

Beyond Home and Heterosexuality

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Between 2008 and 2017, Léonora Miano published three novels on the fate of four interrelated characters, namely Amok and his sister Ajar, both born in Cameroon, Shrapnel, Amok's best friend, and Amandla, Amok's girlfriend, originally from La Guyane. The first novel, *Tel des astres éteints* (TAE, 2008) finds the characters in Paris, in their early thirties, where they ended up to first get professional training and then stayed. In the two following novels, *Crépuscule du tourment* I and II (2016 and 2017), the same characters reappear, now supplemented by Ixora, Shrapnel's once girlfriend and mother of his son, Amok's parents and Amok's acquaintance Regal. Both novels are set in an African country whose name is never mentioned, yet the geography and the verbal expressions annotated by the author refer to Cameroon.

While the first novel covers a time span of several weeks with numerous analepses, *Crépuscule* takes place within a few days only – the first part notably within about 18 hours, the second starting on the same day and continuing for several days told in detail and weeks elliptically summarised. Miano uses a heterodiegetic narrator for *Tels des astres éteints* and *Crépuscule II*, with changing focalisations, whereas *Crépuscule I* is told by four female homodiegetic narrators who all address an absent Amok. All three novels are multi-perspectival, chronological on the first level and set in one place, but they reach out to other places and times rather excessively. Narrative pauses – in which the character meditates on life and belonging – dominate the novels; the activities of the characters on the main plot level are quotidian, told iteratively, in TAE, whereas events in the past figure repetitively, just like the major event in the present of *Crépuscule I*, Amok beating his compagne Ixora and leaving her on the muddy street in the rain.

The little spectacular action of the novels is, however, closely tied to meditations on home and belonging by all characters and it means different things to each of them. To Amok, home, "la grande maison" (the mansion), is a place of violence. The primary scene of repetitive conjugal violence deeply traumatised him – at the beginning of TAE he calls the police because he hears a woman in his run-down apartment block screaming. The frequent beatings their mother received without leaving her husband are situations both Amok and Ajar turn to in their reflections. Yet, this conjugal violence in a privileged, upper-class family,

is also metonymic of the country's history. Amok's paternal grandfather collaborated with the colonisers and thus gained reputation and esteem. Amok's maternal grandfather had been abducted from the hinterland as a slave and sold to the coast, where he was finally set free and acquired a fortune, without ever being able to shed the tarnish of slavery. Even though Madame brought this fortune into the marriage, she is considered a sub-standard match for the Mususedi family.

By contrast to Amok, Amandla and Ixora are both raised by single mothers from the DOM, Amandla growing up in the overseas department, while Ixora grew up in France. Through her mother, Amandla is imbued with afrocentrist thinking and spirituality. Her aim is to return to the African continent; in Paris, she gets involved with La Fraternité Atonienne, a secret group of Black radicals which advocates a return to afrocentrist values and terms: "Cette réappropriation de soi passait d'abord par l'emploi de termes adéquats, pour nommer les choses et se définir soi-même" (This reappropriation of oneself was first carried out through the use of adequate terms to name the things and to define oneself; TAE 154). Shrapnel attends these meetings too. In contrast to Amok he grew up in the village, with a loving grandmother and a large spiritual community tree, Shabaka, which was cut down when foreign investors bought the land and chased the families away. Victim to neocolonial violence, Shrapnel wants to retaliate by forging a strong Black movement which could stand up against white supremacy. He plans to create this Foucauldian heterotopos in the form of a cultural centre in Paris, yet he dies one night from a heart attack on the metro. Although the characters in TAE are thus situated in Paris, each of them is tied to the African continent in a different way: trauma (Amok), nostalgia (Shrapnel) and hope (Amandla).

In *Crépuscule*, all characters have resettled on the continent with the exception of Ajar, who, having spent some time working in the country, returns to Paris. Amandla, after her breakup with Amok, settles in his city, because it is the only African one she knows, and creates a private school where she teaches Kemite knowledge to the children and rebaptises them with African names. Her home is in a poorer part of town. Amok returns to his hometown with Ixora and Kabral, Shrapnel's son, whom he has adopted in the meantime. He returns to his mother's villa and his family business, because he does not want Kabral to grow up in the racism infested atmosphere of the North. Yet, his return triggers the return of the repressed: Intent on not procreating in order to prevent the violence he believes to have inherited from his father, he falls prone to just this violence the night the novel begins.

Whereas TAE describes a geography of Paris with its cultural semantics of different quarters of town, *Crépuscule's* geography remains vague. Rich living quarters – location of the Mususedi home – a downtown area which harbours the *Prince des Côtes*, the family owned grand hotel, and two named quarters of town plus Amandla's quarter make up the geography of the city; in addition, there is an area just outside of the city where Amok has a car accident on the way to his father's country home. There is a spiritual permeability in this location outside which is equalled only by the quarter Vieux Pays. Both are places of healing which permit journeys to the inner self. Amok's journey inside his heart follows upon his accident: « Fils d'Oshun, tu peux maintenant pénétrer dans ta maison, dans ton Coeur. Tu ne pourras pas t'échapper, n'y pense pas" (Son of Oshun, you can now accede to your house, to your heart. You cannot get away, don't think of that; C II: 55). This place is named TaMéry by the guardian figure he encounters. Whereas Amok is confronted with this journey unintentionally, as a remedy to his troubles, all other characters purposefully enter Vieux Pays to look for someone or something. Vieux Pays is a place off-limits, where taxi drivers refuse to take their clients. Ancient spiritual knowledge and ancient traditions find their place there; it is a space outside of heteronormativity, yet with a distinct call to procreation. It is primarily women who live there and their spiritual knowledge also entails sexuality.

Regal, a queer young man who crosses the path of both Ajar and Amok, is first sheltered in Vieux Pays before he moves on to Veuve Joyeuse, another part of town. Not subscribing to the procreative imperative of Vieux Pays, he chooses an equally remote quarter where mostly queer people live from subsistence farming and prostitution:

La morale ancestrale renouvelée à Vieux Pays n'avait pas cours Veuve Joyeuse était un chaos-monde Un présent issu de lui-même qui se dirigeait vaillamment vers son future incertain [...] Un état antéfuturiste Enchevêtrement de possibles contadictioires (C II: 159)

The ancestral mores renewed at Vieux Pays were not valid Veuve Joyeuse was a chaos-world A present born from itself which turned courageously to its uncertain future [...] An antefuturist state Tangle of contradictory possiblesⁱ

Regal is the only character in the entire text whose phrases omit any punctuation and thus remain fluid. The place he lives in and his character match perfectly, since he is himself a maze of contradictions: a brilliant student, now working at the local university, a sometime prostitute for men and women, queer, a descendant from a poor community whose scholarship Amok snatched away through the family connections, and someone who

nevertheless permeates and perforates upper class society. Coming from the social margins, he might just be a possible model for a different future.

Running below a discussion of different spaces and heritages is a discussion of sexuality. In *Crépuscule*, the topic comes to the forefront early on, on the third page of Madame's interior monologue opening the novel. There, she commemorates bygone days when there was a physical and affective community of women:

Nous ne savons plus les caresses échangées, entre jeunes initiées, dans le secret de la case commune [...] Jamais elles ne nous dirent que l'équilibre affectif reposerait sur notre capacité à nous épanouir auprès de l'un et l'autre sexe, sans exclusivité (C I: 11)

We no longer know the caresses shared between the young initiated, in the secret of the communal hut. [...] Never did they tell us that affective equilibrium rested on our capacity to flourish next to both sexes, nonexclusively.

In the course of her interior monologue, she talks about her own desire of a woman she once met on vacation, a relation she then discontinues to maintain her social position. Her trajectory is somehow taken up by Ixora, who falls in love with Masasi, Madame's hairdresser, who also lives in Vieux Pays. Crossing the border to Vieux Pays, Ixora discovers her sensual pleasure in women, notably Masasi, and breaks up with Amos – a confession which leads to the fatal beating on the night of *Crépuscule I*.

Ajar, likewise, treats sexuality unusually. When she meets Sisako Sone, the healer at Vieux Pays, in order to learn more about her maternal family's history, she is taught to approach her sexuality, but equally her whole being differently. However, she realises that an apparent gulf separates her from life as lived at Vieux Pays, provoked by her parents' refusal to transmit local knowledge or local languages: "On ne conquiert pas sa propre culture, on doit la recevoir ou ne jamais la posséder, donc ne pas lui appartenir non plus" (On does not conquer one's own culture; one must receive it or never possess it, thus not belong to it either; C I: 258).

As Amok's accidental encounter with TaMéry shows in *Crépuscule II*, this spirituality which is related to traditional knowledges, does not need to be conquered, it could just cross your way. In contrast to Ajar, however, Amok shows some knowledge of afrocentrist thought when he muses on the dogmas supported by the Fraternité Atonienne (c.f. TAE). Yet it is also the spirits who watch over him – the woman nursing him after his accident has a spiritual double, his guardian.

Vieux Pays asks for the feminine and the masculine side in each being to be developed and tolerates male and female homosexual practices.ⁱⁱ Northern concepts of gender and sexuality are declined and replaced by new ways of being human which are not based on the gender and sexuality binary. Almost all characters in the novel could be considered queer; in fact, the Palace of Shabbaz which Amos Mususedi builds, his country abode, might be a non-binary refuge. Although Amok recognises a possible homosexual heritage in his father, his own sexuality also goes back to another childhood trauma, his rape by a paternal aunt. This rape which repeats the historical denigration of the captive and takes part of its sadistic pleasure from it leaves him with a desire for a different kind of sexuality – ‘l’alternance des rôles qui était son fantasme’ (the alternation of roles which was his fantasy; C II: 120), which he only really lives ones with a transsexual lover, Mabel, to whom he then decides to dedicate the story he starts to write at the end of *Crépuscule II*. When he decides to call Mabel “Oshun” in his book, “un nom de déesse” (a name of a goddess), and is being called “son of Oshun” himself by his spiritual guardian, the relation between Amok and Mabel is more than fleeting.

In his famous *Die Theorie des Romans* (1920), Georg Lukács coins the term “transzendente Heimatlosigkeit” (transcendental homelessness; 107) and he summarises in his 1962 preface: “die Problematik der Romanform ist hier das Spiegelbild einer Welt, die aus den Fugen geraten ist” (the problems with the novel here is the mirror image of a world out of joint; 11). Both observations can be fruitfully applied across time to Miano’s novel and the question of this conference. Most of the characters in these three novels suffer from transcendental homelessness. While Amok and Ajar never had a spiritual home and only a violence-stricken luxurious habitation, Shrapnel lost home and spiritual home all at once and tries to reconstruct both. Amandla might not be transcendently homeless like the others since her mother imbibed her with this spiritual home of Kemet, yet it is an elusive and exclusive belief.

At a roundabout in the city, Amok one day encounters an old, seemingly disturbed woman, who undresses herself and cries out, beginning her speech “Enfants égarés de Katiopa...” (Lost children of Katiopa; C II: 27). The old woman is later described as an incarnation of Amok’s guardian spirit. He, that day, saves the woman from the drivers’ rage and takes her to where it is safe for her to follow her way. It is noteworthy that Miano uses the Congolese name for the African continent here, a name she then takes up in her novel *Rouge*

impératrice (2019), set in the future. There the novelist constructs a new geographical space of belonging, a unified state of Katiopa; by contrast, in *Crépuscule* and TAE, the visions of a different type of community remain largely visions. The only truly heterotopic spaces are the two quarters mentioned; both support self-subsistent and self-governed forms of living and closely survey or prevent any intruders. Miano's characters are not Taiye Selasi's neoliberal and multilocal characters, at home and at ease everywhere in the world. Although Ajar and Amok are among those who do not have to worry about visas, they are neither at home in Paris nor in Duala. Home to them –as to all other characters in the three novels – is a place they need and want to build. Setting up a home is an activity both strangers to this African country, Amandla and Ixora, undertake quite quickly; in different ways they realise their idea of belonging: Amandla to the continent she considers her “terre-mère”, the mother country; Ixora to Masasi and the discovery of joyful intensity. Amok's final retreat to writing allows him to resituate his life, to create new ties past and future on the basis of his encounter with TaMéry.

Miano's novels discussed here are part of a larger train of thought of hers which labors towards a new vision of Africa which faces its violent heritage but also its rich treasure of ancestral, pre-colonial knowledge (c.f. Miano, *De quoi*). At the end of TAE, a larger-than-life first-person voice says to prosopopeic Africa: “Je cherche ton nom, moi qui te sais: rouge, indigo, the rêves effacés derrière la figure qu'ils t'ont construite” (I'm looking for your name, I who know you to be: red, indigo, your dreams effaced behind the figure they constructed of you; TAE 372). In *Crépuscule*, each of the characters gets in touch with these effaced dreams as well as his*her own wounds to project themselves towards a new vision of life, related to the ancestral knowledge embodied by Vieux Pays and to the creative chaos-world embodied by Veuve joyeuse. It is a way these characters take independently, yet in an assemblage which connects them and which the novels sets up through their particular way of interweaving several life stories. This does not yet lead to a coherent vision of community. « L'Afrique pourrait être le nom d'un projet de civilisation original et souverain » (Africa could be the name of an original and sovereign project of civilisation; *De quoi*, 113). It is in *Rouge Impératrice* that Miano then puts this vision to the test.

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ⁱ In this, *Veuve Joyeuse* takes up the definition Miano gives in her annotation to the meaning of *Noun* in TAE. There she writes: “Noun est souvent traduit par *chaos* [...] Noun est une masse incréée, qui continue de faire partie de la création. Il se niche en quelque sorte dans ses marges, prêt à envahir lorsque l'équilibre est perdu” (TEA Note 1, 120f.).

ⁱⁱ They can hardly be called so in a cultural frame constructed as entirely different from Northern 19th-century concepts of so-called sexual pathology.