

Metamorphosis: Space and Transformation in *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*

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Confiant's *Le Nègre et l'Amiral* presents an island and a population transformed by war. Surrounded by German submarines and under the control of Robert's Vichy authority, the Martiniquan people of this novel experience the second World War as a period of extreme isolation and confinement. As their "mother country" undergoes its own crisis of allegiance, the inhabitants of this French colony are also forced, despite their increasing isolation, to choose and defend their external loyalties. In the midst of these shifting axes of alliance is Rigobert, the novel's hero, who finds his once familiar surroundings shaken and reordered by the war. As he adjusts and responds to his own experience of Martinique's wartime and Vichy years, this singular character transcends the changes brought by war, while at the same time articulating a revised concept of change itself. In his individual trajectory Rigobert forges new spaces and territories, moving towards a reassessment of his landscape and tracing a unique model of personal transformation.

At stake in the renegotiations of space and allegiance evoked in this novel is of course the question of identity. As Confiant and his colleagues propose in *Eloge de la créolité*, colonial Martinique represents a culture constantly under the shadow of assimilation, a people constantly looking outside and elsewhere towards the metropole as its collective badge of identification. The identity crisis of France during World War II thus throws these loyalties out of kilter, as Martiniquans can no longer depend on the stability of this exterior identity as a reference point, and furthermore must confront the highly abstract nature of this identification. Confiant's novel

launches a critique of assimilation by exposing the emptiness and arbitrariness of continued loyalty to this distant country. Amédée the writer, for example, expresses his shock at the persistent and feverish efforts on the part of his companions to rally behind the "mère patrie":

J'observe les yeux fiévreux d'amour de ces pauvres hères pour un pays dont vraisemblablement ils ne fouleront jamais le sol. Un pays qui demeurera à jamais un nom, «La France», autant dire un rêve éveillé de nègre debout face à ce qu'ils appellent tous sans exception la «déveine». (123)

Amédée thus points out that this patriotic fervour is an insistence on the link to the motherland based on a denial of both the physical distance from France and the present and real circumstances of Martinique.

In this sense the circumstances of the war in Martinique and the accompanying disruption of axes of identification could be seen as a potentially positive force in the effort to put assimilation into question. In particular, the island's isolation destabilizes the abstract link to France constructed by its inhabitants, and forces them to take stock of the concrete distance separating them from this idealized land. Products and supplies from Europe are effectively cut off from Martinique; the shortages and food rationing thus serve as an everyday reminder of the fact that the connection to France has been severed, thus inhibiting the replication, real or imagined, of European commerce on the island.

The image of enclosure is a central one in Confiant's novel: the narrative is structured as a series of five "circles", each one containing several chapters and accompanied by an epigraph.¹ The first of these epigraphs immediately brings the reader's attention to the circle as the lens through which to view the circumstances evoked in the novel:

¹ For a detailed study of the narrative structure of the novel, see Spear 255-256.

Or donc l'île se trouva cernée en chacune de ses anses par d'invisibles sous-marins allemands curieusement doués d'ubiquité et fut contrainte de jouer dans son nombril. La mer devint taboue et la milice blanche veilla à ce que l'impudence des nègres ne dépassât pas la première ligne des vagues à Grand-Rivière. (9)²

The isolation of Martinique is thus also articulated along color lines, recuperating the segregation between the colony and Europe, and refusing the blurring of these lines through cultural assimilation. In this sense the circle functions as a recurrent counter to the desire to reaffirm allegiance to France in this time of crisis, reminding the inhabitants of Martinique that they are "enfermés comme des crabes dans une barrique, cherchant désespérément à grimper vers les mirages du ciel" (151).

This image of enclosure and entanglement points to a further destabilization of identity evoked in the novel, which is the carnivalesque reversal brought about by war. Everyday life is unable to continue as before, as populations are transplanted across the island, buildings and communities destroyed, and soldiers brought in to protect Vichy interests. Within the lines of enclosure, then, is an internal chaos. Rigobert expresses a sense of profound disorientation in his own homeland, and tells himself: "C'est la guerre. Avec elle on voit de tout, me répétait mon défunt papa. On voit les hommes marcher à quatre pattes et les chiens parler, oui. Midi ne sonne plus à la même heure et l'eau qui dégringole du ciel n'a plus le même goût" (73). Wartime Martinique becomes in a sense unrecognizable, necessarily shifting out of its previous existence in response to international events. What Confiant's novel suggests is that at the heart of this disruption is the possibility for positive change, of a renewed understanding of Martiniquan identity that is not aligned with the colonial power.

² See Ronnie Scharfman's analysis of this opening passage, where she notes the use of the word "nombril" as a reinforcement of the inward focus effected by enemy lines in Martinique (133). I shall return to her remarks later in

As a *point de départ* for an examination of this question in *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*, I would like to consider briefly an article published by Frantz Fanon in *Esprit* in 1955. In "Antillais et Africains", Fanon proposes that black Martiniquans experienced a profound psychological transformation as a result of World War II. He frames this transformation as a shift from a pre-war identification with Europe to a post-war identification with Africa:

Alors qu'avant 1939 [l'Antillais] avait les yeux fixés sur l'Europe blanche, alors que pour lui le bien était l'évasion hors de sa couleur, il se découvre en 1945, non seulement un noir, mais un nègre et c'est vers la lointaine Afrique qu'il lancera désormais ses pseudopodes. (267)

This re-identification with Africa, he maintains, rose out of a disillusionment with Europe, stemming in part from the witnessing of a defeated France ("le meurtre du père" (265)), as well as from the prolonged contact with the overt racism of the 10,000 European soldiers stationed in Martinique during the war. Fanon further credits Césaire's valorization of *négritude* for providing a defense against this racism and a means of redefining Martiniquan identity: "Alors il devint réel que non seulement le noir-couleur était valorisé, mais le noir-fiction, le noir-idéal, le noir dans l'absolu, le noir-primitif, le nègre. Qu'était-ce, sinon provoquer chez l'Antillais une refonte totale de son monde, une métamorphose de son corps?" (266). Fanon's use of the term metamorphosis here is revealing, as it highlights the idea of a complete reversal, a replacement of Africa for Europe, of black for white.

Although there are elements of this kind of transformation in *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*,³ the novel as a whole can hardly be said to articulate a shift in identification towards Africa. As the *Eloge de la créolité* makes clear, the *négritude* movement, although a pivotal moment in the

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understanding of *créolité*, is conceptually problematic in that it continues to posit an exterior reference point for the formulation of Antillean identity. The *Eloge* insists instead on the need for an *interior* gaze, for a focus on the particularity of the Antillean experience. As Ronnie Scharfman elegantly demonstrates in her analysis of *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*, the military enclosure of the island of Martinique in Confiant's novel also propels its characters towards an "interior vision"⁴. The *créolité* proposed by the novel is thus also a transformation brought by war, and Confiant's insistence on the theme of enclosure and interiority could in this sense be read as a revision of Fanon's model of reidentification.

What I would like to examine more closely is the particular concept of metamorphosis that Confiant envisions in his novel, specifically as it is evoked through the intricate experiences of Rigobert. Rigobert, like all of the novel's characters, is profoundly affected by the war: as he is a character who refuses to conform to anything, his is perhaps an extreme case, providing the most dramatic example of the individual changes brought by war. But the transformation of this title character points to the importance not only of the end result of the metamorphosis, but also of the nature of the metamorphosis itself. Rigobert's character, in other words, is remarkable not only in his post-war state, but perhaps more importantly in how he got there. What is striking about Confiant's narrative is the fact that it aligns Rigobert's personal journey with the spatial layout of his island, so that the Martiniquan landscape is fundamentally implicated in his transformation.

Rigobert's trajectory reveals Martinique as a divided island. Early in the novel he is aimless and nearly immobile, a state exacerbated by his difficulty in navigating the various

³ The character of Alcide, for example, having lost access to American hair products, is confronted with "la négritude de ses cheveux" (103), which, ultimately, he comes to prefer (223).

⁴ Scharfman formulates this "vision intérieure" as a second form of resistance in Martinique: "résidence" as a counterpart to "dissidence" (125-126, 133).

boundaries encountered in the constricted space he inhabits. His fate is implicitly linked to the forty-four steps linking Morne Pichevin to the boulevard de la Levée, both of these axes demarcating strict divisions between the classes represented in these neighborhoods. At every ascent and descent of these steps, Rigobert is stalled, hindered by his confusion as to which of the forty-four steps will assure him eternal love, and which one will instead guarantee his downfall. His daily life is characterized by a similar sense of paralysis, an awkward set of obstacles to movement either forward or backward. Rigobert senses in fact that he is alone in his sense of immobility, as life seems to progress for everyone else: "Les carêmes succédaient aux carêmes sans que la vie de Rigobert bougeât d'un millimètre" (14). His inability to cross space thus seems mirrored in a temporal stasis as well.

The onslaught of war in Martinique, however, renders Rigobert's continued immobility impossible. Like the rest of the population, Rigobert's space is enclosed by the presence of German forces, and his gaze is forced inward. However, his landscape is further defined by his own transgression of the boundaries set by Vichy: he has intercepted a convoy of military supplies, has been denounced for the crime by the traitor Barbe-Sale, and is on the run from Robert. The war is thus a catalyst for Rigobert's renegotiation of space and landscape: "[I]l avait même le sentiment qu'au fond, cette guerre qui l'avait contraint à abandonner son Morne Pichevin, là-bas, lointaine, impalpable, n'avait qu'une raison d'être: lui faire trouver un sens à l'errance quotidienne qui avait été la sienne jusqu'à maintenant" (240). It is interesting to note here that, although like others on the island Rigobert is forced to shift his identification inwards, for him this inward movement also engenders a movement *out* and *across* the previous boundaries of his existence. Robert's pursuit forces Rigobert not only out of the familiar spaces

of his home but out of his state of immobility; Rigobert must constantly remain on the move, must continue to travel across boundaries and into new spaces.

Rigobert's ability to traverse his native land, while a triumphant indication of personal transformation, also provides a reminder of the shape of that land: although he leaves behind the obstacles and segregated spaces he faced in Morne Pichevin, he does not leave the divisions themselves behind. On the contrary, his travels reinforce the image of Martinique as an expanse of distant spaces, sharply divided by physical and perceptual boundaries which are rarely crossed. Amédée comments on the link between this sense of mutual remoteness and the conception of Martinique as a "pays" rather than an "île" in his memoirs:

Ils disent le «pays» et dans leur bouche cela renvoie à des étendues quasiment illimitées et non à quelconque monceau de rocher cerné de toutes parts par l'océan et battu par les vents ou les cyclones. C'est pourquoi il ne s'inquiètent pas outre mesure pour Rigobert, car ils savent que celui-ci trouvera bien un refuge sûr dans nos montagnes et nos forêts du Nord. D'ailleurs, sans même m'en rendre compte, n'ai-je pas tenu le même raisonnement qu'eux à propos de Philomène dont, en final de compte, le Gros-Morne natal n'est distant de Fort-de-France que d'une vingtaine de kilomètres? (270)

As this passage suggests, the distances and separations between the various regions of Martinique are perhaps less a question of geography than a matter of perception: the *idea* of Gros-Morne as far away and inaccessible pulls Philomène much further out of reach from Amédée than the twenty kilometers visible on a map. The divided terrain traversed by Rigobert, then, is a conceptual vision of a layered and diverse "pays" suspended and expanded in the minds of its inhabitants. Amédée suggests further that the divisions of Martinique arise from a lack of communication or collective consciousness: "[J]e suis saisi d'effroi quand je constate que sur

cette île si étroite, des strates entières de gens vivent des existences parallèles sans jamais soupçonner de quoi est faites celle du voisin" (128). The writer's alarm at this state of affairs suggests an uneasiness with the lived vastness of the Martiniquan landscape, and a desire for a unifying element that would erase these divisions and shrink down the island to a conceptually manageable size.

In fact the incidence of the second World War in Martinique provides just such a possibility. But the most effective model of unity in the narrative is that undertaken, significantly, by the Vichy state. Georges Robert's power on the island depends logically enough on his ability to extend and reproduce his ideological presence throughout its landscape. His strategy is thus to import the Vichy government to Martinique, to bypass the island's isolation from the outside world by creating a perfect reproduction of his own exterior referent.⁵ This is a model of transformation that needs first to eliminate all opposition (by exporting or imprisoning dissidents), and then to rally the population around a single image. In this light the scene depicting the Vercingétorix ceremony is extremely revealing. As Amédée describes the event, speeches and fanfare culminate in a ceremonial mixing of earth in a tribute to Pétain. Amédée's cousin Bertrand proclaims:

[N]ous allons mêler la terre des trente-deux communes de la Martinique pour en faire une seule et unique motte, manière de signifier à l'ennemi que tous les Martiniquais sont soudés derrière l'Amiral et par conséquent derrière notre guide suprême, le maréchal Pétain. (133)

⁵ Historian Fitzroy André Baptiste has noted that the Admiral was selected precisely because of his potential to reproduce Pétain's presence in Martinique, describing his position as a reign of power "in the style of Pétain" (196), his efforts to "Vichyize" the local education systems (197), and the *carte blanche* he was given in order to "apply the Vichy brand of statism to the French Caribbean" (174). Robert himself also repeats this unifying ideology in his memoirs, dedicating the work, for example, to the "nombreux Antillais et Guyanais qui ont senti de quel cœur je me suis attaché, quatre années durant, à fertiliser leur attachement à la 'Mère Patrie'" (iii).

In this sense, then, Robert takes strategic advantage of the internal divisions in Martinique, divisions made more visible by this period of isolation from the outside, in order to present a compelling model of unity in the form of Vichy ideology.⁶

Within the narrative, this ceremony is soundly ridiculed by both Amédée, who denounces it as "l'une des loufoqueries les plus extravagantes commises sous le règne de l'Amiral" (132), and by Rigobert, who refuses to even acknowledge the event and instead turns on his heel, spluttering in creole, "Merde à la France!" (133). But what is interesting to consider is the Admiral's strategy as a model of transformation: his success entails the molding of a new conceptualization of Martiniquan identity, and is thus dependent on the erasure of the perception of difference. The vision of Martinique as a vast and diverse "pays" must be replaced by an aesthetic of unity, a reduction of the land's various spaces into a single entity. Confiant thus suggests in Robert's absurd ceremony an informative allegory of war, a reminder that metamorphosis in this context functions as a mechanism not only of change but of replacement.

If we return to Rigobert's metamorphosis, it seems clear that it is not the mere fact of change that is essential, but the manner in which that change is effected and perceived. For Rigobert's journey, as we have seen, proposes no such melding of diverse lands, but rather insists on preserving the distinctions between and among the spaces he traverses. His trajectory is characterized not by stasis or resolution, but by constant motion through space; in fact, his safety depends on movement and distance, since in order to remain out of the reach of Robert's officers he must in each successive space be remote and inaccessible to previous ones. This relationship to the land is a mutual one, in that the spaces he enters also depend on his movement out of them to maintain their existence as unique and separate realms. Nowhere is this more clear than in the

⁶ Baptiste in fact notes that Robert exploited racial divisions in the French Caribbean in order to rally Martinique and Guadeloupe behind Vichy (67).

remote paradise of Morne-des-Esses, where Rigobert learns a new appreciation for the specificity of the Martinique landscape.⁷ Here he loses track of the days, seemingly prepared to lose himself as well in this peaceful and bountiful space so remote from the realities of wartime rationing and deprivation in Morne Pichevin. However, although Rigobert draws strength and understanding from this place, his integration into this land would destroy it. His idyllic experience is brought to a sudden close by the approach of European soldiers, whose proximity threatens the existence of this earthly paradise, and he is compelled to leave by its inhabitants: "[T]a venue nous a amené la pire des emmerdations. Jamais les soldats ne montaient aussi haut pour voler les légumes des gens. Jamais!" (213). In this sense Rigobert's desire to stay in this new territory is presented as a mistake, a misguided effort to erase the divisions of his spatial experience.

The fact that Rigobert does not assimilate, that he does not become a part of the distant lands he visits, is not to imply that he remains unchanged by his experience. The novel's close underlines on the contrary the profound transformation traced by this character. In fact, Confiant suggests in these final pages that Rigobert's is perhaps the only true metamorphosis, since in many ways life in Morne Pichevin seems to be returning to its pre-war state, erasing the evidence of change. Rigobert senses that he alone has retained the dizzying effects of a six-year upheaval: "Il se croyait le seul à avoir été changé par la guerre, dans cette ville insensée qui avait soudain retrouvé son animation dérisoire. Les choses avaient regagné leur place, comme si rien ne s'était produit" (333). Rigobert, however, instead of returning to his former immobility, maintains his ability to cross the various spaces of his community, and even offers a rereading of the forty-four steps that had previously stunted his movement with their illegibility (214). While other

⁷ See Scharfman's consideration of the "jardin créole" as the center of the possibility of resistance through *créolité* (130-131).

inhabitants of Morne Pichevin begin an animated discussion of the possibility of “becoming American” (334), Rigobert expresses no interest in these questions and instead returns home to Carmélise and her calm indifference to such crises of identity. The conversation he rejects is, significantly, the consideration of yet another model of metamorphosis through reduction and substitution.

Rigobert's trajectory, then, is characterized not by the lack of change, but by the lack of this ideology of substitution: he has not replaced his previous identity with a newly-formed one, but instead has forged an understanding of the various stages of his personal journey as distinct and even irreconcilable. In this sense his is a metamorphosis that is posited in direct contrast to the Vichy model of transformation: while Robert envisions transformation as a means to an end, Rigobert's experience emphasizes the importance of the process. The transformation brought by military power depends on the destruction of a previous existence and its replacement by another. The individual metamorphosis of Rigobert, on the other hand, refuses to resolve difference through an arrival at a final stage of change, and instead suggests a simultaneous awareness of each point of transformation.

This emphasis on process over replacement finds a striking echo within Confiant's novel in its evocation of narrative itself. Amédée, frustrated in his attempts to write his own novel, explains the importance of abandoning "tout cartésianisme": “[J]’ai appris, à l’instar de Philomène ou de Rigobert, à raconter, avec la véracité troublante de celui qui nie sur le bûcher, trente-douze mille versions d’un même événement. Une fois pris dans cette spirale, il n’y a plus qu’à croire en chacune d’elles successivement” (263).⁸ The story woven by these characters thus mirrors Rigobert's journey through the Martiniquan landscape: to “hear” this story is to shift from one version to another, without any attempt at resolution, without any attempt to substitute one

version for a previous one. This narrative thus follows Rigobert's model of metamorphosis, rather than Robert's, emphasizing the accumulation of experience over replacement and unification. Confiant thereby signals this concept of metamorphosis as both a literary and political esthetic of change.

The opposition signaled in the novel's title thus evokes not only a battle of wills between two characters, but also the two models of metamorphosis proposed by their wartime years in Martinique. The final chapter of *Le Nègre et l'Amiral* presents a new but open-ended Rigobert, shaken out of immobility into an awareness of the diversity and irreconcilability of his native landscape. Robert, however, is less fortunate, as his presence in the novel's concluding pages is in the form of a pig: Rigobert runs into an old woman who tells him that the pig she is fattening up for slaughter is her husband, none other than the Admiral Georges Robert: "'On a prétendu qu'il est parti en courant comme un capon! C'est pas vrai, le voilà! Amiral Robert, allez, montre au monsieur que tu es bien avec ta femme chérie'" (322). In this perhaps more classical evocation of metamorphosis, Confiant provides what is at once a playful and eerie reminder of strategic transformation. Rigobert's victory here can only be complete, as, true to his strategy, Robert's metamorphosis will allow no return to his former state.

⁸ See Thomas Spear's analysis of the links between Confiant's novel and Amédée's project in this context (263).

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