

Gerry Turcotte

The Caribbean Gothic Down Under: Caribbean Influences in Marianne de Pierres' Parrish Plessis Novels

Abstract: This paper investigates the way voodoo, postcolonial theory, Indigenous spirituality and Caribbean culture are brought together to discuss contemporary and future race politics down under in the novel *Nylon Angel*, *Code Noir* and *Crash Deluxe*. Marianne de Pierres' Parrish Plessis books are edgy, street-smart science fiction novels set in a future Sydney where government has effectively collapsed, media controls its citizenry and gangs vie for control of the streets. In some ways it appears a fairly typical model for SF writing, except that de Pierres has invested great effort in the delineation of racially complex groups. Of these, the encounter between Caribbean (and Voodoo), shamans, and Indigenous Kaidaitcha men, makes for a refreshing, but uncomfortable, contemporary negotiation of race politics in Australia.

Keywords: Caribbean Literature; Marianne de Pierres' Parrish Plessis; Gothic; Science Fiction; Indigenous Identity Politics.

GERRY TURCOTTE

St. Mary's University, Calgary, AB, Canada
Gerry.Turcotte@stmu.ca

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This paper examines Australian science fiction writer Marianne de Pierres' Parrish Plessis novels, in particular her first work *Nylon Angel* which introduced the character to the public and in which the Caribbean influences are strongest. The Plessis books are edgy, street-smart cyber/techno punk works set in a future Sydney where government has effectively collapsed, media controls its citizenry and gangs vie for control of the streets. In some ways it presents as a fairly typical SF narrative, except that de Pierres has invested great effort in the delineation of racially complex groups. Of these, the encounter between Caribbean (and Voodoo) shamans and Indigenous Kaidaitcha men, makes for a refreshing, if uncomfortable, contemporary negotiation of race politics in Australia.

This paper investigates the way voodoo, postcolonial theory, Indigenous spirituality and Caribbean culture are brought together to discuss contemporary and future race politics down under. In particular this analysis approaches the Caribbean dimension in de Pierre's works as part of a contemporary debate on racialized spaces,

as articulated through the genres of science, detective and gothic fictions which all commingle in this work. De Pierres' Parrish Plessis novels — *Nylon Angel*, *Code Noir* and *Crash Deluxe* — are demanding texts, refusing to compromise for the reader. They develop their own language, slang and landscape, but they avoid the conceit of many similar works of having mediating characters through whom details are back-filled for the reading public. For de Pierres, the world that is entered into is one ready-formed, and readers are expected to find their bearings as best they can, arguably in the same way that her protagonist negotiates the mean streets of future Australia.

And these streets are mean indeed. From the very first page of *Nylon Angel* Plessis is presented as a battle-scarred, sexually brutalised enforcer, enslaved to the savage Jamon Mondo, a crime lord who reigns over the inner city region known as the Tert, itself a 'burb of a megacity. Plessis is an unusually tall woman, "handy with [her] fists and feet" who can "cut a mean, hungry look" when she wants to, but who will "never make the front cover of a glossy, on account of my badly rebuilt nose and flattened cheek-bone" courtesy of an abusive stepfather.¹ As the new kid on the block, Plessis is noticed by the warlord, who quickly hires her as one of his bodyguards, but not before having his pack of dingo boys—savage, genetically modified street punks—gang rape her. As a result of this humiliating initiation she joins a "club you had to die to leave,"² and understandably begins to look for a way out.

Her opportunity comes in the form of a murder-mystery, the death of one of the Media's star reporters — Razz Retribution — and this sees her moving through

different inner city gang environments, clashing with competing warlords, and entering the rich, protected enclaves of the powerful. We also see the beginning of her attempts to deal with an incipient infection that we later learn is a type of parasitic, cyber virus that, in the course of the trilogy, threatens to over-take her specifically, but humanity itself more generally. However, de Pierres' decision to link this virus to questions of genetic engineering and Aboriginal empowerment puts an intriguing spin on traditional SF scenarios and allows her to tackle complex questions about racial identity in future Australia. That the novels have been read, in the handful of reviews thus far, as either successful or failed bids at genre fiction marred by under-developed characters, rather than as narratives about racialized fears and desires, perhaps suggests the way popular fiction is often misread, or under read, by the general public. No doubt, in response to this, many might argue that my own analysis displays the way popular texts are over-invested with meaning by academe.

Nevertheless, as a classic rich versus poor narrative, where the working class are brutalised and dispossessed, and the wealthy live in gated, technologically protected communities, *Nylon Angel* rather deftly negotiates the maze of "techno-urban squalor with its street and cyberpunk crime,"³ and invokes rather than skirts the racialized dimension of street gangs, urban ghettos, and racial anxieties. Indeed, in an early chapter she describes the toll boys who presumably extract money from innocent bystanders for right of passage through public spaces, as "Body-enhanced, skin-mixed, libido-jacked jerks. The latest craze in Plastique-ville was patchwork skin: Caucasoid, Negroid,

Mongoloid with a splash of Albino thrown in for highlights.”⁴ These hybrid figures are referred to as “zigzags” or “frigging zebra[s],” so that the theme of miscegenation, cross-fertilisation and cross-culturation is not only an issue in the text, but the subject of fashion trends. It is an interest that is picked up in the wider narrative that works through the trilogy, where a key plot point is an Indigenous man’s master plan to work with, and sometimes against, the Cabal Coomera, “The Tert’s real lawmakers,”⁵ to restore Aboriginal genetic purity and re-establish Indigenous sovereignty over the corrupted Australian land.

The Cabal Coomera is itself described as “A mysterious, unaccountable sect who operated above the daily Tert politics. Some said they were descendants of the Kadaitcha, the feather feet police of the original indigenous tribes,”⁶ though Parrish dismisses this as “romance” and expresses fears, not unfounded it later turns out, “about vigilante group[s]” fighting to enforce “race politics.”⁷

That de Pierres explores this complex inter-cultural landscape through an equally heterogeneous mix of literary conventions heavy on Gothic and science fiction conventions is not at all surprising. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the Gothic has always been used to speak of the liminal, the unwanted, the feared and unspoken, and as such proved itself particularly useful for enunciating the colonial condition (see Turcotte, 1998, 2009 & 2017).⁸ Indeed, it was not long in the history of the newly evolving Gothic genre that colonial landscapes began to replace European ones as sites of depravity, perversity and horror that tested even the steeliest Englishman and woman.

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gilbert has argued that “it is finally in Caribbean writing that a postcolonial dialogue with the Gothic plays out its tendencies most completely and suggestively,”⁹ and while this underplays the complex negotiations that the genre has exhibited in Australian and Canadian fiction more widely, it does nevertheless underscore the way the “lineaments” of clichéd Caribbean tropes have aligned well with the clichéd “lineaments of gothic fiction.” Hence narratives of the “many Obeah men, ‘voodoo’ priests, zombies, and sorcerers that people Gothic fiction, the many plots that revolve around the threat of mysterious practices associated with animal sacrifice, fetishes, and spells, all contribute to make of the colonized space the locus of horror necessary for the writing of Gothic literature.”¹⁰

The powerful deployment of the Gothic through the Caribbean register can be seen in a range of postcolonial texts, most notably in the works of Canadian writers such as Dionne Brand, Shani Mootoo and Nalo Hopkinson. Unlike these writers, de Pierres does not lay claim to Caribbean ancestry, and so her use of the cultural *métissage* that dominates her book references a fascination with a diversity of influences, rather than championing a specific force. It is certainly safe to say that de Pierres’ use of a Caribbean mythology, however small a part of her overall world, is rather unique to the Australian speculative arena. Nevertheless, de Pierres is careful not to represent the Caribbean merely as a sensationalised site that underscores the savage, brutal condition of the non-white other. In many texts by postcolonial Caribbean writers, the perception of this savagery is mocked, deconstructed or

subverted, either by demonstrating the role that Imperialism played in initiating the violence — for example, in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, or by rewriting and reclaiming the power of Haitian Vodou or Jamaican Obeah, as we find, for example, in Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*.

For de Pierres, the notion of Obeah and voodoo are certainly used to sensationalist effect, but it also functions to texture the multicultural environment of her dystopian universe. Parrish stumbles into the world of voodoo while attempting to escape the labyrinth of the urban nightmare she has had to flee into as a result of her probing into the Media's conspiracies, an act that sees her framed for a high profile murder. In negotiating the back alleys and tenements of the slums she is accidentally feathered in a bleeding ceremony that sees the Obeah-worshipping clans identify her as a powerful entity named Oya. "We'd lobbed into a villa chock-full of Mueno clones. Greasy food-littered rugs covered the floor and bundles of feathers and fur dripping with fresh blood hung from ceiling and doorway."¹¹ When the blood and feathers cover her, the Muenos worshipfully throw themselves to the ground chanting as she flees, "the prickle of voodoo at [her] back."¹² She reflects that she "hate[s] spirit shit" and goes on to say that "You don't see so much of it around Torley's or even the south side of The Tert. The Slag, though, was full of it. Voodoo, animism, satanism, tek worship [...] And then there's the Cabal Coomera; although I like to think of their brand of spirit wisdom as something more pure."¹³

Parrish realises that she needs to go back, and in the course of retracing her steps she discovers that she has been

anointed as the white saviour—she who "*Wears the Feather Crown*,"¹⁴ "the warrior witch or somethin'."¹⁵ Later, when the Muenos pledge their allegiance to her she notes, "It seemed likely they'd somehow worked me into some old myth. Punters needed heroes—didn't matter what religion they gigged to. Muenos were worse than most. It had something to do with their particular mash of Catholic, voodoo, tek worship. God's in the heavens, the animals *and* the machine! Crowded huh!"¹⁶ In some respects the novel clearly sets the believers up as naïve, perhaps even childlike, making clear that their spiritual investment is based on error and superstition. And yet, as the story plays out, her adopted clan repeatedly saves her from danger, and we begin to see that perhaps the process of absorbing the ritual has in some small part transformed and strengthened her.

The events can be read in multiple ways: as either the white fantasy of absorbing and leading the primitive and tribal as per the Tarzan/Phantom motif (she is, after all, the white witch who was promised as saviour); or as the metaphor for the power of miscegenation and interculturalisation. That the novel leans towards the latter view is suggested in the way de Pierres turns the series of novels into a critique of the quest for racial purity, led, it turns out, by Indigenous interests.

The novels negotiate the delicate issue of Indigenous prior ownership and the dangers of a type of monolithic quest for a long-lost purity. One of the leading figures in the novels, alternately referred to as Dark or Daac, is an Indigenous man who attempts to reclaim Australia for his *gens* — his people. As he tells Parrish, "My *gens* have always lived in the Tert. It's our

land. Long before Mondo and Lang's. Even though we don't exist as a tribe any more — our task does." He goes on to say, "Our land is poisoned and sick. Our Task is to reclaim it, bring it to health, bring its people to health."¹⁷ Parrish is sceptical and announces, in a voice that could easily be conservative white Australia's: "What *gens*? [...] The Tert is a rubbish dump of people and waste."¹⁸ The text goes on to say: "A sneer ghosted his face. 'You're from Viva, aren't you? Originally, I mean. You wouldn't understand about family and place. When people return to one place over generations, it becomes part of their soul's code.'¹⁹ Parrish is stunned as she realises that he is Aboriginal. "You're a native of the continent?" Daac replies: "Maybe once. Genetically I'm as much a mishmash as you. But *gens* is a complicated thing. Hard to define. Those of us that carry the thread of *l'origine* know and understand."²⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that de Pierres is not an Indigenous Australian, the work tends to come down on the side of diversity and multicultural plurality, while both acknowledging the power of spiritual presences including those of the Kaddaitcha and Obeah. Perhaps, though, the trilogy's position can be read through its opening metaphor of the "zigzag" trends, and accounts for the appeal of both Gothic and Caribbean influences. In "Postcolonial Voodoo," Ken Gelder speaks of the way ethnicity is increasingly presented as a "surplus" rather than as a lack, as played out in much postcolonial and whiteness theory. Mike Hill, cited in Gelder, argues that "what whiteness wants ... is something that whiteness cannot have and still be white,"²¹ prompting Gelder to suggest that "one might resent [ethnicity] not because

it is something less than whiteness, but rather because it can seem like that something extra of which whiteness has been dispossessed."²²

If Gelder is correct here in seeing resentment combine with "enchantment, a certain abject yearning ... to be in possession of an ethnicity that always seems to lie elsewhere," then we could read de Pierres as literalising this desire. Her character's account of the toll boys arises immediately following her description of her own efforts to appear "interesting." The crime lord, in inviting her to a public event luridly orders her to "Wear something interesting," and she reflects: "Well, interesting he got! I'd changed to a funky black nylon suit with lime pleats interweaved into the flared legs and a leather tank top underneath."²³ This, coupled with her garrotte-equipped g-string is definitely "extra-ordinary," but certainly banal compared to the "patchwork skin" and "piebald" faces of the truly fashionable. To cite Gelder again: "the ways in which the 'fatal charm' of ethnicity is contrasted to the banality of metropolitan-based whiteness; the extra-ordinary against the ordinary; and the reminder that whiteness has its ethnicity too is a way of making whiteness fatal again in its own peculiar terms."²⁴

I'm interested here in the way de Pierres straddles the issue of ethnicity and race politics through a text that fetishizes the "voodoo-ing" of whiteness, which of course in the novel is both a dominant force of the existing culture as well as constantly under siege from the predatory non-white underclasses that have been pushed to its encroaching peripheries. Still, it is interesting that the notion of zombie-fication could arguably be claimed as a mark of

complacent whiteness — “soft-bottomed white-collar chump[s]”²⁵ — and vodoun belief as emblematic of community cohesion and empowerment. One could go further and argue, however, that the idea of voodoo as vital supplement, might well extend to the nature of de Pierres’ narrative itself — that its ethnically excessive colourfulness supplements the science fiction genre itself, while also working to produce an accumulation of effect against which both the blandness of whiteness and the unarguable originality of Indigeneity are braced.

Gelder looks at the way a number of critics resist the “enchantment” of voodoo in a range of narratives about, for example,

Haiti, in a bid to “move out of romance and address the process of becoming modern.”²⁶ In contemporary science fiction that uses voodoo it is interesting to see its “enchanted” dimensions invoked to argue for a *post-modern* condition — and one that speaks a particular postcolonial reality of plurality and even cultural métissage that both refutes whiteness as an authoritative wholeness but also indigeneity as a moral precursor. It would be tempting to read this as somehow forward thinking, except that it is also possible to interpret this middle ground as a way of recuperating a space for whiteness to inhabit, albeit costumed in an array of “zigzagged” cultural accoutrements, that in the end, leaves the core intact.

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NOTES

1. Marianne De Pierres, *Nylon Angel*, London, Orbit, 2004, p. 2.
2. *Ibidem*, p. 3.
3. Jonathan Cowie, “Review of *Nylon Angel*,” accessed May 29, 2015. <http://www.concatenation.org/frev/nylon.angel.html>
4. Marianne De Pierres, *Nylon Angel*, p. 13.

5. *Ibidem*, p. 7.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 7-8.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 8.
8. Gerry Turcotte, "Australian Gothic," in Marie Mulvey Roberts (ed.), *The Handbook of Gothic Literature*, London, Macmillan, 1998, p. 10-19; Idem, *Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Canadian and Australian Fiction*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2009; Idem, "Post-Colonial Gothic: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Pacific," in Coral Ann Howells, Paul Sharrad and Gerry Turcotte (ed.), *The Oxford History of the English Novel. Volume 12: Australia, Canada, New Zealand & the South Pacific since 1950*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 205-20.
9. Lizabeth Paravisini-Gilbert, "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: the Caribbean," in Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 233.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 233.
11. Marianne De Pierres, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 65.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 65.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 70.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 76.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 77.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 189.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 190.
19. *Ibidem*.
20. *Ibidem*.
21. Ken Gelder, "Postcolonial Voodoo," in *Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2000): p. 89.
22. *Ibidem*.
23. Marianne De Pierres, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
24. Ken Gelder, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
25. Marianne De Pierres, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
26. Ken Gelder, *op. cit.*, p. 95.