



Voices
from the
Gaps

The Drifting of Spirits by Gisèle Pineau

In a miserably small town of jealous and vengeful villagers, anything can happen. If one has no particular desire to be cursed for all eternity with a stutter, a clubfoot or an overly fertile phallus, one will realize the presence of the ancestral spirits and the power of their protection. These same such curses are only an inkling of what Pineau's massive collage of characters experience in her novel, *The Drifting of Spirits*. This passionately poignant tale of Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, encourages readers to listen to the spirits and gain deeper understanding in the nature of life on earth. She possessed a knowledge that everyone held in high regard in this country which is searching for its history lost in the depths of the dark days of slavery, on a boat from Colombo, in memories of Brittany or what is left of the memory of someone a hundred years old (201).

Pineau recounts the story of the bloodline of Sosthène and Ninette, beginning with their son Léonce. Léonce is blessed at birth with a caul and clubfoot signifying a gift of direct access to the spirit world. Léonce can communicate with his ancestral spirits. Ma Ninette sees this gift as a curse and counters it by pounding the caul and feeding it to baby Léonce. The gift disappears and Léonce is left alone with the clubfoot. The clubfoot turns from a mark of blessing to burden.

Ostracised daily, by his peers and the subject to every gossiping villager's ridicule, Léonce feels alone, alienated and abandoned. In the midst of adversity he works hard, holds true to himself and wins the heart of Myrtha. His gift is returned to him by his spirit grandmother, Ma Octavia, in recognition of his deep devotion to her before her death. Léonce learns with time, that the gift can be taken away as easily as it is given. The relationship the characters have with their ancestral spirits determines the fate of their existence.



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Reviewed by Maggie
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The orality of Pineau's writing communicates the pertinence of the oral tradition within an Antillean culture heritage. Her story telling teaches us the connection between past, present and future. We learn that both celebrative and tragic fates that befall Léonce and his family are closely linked to events from the past and influence the events of the future. The orality of Pineau's writing in reflection of the Antillean oral tradition creates conviction. It empowers the reader to follow learn from the triumphs and mistakes of her characters.

Memory is kept alive in the devotion to the drifting spirits. Their exchange and support determine a family's rise or fall. Pineau's characters learn to honour and observe the spirits. In submitting themselves to the manipulation, direction and possession of the spirits they find agency in the memory of cultural heritage. Spirits infiltrate the body to evoke the healing power of memory in those who attempt to forget. Hence, Pineau's story of transitioning characters, the experiences of their ups and downs, in and outs, always return to their origin of being, rooted in the devotion they have to their spirits whether in fear or love.

Pineau evokes the theme of Crossing or Passing. The story's multiplicity of events symbolizes the existence of a common life force linking all in a cyclical movement of growth and development. The progression of the story happens in many phases. These phases are the rites of transformation. They signify continuous creation and destruction. Both creation and destruction become symbolically synonymous to one another. The Crossing or Passing of the two is realized in the fluidity of movement from one phase in life to the next, there is no beginning; there is no end, only transformation, only Crossing. This is the original driving force of the African ethos in countering the physical and psychological haunting of the Transatlantic Slave trade and its trail, the socio-political, economic and culturally expansive underpinnings embedded in Caribbean soil for all eternity. Pineau evokes images and symbols of this struggle and disparity. Her heroic characters challenge racism, sexism, colonial and postcolonial tension. The monuments of the war dead sprang up out of the earth in the same dazzling way as these banana trees today, over fertilized, which eat their way through the Guadeloupean countryside. (131) Transition from life into the spirit world and from the spirit world back into life is fluid. Therefore the theme of crossing is sacred in the oral tradition. The theme marks a transformation and emergence into higher being, a blacker, brighter, African originated being, it is a shedding of layers of historical memory. The character's cursing or devotion to the spirits determines the impetus of his or her time spent in the bodily state as well as their offspring and the generations to come signaling that all is linked, destiny plays its hand do not believe the earth on which we blindly walk is dumb...look at how alpha and omega are always connected (205).



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Pineau's style of writing challenges readers. The effect of this challenge is itself the experience. It parallels the behavior and movements of the ancestral spirits. The spirits are, after all, like people. They are alive and wild. They can love, be sad, get angry, jealous or frustrated. Overall they are a dramatic rumble of active emotion. The violence of their behavior acts against the backdrop of the violence of nature; hurricane's plague and volcanoes erupt. The power of their temperament influences nature and determines a characters' fate. If the spirits support you, you're safe. If the spirits don't like your behavior or the choices you make, they will curse you, or worse yet, allow other jealous vengeful villagers to curse you in whichever way they please. Pineau's writing is the embodiment of the spirits nature. They are, like her writing, fragmented and unpredictable. The rambunctious mixture of her characters' individual relationship to their spirits flips from one story to the other with little recognition to time or space. The reader sweats to keep up with names, dates and settings before realizing the deliciously fluid state of being that comes with the reader's immersion into the stories time-traveling flow. Her writing is hypnotic, a spiritual possession in itself.

The effect is intentional. It is the product of Pineau's writing process. Pineau explains, "Writing is a job. It requires availability. During my writing period, I am rather contemplative. In front of the white page, I wait for a visit. I let myself be invaded. I look for the words that are going to translate the feelings, the emotion I have lived and wish to share. Entering the writing process, it's like going deep into the woods, losing myself. I encounter characters whose intrusion, invasion and outbursts I accept. I write without any premeditation. With each step comes a discovery. When I don't write, I feel empty".

Gisèle Pineau has produced a plethora of writing. Her published work includes novels, short stories, essays and books for children and young adults. Her work represents the Créolité movement. It responds to France's departmentalization of the Antilles beginning in 1946 preceding French colonization since 1635. The Drifting of spirits translator, Michael Dash, preserves Pineau's themes of home, fragmentation and alienation. These themes explore objectivity vs. subjectivity manifesting in tension between modernization and tradition, urban and rural, in essence; reason vs. heart. These themes recur in Pineau's additional works, *Macadem Dreams* (1995), *Exile according to Julia* (1996), and the yet to be translated, *L'ame prêtée aux oiseaux* (1998) and *Chair Piment* (2002). Pineau was born in France in 1956 and circulated back and forth till here family's permanent reinstallment in Guadeloupe and Martinique. She returned to the Metropole to attend university and studied literature at Nanterre. Due to a lack of finance she returned home to Guadeloupe. She became a psychiatric nurse. After twenty years of practice she has returned to Paris where she continues to write full time. She received the Prix Carbet (1993) and Le Prix des lecteurs d'Elle (1994) for *The Drifting of Spirits*.



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Pineau's *The Drifting of Spirits* gives itself entirely, crafted of the body, tears and sweat of the French Antilles. It is for readers who desire their own relationship with Pineau's *Spirits*, those who like books that howl, sing, spit and swear, books that swing from tree to tree, make faces, tell stories, sleep under the stars, books that make fires, make love, plant gardens, birth babies, books that kick, kiss and cry. Above all, those who seek education and scholarship, those who wish to experience the highest and oldest form of truth of the ancient oral tradition: Allow these drifting spirits to enter! Invoke Pineau's spirits! These thoughts that swarm in the head as in a market. Thoughts jabber, weigh down and jostle each other. (42) For she is the ultimate obeah woman in the ritual practice of the literary arts, She raised her eyebrows and it was as if she was lifting the curtain behind which, trembling from having been caught lay those three accomplices: the past, oblivion and memory. (37)