Madness, Isolation and the Female Condition in Gisèle Pineau's Writing

ANTONIA WIMBUSH

Abstract
This article examines themes of madness and mental illness in fictional and non-fictional writing by Guadeloupean author Gisèle Pineau. Madness is an important trope in French Caribbean literature that critiques the enduring legacies of colonization, slavery and forced displacement. It is a prevalent theme in Pineau's work because her writing is inspired by her parallel career as a psychiatric nurse. The article explores madness from a gendered perspective in her short stories "Ombres créoles" (1988) and "Ta mission, Marny" (2009). Arguing that here, madness is a specifically Antillean condition that both erases the agency of the female protagonists and grants them power to resist, the article then examines how Pineau explores the theme from a metropolitan viewpoint in the autobiographically inspired *Folie, aller simple: journée ordinaire d'une infirmière* (2010). Through her writing, Pineau bears witness to the ordeals of Caribbean women haunted by the collective trauma of slavery and patriarchal power.

The Caribbean has long been associated with eccentricity and madness. As Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca explain, "certainly, a legacy of forced servitude, displacement and violence resulted in an ontological trauma that still manifests in what some perceive as contemporary Caribbean neuroses regarding identity, which are articulated in literary, theoretical, philosophical, and political discourses."[1] Madness appears in Caribbean literatures as a form of social critique that denounces how the histories of colonization, slavery and displacement have fashioned the disturbed psychic landscape of Caribbean subjects. In French Caribbean literature particularly, women are often represented as "mad" or "deranged" not only because they are subjected to the unequal political hierarchies between the metropolitan centre and the Caribbean periphery, but also because they are confronted with patriarchal hegemony. Texts by Guadeloupean authors Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Simone Schwarz-Bart, Martinican writers Suzanne Dracius and Fabienne Kanor and Haitian writers Marie Vieux-Chauvet and Évelyne Trouillot all feature women characters who suffer from madness or mental illness. They

[1] Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca, "Madness Is Rampant on This Island: Writing Altered States in Anglophone Caribbean Literature", in Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan and Daria Tunca (eds), *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1–18 (p. 5).

therefore disrupt the stereotype of the female *poto-mitan*, in which the woman is at the centre of the Caribbean family unit.[2]

Despite the prevalence of creative work originating from the French Caribbean islands in which madness is a core theme, a gap exists in the critical discourse about literary representations of madness. There has been a recent surge of interest in academic scholarship on madness in postcolonial writing from the Caribbean (and other locations) written in English, but this focus has not yet been extended in a sustained manner to the French-speaking world. For instance, Susanna Zinato and Annalisa Pes's edited collection *Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction* offers an interdisciplinary approach to themes of madness in fictional work by writers writing in English from southern Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, the Indian subcontinent and the Asian diaspora.[3] In addition, Kelly Baker Joseph's *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2013),[4] Ledent, O'Callaghan and Tunca's *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge* (2018), and Caroline A. Brown and Johanna X.K. Garvey's *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions* (2017) all position literary madness as a core preoccupation of postcolonial literature, but in an Anglophone framework.[5] Of course, a literary examination of madness across the Francosphere is not entirely absent, and Valérie Orlando's groundbreaking 2003 study *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls* offers a specifically feminist reading of madness as a manifestation of the split/divided

[2] As Vanessa Lee explains, *poto-mitan* is a term borrowed from Creole, "describing the central pillar of the Caribbean voodoo ritual". It depicts women as an authority figure, but also reduces them to domestic and maternal roles. See Vanessa Lee, "Staging Female Creatives in French Caribbean Women's Theatre", in Adele Bardazzi and Alberica Bazzoni (eds), *Gender and Authority across Disciplines, Space and Time* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 331–348 (p. 336).

[3] Susanna Zinato and Annalisa Pes (eds), *Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction* (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2013).

[4] Kelly Baker Josephs, *Disturbers of the Peace: Representations of Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

[5] Caroline A. Brown and Johanna X.K. Garvey (eds), *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

subject.[6] However, more recent academic scholarship on French Caribbean literature has not focused sufficiently on this theme.

This article responds to this critical lacuna by analyzing the theme of madness in the work of Guadeloupean writer Gisèle Pineau. She was born in Paris in 1956 to Guadeloupean parents, and her life has been marked by constant displacements between metropolitan France and the Caribbean, heightening her own sense of alienation. Madness and mental illness are themes that cut across her works, regardless of the genre she adopts. These themes are present in the short stories "Paroles de terre en larmes" (1988), "Ombres créoles" (1988), "Léna" (1988),[7] and "Ta mission, Marny" (2009);[8] in the novels *La Grande Drive des esprits* (1993)[9] and *Chair piment* (2002);[10] in the factual récit *Femmes des Antilles: traces et voix cent cinquante ans après l'abolition de l'esclavage* (1998)[11] and in the autobiographical narratives *Mes quatre femmes* (2007)[12] and *Folie, aller simple: journée ordinaire d'une infirmière* (2010).[13] Without doubt, Pineau has been greatly inspired by her parallel career as a psychiatric nurse, a career she discusses honestly and sensitively in *Folie, aller simple*. In an interview in 2004, Pineau explicitly attributes her desire to uncover marginalized voices to her experiences caring for her patients: "I am interested in difference and how we look at others—it brings me terribly close to my profession of psychiatric nurse."[14]

---

[6] Valérie Orlando, *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2003).

[7] Gisèle Pineau, "Paroles de terre en larmes", in Centre d'action culturelle de la Guadeloupe (ed.), *Paroles de terre en larmes: nouvelles* (Paris; Montéran, Guadeloupe: Éditions Hatier), pp. 5–20; "Ombres créoles", pp. 95–110; "Léna", pp. 111–28. All references will be given in the text.

[8] Gisèle Pineau, "Ta mission, Marny", in *Nouvelles de Guadeloupe: récits de voyage* (Paris: Magellan, 2009), pp. 11–30. All references will be given in the text.

[9] Gisèle Pineau, *La Grande Drive des esprits* (Paris: Serpent à plumes, 1993).

[10] Gisèle Pineau, *Chair piment* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2002).

[11] Gisèle Pineau and Marie Abraham, *Femmes des Antilles: traces et voix: cent cinquante ans après l'abolition de l'esclavage* (Paris: Stock, 1998).

[12] Gisèle Pineau, *Mes quatre femmes* (Paris: Philippe Ray, 2007).

[13] Gisèle Pineau, *Folie, aller simple: journée ordinaire d'une infirmière* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2010). This text will subsequently be referred to as *Folie, aller simple* and references will be given in the text.

[14] Gisèle Pineau, "An Interview with Gisèle Pineau", by Nadège Veldwachter, *Research in African Literatures* 35: 1 (2004), 180–186 (p. 181).

This article explores connections between madness, gender and the postcolonial condition in a selection of Pineau's works. "Ombres créoles" narrates the decline of the protagonist Lélette, an elderly woman who barricades herself into her hut and eventually commits suicide following the demise of her family life. In contrast, "Ta mission, Marny" features a young female protagonist. A medical student in Paris, Guadeloupean Marny is overwhelmed by solitude and becomes hospitalized for her anorexia and psychosis. These stories, which to date have not attracted any critical attention, are read alongside *Folie, aller simple*, one of Pineau's better-known texts, which offers a metropolitan perspective to the theme of madness. I argue that through her writing, Pineau bears witness to the ordeals of Caribbean women haunted by the collective intergenerational trauma of slavery and by the violence of patriarchal power. Bonnie Thomas has explored how the 'transgenerational traumas experienced on a cultural level can profoundly affect individuals' in Pineau's *Chair piment* and *Mes quatre femmes*.[15] Drawing on psychoanalytical work by Nicolas Abraham, memory work by Marianne Hirsch and philosophical writing by Édouard Glissant, Thomas argues that Pineau's characters in these texts suffer their own psychological torment as an unconscious response to the trauma of previous generations of their family who were enslaved. The texts under consideration here unite this memory work with a critique of patriarchal power.

Colonial and postcolonial discourses of madness

Theoretical work has long positioned colonialism as the source of psychological instabilities among formerly colonized peoples. Being subjected to violence and forced to adopt the colonial mentality has led to a collective sense of inferiority, cultural shame, and self-rejection among oppressed groups. These symptoms have often been interpreted on a deeper level as manifestations of colonial madness. In *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), Frantz Fanon posits

[15] Bonnie Thomas, "Transgenerational Trauma in Gisèle Pineau's *Chair Piment* and *Mes quatre femmes*", *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 13: 1 (2010), 23–38 (p. 25).

that the dehumanizing alienation of colonized groups, the concept on which the whole colonial project is built, has caused an enduring and psychologically damaging neurosis that has greatly impacted the subject formation of these groups.[16] While Michel Foucault's *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961) adopts a European perspective, like Fanon he draws attention to the influence of social and political forces on the medical response to madness and mental illness.[17] Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which reads the Orient as a fictional creation by Western academic discourse, is also a key text that connects knowledge to colonial power, and psychological weakness to those subjugated by this colonial power.[18]

In the Caribbean, the trope of madness has been linked to its traumatic history of slavery, incarceration and forced labour. In *Le Discours antillais* (1981), Édouard Glissant argues that contemporary manifestations of neurosis affecting Caribbean peoples stem from the historical lacuna in which the region exists. Indigenous Africans, many of whom died during the so-called "Middle Passage", were transported in appalling conditions by ship to the Caribbean to work as slaves. Forcibly removed from their homeland and stranded on islands in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, they were neither part of African nor European histories, and thus they suffered a permanent exile. For Glissant, this exile has caused a loss of a sense of self among Caribbean peoples and an inability for them to position themselves in relation to other minority groups, a condition he himself terms "madness": "sur les côtes de Sénégal, Gorée, l'île au devant des eaux, premier pas de la déraison".[19] More recent theoretical writing on the Caribbean condition of madness has drawn inspiration from Glissant's association of neurosis with Caribbean history. For instance, J. Michael Dash argues that the figure of the madman appears in Caribbean culture as a symbol of the Caribbean's historical otherness. He claims that the trope of madness is not "a

[16] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).
[17] Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961).
[18] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
[19] Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 18.

form of pathological behaviour"; rather, it is "an exemplary state of extreme consciousness" that emerges from Caribbean histories of exile and constant displacement.[20]

The enduring legacies of trauma, violence, forced servitude and displacement have thus converted the Caribbean into a pathological site of psychological instability. As Ledent, O'Callaghan and Tunca explain, the repercussions of this trauma can still be felt in the Caribbean in the twenty-first century, because of "further and continuing displacement (in the diaspora) [and] different visitations of violence (domestic abuse, political tribalism, punishment of alternative sexualities)", among other factors. They also warn, however, of the problems of solely associating the region with madness: pathologizing the Caribbean as a site of derangement is damaging for the wellbeing of those already suffering from mental illness, a condition that is heightened by the gendered, racial or class inequalities they may face.[21] Here we are reminded that madness is not only a literary trope; for many individuals, it is their daily reality.

Examining the intersections between gender and madness in Caribbean contexts, we can see how women are oppressed by political power structures and patriarchal frameworks in domestic spaces. Marta Caminero-Santagelo argues in *The Madwoman Can't Speak* (1998) that the image of the madwoman in literature and culture has been romanticized by feminist theorists as a symbol of political protest and gender transgression. For her, madness does not emphasize women's agency, but rather it foregrounds their alienation: "as an illusion of power that masks powerlessness, madness is thus the final removal of the madwoman from any field of agency".[22] Pineau's texts under analysis here complicate this assertion somewhat. Madness is an alienating condition that erases the female protagonist's sense of self, yet at times it does act as a tool for

[20] J. Michael Dash, "The Madman at the Crossroads: Delirium and Dislocation in Caribbean Literature", *Profession* (2002), 37–43 (p. 41).

[21] Ledent, O'Callaghan, and Tunca, "Madness", pp. 5–6.

[22] Marta Caminero-Santagelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak; or, Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 12.

female agency, because it grants her a sense of control and gives her the power to resist colonial and hegemonic discourses.

Madness and the postcolonial condition in "Ombres créoles" and "Ta mission, Marny"

"Ombres créoles" is set in a village in rural Guadeloupe. By situating the narrative in an unnamed Caribbean location, Pineau subscribes to Glissant's claim that madness is an affliction that affects all Caribbean peoples. The story is recounted in the first person by Lélette, an old Guadeloupean woman, thereby conforming to stereotypes in Caribbean literature of the elderly madwoman suffering psychic collapse. This early short story, then, seems to uphold and perpetuate these stereotypes rather than breaking them down. It must be noted, however, that "Ombres créoles" is one of Pineau's first published works. It appeared alongside her other short stories "Paroles de terre en larmes" and "Léna" in the collection *Paroles de terre en larmes* (1988). The collection arose following a competition organized by the Centre d'Action Culturelle de la Guadeloupe, in which budding writers were invited to explore the realities of life in the French Caribbean. The stories were judged by the prolific Caribbean writers Maryse Condé and Daniel Maximin; Pineau won the competition and three of her stories were featured in the collection.[23] While her work was clearly judged to be of thematic importance and aesthetic merit, I would argue that her writing has greatly developed since these initial short stories, and that her subsequent work is more concerned with disrupting stereotypes rather than upholding them.

The structure of "Ombres créoles" is cyclical: it opens with Lélette looking back on her life with nostalgia as she waits for customers to visit her grocer's shop, and it closes with her confinement in this same hut after the breakdown in relations with her son Léon. Lélette addresses her interlocuter(s) as "vous" throughout the story, but their identity is not revealed until the end of the narrative. Lélette has been telling her story to a journalist working for the fictional

[23] Antonia Wimbush, "La Dissidence in Gisèle Pineau's Œuvre", *Journal of Romance Studies* 20: 1 (2020), 159–178 (pp. 169–170).

newspaper *Les Belles Antilles*, who has come to interview the woman who has barricaded herself in her hut. The narrative voice changes at the end of the story. The first-person narrator gives way to an omniscient third-person narrator who tells of the publication, on 6 October 1986, of this newspaper bearing the headline "La femme folle de C… en finit avec la vie" (p. 110). The reader thus infers that Lélette has taken her own life, although the details of her death are hazy. Lélette's loss of narrative voice at the end of "Ombres creoles", a textual representation of her suicide, highlights the erasure of her identity and sense of self that is caused by her madness.

Lélette's madness is bound up with both the patriarchal structures in Caribbean society and the peripheral relationship of Guadeloupe to metropolitan France. As a young woman she is a successful businesswoman who can afford to send her son Léon to school in Pointe-à-Pitre. She is acutely aware of the highly gendered nature of Guadeloupean society, in which women have to shoulder the domestic duties in addition to working in the sugar cane fields, and she describes women's lives as "un chemin de croix sans fin", comparing their daily sacrifices to the sacrifices made by Jesus Christ at his crucifixion (p. 97). She is proud that he is the first in the village to go to secondary school, and she has high aspirations for him: "[J]e vais en faire un avocat ou un médecin de mon Léon, je vais en faire un sénateur" (p. 99). Yet when Léon is fourteen, he loses interest in his studies. He leaves school to work on a building site, and then eventually leaves the island for metropolitan France, a location that, problematically, he believes affords him much better prospects and professional opportunities. His mobility is enabled and encouraged by the framework of the *départements et régions d'outre-mer*, which means that Guadeloupe is administered as part of France, and his movements are mirrored by many Antilleans who frequently travel between the Caribbean and the metropole for work, study and family commitments. Here, the political and patriarchal structures become intertwined, as the reader first witnesses Lélette's psychological demise when her son leaves her. Attracted by the temptations of the metropole, Léon is now in control of his mother, who prays for his return. Alone and

abandoned, Lélette starts talking to the shadows of herself, to which the title alludes, which she conjures by lighting candles in her hut: "[J]'avais pris des habitudes, vous comprenez! Tiens, tous les soirs, j'allumais ma lampe à pétrole et mes chandelles. D'un coup, j'avais de la compagnie, je pouvais faire la conversation. J'avais mes ombres" (p. 101). This one-sided conversation with herself is indicative of her loneliness and marks the beginning of her psychological troubles, emphasized textually by the short sentences in this passage.

Léon eventually returns to Guadeloupe, with his wife and son in tow. Pineau makes a comment here about race relations in the Caribbean through Lélette's approval that he has married a white metropolitan woman who will raise his status in the social hierarchy, rather than a "négresse insignifiante" who would cause him trouble (p. 105). Tensions become apparent between mother and son when Léon asserts his authority in a further portrayal of masculine control, throwing away Lélette's produce in the shop to create a home for his family. Linguistic issues also surface as Léon's wife claims that she cannot understand Lélette's speech, suggesting once again that madness is a specifically Antillean condition expressed through the Creole language, a language with an inferior status to that of French. Lélette is lonely even with her family close by, and her isolation worsens when Léon wants to demolish her hut and build a modern house for the family. The conflict between tradition and modernity is clear here: Léon wants a more modern existence, having experienced material comforts in metropolitan France, but Lélette considers this a betrayal of her identity. She barricades herself inside her hut and refuses to leave. Pineau does grant Lélette some agency here. At her age, she is expected to be submissive and give in to societal expectations, yet Lélette refuses to compromise her beliefs and she stands up to her son. By barricading herself in her hut, she resists patriarchal norms that position men as figures of authority, and thus her "madness" enables her to take control of her situation. Any agency Lélette is granted, though, is offset by her loss of narrative voice and her suicide at the end of the story.

The embodiment of madness is a theme that connects "Ombres créoles" to "Ta mission, Marny". In "Ombres créoles", the protagonist overeats to compensate for her emotional emptiness after her son leaves Guadeloupe to settle in the metropole, while in "Ta mission, Marny", the protagonist suffers from malnutrition and anorexia, as the voices inside her head forbid her to eat food that may harm her. Pineau's concern for social issues that particularly affect young generations, such as eating disorders, is apparent in the subject matter of this short story. At the same time, her choice of young female protagonist in the character of Marny, a medical student in her twenties, demonstrates that madness and mental illness affect a cross-section of people in society. In this way, in her later writing Pineau breaks with the literary stereotype of the elderly madwoman, indicative of a development in her writing since "Ombres créoles" was published in 1988. While the collection *Paroles de terre en larmes* aimed to promote new Caribbean literary voices, *Nouvelles de Guadeloupe* (2009), the volume in which "Ta mission, Marny" appears, instead seeks to celebrate established writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart and Ernest Pépin (in addition to Pineau). This collection thus positions Pineau now as one of the most successful writers from Guadeloupe, and Pineau uses this platform to disrupt stereotypes concerning madness and alienation.

The story opens with the voices that Guadeloupean Marny hears inside her head, meaning that the reader is introduced to the voices before being introduced to the character of Marny. These voices define her character and the reader's perception of her. They appear in italics, emphasizing their innate strangeness:

Chuchuchu…

Au ciel et sur la terre…

La mission de Dieu…

Chuchuchu…

Blasphème érésipèle…

(p. 11)

The religious nature of these voices is salient: they appear to be sent from God, granting Marny a divine mission which she alone is able to complete. Furthermore, even though the story is predominantly set in the metropole, the voices are specifically associated with the Caribbean through Pineau's comparison of the voices to a powerful hurricane. This comparison draws attention to environmental concerns while also positing madness as a Caribbean condition that afflicts black people in particular. Marny thinks she deserves to be punished for her race, just as historically black people have been punished for their blackness. Pineau thus goes further in her discussions on race in "Ta mission, Marny" than in "Ombres créoles" by making an explicit association between madness, Caribbean identity and blackness.

The voices become increasingly violent, and by the end of the narrative Marny is admitted to a psychiatric hospital, after the voices tell her to set fire to her bedroom:

Tu es l'enfant du péché…

Tu es la fille de Satan…

Tu dois mourir pour sauver le monde…

Mettre le feu!

Mettre le feu!

Mettre le feu!

Ta mission, Marny…'

(p. 30)

Once again, the message carries strong religious connotations as Marny, figured as the devil, is expected to sacrifice herself for the good of others. The religious nature of the message is also emphasized by the fire imagery, which not only suggests violence and destruction—apparent textually in the three-fold repetition of the phrase "mettre le feu"—but also religious purity. The voices appear to tell Marny that she will achieve some sort of salvation by lighting fire to her room. Fire is a repeated trope in Pineau's wider *œuvre* and in Caribbean literature more generally, as important works such as Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) use the image of fire to symbolize resistance, redemption and liberation from colonial oppression.[24]

Marny does not succeed in liberating herself from colonial frameworks, however. The root cause of her madness is her exile from Guadeloupe to Paris and the internal alienation that this displacement provokes. Her failure to integrate into metropolitan life, even after living in Paris for three years, causes her to isolate herself from her surroundings. This alienation manifests itself corporeally in her anorexia, and as the voices inside her head become more powerful, she convinces herself that she does not need to eat because they will sustain her: "[E]lle était convaincue que ses voix la sustentaient d'une manière surnaturelle, quasi biblique" (p. 20). For Marny, the difference in eating habits between Guadeloupeans and metropolitan French citizens is indicative of the huge cultural and social gulf she perceives between the two communities. In Guadeloupe, eating is a communal activity, and Pineau includes a never-ending list of Guadeloupean produce to emphasize the Caribbean community's love of food (p. 15). Yet in France she cannot find these goods, and she does not have anyone with whom to share the communal habit of eating.

Brinda Mehta explores how food acts as a marker of identity in Pineau's autofictional writing, arguing that "eating, cooking, and food choice consequently become explicit political

[24] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939, 2nd ed. (Paris: Présence africaine, 1956); Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: André Deutsch, 1966).

acts to demarcate boundaries of inclusion, exclusion, affirmation, and negation within circular routes of diasporic mobility and an imagined 'home locale' in Guadeloupe".[25] Mehta argues that in *L'Exil selon Julia* and *Un papillon dans la cité*, food provides physical, mental and affective sustenance, as the preparation and sharing of meals binds communities together. However, in "Ta mission, Marny", food is not a positive source of emotional nourishment; rather, it reminds her of her difference. The fact that Guadeloupean produce is not available in metropolitan France suggests on a deeper level that Guadeloupeans are not welcomed in France, despite the French citizenship afforded to them by the structure of departmentalization. Yet, in a way, Marny uses food as a form of resistance; by starving herself, she refuses to conform to metropolitan notions of Frenchness and is able to define her identity in her own way. Anorexia is thus a means for Marny to exercise a degree of control against those who seek to regulate her behaviour, such as her mother.

However, Marny is unable to resist her mother fully, which aggravates her mental illness. Unlike in "Ombres créoles", in which Lélette must concede to her son's authority, here it is the mother figure who is in control. "Ta mission, Marny" is unusual in Pineau's writing in that it focuses on the mother-daughter relationship, as much of Pineau's other work privileges the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter. Louise Hardwick discusses the significant role played by the grandmother in Caribbean society, who provides emotional and intellectual nurturing to the child.[26] The grandmother figure is absent in "Ta mission, Marny" as she is no longer alive, so perhaps this explains why the mother is so demanding towards Marny, because she is overcompensating for the lack of an older female role model. In a change of narrative voice, the mother utters a monologue in which she explains her determination that her daughter should study medicine in France: "[E]lle fera ses études de médecine en France. Et je me

[25] Brinda Mehta, *Notions of Identity, Diaspora, and Gender in Caribbean Women's Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 91.

[26] Louise Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography, and the Francophone Caribbean* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 194–197.

saignerai aux quatre veines pour qu'elle réussisse" (p. 18). This maternal pressure does not cease once Marny has relocated to Paris; she writes letters to her mother, thanking her for the sacrifices she has made, but her mental health declines on trying to conform to her mother's high expectations. Marny does have family in the metropole, as her mother's estranged sister Denise lives in Argenteuil. Yet her aunt does not offer her any form of familial protection or female solidarity, as she projects her bitterness towards her sister onto Marny, leaving Marny to feel even more alone. As Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo comments, a harmful mother-daughter relationship is often at the root of the protagonist's neurosis in Caribbean women's writing,[27] and Pineau's "Ta mission, Marny" thus sits in a line of Caribbean texts that problematize the relationship between mother and daughter, including Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl" (1978) and Edwige Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994).[28]

Both "Ombres créoles" and "Ta mission, Marny", then, present madness as a symbol of female alienation in the Caribbean and a criticism of the centre-periphery structure that continues to dominate relations between Guadeloupe and mainland France. Both protagonists ultimately suffer a downfall—Lélette commits suicide, while Marny is hospitalized—revealing an ability to confront these social and political obstacles. How does Pineau's autobiographically inspired narrative *Folie, aller simple* counter this somewhat simplistic association between Caribbean identities and madness?

Folie, aller simple, a metropolitan perspective

In contrast to the short stories, *Folie, aller simple* is set in metropolitan France. The protagonist is named Gisèle, an obvious clue to the autobiographical status of the narrative, which is confirmed textually by conversations between Gisèle and her patients about her writing career. In the

[27] Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo, "Discourse, Madness and the Neurotic Heroine in French Caribbean Women Novelists", *Journal of West Indian Literature* 6: 1 (1993), 29–44 (p. 32).

[28] Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl", *New Yorker* (26 June 1978); Edwige Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho, 1994).

narrative present, Gisèle recounts her daily activities in the psychiatric hospital. She is shocked to learn of the suicide of her patient Sophie, who threw herself under a train, and as the police arrive to conduct their investigation, Gisèle's mind conjures up images of Sophie's dismembered body, which disrupts her own sense of self. Interrupting this narrative are the internal reflections of Gisèle on her own state of mind and on the origins of her career as a psychiatric nurse. She reflects on how easily her mental health could have deteriorated too, particularly given that mental illness is present in her family history (she explains that her grandfather suffered from post-traumatic stress following his engagement in the First World War, and her grandmother suffered from depression during the period she spent in Paris). Pineau explores her family history in more detail in *Mes quatre femmes*, and we learn in this text that her mother's sister Gisèle, whom she is named after, takes her own life after being consumed by grief following the death of her husband. Incorporating autobiographical reflections into her writing seems to be a means to avoid over-romanticizing the tropes of madness and mental illness, as she reveals that even her own family has been affected. By discussing her family history of illness, Pineau also demonstrates, according to Thomas, that "we all experience the same challenges", and therefore she draws connections between "normality" and madness in an intimate example of Glissant's concept of Relation.[29] It is the way people cope with their troubles that differs, and writing has been Gisèle's/Pineau's salvation to avoid succumbing to mental illness. In an early chapter of *Folie, aller simple*, Gisèle explains her love of writing, equating it with escape and freedom: "[J]'aime lire et écrire. Peut-être que c'est une façon de fuir la réalité du monde. Peut-être que je ne suis pas faite pour ce monde-là…" (p. 35). As Lorna Milne comments, "it is Gisèle's creative imagination and writing that have rescued her" from her own madness.[30]

[29] Bonnie Thomas, *Connecting Histories: Francophone Caribbean Writers Interrogating their Past* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), p. 71.

[30] Lorna Milne, "Working, Writing and the Antillean Postcolony: Patrick Chamoiseau and Gisèle Pineau", *Paragraph* 37: 2 (2014), 205–220 (p. 212).

Pineau breaks the association between Caribbeanness and madness by positing that madness can affect anyone, regardless of their cultural or racial heritage. The majority of Gisèle's patients are white Parisians, meaning that madness is as much associated with the metropolitan centre as with the Caribbean periphery. At the outset of the text, Gisèle compares her Parisian patients to the shells washed up on a Guadeloupean beach that she used to collect as a child, an evocation of the Antillean environment that features repeatedly in Pineau's writing: "[T]els les coquillages jonchant les plages de la Guadeloupe, les personnes qui se trouvent à l'hôpital pyschiatrique arrivent d'un long voyage. Ce sont bien sûr les malades" (p. 14). Like the shells broken and battered by the powerful waves of the Caribbean Sea, Gisèle's patients arrive at the hospital crushed and fragmented, in need of psychiatric treatment to help make them whole again. Importantly, the point of reference for these metropolitan patients is the Caribbean, in a reversal of the centre-periphery discourse that positions the Caribbean in a subordinate relationship to mainland France. Milne explains that,

> by posing the explicitly Guadeloupean shells as the first term of her analogy, Gisèle discreetly "centres" her comparison on the Antilles, casting her metropolitan patients as the secondary and peripheral element of the simile in a reversal of the usual centre-periphery relationship where the metropole generally figures as the "central" norm and yardstick of any comparison. Thus Pineau hints that while Antilleans are damaged by history and must transcend the "jail" of memory, anyone can be damaged by random misfortune (such as mental illness).[31]

In this way, Pineau provides an important metropolitan perspective to madness and mental illness that counters the approach she follows in her short stories, which seems to confirm the theoretical

[31] Milne, "Working, Writing", p. 214.

discourse arguing that madness is an intrinsically Caribbean state. It is thus helpful to read across Pineau's *œuvre* and to explore both her fictional and non-fictional writing to gain a more complete image of her attitude towards madness.

The mentally ill characters are treated by other people in different ways in the three narratives. In "Ombres créoles", Lélette is derided for her "mad" behaviour by her neighbours; in Ta mission, Marny", the other students ignore her because of her mental instability. In contrast, in *Folie, aller simple*, the nurses are firm yet kind to the patients, taking the time to listen to their problems despite their own frustrations at the lack of resources available to them. In a poignant scene, Gisèle goes to sit outside with the patients of her own accord, and the patients are grateful for this shared space of communal exchange: "[O]ui, d'expérience, je sais que les patients apprécient cette présence infirmière parmi eux, hors les murs, sous les arbres de la cour" (pp. 135–136). As Gillian Ni Cheallaigh explains, the patients are treated with care and respect; "they are given their first names, and there appears to be a concerted effort to record and offer testimony to their individual experiences within the asylum".[32]

Despite these clear differences between the autobiographically inspired *Folie, aller simple* and her earlier short stories, there are several parallels in Pineau's treatment of madness across the texts. Most of Gisèle's patients are female, thus conforming to the treatise that madness and lack of reason are inherently female conditions. Pineau also comments on the gendered nature of the caring profession through Gisèle's observation that there are more female nurses and care workers than male in the team (p. 174). Racial discrimination towards black communities is a further theme that connects the three texts. Gisèle remembers when, in the 1970s, she tried to treat a patient who refused to be cared for by a black nurse, who cried out, "[J]e veux pas la négresse! Pas la négresse! Pas la négresse!" (p. 133). Although in the present Gisèle does not

[32] Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, "Errer dans le labyrinthe de l'asile ou de l'écriture: The (Writing) Madwoman from the Attic to the Asylum", in Gillian Ni Cheallaigh, Laura Jackson and Siobhan McIlvanney (eds), *Quand la folie parle: The Dialectic Effect of Madness in French Literature* (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 76–96 (p. 90).

experience rejection because of the colour of her skin, she has certainly been the victim of racial prejudice throughout her career, and this mirrors the attitudes towards blackness that can be found in both “Ombres créoles” and “Ta mission, Marny”.

In her writing, then, Pineau presents female experiences of madness not only as a specifically Caribbean condition, inscribed in a history of trauma and forced servitude, but also as a universal state of isolation and alienation that can afflict all communities and ethnic groups. While the two short stories seem to typify the postcolonial discourse put forward by Glissant and other theorists, which reads madness as the enduring legacy of slavery and colonization in the Caribbean, *Folie, aller simple* offers an alternative, metropolitan perspective, thus conforming to Ledent, O’Callaghan and Tunca’s appeal to avoid over-determining the Caribbean as a site of derangement. The political messages underlying Pineau’s writing are stronger in the short stories than in *Folie, aller simple*, which is perhaps indicative of the latter’s autobiographical status, and the affective, emotional charge that this genre brings to the text. Reconsidering the theme of madness across a variety of Pineau’s narratives reveals her determination to counter stereotypes about the Caribbean and to centre the islands within the French Republic.

University of Liverpool