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Danica L E Guerrero

independent scholar, morningstar74000@gmail.com

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Belonging and Heroic Non-Conformity in Marie-Célie Agnant's *Femmes aux Temps des Carnassiers*

Danica Guerrero

Abstract – In an effort to maintain power in an authoritarian state, dictators target, silence, and eliminate those unwilling to conform. In Marie-Célie Agnant's 2015 novel *Femmes aux temps des carnassiers*, Mika Pelrin and her daughter Soledad are kidnapped, raped, and tortured by the Tonton Macoutes because of Mika's refusal to be silenced by the Duvalier regime in 1958. Through this fictional account based on appalling historical events and the tragic fate of journalist Yvonne Hakim Rimpel, Agnant insists on the vital societal role played by courageous women like her defiant character Mika who, through nonconformity and at the risk of their own lives, dare to stand up against corruption and abuse of power. A secondary storyline presents Junon, Soledad's daughter produced by the aforementioned rape, striving to earn her traumatized mother's acceptance and to discover the truth of her origins. With the help of her grandmother Mika's reluctant disclosure, Junon learns about the events of January 1958 and their enduring impact on her family. The portrayal of these female relationships reinforces the beauty in unconventional families, the strength required to heal multigenerational trauma, and the diversity of personalities who can restore humanity to a shattered family. Agnant boldly declares not only that such courageous women as Mika, Soledad, and Junon belong, despite their unwillingness to conform, but indeed that they are also the heroes of the devastating history of mid-twentieth-century Haiti. Such women are in fact the ones who have the potential to change their long-afflicted nation for the better.

Keywords: Haitian women's literature, exile, belonging, Marie-Célie Agnant, dictatorship

Introduction

American historian and Harvard professor Laurel Thatcher Ulrich famously said, “Well-behaved women seldom make history.” While this quotation may initially elicit a smile, upon further consideration, the careful observer may realize how profoundly true it is. It may also prompt the question of how to define “well-behaved” in a country such as Haiti in the late 1950s, as the shadow of what would become an almost 30-year dictatorship was descending upon citizens who were powerless to stem the impending destruction of their society. While simultaneously looking back at specific scenarios from this notoriously difficult era and drawing

conclusions that still ring true today, Marie-Célie Agnant celebrates the courage of women who dare to defy authoritarianism, no matter what it may cost them.

Femmes aux temps des carnassiers, which was translated in 2022 as *A Knife in the Sky*, recounts the story of three generations of women who were profoundly impacted by the violent events of January 5, 1958. While this novel is a work of fiction, it draws upon real events in the life of journalist Yvonne Hakim Rimpel, who is represented by the protagonist, Mika Pelrin. Refusing to stop writing about the arrest, disappearance, and murder of those who opposed François Duvalier as he rose to power, Mika finds herself and her family in the crosshairs of the dictator's private militia, the *Tonton Macoutes*. In the novel, the journalist and her children are attacked in their home, and Mika and her oldest daughter, Soledad, are kidnapped, brutally beaten, and raped repeatedly. Though injured and deeply traumatized, Mika and Soledad are intentionally left alive as an example of Duvalier's power and of what would happen to those who opposed him.

This novel raises questions of belonging within a society that has been hijacked by an authoritarian leader, while also beautifully illustrating the courage of survivors and the diversity of personalities who can restore humanity to a shattered family in the wake of devastating personal and political trauma. This work, by shedding light on the experience of living in exile, also elucidates parts of the post-traumatic healing process, notably the pursuit of truth and the creation of a community, which can foster a sense of belonging. While Agnant's gaze in this novel is clearly fixed on the Duvalier era in Haiti, she also refers to the dictatorship of Francisco Franco in Spain and draws timeless conclusions that transcend geographical and historical boundaries to teach readers about the real heroes: the "misbehaving women" who make history and the types of leaders who are needed to transform Haiti in the present moment and into the future.

Discrimination and Belonging within the Duvalier Regime

François Duvalier, perhaps better known as "Papa Doc," called into question the notion of belonging within one's home nation for a large number of Haitians. The first of the Duvalier dictators, Papa Doc was infamous for the ruthless murder of anyone who dared to oppose him. In fact, according to the *New York Times*, within the first year of his presidency alone, François Duvalier had ordered the murder of more than 300 people (Krebs). The killing continued throughout his 14 years in office and beyond: an estimated 30,000-60,000 people were victims of his private militia during the 29 combined years of his presidency and his son's subsequent tenure (Danticat). In a report on mass emigration from Haiti, John Scanlan and Gilbert Loescher explain:

Duvalier's paramilitary forces wielded wide discretionary power to arrest, imprison, torture, and put to death any Haitian citizen without even an order in writing...the

disappeared came from all ranks, including labor union representatives, professors and students, lawyers who defended critics of the regime, peasants suspected of harboring ‘subversives,’ and people abducted out of personal caprice of the *tonton macoutes*. (318)

By targeting anyone who expressed dissent or whom he even suspected of such intentions, Papa Doc (and later his son, Jean Claude Duvalier, or “Baby Doc”) defined and alienated the enemy, sending a clear message that dissidents did not belong in their regimes.

But Papa Doc also used fear to purge Haiti of some of the more subtle threats to his power through exile in what became known as “the brain drain.” He was not the first authoritarian head of state to use involuntary emigration to create a more compliant population. For this very reason, the late 1950s and early 1960s mark the first major wave of immigration from Haiti to the United States--among other nations--a trend that continues to this day for different reasons. Papa Doc tightened his grip on the Haitian people by making certain populations, especially those more prepared to oppose him, feel unwelcome and unsafe in their own nation.

Massacres, confiscation of property, and persecution of members of the educated and professional class propelled their outflow...The dictator’s goal of building a new black aristocracy in Haitian society under the *noiriste* ideology...called for the extinction of the existing upper and educated classes...The *noiriste* ideology was also the basis for Duvalier’s promotion of the emigration of Haitian professionals and technicians to the newly independent countries of Francophone Africa in the 1960s. By so doing, Duvalier did effectively reduce potential political opposition, but this period also marked the beginning of Haiti’s brain and capacity drain. (Wah)

In addition to targeting French-speakers and intellectuals, Papa Doc also targeted his political rivals, journalists and editors within opposition newspapers, and anyone in his own administration and military whom he suspected of disloyalty (Krebs). While the dictator’s inclusion and exclusion may have seemed chaotic or arbitrary at the time, Duvalier’s methods appear relatively systematic in retrospect: He favored and included the poor, less educated, Creole-speaking and often illiterate black majority due to his black nationalist beliefs and his vision for Haiti. By favoring Creole, the language of the masses, and by preying on people’s vulnerability to superstitions and the practice of voodoo/Vodun, Papa Doc ingratiated himself with the common man, rather than with society’s elite. This approach was a catalyst for the flight of intellectuals, French-speakers, and white-collar employees; meanwhile, Duvalier held the island’s impoverished population hostage with his authoritarianism and continued to target anyone who appeared to be a threat to his power. Within François Duvalier’s Haiti, unquestioning compliance was highly valued, and Papa Doc’s façade of being a humble and affable country doctor concealed a strong political ambition and a ruthless need to maintain total control.

Societal Belonging

Femmes aux temps des carnassiers addresses the notion of belonging within society and within the microcosm of a family while proposing different methods for cultivating belonging despite adversity. In a democratic society, freedom of speech is a central component of belonging for all individuals. If any group is consistently denied free speech, can its members truly feel as if they are valued or even that they belong? This is one of the topics the novel's protagonist, Mika Pelrin, addresses in her writing shortly before being attacked. She discusses free speech, especially that of women, in a newspaper article called, "Who shall be silenced?" Mika boldly argues, "In countries that claim to be free, countries where citizens are truly free, the fundamental freedom each person has is nothing less than the fruit of freedom of speech. In free countries, men and women are free without condition, and women have the right to speak by any means available-- first and foremost the press and newspapers" (Agnant 30). Mika goes on to point out that "The acquired right to freedom of speech, this right women have won, is invaluable, and all credit is due to them" (30) because if women had been content to be silenced throughout history, their existence would constitute nothing more than enslavement (31). Finally, Mika insists, using the first person and speaking for all Haitians,

We do not dream of utopia, we simply dream of speaking freely, to allow us to build a true society of free women and men... We shall speak out of duty and in the name of freedom to fight prejudice and to banish ignorance, that ignorance so carefully upheld on our island, the ball and chain that prevents us from moving forward. (31)

In the novel, Mika receives the first death threat two days after this article is published, which clearly spells out François Duvalier's policy regarding freedom of speech.

Yvonne Hakim Rimpel, the inspiration for Mika Pelrin (whose name appears to be an anagram symbolically honoring the woman at the heart of this story), was the director of an anti-Duvalier newspaper named *L'Escale* (Krebs). She boldly used her platform to criticize François Duvalier's rise to the presidency and his nefarious actions. Unfortunately, this position made her a target of violence, just as Mika's articles did in the novel. The way in which the *Tonton Macoutes* left Mika alive after assaulting her in the novel (and Yvonne, historically speaking) proves that Mika was intended to be an example to other potential dissidents in society.

'She must stay alive,' [Duvalier] told [the *Tonton Macoutes*]. 'She must remain a living example. Everyone will know what François Duvalier is made of.' That was what he said. Then he got up and walked back toward the door. Before he left, as if throwing dogs a bone, he turned back: 'I'm leaving now. The carcass is yours if you want it...'. (Agnant 102-03)

His message was painfully clear: anyone who dared to criticize the president did not belong in Haiti.

If a nation's leaders fail to build an inclusive and free society, to whom, then, does this task fall? In this novel, it is the work of ordinary women who support one another in powerful solidarity during a dangerous era. Not only do the women in Mika's family and her female friends and colleagues cook for, visit, and encourage one another during the early days of the Duvalier regime, but another character, María Luz, develops a concern for Soledad after she is attacked and returns to Spain, empowering Soledad tremendously in giving birth to and raising her daughter Junon. Whereas Duvalier and the *Tonton Macoutes* isolated and alienated Haitians who proved difficult to control, the female protagonists in this novel work courageously to bring people together and to support one another. Their efforts are thus portrayed as heroic.

Familial Belonging

Another, more personal way in which the theme of belonging is at the heart of *Femmes aux temps des carnassiers* is the notion of belonging within a family. The youngest protagonist, Junon, being the product of the rape of her mother Soledad, is a tragic and perpetual reminder of this violence. Soledad, understandably, is permanently shaken by the experience of being kidnapped, beaten, and violated. Even by the time her daughter Junon is a teenager, Soledad still cannot comfortably discuss what happened to her and her mother in 1958. Struggling profoundly against depression, she prefers to remain silent and not address the trauma with her daughter at all. But, by choosing silence over verbally processing her past with her daughter, Soledad unintentionally isolates Junon, who feels she has to earn her mother's acceptance and love in a way that could somehow erase the past. As a teenager, Junon thinks of herself as "the child [Soledad] didn't want" (91). It is difficult for Junon to understand her mother's silence and anger, and like any child, she simply longs for parental love. Agnant writes of Junon's youth, "All the hatred that Soledad spewed out, I absorbed. I sipped it, I drank it down, as the years went by I became consumed with a desire for revenge that was as overwhelming as my longing for love" (97).

Junon initially struggles to find her place in her own family because her absent father is a criminal and her mother has been shattered by the trauma her father inflicted upon her. Since Soledad never married or produced any siblings for Junon, their nuclear family is limited to mother and daughter. Though she is in fact far from being unwanted by her mother, in the context of her small biological family, Junon wrestles with the circumstances of her existence and works hard to belong in her traumatized mother's heart. Fortunately for Junon, two additional maternal figures come alongside her and Soledad to offer healing.

Female Solidarity Creates Belonging

María Luz is a close friend of Soledad in Spain, and because of the trauma they have both faced due to political turmoil in their respective nations, these two women form a bond that unites them like siblings. María Luz tells Junon one day, “The first day Soledad and I met...I thought, ‘Oh, a woman who looks like me’” (90). Sharing their pain creates an unbreakable bond between these two women. Furthermore, from the moment of Junon’s birth, María Luz, who acted as a midwife to her friend, becomes a secondary mother figure to Junon; María Luz’s exuberance fills the emptiness left by Soledad’s silence and grief. María Luz explains how she delivered Junon and held her patiently while Soledad wept, and then, when the mother was ready to receive her child, María Luz tells Junon, “I laid you in her arms” (96). As Junon grows, and as Soledad remains emotionally distant from her daughter, Junon realizes that “María Luz fought to block out that sadness, to protect me with her imperfect words...Soli, who only ever paid silent attention to me--silence punctuated by withering sighs that burst from her chest. And there was María Luz, trying to fill the void” (97). María Luz insists to a disheartened seventeen-year-old Junon, “She does love you, our Soli...In her own way, of course, she loves you. And you know it” (98). As an intermediary between mother and daughter, María Luz helps Junon to feel like she belongs within her family.

Another maternal figure also helps Junon to contextualize her existence and soften her anger-fueled adolescence. Mika, Junon’s grandmother and the co-sufferer with Soledad in the events of January 1958, is able to offer not only information that Junon eventually needs to know about her mother’s traumatic experience, but also an annual visit to Spain, since Soledad refuses to return to Haiti. Through her grandmother’s dignified, persistent, and honest character, Junon learns not only the truth of what happened but also how to live with this information. When Junon is eighteen, Mika explains gently, “There are things you need to know that only I can tell you, and it is up to me to provide you with this information even if it means dragging us both down...My child, you have to know” (100). Mika says that she has never claimed to be the “keeper of truth,” (101) but in fact the truth is exactly what she preserves and offers to her granddaughter at an appropriate time.

Agnant’s message of the profound support and healing that women can offer each other shines through both additional maternal figures, María Luz and Mika Pelrin. Both women love and support Junon as she matures into adolescence, seeks to uncover the truth, processes her complex emotions, and responds to the events of the past in a way that can bring her peace and closure. Each of these women provides Junon with intangible but much-needed support in the form of a sense of belonging and ongoing emotional safety.

Earlier in the novel, before she is assaulted, Mika’s friendships with her aunts, colleagues, and neighbors had also sustained her through the anxious months when she continued publishing articles criticizing Duvalier, despite the threats made against her. Her aunt Bé, who raised Mika, regularly visits, cooks for Mika, distracts her from her torment, and brings news of the family and neighbors. During this time, Mika’s husband, by contrast, had not only abandoned

her but also perpetually criticized her for endangering herself and their family through her controversial writing. The solidarity in this novel is specifically feminine.

One of the most powerful lessons Marie-Célie Agnant offers to her readers through this novel is that female solidarity, particularly among victims of discrimination or violence, is a vital component of mental health. Had Mika, Soledad, or Junon lacked friendship or an empathetic listener, their situations may have felt very different to them. Ongoing friendships with other women and strong maternal figures therefore enabled each of these characters to belong within a community, to be courageous in seeking and revealing the truth, to expose corruption, and to survive within an environment rife with discrimination.

Unconventional and Diverse Families Cultivate Belonging

Despite the fact that Junon's nuclear family is limited to herself and her mother Soledad, María Luz acts as a surrogate mother to Junon when Soledad cannot find her words. This substitution makes these three females an unconventional but beautiful and resilient family. Junon calls María Luz "my second mother--my mother of joy" (114). The victim of sexual assault, the child who is a product of that assault, and another traumatized woman who knows the depths of the pain they have experienced somehow help each other along and seek to heal each other's wounds. Despite having very different personalities, each of these three women works to restore humanity where it has been shattered and to shed light on the truth in an effort to move collectively toward healing. In some manner, María Luz even replaces Junon's absent father to complete the small family and to cultivate a powerful sense of belonging for Junon, who would have otherwise lacked community.

Taking Ownership Fosters Belonging

The final lesson about belonging in this novel comes from making peace with the past. As a university student, Junon visits her grandmother, Mika, and discovers Haiti for the first time. In this way, Junon is able to make amends with her mother's past and to finally dissolve the righteous indignation and anger that she feels at the core of her being. Seeing the ravaged country (now under the leadership of Jean Claude Duvalier) and briefly befriending adolescent revolutionaries who might have been her peers, had she grown up in Haiti, enable Junon to concretize the things, places, and people she grew up hearing about and imagining. Her trip to Haiti, with the goal of creating a documentary film about the abuses of the Duvaliers, allows her to take ownership of the past in a new way, rather than feeling that she is a victim of it.

Author and Columbia University professor Marianne Hirsch would call Junon's inherited memories of 1958 in Haiti "postmemory," as these recollections are Soledad's and Mika's, and not Junon's in the first place, even though they feel vividly personal to Junon. "To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that precede one's birth or

one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (Hirsch). The challenge for Junon is to move past her mother and grandmother's life-changing trauma and to courageously forge her own path in a world still held hostage by the Duvalier dictatorship.

Junon, despite being weighed down heavily by a past she cannot control, does not let her circumstances define her. Though she is fueled by rage in the first two decades of her life, and though she seeks revenge on the man who assaulted her mother and grandmother, she ultimately aims to reveal the wrongdoing of the Duvaliers and to hold people accountable for their actions through film (just as her grandmother Mika did through journalism). In the end, and perhaps thanks to her grandmother and María Luz's pervasive love, support, and guidance, Junon is able to overcome her anger and the burden that she carries for her mother and grandmother without resorting to violence, and readers are left to assume she will be able to lead a productive adult life.

Exile: An Alternative to Belonging

Marie-Célie Agnant's authorship of *Femmes aux temps des carnassiers* is particularly authentic, given her departure from Haiti as an adolescent and her choice to reside in Quebec ever since. In a 2006 interview with Patrice Proulx, Agnant stated that leaving Haiti during the Duvalier years was essentially a question of life and death (Proulx 46). She speaks of the fear that inhabited her before her departure and the disappearances of close family members during the Duvalier regime. Echoes of these lived experiences not only haunt her writing but also reinforce her view of the critical importance of storytelling for those who have survived trauma, including the trauma of exile. Although she has returned to Haiti in post-dictatorship years, Agnant explains that due to political factors and ongoing instability, her expatriation is permanent.

Because of her young age at the time of her emigration, Agnant was not specifically a part of Haiti's "brain drain;" however, she cites the fact that even despite significant economic challenges, many people who departed would have been able to remain, had it not been for François Duvalier (Proulx 46). Exile is thus a major theme in her works, as it has been in her life. Speaking about her experiences integrating into Canadian society, Agnant describes immigration very realistically as "un travail qui se fait au fil du temps¹" (49). This requires great patience and courage, two attributes her female protagonists often exemplify as they navigate their own expatriation, whatever the cause may have been. Agnant highlights the positive aspects of exile by explaining that after spending several decades in Quebec, raising her children there, and assimilating into Canadian society to a certain extent, she has realized that "peut-être qu'en étant immigrant on a la chance de vivre deux vies et c'est tant mieux²" (49).

While there may be some autobiographical elements in her writing, Agnant's characters' lives vary greatly from her own. Since the adolescent protagonist Junon is born and raised in

¹ work which happens over the course of time (translation mine)

² maybe by being an immigrant one has the opportunity to live two lives and that's even better (translation mine)

Spain after her mother's refusal to return to Haiti, Junon certainly benefits from this choice. While Haiti remains under a violent dictatorship for nearly three decades, Junon grows up in relative safety. Whereas Soledad experiences the "two lives" of which Marie-Célie Agnant speaks, Junon only knows a life lived after her mother and grandmother's trauma, that is until she chooses to visit Haiti as a young adult. Soledad's decision to flee Haiti and never return may reflect a desire to protect her daughter from experiencing trauma, yet Junon's curiosity about Haiti and about the past fuels her pursuit of truth and justice. While Junon does carry the burden of her mother and grandmother's traumas indirectly, a life in exile ultimately provided a certain measure of safety for her. Exile can thus be seen as an alternative to the danger of being nonconformist in an authoritarian society.

Conclusion: The Real Heroines of History and Today

The same protagonists who struggle to overcome trauma, to find the courage to help each other despite everything, and to hold others accountable for their crimes—these are the everyday heroines of *Femmes aux temps des carnassiers* and of Duvalier-era Haiti. Mika Pelrin is portrayed as a role model because she did not stop speaking the truth, even after receiving repeated threats from the *Tonton Macoutes*. She categorically refused to be silenced. Furthermore, Mika managed to maintain her humanity after being attacked, and she did not hide the truth of what happened from Junon. At the appropriate time, by telling Junon everything, Mika allows her granddaughter to wrestle with the facts, draw her own conclusions about the Haitian dictators, and act accordingly. As a journalist, a mother, and a grandmother, truth and courage matter to Mika. Luckily, Junon inherited her grandmother's fearlessness. María Luz, through her unfailing devotion to Soledad and Junon, sustains them before Junon's birth and through the difficult years of Junon's youth. The solidarity María Luz provides helps to create a sense of belonging and family for Junon--who grows up in exile--while Soledad works through her trauma.

As for Junon, her filmmaking aspirations have the potential to universalize her message about the abuses of the Duvaliers. She embarks on an admirable quest for truth, and choosing an artistic platform to make her voice heard shows a maturity beyond her years. While she deeply desires revenge on the *macoute* who harmed her mother and grandmother, the story's conclusion brings justice in a way that could only be described as poetic: it provides closure for Junon while allowing her to keep her hands clean. She walks the line between accountability and revenge without resorting to violence like those who harmed her family. Finally, Soledad, who transforms from a bright and ambitious university student to a traumatized and silent mother (a recurring theme in Agnant's works) slowly moves toward healing through painting, thanks to the power of friendship and her mother's continuous support. She, like Junon, chooses an artistic outlet for her pain and leans into friendships, allowing herself to survive, heal, and eventually re-emerge after trauma.

Marie-Célie Agnant, in her beautifully subtle but insistent way, leaves readers with certain timeless lessons that transcend the historical context of this novel to make them reflect on the kind of heroes (and heroines) Haiti needs today. Courage and the pursuit of truth matter deeply to these heroes. In the face of overwhelming trauma and the weight of memories, a sense of belonging can be created, even in exile, by individual people who choose to foster it. The embodiment of love, community, and familial support in this novel are specifically feminine, and this community in which people who “misbehave” help each other to find healing can be more powerful than external circumstances. Furthermore, familial stability matters greatly to one’s sense of belonging, no matter the family structure. Finally, freedom of speech, the right to belong within a society, and the protection of diversity are values humanity must insist on at all costs, even when a society’s leaders do not promote them.

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