



**HAL**  
open science

## **From J. S. Alexis' Claire-Heureuse in 'Compère Général Soleil' to Edwidge Danticat's 'Claire of the Sea Light': What Fate for Haitian Marvelous Realism?**

Charles W Scheel

### **► To cite this version:**

Charles W Scheel. From J. S. Alexis' Claire-Heureuse in 'Compère Général Soleil' to Edwidge Danticat's 'Claire of the Sea Light': What Fate for Haitian Marvelous Realism?. CLA Journal, 2015, 59 (2), pp.177-193. <hal-04072125>

**HAL Id: hal-04072125**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04072125v1>**

Submitted on 17 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Copyright - All rights reserved

**Charles W. Scheel**  
Université des Antilles (Campus de Schoelcher, Martinique)

FROM J. S. ALEXIS' "CLAIRE-HEUREUSE"  
IN *COMPÈRE GÉNÉRAL SOLEIL*  
TO EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *CLAIRE OF THE SEA LIGHT* :  
WHAT FATE FOR HAITIAN MARVELOUS REALISM ?

*to Hal Wylie*

The first name "Claire" on the cover of Edwidge Danticat's recent novel, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013), recalls – and is surely meant to recall – "Claire-Heureuse," the main female protagonist in Jacques Stephen Alexis's famous novel *Compère Général Soleil*, published in Paris in 1955, but only in 1999 in an English translation under the title *General Sun, My Brother*. This tenuous link from one Claire to the other, spanning almost sixty years of Haitian literary production, will be used in this paper to explore just how much of Alexis's 1956 Parisian manifesto for a "Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens" may still be traced in a contemporary novel published in English in the USA by a woman writer of the Haitian Diaspora.

Danticat's already rich literary production may obviously be approached from a wide array of perspectives. When it comes to echoes of Haitian literary classics in work titles, another link is evident in the word "dew," which appears in Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (the 1947 English translation of the 1944 original French edition of *Gouverneurs de la rosée*), a novel widely considered as Roumain's masterpiece and also as a precursor of marvelous realism. The same word appears on the front page of another Danticat novel: *The Dew Breaker* (2005). Both titles are phrased poetically, but while Roumain's "masters of the dew" are the Haitian peasants of the 1930s, Danticat's "dew breaker" turns out to be a former torturer of the Duvalier regime, living in the USA in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thus, if these books are united by a common word used within a poetic metaphor in their titles, they could hardly be more opposed in a political or sociological perspective.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From a thematic angle, Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* has much more in common with *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2006), the successful first novel of Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz. Both books deal with the fate of torturers and their victims in a complex, decades-long interaction, both on Hispaniola Island itself and among the Diasporas of the two nations in the New York/New Jersey area. In both cases, the works of these two young

Such echoes make it irresistible to approach Danticat's new book from the angle of "marvelous *realism*," a notion promoted by Jacques Stephen Alexis in the wake of the "marvelous *real*," which the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier had presented in the famous prolog of his novel *The Kingdom of this World* (1949). A year only after publishing his first novel, *Compère*, with Gallimard in Paris, Alexis read (in French) his "Prolegomena to a Manifesto of Haitian Marvelous Realism" at the watershed event of the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956. Alexis's essay formalized a specifically Haitian aesthetic, blending –at times somewhat awkwardly– a synthesis of African and Caribbean cultural inheritances with the dictates of socialist realism. His first novel illustrated such an aesthetic rather convincingly by centering on the destiny of Hilarius Hilarion, a proletarian protagonist, between his imprisonment in Port-au-Prince for stealing a wallet while desperately hungry, and his tragic death during the infamous 1937 mass-slaughter of Haitian cane workers by Dominican armed forces along the aptly named Massacre River bordering the two nations.<sup>2</sup>

Between the two events, Hilarius had been enlightened about Haitian society by mixing with communist and union leaders, and also become the common-law husband of a young and pretty woman, Claire-Heureuse, who survived the massacre alone: the couple's new-born baby, Désiré, was killed by Dominican police dogs during the family's flight back to Haiti. Alexis' intense and substantial novel has been likened to a large social fresco of Haiti in the 1930s, and the author's commitment to both his country and the class struggle is expressed in a way –often highly poetic and/or impetuously didactic– that illustrates what Alexis meant by Haitian marvelous realism, in a distinctly epic manner, one he will not resort to in his three later works of fiction. In fact, it is often Alexis's second novel, *Les Arbres musiciens* (1957, still not translated in English), which foregrounds the "magical" elements in the beliefs of a main protagonist living in the wilderness and of rural communities heavily involved

---

novelists deal respectively, in English, with the legacies of infamous dictators Trujillo and Duvalier, which have weighed heavily on Haitian or Dominican survivors and their offspring to this day. Yet these books, although produced on the basis of a similar history, are very different in tone or style and are likely to strike different chords depending on the reader's familiarity with the French-Haitian and/or Spanish-Dominican literary backgrounds of these young diaspora authors living in the USA. The famous aesthetic notion of "the American marvelous real," which the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier started promoting in the 1940s, furnished an interesting angle of attack for a study of Diaz's postmodern and postcolonial novel (Scheel 2014).

<sup>2</sup> This important event in *Compère* could prompt another comparative study with yet another Danticat novel: *The Farming of Bones*, which, under a rather un-poetic title, also explores aspects of the so-called 1937 "Dominican Vespers."

with voodoo practices, that is associated with “marvelous realism” or “magical realism,” seen as forms of popular cultural resistance to economic and religious oppression by Haiti’s political elite and its accomplices: the Catholic church and American capital. Because Alexis’s underlying Marxist rhetoric is far more discreet in that second novel, it is easier to see in it an illustration of Carpentier’s “marvelous real,” understood as a worldview still imbued with a strong faith in ancestral powers, whether of African or pre-Colombian American origin, deemed superior to a Western culture which is considered to have lost its soul in the cult of reason and technological progress.

### ***Marvelous realism versus the marvelous real in the North-American champ littéraire***

At this point it should be underlined that, while comparatists in 20<sup>th</sup>-century world fiction, familiar with the literary fields of Europe and the Americas, might be aware of the subtle links and distinctions between Carpentier’s “marvelous real” and Alexis’s “marvelous realism” (and their common or respective historical links with the far more popular notions of “surrealism” and “magical realism”), the two notions are often fused together or mixed up. Also, their receptions in an Anglophone country like the USA, are hardly comparable in quantitative terms. If we play with keywords on various databases (starting with the MLA’s), references to Carpentier and the “marvelous real” are usually ten to twenty times more numerous than the ones to Alexis and “marvelous realism.” This discrepancy in popularity is the result of two phenomena: firstly, the resonance of Carpentier’s publications in Spanish within the huge Latin-American world and the international attention gained as of the 1960s by its “Boom” writers (“for whom Carpentier prepared the ground,” as formulated by Kramer 2014); secondly, the fact that English translations of Carpentier’s works started appearing in New York as early as 1957 (*The Kingdom of this World*), over forty years before the first Alexis novel appeared in the States. Within the Americas, the potential public of francophone Caribbean literature (from Haiti and the French *départements* of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyane) was limited from its start in the 1950s to a literate elite of about 3 to 10% of the populations in those small territories, and to the Québec readership (itself only starting to develop on a large scale in the 1960s). And while readers of fiction in Spanish had access to translations of *Compère* as early as the 1970s, scholars of Caribbean literatures had to wait till 2008 for the Spanish translation of Alexis’s 1956 Manifesto –almost a half-century after its publication in French and English, and exactly 60 years after the original publication of Carpentier’s famous “Prólogo.”

In light of these considerations, it is hardly surprising that except for the groundbreaking Canadian publications in English, by Michael Dash (1974 and

1975) on both Alexis and his manifesto “Of the Marvelous Realism of the Haitians,” the reception of Alexis’s works in American academia was de facto limited to departments teaching francophone literature in French<sup>3</sup> or to Quebec.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the publication in the USA of an English translation of Alexis’s masterwork of Haitian literature in 1999 appears almost miraculous and has rekindled interest in Alexis, as witnessed by a recent article in an American publication (Kramer 2014). Surely 1955 was not a good moment for an American editor to even think of publishing a book so glowingly and explicitly committed to communism as *Compère*, but it strikes one as odd that it was not done at the latest in the seventies. Whatever be the reasons for such a tardy publication, one cannot but admire the translation offered by Carrol F. Coates and the beautiful editorial and printing job of this Caraf Book by the University Press of Virginia.<sup>5</sup>

### **Coates’s *General Sun, My Brother* and marvelous realism**

So late in the season, Coates’s good work might not allow Alexis to “catch up” with Carpentier’s reputation in Anglophone (not to mention Hispanic) academia, but the Caraf edition is bound to become the main reference for readers of the novel in English and both the translation and Coate’s introduction to Alexis’s novel need to be assessed critically. Thus while the blurb on the book, offered on the University of Virginia Press web page,<sup>6</sup> mentions that Alexis’s first novel “has brought comparisons to the work of Emile Zola, André Malraux, Richard Wright, and Ernest Hemingway,” it seems to me that John Steinbeck would constitute a more suitable reference than Hemingway, as it should become clear further down. The blurb also states that “a militant Marxist himself, Alexis championed a form of the ‘marvelous realism’ developed by the Cuban novelist

---

<sup>3</sup> This is how this (French) reader discovered *Compère* in a graduate course on Black Francophone literature at UT-Austin in the late 1980s, given by Hal Wylie, who also published one of the few studies on Alexis in English (1989) and saluted the novel’s long-awaited translation (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Thus, one of the most interesting studies of Alexis’s marvelous realism in French was produced in Québec in 1987 by Maximilien Laroche, an Haiti-born connoisseur of Haiti literature and culture, unfortunately published in a Laval University research journal that was not easily accessible from abroad (in the same year, the same research group also published a study by Cecilia Ponte, “Le Réalisme merveilleux dans Les Arbres musiciens de J. S. Alexis”).

<sup>5</sup> Even if the choice of a slick and elegant page layout may translate into vexing readability issues, signaled by various reviewers, including Hal Wylie, for whom “the only problematic aspect is the way Coates handles the Creole sprinkled through the work. He insists upon the new ‘standard’ or ‘American’ spelling of Kreyòl, distancing it from the old orthography which made clear its relation to French. He even puts proverbs in French in the original into Kreyòl. And when Alexis placed a note at the bottom of the page, Coates sends us to the glossary in the back of the book.” (Wylie 2000.)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://books.upress.virginia.edu>.

Alejo Carpentier, who called for a vision of historical reality from the standpoint of slaves for whom the supernatural was as much a part of everyday experience as were social and other existential realities.” Both halves of this statement strike me as problematic because, as previously emphasized, Carpentier offered not a marvelous *realism* but a marvelous *real*.<sup>7</sup> Nor should Carpentier’s “marvelous real” be reduced to its illustration in *The Kingdom of this World*, in which some of the narrative is, indeed, focalized by an illiterate and yet astute slave, Ti Noel – but only some.

Just what Alexis’s marvelous realism was cannot be summarized easily, and although Coates’s 24-page introduction to his translation is quite balanced on the whole and extremely informative for readers with little knowledge of Haitian literary and political history, the two paragraphs dedicated to the question of marvelous realism and its origins are as problematic as their further reduction on the book’s back cover. While Coates does well to mention the stimulating visits in Haiti by Nicolás Guillén (1942), Alejo Carpentier (1943) and André Breton (1945-46), and the original impact of Césaire’s *négritude* in those years (p. x), he does not make clear that by 1955-1956, Alexis had long rejected both Breton’s surrealism (because while in Paris he felt much closer to the ex-surrealist but then communist Louis Aragon) and *négritude* (because he wanted to stress the various facets of Haiti’s cultural makeup and not reduce it to only its African roots – a point finely analyzed as early as 1978 by Claude Souffrant in *Une Négritude socialiste*). Even more problematic is the paragraph on Carpentier in which Coates equates the latter’s alleged idea of the “marvelous American realism” with “magical realism” (x). Such a confusion is common, often unexplained, sometimes willful,<sup>8</sup> and not restricted to comments about Carpentier.<sup>9</sup> When referring to Carpentier, we need to remember that Carpentier had adamantly distinguished his “marvelous American real” from both surrealism and magical realism, which he considered as flawed by their European origin and alleged artificiality. In the same paragraph, Coates wants to illustrate Carpentier’s “marvelous realism [sic]” by mentioning “stereoscopic vision” (with reference to

---

<sup>7</sup> This very common confusion is also apparent in Marco Katz’s 2012 article on Carpentier and “Marvelous Realism and a New Place for America.”

<sup>8</sup> Attempts at differentiating between the two notions exist too. Thus Margaret Heady, who had published in French on “Le merveilleux et la conscience marxiste dans *Les arbres musiciens* de Jacques-Stephen Alexis” in 2002, offered an interesting comparative study in English (2005) about “double consciousness” in Alexis and Simone Schwarz-Bart novels. But this reader fails to understand the theoretic underpinnings of what she calls a Caribbean “discourse of the marvelous” on the one hand, and “the narrative technique of magical realism” on the other.

<sup>9</sup> In a recent, substantial publication on Haitian Exile literature, Martin Munro mentions “Alexis’s magical realism” (2007, 61, 87) when I suspect he meant his “marvelous realism.”

Laroche 1987, 8). Unfortunately that particular notion is a good example of the alleged European artificiality that Carpentier denounced.<sup>10</sup> A short but excellent critical analysis of the history of these different aesthetic movements was provided in Haiti by philosopher Jacques Gourgue in his introduction to an anthology of texts under the title “Du Surréalisme au Réalisme Merveilleux” (1992, 6-9). Gourgue opined that, in a country like Haiti, where popular imagination expresses itself in an “ordinary delirium” both surrealism and Carpentier’s marvelous real were “conservative theories” (7), and that “the aporias of the aesthetics of both Carpentier and Alexis [these Siamese twins that are so easily mistaken] stem from their desire to seize art as if it were perfectly circumscribed [...] when they refer to images and not to things” (9, my translation).

Coates devotes another paragraph specifically to Alexis’s 1956 Paris lecture “Of the Marvelous Realism of the Haitians,” from which he quotes a sentence about the various cultural sources of Haitian art and the inclusion, in marvelous realism, of the mysterious, of dreams, of beauty and even of ugliness. He then notes that Alexis had also claimed recognition for Kreyòl “as a language and not simply a patois” (xii). This is true but very incomplete. Considering the importance of the notion of Marvelous Realism in the history of Haitian literature and with regard to *Compère* especially, it is regrettable that Coates should not have quoted more precisely the four point-summary that Alexis gave at the end of his clearly programmatic manifesto:

1) sing the beauties of the Haitian fatherland, its greatness as well as its misery [...]; 2) reject art without any real or social content; 3) look for expressive words suitable for its people [...]; 4) have a clear awareness of the precise, concrete and current problems and real dramas that the masses are confronting, in order to touch them, and to lead the people in its struggles. (Alexis 1956, 268)

It seems rather clear that, whatever cultural concessions Alexis makes in points 1 and 3 about the “specifically Haitian beauties” and the “suitable words” to express them, points 2 and 4 mean that Haitian artists were expected to harness themselves to a program that corresponded to the agenda of socialist realism. Alexis’s essay paid barely lip service to any artistic freedom. If we bear this in mind, it is hard to ignore that *Compère* is overall a precise illustration of points 1, 2 and 4 of this program (point 3 needs to be bracketed out, since the vast majority

---

<sup>10</sup> “Stereoscopic vision” was claimed by writers like Ernst Jünger and Massimo Bontempelli who had given a futuristic and/or mystical twist to Franz Roh’s original 1925 coining of the phrase “magical realism” as a new, post-expressionist aesthetic in European painting (Scheel 2005).

of Haitians could not have understood –and certainly not read– Alexis’ lofty French prose). Further down in his introduction, Coates explains how the five years (1955-1960) of Alexis’s amazingly rich literary production as a fiction writer, run parallel to his growing political involvement with unionism and communism, from the Haitian to an increasingly international scene, culminating in his fateful choice “to put down the pen and pick up the gun to become a guerillero”<sup>11</sup> and fight with his own hands the newly-risen dictator in his country. Towards the end of his analysis of the novel’s structure, Coates does state that Alexis wrote “of course, a ‘Communist’ novel,” with a realistic presentation of misery, political corruption, a deleterious U.S. involvement, and a people that kept faith in spite of all that (xxii). It is therefore puzzling that his concluding lines about the novel’s French title, *Compère Général Soleil*, are these:

Referring to Hilarion’s role as a *kanzo*, I would propose that General Sun/Legba is, in fact, the guardian spirit, the sustainer of life, and the leader of the true *nèg*, the Toma d’Ayiti. Thus, this novel, rejected by some readers as ‘communist,’ is not simply a ‘proletarian novel’ but a novel of Haitian common men and women, steeped in Haitian traditions and initiated into Haitian religion, believing profoundly in the value of human existence and love, and following the spirits of his ancestors, most notably, Brother General Sun/Legba. (xxxiii)

Brother General Sun = Legba? How could that be, when towards the end of the novel, Coates translated the following sentences in Hilarion’s impassioned death speech to Claire-Heureuse:

I thought my illness [epilepsy] was caused by an evil spell cast by Brother Sun. And yet, *General Sun is a great man* – he has always been the friend of poor black men [...]. The great truth is that *the sun of Haiti shows us what we have to do*. Pierre Roumel, Jean-Michel, Paco, and *all the others finally understood that*. *I didn’t want to become a soldier in General Sun’s army as they did*. I have always been a hardheaded man, a bad man, one who follows his own way! [...] You must give birth to another Hilarion, other Désirés, and only you can create them. [...] Tell Jean-Michel that I saw the light the day when *a great red sun lit the chest of a worker named Paco Torres*. Tell him he has to follow that sun! (289-290, italics mine)

---

<sup>11</sup> As Souffrant put it (193, my translation).

It should be indisputable that the hero in General Sun's army here is "comrade" or "brother" Paco Torres, the Dominican worker who lost his job for being a union leader and who died for having the courage to call for a strike among the cane-cutters, thus prompting Trujillo to restore discipline and make for a whiter population in the D.R. by ordering the slaughter of thousands of Haitian workers. Even if Alexis did portray the amazing feats that could be performed by participants in voodoo services when overcome by the spirit, or the human solidarity shown by a Christian Dominican shepherd like Cocozumba, the narrator of *Compère* leaves no doubt about his skepticism where religions are concerned, voodoo included: "It is frightening how Africa weighs on these poor people" (102). In the chapter devoted to the voodoo service held in Hilarion's hometown Leogane, the narrator tells that the "damned lieutenant had to be paid [...] so that the forbidden rites could take place" (106), because voodoo and Protestantism had been fought by the Catholic Church in Haiti since 1835. But the whole endeavor initiated by Hilarion's mother to pacify the allegedly angry voodoo gods is described by the narrator in internal focalization on Hilarion, and he observes that the poor people in the country "have to sacrifice their last pennies for masses and requiems and then they pray to the deaf old gods of Africa [...] but nothing works. As Jean-Michel says, it's time to stop praying, for God's sake, and to rebel!" (90). The reunion (only "tolerated" by the local police officer) ends in a disaster that forces Hilarion's cousin Josaphat to flee to the D.R. after he killed the officer who tried to rape his young sister. In any case, it was not to reinstate voodoo (*that* was done gradually by François Duvalier as of 1957), that Alexis came back from Cuba to Haiti in 1961, but to launch a communist party and lead the Haitian army of workers to victory against exploitation – and not back to the spirit of the African ancestors.

It has been observed by many commentators that the literary treatment of voodoo by Alexis (and by Roumain) is ambiguous, but anybody doubting Alexis's priorities in "the struggle" should read his little known but wonderfully clever and erudite open letter to Father Salgado (1958), in answer to the latter's dismissive review of *Les Arbres musiciens*, Alexis's second novel, which he had dedicated to "his friends among the new generation of Catholic Haitian priests."<sup>12</sup> The most telling statements in this letter, in the midst of many pages of a passionate apology of Haiti's popular religion as a means of survival and cultural resistance to shameless exploitation by a corrupt government and shameless repression by the Catholic church, are the ones in which Alexis claims that, although not a Catholic himself, he concedes "that the adoption of Catholicism by

<sup>12</sup> Salgado's review and Alexis's answer to it were appended in Souffrant 1978; I am not aware of a published English translation.

great masses of Haitians would mean that our people has finally gotten over the semi-tribal, semi-feudal stage in order to enter the indispensable passage to capitalism and modern technique” (Souffrant 219, my translation).

Ever since Michel Seonnet’s rather poetic, and lavishly illustrated, biography of J.S. Alexis,<sup>13</sup> it seems to me that there has been a tendency to water down Alexis’s commitment to communism while stressing his blackness and his alleged endorsement of voodoo as *the* authentic Haitian cultural trait. I believe that where *Compère* is concerned (and *Les Arbres musiciens* too), such readings stretch the texts. Very recent studies stress again Alexis’s decidedly political targets.<sup>14</sup> Also, in a detailed comparative analysis of Carpentier and Alexis’s respective theories and literary works, Nicholas Kramer argues convincingly that:

the absence of the mention of Carpentier in Alexis’s writing is due not so much to a desire to erase the strong influence the Cuban had exerted upon him, but rather to the fundamentally divergent theory of Haitian identity that Alexis had established. Alexis draws upon Carpentier’s theory of marvelous realism [sic] not as a model to imitate, but as a paradigm against which to define his own more politically engaged and Haiti-specific writing. (232)

To go back to Coates’s introduction to *Compère*, as Coates observes, “the novel personifies the sun as the ally, brother, and leader of the peasants.” Just like Roumain’s hero Manuel taught the peasant *masters of the dew* to organize their work as a cooperative, or a “koumbite,” Alexis has Hilarion express his own final message of the necessity of communist action, in a grandly epic style rather typical of so-called “social realism,” and reminiscent of Bigger Thomas’s sudden articulateness at the end of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), or of the highly symbolic final images of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Alexis’s *Compère* clearly ties up with such proletarian or social novels of the 1930s, rather

---

<sup>13</sup> A book which revealed a lot about the inner turmoil of a man constantly torn between several facets of his personality, a book much read by the new young militants, which has been labeled as “weird,” “shaggy,” “inspirational,” and as “mixing the creative with the scholarly” (Wylie 1989, 32).

<sup>14</sup> Thus Pierre Schallum concludes his interdisciplinary dissertation (2013) by hoping that Alexis’s marvelous realism, which he calls “a neo-humanism,” will inspire future studies that “will enrich the kind of thinking that Edouard Glissant calls, not without reason, le Tout-Monde” (312, my translation). In his discussion of Alexis’s exchange with Father Salgado, Schallum underlines what had been pointed out by others before him, that even if Alexis defended the right of people to choose voodoo as their religion (or cultural practice), Alexis (and Roumain) considered religion as an opium and that its promotion by the Haitian Griots and ethnologists “was more propaganda for an alleged ‘African soul’ than science” (257).

than with later works more concerned with cultural identity and the search of roots. To conclude any presentation of *Compère*, I feel it should be pointed out that beyond its undeniable *engagé* and social realist aspect, Alexis managed to paint a large fresco of contemporary Haiti in a decidedly poeticized narrative couched in impeccable, stylistically varied, often sophisticated or even erudite French, a novel of much wider scope than Roumain's previous masterpiece of a peasant novel written in creolized French, an artistic masterpiece in a new aesthetic theorized by its very creator. To a large extent and in fascinating formal variations, the combined qualities of a poetic narration and an undeniable political involvement,<sup>15</sup> evident in *Compère* and theorized in "Le réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens" also inform the next works published by Alexis, as Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi indicated in the very apt title of her 1992 study, *L'oeuvre romanesque de Jacques-Stephen Alexis, une écriture poétique, un engagement politique*.<sup>16</sup>

### **From Claire-Heureuse to the female characters in *Claire of the Sea Light***

What is Claire-Heureuse's part in *General Sun, My Brother*? Her original encounter with Hilarion, as a young and pretty girl swimming naked in the sea, provided an idyllic love scene, and her honesty, strength of character, intelligence, and hard work made her the ideal companion and supporter of an Hilarion equally willing to learn and do well. But her decision to follow Hilarion, while pregnant, to work in the Dominican cane-fields to make a living, after their economic situation in Port-au-Prince became unbearable, added to the final tragedy. The dying Hilarion urges her "to remarry and to continue to work for a Haiti where people can live in dignity and peace."<sup>17</sup> Then Claire is left alone in a remote area, totally exhausted by days of flight and heartbroken over the death of the baby and of her companion. She is truly "mal-heureuse." Not only left "alone" (the final word of the novel) but much worse-off than Annaïse, the female protagonist in *Masters of the Dew*, who, in the end, lost her man but carried hope in her belly ("la vie nouvelle") and can count on the support of Manuel's parents to raise her and Manuel's child in his hometown. Assuming Claire-Heureuse makes it back to Port-au-Prince to convey Hilarion's message to Jean-Michel, the communist doctor, and tell him that he was right in his commitment to the cause, it is hard for the reader to imagine how she will have a life, apart from getting some support

<sup>15</sup> This combination lies at the core of a redefinition of marvelous realism as a narrative mode (Scheel 1991 and 2005).

<sup>16</sup> A similar approach had already been chosen in French academia by a comparatist from Venezuela, Marina Boadas, in her 1987 dissertation on "Le réalisme merveilleux dans l'œuvre de Jacques Stephen Alexis."

<sup>17</sup> According to the Caraf description of the novel. Actually, Claire and Hilarion were not married, for such an institution is presented as bourgeois in the novel; what Hilarion tells Claire is that "she needs to have a life and other babies."

perhaps from her Godmother, to go back to her street-vending activities. Her part in the novel, just like the ones of the few other strong women who helped her during her stay in Macoris (Conception, who rented them a room, and Domenica, the painter, who hid them from the militia after Paco was killed, and found them a guide to lead them back to the border), was only supportive. It was Claire and the baby who gave Hilarion the incentive to move on and fight for a better job and the kind of instruction dealt by unionists, before he was forced out of town to work in the cane fields. But Claire herself was not instructed in the class struggle.

Edwidge Danticat may have been living in the States for several decades by now but her involvement with her country of birth and with Haitian literature in particular has been ongoing. It is therefore hardly surprising that her very positive review of the English translation of “Jacques Stephen Alexis’ masterpiece *Compère Général Soleil*, [...] this brave and timeless narrative [by a] most committed and enormously talented writer” should feature prominently in the description of the Caraf edition.<sup>18</sup>

Danticat’s most recent novel is completely set in Haiti –a fairly contemporary one– and its heroine is another Claire, not “Happy-Claire,” but “Claire of the Sea Light.” It may be stated from the start that there is nothing comparable, in Danticat’s sober prose, to Alexis’s poetic flights (starting with the striking modernism of the Prolog of *Compère* that tells of sordid events in a highly aestheticized manner, and several other lengthy passages of a descriptive and lyrical rather than narrative nature) or to Alexis’s political rants (expressed by the narrator or various characters) about the country’s history, the fate of the Haitian worker, and the glory of unionist commitment. Thus we may note from the start that a main ingredient of Alexis’s marvelous realism, the exhortation to the class struggle, is missing. Yet Danticat’s novel, although not constituting nearly as large a social fresco as *Compère*, also depicts various facets of current Haitian society in a small town<sup>19</sup> while developing a plot that includes several tragic events –often linked to stark class differences and a corrupt political system. Certain things, like poverty and acts of violence, do not appear very different from what Alexis knew in the 1930s, even if the scale of horrors may not be anymore what they were under the Stenio Vincent and Duvalier regimes. If there is a political “hero” in Danticat’s book, it is probably the local radio hostess Louise George, who allows people to unveil personal and often controversial

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in the pre-title pages of *General Sun, My Brother*. Nor is it surprising that her expertise led her to function as co-translator, with Coates, for the English translation of Alexis’s last novel, *L’Espace d’un cillement* (1959), published in the Caraf collection under the title *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* in 2001.

<sup>19</sup> It may not be mere coincidence that the novel, set in a town called Ville Rose, is dedicated to Danticat’s mother, Rose, and to her own daughters, and that in the acknowledgments she thanks her “family in Leogane for introducing and reintroducing [her] to the sea.”

stories, one of which leading to the suicide of a young and rich rapist, ten years after the facts. But her kind of committed journalism centers on feminist issues rather than on the class struggle.

So in spite of a title, *Claire of the Sea Light*, that is as poetically phrased as Alexis's *General Sun, My Brother*, Danticat's themes and her discourse strike one at first as far removed from Alexis's committed marvelous realism, both in its poetic and political sense. What Danticat has been doing in her books is pushing the frontiers of her linguistic, social, and literary consciousness into the Haitian Diaspora in the USA, thus expanding the awareness of Haitian reality in directions that Alexis could not have foreseen when he wrote in the 1950s as a male, French-educated doctor, writer and political activist.

What kind of Haitian marvelous realism could be left in a novel in which the heroine, Claire "Limyè Lanmè" –as her name would be in her Creole-speaking world– on her emotion-laden seventh birthday, runs down from the Ville Rose lighthouse to leave her poor fisherman father's shack and become the adopted daughter of the widowed bourgeoisie, Madame Gaëlle?

"In this stunning novel about intertwined lives, Edwidge Danticat crafts a tightly woven, breathtaking tapestry that explores the mysterious bonds we share—with the natural world and with one another" says the synopsis of the book by Random House on the back cover, and "intertwining" is indeed –and again– the key word in Danticat's discourse. The plot centers on Claire and the unusual events on her seventh birthday, but it also explores the lives of about a dozen characters which intersect during some fifteen years in the fictive small town of Ville Rose in contemporary Haiti. The book is divided in two parts of four chapters each and framed by chapters entitled respectively "Claire of the Sea Light" and "Claire de Lune" –the latter consisting of a pretty pun on the French expression "clair de lune" or moonlight. Here Claire, named after her mother and the "light of the sea" (two words which happen to have the same pronunciation both in French –la mer/mère– and in Creole –lanmè), exits the novel under the moonlight and with an adoptive mother.

Within the book, the proximity of birth and death is heavily thematized: life appears as fragile and permanently threatened by nature's or mankind's outbursts. At dawn on Claire's seventh birthday, the sea, in the guise of a freak wave, takes away an old fisherman –and would have taken Claire's father away too, had he not been running a bit late on that day; that same night the sea brings back the body of a drowned young man, who might be resuscitated or not. Claire observes all this from the seaside, while her own life is about to change drastically: she is to leave her father's shack and be adopted by a rich widow who had lost her own daughter, Rose, in a street accident on Claire's fourth birthday.

The book's composition underlines a paradoxical sense of both

randomness and circularity –even a certain fatalism. Such a feature does not square with the mainly socialistic and nationalistic thrust or the “dialectical materialism” of Alexis’s conception of marvelous realism: Hilarion was killed for a reason and by an enemy, not by accident. At the end of *Compère*, Claire-Heureuse, although half-dead with exhaustion and half-demented by grief, is still supposed to help with the class struggle. At the end of *Claire*, we can only hope that Claire’s accepted new life with rich Madame Gaelle will be better than with her poor but loving father. In the final section of *Compère*, the narration is almost exclusively left to an (unlikely) heroic first-person discourse held by the dying Hilarion, which leaves Claire in a silent witness position. In *Claire*, Claire hardly speaks because she is shy and mostly alone, but the narration is focalized internally on her and we learn that after her bewildered run to the lighthouse (which was her way of expressing her own will), she is now intent on going back one more time to her father’s place before moving on towards a very open future.

What also changes quite a bit from *Compère* is the portrayal of characters, especially the female ones. Claire Narcisse, Claire’s mother, was a simple person but also loving and wise in the handling of corpses because of her job in a funeral parlor, and perhaps also wise in foreseeing her early death in childbirth: she had established a tie with Mme Gaelle during the latter’s pregnancy and thus paved the ground for Claire’s later adoption, when her father decided it was time for him to find a better job –presumably in the D.R., which is still a potential reservoir of employment for destitute Haitians, in spite of the historical massacres at the border and a rampant anti-Haitian racism. Mme Gaelle is not a proletarian figure but a wealthy business woman, financially and sexually independent after her husband’s accidental death in a gang war on the very day she had given birth to their daughter.

Even more “modern” in *Claire* is Jessamine, a young Haitian-American woman from Miami, who visits Haiti for the first time and accompanies Max Ardin Junior on his return home after ten years in the States. She is only Max’s friend, since the latter is gay, and she finds out via a radio program, that Max had raped his family’s teenaged housemaid when he was nineteen, and that a boy was born of that single sexual contact. The most radical character in the book is Flore Voltaire, that former Ardin housemaid turned manager of a beauty parlor who, for revenge, not only comes in order to coldly introduce her ten-year-old son to the boy’s father, but invites herself to a radio-show in which she tells the sordid tale of her rape for all the town to hear. While Max’s father is merely annoyed by the revelation, his son is so affected that he attempts suicide by wading into the sea in his red shirt.

Most intriguing, perhaps, among the female protagonists of the novel, is Louise George, a single woman, independent radio journalist, and occasional

lover of Max Ardin Senior, the respected owner of the town's reputed private school. Louise accepted to interview Flore Voltaire in her challenging "Tell me" program, because she wanted to get back at Max Ardin who had let a student's mother slap her in his office, in retaliation for having herself slapped the boy for unruly behavior in a class. Flore also told on the radio program how Max Senior offered her money to make up for her rape, while sending his son to his mother in Miami, so that he need not deal personally with the consequences of his action.

### Conclusion

These are a few examples of how in many distinct scenes, often quite innocuous seeming, Danticat's narrative exposes the various threads that interconnect several personal lives, thus furnishing a fairly rich and realistic but also a thrilling picture of contemporary life in a Haitian small town, without ever taking sides or promoting a political attitude. If some of the characters experience some nice moments, there is no insistence on any "marvelous" quality of Haiti's nature or society: people are varied, no character is idealized, and life is insecure or unpredictable for most people, especially the poor. Young as she is, Claire of the Sea Light seems to be aware of all that and ready to take the plunge, away from her father's familiar presence and on to the mysterious world of Mme Gaelle, who wears a slick wig, lives in a villa and drives a Mercedes.

What is marvelous in the book is the quiet and methodic way in which its rich and realistic social tapestry is woven. As a story, it is also greatly successful because of its subtle and intriguing composition. But the novel's style and mood are as far removed from Alexis's aesthetic of marvelous realism as from the "hip neo-baroquism" and the "postmodernist magical realism" of Junot Diaz's *Oscar Wao*,<sup>20</sup> or from the egotistic, erotic, and macho playfulness of a Dany Laferrière. More than the political and cultural line that still separates today Creole-speaking Haiti from the Spanish-speaking Dominican Republic on the Hispaniola map, could it be that, where the contemporary literary aesthetics of the writers of the Haitian and Dominican diasporas are concerned –all the way from the Caribbean, up to New York and Montreal, via Miami– the divide, both marvelous and realistic, be ultimately a matter of gender?<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> See Scheel 2014.

<sup>21</sup> A stark contrast of that nature was already underlined by Marie Dominique Le Rumeur in her study "Apogée ou déclin du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens ?" which she concludes thusly: "The marvelous does not show up in the extraordinary anymore but in the poetics of reality and in the details of daily life. / When claiming the word, women hardly feel like theorizing. [...] Surely Haitian women [writers] are still talking about the marvelous but their perspective is different. [...] Far removed from clichés, their breath symbolizes hope, the will to face adversity, and the permanent struggle to attain love. Just it is the case with Danticat, the marvelous in Lahens or Jan J. Dominique finds refuge in the unremarkable, in the daily

## Works Cited

- Alexis, Jacques-Stephen. *Compère Général Soleil*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955. Published in Spanish as *El compadre general Sol*. Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1974. Also as *Mi compadre el general Sol*. Santo Domingo: Taller, 1976. Published in English as *General Sun, My Brother*. Trans. Carrol F. Coates. Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Du Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens." *Présence Africaine* June-Nov. 1956, 8-10: 245-71. English version under "Of the Marvellous Realism of the Haitians" in the same publication: 249-75. Reprinted in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, eds. London: Routledge, 1995, 194-198. Published in Spanish under "Prolegómenos a un manifiesto del realismo maravilloso de los haitianos." Trans. Domínguez, Isabel. *Cuadernos del CILHA* 9.10 (2008): 144-167.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Les Arbres musiciens*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957. Reprinted 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *L'Espace d'un cillement*. Paris: Gallimard, 1959. Published in English as *In the Flicker of an Eyelid*. Translation by Carrol F. Coates and Edwidge Danticat. University of Virginia Press, 2002.
- Antoine, Régis. "Le Réalisme merveilleux dans la flaque." *Rayonnants écrivains de la Caraïbe*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1998.
- Boadas, Marina. "Le réalisme merveilleux dans l'œuvre de Jacques Stephen Alexis." Dissertation, U. de Bordeaux 1987. Published Saarbrücken: Alemania, 2011.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "Lo real maravilloso." *El Nacional*, Caracas, 8 april 1948. Reprinted as "Prólogo" to *El Reino de este mundo*. Mexico: EDHASA, 1949.
- Coates, Carrol F. "Introduction" to *General Sun, my Brother* (translation, by Coates, of *Compère Général Soleil* by Alexis, Jacques-Stephen, 1955). Charlottesville: UP Virginia, 1999.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Claire of the Sea Light*. New York: Vintage Books, 2013. Print. (Vintage Contemporaries Paperback, 2014).
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Dew breaker*. New York: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- 
- simplicity, and makes hearts vibrate. Creating a new world by revalorizing trifles [...] leads them to transfigure banality and to give it meaning" (1998, 224, my translation).

Where is the citation for Danticat's review of the English translation of "Jacques Stephen Alexis' masterpiece *Compère Général Soleil*, cited in text on page 13?

Dash, J. Michael. *Jacques-Stephen Alexis*. Toronto: Black Images, 1975. Print.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Marvellous Realism: the Way out of Négritude." *Between Negritude and Marvellous Realism*. Toronto: Black Images, 1974.

Depestre, René. "Un grand roman haïtien, *Compère Général Soleil* par Jacques-Stephen Alexis." *Présence Africaine*, oct-nov. 1957, 16: 91-92.

\_\_\_\_\_. "*Les Arbres musiciens* par Jacques-Stephen Alexis." *Présence Africaine*, oct-nov. 1957, 16: 188-189.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Parler de Jacques-Stephen Alexis" and "Le merveilleux dans les lettres et les arts de Haïti." *Bonjour et adieu à la Négritude*. Paris: Laffont, 1980: 197-226 and 242-246.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Une vie, une œuvre : J.S . Alexis." Interview on France Culture. Paris: INA, 1995.

Figolé, Jean-Claude. "Réalisme Merveilleux ! Métamorphose du Réel?" [Trans. Kaiama L. Glover]. *Journal of Haitian Studies* 16.1 (Spring 2010): 23-39 [40-57].

Gourgue, Jacques. "Du Surréalisme au Réalisme Merveilleux." *Conjonction* 194 (1992): 6-9. Print or Web?

Heady, Margaret. "Le merveilleux et la conscience marxiste dans *Les arbres musiciens* de Jacques-Stephen Alexis." *Études francophones* 17.2 (Fall 2002): 112-124.

\_\_\_\_\_. "From Roots to Routes: Double Consciousness in the Francophone Caribbean Novel." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 8.2 (2005): 147-164.

Hoffmann, Léon-François. *Le Roman haïtien: idéologie et structure*. Sherbrooke : Naaman, 1982.

"Jacques-Stephen Alexis et la littérature d'Haïti." *Europe* 49.501 (1971 Jan.): 3-81.

Katz, Marco. "As the Sun Sets on Europe: Marvelous Realism and a New Place for America." *Atlantic Studies: Literary, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives* 9.2 (2012 June): 127-141.

Kramer, Nicholas Michael. "Marvelous Realism in the Caribbean: A Second Look at J. S. Alexis and Alejo Carpentier." *Atlantic Studies: Literary, Cultural, and Historical*

- Perspectives* 11.2 (2014 June): 220-234.
- Laroche, Maximilien. "Contributions à l'étude du réalisme merveilleux." Sainte-Foy: Université Laval, GRELCA, 1987.
- Le Rumeur, Marie-Dominique. "Jacques-Stephen Alexis, un médecin face à la création littéraire." *Conjonction* 173 (1987): 163-171.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Apogée ou déclin du réalisme merveilleux haïtien?" *Francofonía* (Universidad de Cádiz), 1998, 7: 209-224.
- Mudimbe-Boyi, Elisabeth. *L'oeuvre romanesque de Jacques-Stephen Alexis, une écriture poétique, un engagement politique*. Montréal: Humanitas, 1992.
- Munro, Martin. "Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Inter-Caribbean Exile, Creolization, and Repetitive History in J. S. Alexis *Compère Général Soleil*." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 2005, 4.1: 163-174.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Exile and Post-1946 Haitian Literature: Alexis, Depestre, Ollivier, Laferrière, Danticat*. Liverpool: University Press, 2007.
- Ponte, Cecilia. "Le Réalisme merveilleux dans *Les Arbres musiciens* de J. S. Alexis." Sainte-Foy: Université Laval, GRELCA, 1987.
- Roumain, Jacques. *Gouverneurs de la rosée*. Port-au-Prince: 1944 (Paris: 1946). Published in English as *Masters of the Dew*. Trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook. New York: 1947. Reprinted with an introduction by Michael Dash. London and Kingston: Heinemann, 1978.
- Schallum, Pierre. "Le Réalisme Merveilleux de Jacques Stephen Alexis: Esthétique, éthique et pensée critique." Dissertation. Québec : Université Laval, 2013.
- Scheel, Charles W. "Magical Versus Marvelous Realism in French Fiction," PhD. Dissertation, UT at Austin, 1991. <https://www.academia.edu/1430858>. Web. 24 March 2016.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Réalisme magique et réalisme merveilleux. Des théories aux poétiques*. Preface by D. H. Pageaux. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Junot Diaz's novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: McOndo for Sure but Magical Realism Nonetheless - With a New Twist." <https://www.academia.edu/6605729>, 2014.

Séonnet, Michel. *Jacques-Stephen Alexis ou "le voyage vers la lune de la belle amour humaine."* Toulouse: Atelier de création populaire, 1983.

Souffrant, Claude. *Une Négritude socialiste: religion et développement chez J. Roumain, J.-S. Alexis et L. Hughes.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1978.

Trouillot, Lyonel, Dalembert, L.P., Chemla, Yves. *Haïti. Une traversée littéraire.* (book +CD). Paris: Seuil, 2010. Print.

University of Virginia Press Books. <http://books.upress.virginia.edu/detail%2Fbooks%2Fgroup-1732.xml?q=alexis%20general%20Sun>. Web. 24 March 2016.

Wylie, Hal. "J.S. Alexis: Exile Writing and the Struggle for Liberation." *World Literature Today*, 63.1 (1989): 31-36.

\_\_\_\_\_. *General Sun, My Brother* (Book Review). *World Literature Today* 74.2 (2000): 352.