeless arcs across the ceiling. Lefèvre struggles to belong, to fit her body into the space of her mother's home.

Just as Lefèvre must reconcile her imagined house with the one she discovers in Vietnam, so she must reconcile her remembered geography with the current geography of the country. Before she leaves France, Lefèvre buys maps of Saigon and Hanoi in an attempt to prepare herself for the return. These maps, however, evidence the vast temporal distance between the

¹¹⁶ *Idem*, 157.

"The room where we stand is small. A weak light bulb illuminates it. It is very hot. On the ceiling, a fan turns with a desperate slowness."

Vietnam of Lefèvre's childhood and its current existence. The end of French colonialism, war with the United States, and a communist victory separate the geography of Lefèvre's childhood from the maps she buys in Paris. When she attempts to "retrouver les rues [qu'elle a] fréquentées jadis,"¹¹⁷ she finds that too many names have changed and she is unable to orient herself on the map. After her arrival, the disconnect between Lefèvre's memories and the present continues. Lefèvre drives through a street that was once known as rue Catinat but is now rue Đông Khoi and notices the stark difference from the bustling, lively street of her childhood: "Aujourd'hui la rue Đông Khoi, ex-Catinat, est à peine éclairée la nuit et les maisons qui la bordent exhibent des façades délabrées."¹¹⁸ Lefèvre knows locations based on their past lives. She knows rue Đông Khoi as rue ex-Catinat. She travels a ghost town, matching the buildings and landscapes that she sees to what used to exist.

In Vietnam as in France, the past erupts into Lefèvre's life unexpectedly. In Vietnam, however, these unexpected returns of the past are brought about by locations stumbled across. En route to her mother's home, Lefèvre's driver takes a wrong turn and ends up in front of the convent where Lefèvre lived and attended school. Lefèvre is shocked to discover that soeur Aimée, the nun who secured her education, still lives in the same location. In the same way as she froze before the gate to her mother's home, Lefèvre freezes before the possibility of seeing soeur Aimée again: "Debout devant l'entrée, je fixe comme hypnotisée l'encadrement de la

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, 130.

"to find the streets that [she] frequented long ago"

¹¹⁸ *Idem*, 142.

"Today, Đông Khoi Street, ex-Catinat Street, is barely lit up at night and the houses that line it exhibit dilapidated facades."

porte, là où va apparaître la silhouette de soeur Aimée.”¹¹⁹ As she earlier froze before the threshold of her mother’s home, Lefèvre now freezes before the threshold of her old school and the home of her beloved teacher. Presenting herself to soeur Aimée, Lefèvre refers to herself by her Vietnamese last name for the only time in *Retour*: “C’est moi, Kim Thu.” Struck by emotion, soeur Aimée calls out Lefèvre’s baptismal name, “C’est Éliane.”¹²⁰ In this encounter with the past, Lefèvre takes on her past identities as Kim Thu and Éliane. As Lefèvre transforms into her past self, her memories of her old school and soeur Aimée transpose themselves onto the present. Lefèvre writes, “J’oublie la marque des années sur son visage, c’est une autre que je vois, une autre qui lui ressemble, une soeur Aimée plus jeune et qui veillait sur moi aussi jalousement qu’un ange gardien.”¹²¹ Returned to the spaces of her past alongside the people of her past, Lefèvre finds a brief moment of belonging and joyous nostalgia.

In the title of the text itself, Lefèvre fuses time and space. *Retour à la saison des pluies*, “return to the season of rains,” locates the text in a state of movement, of return. “La saison des pluies,” the rainy season, is a temporal marker. However, Lefèvre is not returning to a time, but to a place—it is not the rainy season in which she seeks to understand her connection to home, but Vietnam. For Lefèvre, it makes perfect sense that “la saison des pluies” is Vietnam, because the natural phenomena of Vietnam inform her imagination of the space. While travelling the

¹¹⁹ *Idem*, 192.

“Standing before the entrance, I stare as if hypnotized at the doorway, there where the silhouette of sister Aimée will appear.”

¹²⁰ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 193.

“It’s me, Kim Thu.” “It’s Éliane.”

¹²¹ *Idem*, 198.

“I forget the mark of the years on her face, it’s an other that I see, an other who resembles her, a younger sister Aimée who watched over me as closely as a guardian angel.”

countryside with her mother, Lefèvre thinks, “je me suis aperçue que le Viêt-nam, c’est d’abord son paysage [...] je retrouve dans cette image de terre et d’eau le Viêt-nam de mon enfance.”¹²² By returning to the physical markers of Vietnam, Lefèvre returns to her past. To travel through time, she must travel through space. When Lefèvre remarks on “cette image de terre et d’eau,” she is referencing the Vietnamese word for “country,” *dât-nuoc*, which she mentioned earlier means “Terre et Eau.”¹²³ The image of land and water is thus the image of the country. To return to a time of rain, of land and water, means to return to Vietnam and her childhood.

In *Retour à la saison des pluies*, time is just as physical as space, and the two dimensions become almost synonymous. Vietnam is not only distant spatially, but also temporally; in Lefèvre’s memory, Vietnam exists thirty years ago, the last time she left the country for France. The expanse of time becomes its own physical entity: “Trente ans, c’est une mesure, une quantité. Mais pour moi, c’est une plage qui s’étend entre mes vingt ans et aujourd’hui.”¹²⁴ Time takes on three-dimensionality. In her essay “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” Svetlana Boym remarks on the particular confusion of time and space that nostalgia implies. “Nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams,” Boym writes.¹²⁵ Nostalgia, for Boym, is a universal experience that is inflected by particulars such as immigration, postcoloniality, or

¹²² Lefèvre, *Retour*, 221.

“I realized that Vietnam is above all else its countryside [...] I find in this image of land and water the Vietnam of my childhood.”

¹²³ *Idem*, 149.

“Land and Water.”

¹²⁴ *Idem*, 13.

“Thirty years, it’s a measure, a quantity. But for me, it’s a beach that extends between my twenties and today.”

¹²⁵ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 8.

nationalism. Lefèvre's yearning for Vietnam follows Boym's hypothesis that nostalgia is a yearning for a different time, as she not feel nostalgia for a general, atemporal Vietnam, but for the Vietnam of her childhood. Boym notes that this desire for a past place causes the nostalgic person to reimagine the past as space: "The nostalgic desires to turn history into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."¹²⁶ Lefèvre does just this, creating a geography of time in her memory. When she reunites with her sisters and mother in Vietnam they spend hours discussing their past. She describes these discussions as a form of physical travel: "nous remontons le cours du temps. Les événements marquants sont des îles où l'on s'attarde."¹²⁷ Lefèvre and her family travel from island to island of memory—and yet they cannot truly travel together. Separated for decades, Lefèvre and her family have developed separate personal mythologies about the past. Lefèvre notes, "J'ai l'impression d'avoir nourri ce passé si longtemps, de l'avoir réinventé tant de fois qu'il est devenu une île inconnue de celles qui la peuplent."¹²⁸ In her absence from Vietnam, Lefèvre has constructed a past homeland that is unrecognizable even to the people she shared her childhood with.

To construct a communal past, Lefèvre must turn to autobiography, which is at once a personal and communal exploration of the past. Autobiography is a form of writing that moves backwards to recuperate a past community. For Lefèvre, autobiography is not a solo pursuit, but

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁷ Lefèvre, *Retour*, 154.

"We move back up the course of time. The formative events are islands where we stop."

¹²⁸ *Idem*, 157.

"I have the impression of having nourished this past for so long, of having reinvented it so many times, that it has become an island unknown by those who populate it."

rather a gesture towards community and family. She starts the novel with an explanation for her writing, stating:

Je l'avais fait pour exorciser le passé mais aussi pour rendre hommage à une femme vietnamienne, ma mère, une femme tout à la fois pitoyable et admirable, afin que son destin ne tombe pas dans l'oubli. Et par-dessus tout, j'avais ressenti la nécessité de parler au nom de toutes les Eurasiennes que j'avais connues, de toutes celles qui, comme moi, avaient été méprisées et rejetées aussi bien par les Français au Viêt-nam que par les Vietnamiens, qui vivent aujourd'hui quelque part et dont on n'a jamais entendu les voix.
129

Lefèvre's mission is three-fold. In writing her autobiography, she desires to exorcise the past (the past haunts her like a demon), to pay homage to and remember her mother, and to give voice to a broader community of biracial French-Vietnamese women. The past haunts Lefèvre because it is unacknowledged. In order to exorcise this haunting she must journey back into the past and reconcile the past with the present. Bell hooks reflects on this need to recuperate the past and to remember family as well: "Writing about the past often places one at risk for evoking a nostalgia that simply looks back with longing and idealizes. Locating a space of genuineness, of integrity as I recall the past and endeavor to connect it to the ideals and yearnings of the present has been crucial to my process. [...] I return again and again to memories of family."¹³⁰ Lefèvre and hooks both express the importance of naming and remembering the women who have come before them. Lefèvre uses autobiography to construct a community amongst silenced voices in disparate places. The community to which Lefèvre speaks lives "quelque part"—a vague location. Despite

¹²⁹ *Idem*, 16.

"I did it to exorcise the past but also to pay homage to a Vietnamese woman, my mother, a woman both pitiful and admirable, so that her destiny would not fall into forgottenness. And above all, I felt the need to speak in the name of all the Eurasians that I have known, of all those who, like me, have been scorned and rejected as much by the French in Vietnam as by the Vietnamese, who today live somewhere and whose voices we have never heard."

¹³⁰ hooks, *Belonging*, 4-5.

this placelessness, Lefèvre finds that to truly speak to this community and to her own past, she must return to the literal land of her childhood. Writing autobiography is a practice in creating homeland and community.

Autobiography, then, does not move only backwards. Autobiography creates community and brings the author into the present. Lefèvre's return to Vietnam and the existence of *Retour à la saison des pluies* are only possible because of the connections to her past that she made through writing her first autobiography, *Métisse blanche*. Laura Marcus notes that autobiography is not only retrospective but also "a mode in which the self or selves are made ready for the future."¹³¹ Thus, "Utopia, too, is valorised as a mode appropriate to the future-orientated dimensions of the new autobiography."¹³² As Lefèvre writes her autobiography, she writes into existence a location of belonging. Lefèvre's travel and her existence in Vietnam, amongst family, and in France are made permanent by the text of the autobiography. Like Philoctète, Lefèvre writes a hopeful future into existence.

¹³¹ Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses*, 293.

¹³² *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

The locations that Kim, Adèle, and Pedro traverse are imbued with meaning. Spaces are not neutral—they are qualified by the languages spoken within them, the names given to them on maps and in speech, and the bodies that are normalized or othered within them. In *The Geography of Identity*, Patricia Yaeger argues for a new approach to discussions of space in order to acknowledge the political nature of space. Location is always a negotiation between people. Any politics, from totalitarian hegemony to radical collectivism, must be carried out through the medium of space and location.¹³³ Yaeger writes, “The omnipresence of political encryption requires a new self-consciousness about the relation of place to narration: it demands the invention of a poetics of geography: a site for investigating the metaphors and narrative strategies that we use to talk about space.”¹³⁴ I read *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* and *Retour à la saison des pluies* as narratives about space and the temporality of space, as exercises in the poetics of geography. Both texts are premised on the existence of human beings in locations that are coded (politically, nationally, historically, racially, and with regards to gender) in such a way as to necessitate movement and circulation.

The spaces inhabited in *Retour* and *Le Peuple* are liminal. Characters in both works are

¹³³ I mean to specify slightly different things through the terms “space” and “location.” With space, I refer to a plane of existence whose counterpart is time. Space refers to the three-dimensionality of existence, the existence of bodies in the three-dimension materiality of the world. With location, I refer to geographic places that may be mapped in relation to each other. The space of the nation is the nation’s physicality—its natural phenomena, its buildings; what it *feels like* to be a body in that nation. The location of the nation is the nation’s placement—on a map, in relation to neighbors; what it *means* (what connotations are attached) to be a body in that nation. Of course, this stark dichotomy is oversimplified and the lines between “space” and “location” can be blurred.

¹³⁴ Yaeger, *The Geography of Identity*, 5.

caught between different identities and nations. For Yaeger, the complexity of space provides a way to study identity that resists either/or binaries. Yaeger writes: “Insofar as location represents a concatenation of social spaces, insofar as it represents a physical site that is continuous, contradictory, convoluted, splintered, layered, and inconsistent, insofar as the borderland displaces traditional descriptions of normative, nuclear space, social geography creates a site for studying social identity more intricate than the discourse of alterity, with its rigid self/other dichotomies, can suggest.”¹³⁵ The study of space, thus, is a means to analyze the complex depictions of domination and identity in *Retour* and *Le Peuple*. I have certainly not completely eschewed the “discourse of alterity” to which Yaeger refers, but I have attempted to complicate the binaries that emerged in my analysis.

We must understand the poetics and politics of space in order to understand any other poetics or politics. There are no universals without location. Every part of an individual’s identity is mediated through location, and every part of an individual’s experience is mediated through space. Lefèvre cannot develop a theoretical understanding of her racial and national identity, she must put her body in different locations in order to feel her connection to the land and the people. Adèle and Pedro’s racial and linguistic identities depend on their location for meaning.

In today’s context, the study of how we narrate space and movement and how we tell stories about our homes is urgent. Read in the context of the United States in 2017, Trujillo’s cry, “Viva los blancos límpidos de la tierra!” echoes back “Make America Great Again!” Declaring a

¹³⁵ *Idem*, 16.

place to be home always weaves a mass of identities into that location and excludes individuals whose identities cross borders. While I have in general resisted making overtly political statements in my thesis, no piece of art or scholarship is apolitical, and this thesis is no exception. My thesis topic took shape in the context of a year of political tumult in the United States—a year in which a man who built his platform on an exclusionary, racist view of homeland and the control of the bodies of women and people of color rose to power.

My emphasis on borderland spaces and mixed peoples is not a naïve assumption that hybridity will end exclusionary violence. In fact, *Le Peuple des terres mêlées* and *Retour à la saison des pluies* make it abundantly clear that this is not the case. I do, however, think that studying these liminal locations and identities clarifies the hidden ways in which we all construct our selves out of the places we live. We exist as humans with identities because we take up space, because we move through space. The location of the spaces we take up give meaning to our identities. Location is the medium through which all other identities take on meaning. Gender, race, language—these markers only possess meaning through location. Movement thus shifts these categories, and as individuals change locations they relate to themselves in altered ways. As Adèle, Pedro, and Lefèvre transgress physical and metaphorical borders in their search for belonging, they illuminate the ways in which we all take up and move through space.

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