

Moving Forward With the Past: History and Identity in Marie-Célie Agnant's *La Dot de Sara*

Kennedy M. Schultz
SUNY-College at Brockport
Canisius College

Francophone writers and theorists have long worked to establish a cultural identity which is true to their collective past and free of Western authority and influence.¹ From Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, *Notebook on a return to the native land*, to Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*, *Crossing the Mangrove*, these writers reflect in their works the need to find their own voice and validate their own perspective in the face of a history fraught with colonial influence and domination. Marie-Célie Agnant, a Francophone writer of Haitian descent living in Montreal, addresses this search for history and identity through the lens of Haitian immigrant characters in her works, namely *La Dot de Sara*, *Sara's Dowry*, *Le Livre d'Emma*, *The Book of Emma* and *Un alligator nommé Rosa*, *An Alligator Named Rosa*. Agnant's works treat the questions of identity and belonging through the experiences of her characters who are exiled from their native roots.

Past histories must be recovered, transmitted and often translated repeatedly in order to maintain a connection to one's cultural identity and history. This re-visioning of their past history and identity, however, often conflicts with the daily lives of her characters, interfering with their adjustment to their new host culture and preventing them from fully participating in contemporary society. The quandary of preserving a connection to the past while participating in modern society reveals itself most poignantly in *La Dot de Sara*. Uprooted from Haiti and ensconced in Montreal society following the birth of her granddaughter, the novel's principal character Mari-

anna must reinvent herself without losing touch with her Haitian heritage. Her ensuing quest reflects a process of identity creation which relies on establishing connections to past experiences and individuals in order to provide a foundational identity from which to move forward.

A Glissantian perspective on H/history and identity

This process of identity creation requires a revision of the past, recuperating lost and rejected experiences. Edouard Glissant, a Caribbean writer who contributed greatly to the post-colonial literary movement by challenging Western influence and domination in his works, describes this process in his collection of essays entitled *Discours Antillais* 'Caribbean Discourse.' As an author, it is not surprising that Glissant calls upon writers to take responsibility for initiating challenges to Western domination. Writers must explore the past and connect with it, bringing its importance to bear on the lives of the contemporary public. Glissant participates in this challenge by drawing together stories and versions of the past which often contradict Western accounts of Caribbean history. Rather than reject these contradictory versions of the past, Glissant weaves them together in what he terms *la Relation*, a manner of exploring the links which tie one person's past to the next. The resulting connections create a foundation of communal identity from which individuals can draw support and strength. While Glissant's theoretical vision was initially applied to previously colonized Francophone communities, the basic tenets of his theory can be seen in Agnant's works in which her immigrant characters struggle with self-definition: trying to reconcile their past and present experiences in a way which enables them to fully engage in the world at large.

Whether applied to communities or individuals, understanding Glissant's theory requires a consideration of his viewpoints concerning the value and prominence of the past in contributing to one's identity, beginning with his differentiation of History (with a capital H) versus history (with a small h). History, the predominant historical narrative of the West, may encompass the past events of non-Western regions, but in recounting these events, History takes as its point of departure the influence and actions of the West in determining the non-Western events. Glissant considers History to

be inadequate in describing the experiences of non-Western groups. Western structures of historical production are imposed on non-Western regions, leading to a skeletal account of the past. In the case of Martinique, for example, Glissant recalls how “l’histoire officielle de la Martinique ...a été conçue à partir de la liste des decouvresseurs et des gouverneurs de ce pays” (*Discours* 139) ‘the official history of Martinique was conceived from a list of its discoverers and its governors.’² Those who discovered the region are considered the initiators of its History, ignoring the events which took place prior to Western contact. What is known about events prior to discovery becomes a pre-History, suggesting that Western contact is the marker against which the region is judged in terms of its global importance and place in society.

Once inserted into Western historical production and appropriated by History, the region loses its voice in determining what events or experiences are important to its own development. History does not speak for everyone and cannot represent a world vision which is equally applicable to all populations. As Glissant explains in *Intention Poétique* “Et si j’écoute la voix de l’Occident, les plus grands politiques, les plus profonds dogmatiques, les plus justes créateurs, j’entends le silence chaque fois qu’il s’agit de ce futur ou partager les différents abîmes de l’homme” (42) ‘And if I listen to the voice of the West, the greatest politicians, the most profound dogmatics, the most impartial creators, I hear the silence each time that it concerns this future, or sharing the different gulfs of man.’ Glissant laments the missing portion of History, the silences which Michel Trouillot admits are an inherent part of Western historical production. In his fascinating book *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot considers the creative, subjective nature of history, drawing an analogy between the nation and the individual: “History is to the collective as remembrance is to an individual” (14). Thus History reflects what one chooses or is permitted to remember, rather than a factual record of past events. Whereas an individual’s remembrance serves as a point of reference in identifying who they are and where they came from, History serves to identify a larger collective. As we will discover, recuperating the past through recollections and memories is just as important for individual identity creation as it is for developing the cultural

identity of a region.

The silences referred to by Trouillot often derived from conscious efforts to quiet the perspective of indigenous populations. Colonized populations were not permitted to produce their own history; rather, they were told where they fit into the History of the West. Indeed the history texts provided to colonial schools in which many Francophone authors were educated revealed a one-sided view of discovery and conquest which valorized Western achievement and silenced indigenous accounts of historical events.³ Retrieving these silences inherent in colonial texts and literature served as the motivation for many writers in the post-colonial period. Their (re) vision of history permitted the revelation of alternative perspectives on past events, allowing for the development of a richer and more encompassing—although often contradictory—understanding of the region's history.

One might expect that authors from Haiti—the first French colony to become independent in 1804—might have a long tradition of literature which recreated indigenous viewpoints on past events. The history of Toussaint Louverture, for example, was exalted in the Caribbean and in newly decolonized African nations as authors recognized the contributions of a former slave in achieving Haitian independence, a role that was denied him in traditional Western accounts of the Haitian Revolution. However, the history of Toussaint and subsequent Haitian rulers reveals a new phenomenon which took hold in Haiti in the years following independence. Newly-independent governments which sought approval and legitimacy from the West instituted repressive regimes aimed at silencing accounts of struggle, poverty, and dissidence. Having first been silenced by the West, populations were now silenced by their own governments.

Haiti, in particular, experienced years of repressive regimes including the reign of “Papa” Duvalier and his son “Baby Doc” in the 1950s. Many Haitians fled the country during this time, waiting in self-imposed exile for the violence and terror to end in their native land. Agnant found herself among these immigrants when at the age of sixteen she fled Haiti and settled in Montreal. Reflecting on her own history and emergence as a writer, Agnant notes that her motivation to write originates from a “besoin de paroles, pour tuer

le vide du silence” (*Écrire* 86) ‘need for words, to kill the emptiness of silence.’ Silence on the horrors of civil strife in Haiti, silence on the struggles of adapting to a new culture—whereas silences once originated from the control of Western forces on literary historical production, new silences emerged, reflecting the absence of accounts of daily life that encompass the struggles, memories, and hardships of immigrant writers. It is this tradition of giving voice to these historical silences that has inspired authors such as Agnant. In recreating identity through the recollection of memories, Agnant bears witness to the numerous histories that were silenced or forgotten in Haiti’s turbulent past.

Collecting past histories on an individual or communal level contributes to a revalorization of life experiences which were once forgotten. Glissant’s definition of history (with a small h) corresponds to this revision of the past by positing certain characteristics against those of History. The three principal characteristics of history are: the presence of a non-linear chronology, a value placed on the oral tradition, and multiple, often contradictory, perspectives of past events. This type of history confronts the basic tenets of Western History whose focus on written systems of recording, linear chronology and a single authoritative voice left little room for divergent accounts of the same historical event. By including multiple perspectives on the same events, history allows a multitude of voices to be included, granting each perspective a measure of authority in reconstructing the past and thus challenging the one-sided Western account: “Là où les histoires se joignent, finit l’Histoire” (*Discours* 132) ‘Where histories join, History ends.’ Those whose histories are heard are those in power. For Glissant, historical production not only recognizes past events; it establishes a history of pride and power, determining the relationship of one group to another. By speaking up for themselves and their histories (both figuratively and through the recollection of stories in the oral tradition), the masses can form a more solid identity. Locating the traces or links to these histories is an integral part of rebuilding communal and individual identity, pride, and power. “Le passé, notre passé subi, qui n’est pas encore histoire pour nous, est pourtant là (ici) qui nous lancine. La tâche de l’écrivain est d’explorer ce lancinement, de le ‘révéler’ de manière continue dans le présent et l’actuel” (*Discours* 132) ‘The past, our

lived past, which is not yet history for us, is still there (here) which links us together. The task of the writer is to explore this linkage, to “reveal” it in a manner consistent with the present moment.’ It is this negotiation with the past, this manner of connecting with history and using it as a tool of empowerment and a springboard towards the future that is exemplified in Agnant’s novel *La Dot de Sara*.

La Dot de Sara as a model for historical consciousness and identity formation

Agnant’s novel validates Glissant’s theory by incorporating each of the three elements of history into the text. The novel centers on Marianna, a Haitian immigrant who has moved to Montreal to help her daughter Giselle care for her new baby, Sara. Making the transition from Haiti to Montreal throws Marianna into a process of self-searching which brings into question her relationships and her very identity as she struggles with feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and dependency. The type of dependency Marianna experiences reflects an oft-studied sociological phenomenon resulting from “a pervasive loss of sense of self and an inability to negotiate their identity in a new culture” (Berger 19). In order to move forward, Marianna must redefine who she is, negotiating the place and value of her heritage as it interacts with her current relationships and lifestyle.

The novel begins with an immediate establishment of the boundaries of Marianna’s identity. She first speaks of Sara, her new granddaughter, and then recalls her own grandmother, Aïda, commenting on the resemblances between these two women of such different generations. Marianna’s association of these two women establishes a clear lineage within which she might place herself. However, the first paragraph does not include Marianna’s own mother, who did not survive childbirth, and it ends with a description of Giselle, Marianna’s daughter—a contradictory personality to the ones already described. The absence of one woman from the lineage and the stark contrast in personality of the other provide a shock in the clear and careful similarities that initially seem to be passed from one generation to the next.

By opening the novel in this way, Agnant alerts us to one facet of the identitarian quest: one’s identity is more complex than just placing oneself within an established lineage. There are missing pieces,

contradictory moments, and awkward connections which contribute to one's round-about search for self. The non-linear nature of this process is further emphasized when considering the novel's timeline: while the main narrative proceeds in a general chronological direction, there is a constant tone of nostalgia which serves to inform the reader of Marianna's history as it relates to the present. As Myriam Chancy notes in her book *Framing Silence*, since "memory is by nature achronological, moving back and forth across boundaries of time and space," the reader must collect these bits of identifying information in order to understand who Marianna really is (91). The non-linear juxtaposition of the characters from Marianna's past and her constant recollecting of past events illustrate Glissant's theory that the *va-et-vient* 'back and forth' between past and present is an essential element in helping to form contemporary identity.

Agnant infuses the text with additional elements which validate the non-Western nature of Marianna's culture and identity. The tradition of orality, so prevalent in Haitian society, enables Marianna to maintain a connection to her past and recreate the cultural basis of her identity in the present. As Chancy notes, "stories told and handed down from one generation to the next [transfer] wisdom from the elderly to the young in order to preserve the self as well as the community...orality equals survival" (74). Marianna initially survives by embracing the role of griot, retelling stories of her past to Sara. Given the refusal of Giselle to recall her past and expose her daughter to the Haitian part of her heritage, Marianna accepts this traditional female role: "as carriers of and those responsible for transmission of the cultural heritage of their homeland and educating the young generations about the beliefs, norms, and values of community life" (Berger 20). Thus, Marianna's recollections of her Haitian life serve a dual purpose: they teach Sara about her heritage while also reinforcing Marianna's own identity and belonging to that heritage.

Agnant valorizes the orality of Haitian culture while also showing its opposition to written systems of communication often associated to the West. When Marianna's daughter Giselle moves to Montreal, for example, she writes to her mother regularly. However, when this written system falters and the letters cease, Marianna remains informed of her daughter's situation: "Sans qu'elle m'écrive,

j'appris, je ne sais trop comment, que la trouvaille d'homme de ma fille n'était pas ce qu'il y avait de plus extraordinaire...les nouvelles traversaient l'océan, on ne sait par quelle magie, pour venir me tourmenter" (*Dot* 36-37) 'without her writing to me, I learned, I don't know how, that my daughter's 'find' of a man was nothing extraordinary....News crossed the ocean, I don't know by what magic, to come torment me.' The integral nature of orality to the culture is further reinforced through Agnant's choice of narrator: Marianna herself. In speaking to the reader, Marianna often incorporates Creole to infuse the text with elements of Haitian culture and language, and insist upon the importance of verbal culture and the oral tradition (*Dot* 64-68).

The last element of Glissant's theory—multiple perspectives—is perhaps the most important one that aids Marianna in her self-definition. As the protagonist struggles to infuse her contemporary identity with elements of her history, the value of that past is constantly being challenged by those around her. Giselle, in particular, refuses to see any value in the past, noting that the stories Marianna holds so dear to her identity are just "un univers de mythes et de rêves pour fuir on ne sait trop quelle réalité" (*Dot* 67) 'a universe of myths and dreams used to escape some kind of reality,' essentially denying her mother's identity as valid. The connection that Marianna struggles so hard to maintain, Giselle refuses to acknowledge. However, it is this apparent impasse between the two women and their divergent perspectives on what is valuable about history that will eventually serve to help Marianna move forward.

Negotiating identity in the face of opposition

The alternate perspective of the past offered by Giselle clearly opposes that of Marianna: whereas Marianna finds strength and comfort in recalling the past, Giselle prefers to put behind her the struggles of her youth in Haiti. In spite of the moments of shared experience from their past in Haiti, Giselle and Marianna exhibit contradictory viewpoints when it comes to the value of those past events in contributing to one's contemporary identity.

In fact, establishing moments of shared experience does not imply that the resulting identity is homogenous. Indeed, resistance is a necessary part of identity creation. In her book *The Negotiated*

Self: The Dynamics of Identity in Francophone Caribbean Literature, Anne Malena proposes that the search for one's most basic identity is affected by a multitude of relationships and connections that force a constant self-reflection on one's place in society. She states: "The self's constant adjusting is not part of a harmonious and linear process leading toward the creation of a better integrated social group... but takes place within a set of conflictual and hierarchical relations. In this sense, every individual is more or less diasporic in his or her search for the cultural and social values that will shape his or her identity" (22). It is through these conflictual relationships that one finds the Other against who one can define oneself.

Resisting the Other and thus affirming oneself is illustrated in the conflicts between Marianna and Giselle. For example, Giselle's suggestion to sell off the family homestead in Haiti sends Marianna into a rage, so appalled is she that her daughter should consider such a drastic break from her heritage (*Dot* 62). Clearly the value of Haitian heritage that Marianna embraces is opposed by Giselle's pragmatic concerns for their financial well-being in the present. Similarly, during arguments with her mother, Giselle tends to refer to her as Marianna, rejecting the familial tie that Mother would infer, in an effort to establish a unique identity for herself that is not tied to the lineage so important to her mother (*Dot* 63). Marianna is thwarted in her attempts to enfold Giselle into her conception of a Haitian lineage-based identity. Yet this very conflict serves to reinforce the existence of the Other against who Marianna can better define her cultural identity. This is one example which illustrates that Marianna cannot preserve her exclusive Haitian identity while also fulfilling her goal of engaging her family in present day relationships. Without some sort of identity reconciliation, Marianna will remain isolated in contemporary society, unable to negotiate a place for herself among the relationships she holds most dear.

For her part, Giselle finds herself in a similar situation as Marianna. In her refusal to validate or even speak of her past in Haiti, Giselle separates herself from the encompassing lineage Marianna insists on establishing among the women in her family. Marianna's centering of Haitian heritage as the primary element of her identity has relegated Giselle to the margins in her refusal to embrace this heritage. Yet, Giselle's silence regarding her past can be seen as an ef-

fort to refuse the categorization imposed upon her by the Other, or Marianna. Whereas her mother's intent is to maintain the familial lineage through her repetition of past events and their connections, Giselle's refusal to speak of the past allows her to reject the Other of her mother's making. Giselle demonstrates Chancy's intriguing analysis of silence in that "from this marginalization emerges a sense of ...culture that defines itself *through its silencing*" (17 original emphasis). Giselle rejects the nostalgic longing that her mother exhibits through her silence regarding her past, allowing her to negotiate her own identity based upon her present values.

Even when not in conflict with Others, Marianna defines herself based on her relationships with Others, as evidenced by the opening paragraphs discussed earlier. Marianna does not describe herself, but rather the relevant people in her lineage who are connected to her. The relationships she develops—whether conflictual or conciliatory—add another perspective to our understanding of Marianna's identity. Through a chance meeting, Marianna reconnects with Chimène, an old friend from Haiti who happens to live nearby in Montreal. Whereas Giselle has always been a point of resistance, Chimène appears as a point of connection, almost a mirror of Marianna, having faced the same cultural shocks and transitions. Initially, Chimène validates Marianna's links to her past and her ancestry as they reminisce about Haiti, and attend a Haitian immigrant club together. However, Chimène also pushes Marianna to explore other connections. When Marianna seems stuck indoors—unable to venture outside on streets where she says "[je] me sentais étrangère, habitée par une autre histoire" (*Dot* 80) '[I] felt like a stranger, inhabited by another history'—Chimène encourages her to move forward, helping her find a church to attend and teaching her how to use public transportation. While representing a connection to Marianna's past, Chimène displays a level of integration into Montreal society that Marianna had previously refused to accept. As she begins to respond to Chimène's guidance she reveals, "petit à petit, grâce à Chimène, j'ai commencé à vivre une réalité différente, faite de choses autres que mes rêves" (*Dot* 81) 'little by little, thanks to Chimène, I began to live a different reality, made of things other than my dreams.'

Marianna's reliance on her history as a basis for her identity is

challenged again in the relationship she values the most—her relationship with Sara. Sara represents the future of Marianna's lineage, and thus a validation of her heritage-based identity, but Marianna ignores the varying facets of Sara's identity. While Sara loved to hear her grandmother's stories and had even learned to speak some Creole, at six years old she declared "Un jour grand-maman, j'écrirai ton histoire, l'histoire de ta vie...le monde entier la lira cette histoire" (*Dot* 25-26) 'One day grandmother, I will write your story, the story of your life...the whole world will read this story.' This statement can be viewed from several perspectives. On the one hand, Sara's desire to record the beautiful stories for the whole world reflects the value she places on the history and experience her grandmother has passed on to her. Just as Agnant recognizes "l'idée de vouloir préserver la mémoire" 'the idea of wanting to preserve memory' which inspires writers, Sara's efforts to write her grandmother's life story would preserve her past regardless of whether the oral tradition continued (Proulx 53).

On the other hand, rather than imagine a future in which she will someday tell her children or grandchildren the same stories, Sara imagines recording these histories in a traditionally Western way. Sara's impulse to write the story indicates her connection to the Western culture in which she was raised. This statement, while seemingly innocent on the part of Sara, constitutes a revelation of the cultural differences that belie the two women: while Marianna is intent on enfolding Sara into her lineage-based Haitian identity, Sara's life experiences differ greatly from her grandmother's and she may not reflect the same perspectives as her ancestors. Whereas the oral tradition enabled Marianna to maintain a certain level of engagement with her past—and thus separation from her contemporary Western society—Sara's response is indicative of the cultural and generational divide between the two women and fragile nature of their insulated relationship. As Marianna will learn, without engaging Sara in a relationship that incorporates or adapts to contemporary society, Marianna risks losing her connection—and thus herself—in the process.

The connection between Marianna and Sara is of utmost importance as Marianna struggles to create a contemporary identity. In spite of the non-linear elements Agnant infuses in the text, Mari-

anna herself relies on a very linear conception of her ancestry to validate her identity. However, basing her identity solely on linear familial connections creates difficulties when these links are threatened. As Sara grows up, Marianna gets tired of Montreal and desires to return to Haiti. However, she has one condition: she wants Sara to marry and start a family before she goes. In order for Marianna to continue onward (or backward), she must have assurance that the lineage through which she defines herself is continued. Sara does not object to having children—but insists that she will do so someday, maybe, without needing a man to marry. As with Giselle, Sara refuses to be inscribed into Marianna's exclusive conception of linear identity based upon the values of the past.

Sara, Marianna, Giselle and *La Relation*

The arguments between Marianna and Sara regarding the latter's future plans illustrate Marianna's fear of a loss of her self if she is not assured a continuation of the lineage. This impasse is not the first time that this fragile link—*le fil*, or thread, as Marianna calls it—is nearly lost. As a teenager, Sara runs away from home, and a panicked Marianna recalls a parallel situation during Giselle's teen years that made her feel as though “*impuissante, je voyais s'en aller le fil que je ne pouvais plus rattraper*” (*Dot* 29) ‘powerless, I watched the thread that I could no longer catch take off.’ Without Sara, Marianna feels powerless and lost. Yet, it is not until the two argue about Sara's future that Marianna recognizes the dangerous potential of binding yourself to one identitarian connection.

Sara's refusal to submit to Marianna's rigid conception of lineage and identity coincides with the death of Chimène. Faced with this figurative loss of her connection with her past (through Chimène) and with her future (through Sara), Marianna faces the potential loss of herself literally as her health deteriorates and she undergoes an operation. Her physical healing parallels a spiritual healing as well. During her hospital stay, she reflects on the meaningful contributions of her heritage—and thus herself—to the relationships she maintains in the present. In fact, she and Giselle talk openly about their relationship and despite her initial reluctance, Giselle is able to acknowledge a positive role that her heritage plays in her life, saying to her mother, “*J'ai aussi appris à voir le monde autre-*

ment grâce à toi...Tu n'as pas été que la gardienne de ma fille, tu as été la gardienne de mon équilibre" (*Dot* 161) 'I also learned to see the world differently thanks to you...You were not only the guardian of my daughter, you were the guardian of my balance.' In addition, Sara demonstrates the valuable lessons she has learned from Marianna, preparing traditional Haitian coffee for her grandmother daily. The illustration of these cultural traditions in practice allows Marianna to see how others have incorporated their heritage into their contemporary identities, melding elements of both the past and present. The heritage through which she defined herself exclusively, preventing her integration in contemporary society, is now reflected in the actions and conversations of those to whom she has passed along this heritage. In viewing the continuation of her culture, particularly through Sara, Marianna gains a new perspective on her own ability to reconcile her past and present identities.

By establishing and exploring the relationships with others who share her heritage, Marianna is able to develop a unique identity which valorizes her past while enabling her to engage more fully with contemporary society. In spite of the contradictions and struggles she encountered in negotiating her identity with those around her, she discovers a place for her heritage that is prominent, but not exclusive of other perspectives on her identity. Glissant likens this process to the development of identity in Caribbean societies, a process he calls *La Relation*. Through an examination of the past, individuals with divergent perspectives can find moments of connection and form a foundation of understanding on which the community can build its identity. *La Relation* is founded on two principles: first, accepting the Other's particularity and second, connecting with the Other in a non-hierarchical and non-reductive relationship. Rather than consume the Other in an effort to remake it as the Same, *la Relation* respects differences, representing "an engagement with the density of the Other" (Britton 315). Marianna no longer tries to force Giselle and Sara into her narrow concept of a lineage-based identity; she accepts their unique perspectives while finding connections to the elements of Haitian heritage that they all value and share.

Glissant draws on imagery of the mangrove tree to reflect on the connectedness of seemingly divergent histories. He suggests that

beneath the surface of history, there exist roots, or *racines*, which link one story to the next: “Nous sommes les racines de la Relation. Des racines sous-marines: c’est-à-dire dérivées, non implantées d’un seul mat dans un seul limon, mais prolongées dans tous les sens de notre univers par leur réseau de branches” (*Discours* 134) ‘We are the roots of the Relation. Underwater roots: that is, derived, not established from a single stalk in a single stone, but elongated in all directions of our universe by their network of branches.’ Once connected, the histories do not merge into one to become a universal model. Rather, they retain their particularity, each being of equal importance in establishing the vast network of histories which comprise the identity of the region. Similarly, Agnant’s characters connect with each other through the shared roots of their Haitian heritage, but each woman is free to lead her life in a manner which allows for a unique self-definition. Sharing a common lineage does not bind them to the same destiny; rather, they enjoy a common bond from which to grow in their own unique identities. Marianna engages in what Chancy has called “a new sense of collective memory rooted in women’s personal interaction with each other as well as with the world beyond them” (21). For Marianna, her new connectedness to her family permits her to move forward in her life—by returning to her roots.

Following her operation, Marianna experiences a kind of rebirth. Having decided to return to Haiti, Marianna finally asks herself the question which she has been living during the whole novel: “Qui suis-je? Au-dedans de moi, une voix ironique répond, je ne sais pas, je ne sais plus” (*Dot* 166) ‘Who am I? From deep inside me, an ironic voice responds, I don’t know, I no longer know.’ Marianna’s rebirth reflects the difficult process of letting part of oneself go, in order to create something new. Agnant herself reflects on this process in her article “Écrire pour tuer le vide” ‘Writing to Kill the Void’: “Renaître est difficile. Car il faut pouvoir mourir, accepter de mourir un peu, chaque fois, avant chaque nouvelle naissance” (86) ‘Rebirth is difficult. Because one must be able to die, to accept to die a little, each time, before each new birth.’ Marianna recognizes that she is not the same person she who arrived in Montreal twenty years ago. Marianna’s return to Haiti is not the realization of her nostalgic dreams. Indeed, the Haiti she now finds is quite different from the

one she left. Yet she too has changed, as she mentions, “je suis née à nouveau aujourd’hui” (*Dot* 175) ‘I am born again today.’ Rather than look only to her past as a marker of her own identity, she has recognized the richness of the connections in her life, even those that seemed oppositional. Whereas Marianna once spoke of *le fil* as being the representation of a single heritage: “Sara, Aïda, à travers moi, à travers [Giselle], la même racine, le même fil, la même vie” (*Dot* 16) ‘Sara Aïda, through me, through Giselle, the same root, the same thread, the same life,’ she comes to realize that *le fil*, this single thread of her past, is fragile on its own, vulnerable to sudden breakage and loss. Whereas Glissant employs imagery of the mangrove tree’s roots, Agnant uses the imagery of sewing and thread. As a former seamstress, Marianna comes to realize that by connecting her thread (her heritage) with the threads of the women in her life—Giselle, Sara, Chimène—their intertwined lives remain linked while maintaining unique properties. The resulting intermingling of threads weave a fabric of life which is stronger, more colorful, and longer-lasting than a single thread. As symbolized by the old sewing machine Marianna rediscovers in her ancestral home in Haiti at the end of the novel, the seemingly divergent paths of Giselle, Sara, and Marianna have woven together to create a cloth, with each thread contributing to the overall strength and identity of the fabric to which they all belong.

Notes

1 For ease of discussion, I define the term “West” to represent a primarily Western European /modern Québécois perspective as opposed to the “non-Western” perspective which includes previously colonized Francophone populations and immigrants of the Caribbean.

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3 For specific examples of colonial history texts, see the 1935 and 1938 editions of *Histoire de la France et de la civilisation française* by Paul Bernard and F. Redon. Additionally, Roy Preiswerk and Dominique Perrot offer an insightful analysis of colonial textbooks in *Ethnocentrisme et l’histoire*.

Works Cited

Agnant, Marie-Célie. *La Dot de Sara*. Montreal: Éditions du remue-ménage,

1995. Print.

- . “Écrire pour tuer le vide.” *Canadian Woman Studies* 23.2 (2004): 86-91. Print.

Berger, Roni. *Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories*. New York: Haworth, 2004. Print.

Bernard, Paul and F. Redon. *Histoire de la France et de la civilisation française*. Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1935. Print.

- . *Histoire de la France et de la civilisation française*, Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1938. Print.

Britton, Celia. “Opacity and Transparency: Conceptions of History and Cultural Difference in the Work of Michel Butor and Edouard Glissant.” *French Studies* 49.3 (1995): 308-20. Print.

Chancy, Myriam J.A. *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1997. Print.

Glissant, Edouard. *Discours Antillais*. Paris: Seuil, 1981. Print.

- . *Intention Poétique*. Paris: Seuil, 1969. Print.

Malena, Anne. *The Negotiated Self: The Dynamics of Identity in Francophone Caribbean Literature*. London: Lang, 1999. Print.

Preiswerk, Roy and Dominique Perrot. *Ethnocentrisme et l'histoire*. Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1975. Print.

Proulx, Patrice. “Bearing Witness and Transmitting Memory in the Works of Marie-Célie Agnant.” *Québec Studies* 39 (2005): 35-51. Print.

- . “Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Marie-Célie Agnant.” *Québec Studies* 41 (2006): 45-61. Print.

Trouillot, Michel. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon, 1995. Print.