In the Belly of the Beast:

Narration from the Other side in Makenzy Orcel’s *L’Ombre animale*

Makenzy Orcel’s *L’Ombre animale* (2016) is a text which declines to offer a straightforward, or even accessible narrative. This refusal to tell manifests through the enmeshment of dream and reality, earthly and otherworldly, marvelous and real. As I will show in what follows, Orcel’s textual universe is so infused with the non-rational that it brings the reader to question the rational, or the binary that would separate the former from the latter. I read this aesthetic as a form of opacity; in as far as Orcel disrupts the organizing bearings of reason, he leaves the reader uncertain of what, in fact, constitutes truth in *L’Ombre animale*. Orcel’s novel is narrated by a woman who has died of natural causes in her native village in rural Haiti. She speaks to the reader from an unknown location, her body potentially dragged away and buried by her neighbors so that her spirit would not find its way back to haunt them; such is the quality of her detachment from the contemporary reality of her hometown (Orcel 32). The entirety of the novel consists of the narrator’s memories, imagined or otherwise. Because the narrator does not interact with the living world from death, she does not exert her presence on the world of the novel. If she haunts, which is to say, if she brings “a repressed or unresolved social violence” to bear on anyone, it is the reader who inherits the narrator’s spectral presence (Gordon xvi). Her embrace of the liminal disrupts any semblance of reality in the text such that the otherworldly ingrains itself in the very representation of human experience.

Orcel plays with the visual presentation of his text; with limited punctuation and no periods, the text rambles in big blocks of ink. Orcel’s use of commas and em-dashes contributes to the stream-of-conscious rhythm of his prose, while negative spaces between paragraphs offer brief pauses where we might imagine the narrator pauses to inhale. This rambling rhythm is also
facilitated by the singular narrative voice, of whom the novel represents a spectral inner
monologue. The central plot of the novel is recounted from the narrator’s otherworldly position.
She describes her sexually-abusive alcoholic father, Makenzy, victim to the traumatic events of
his own childhood, Toi, her fragile mother who feels herself to be imprisoned in her abusive
marriage, and Orcel, her mute brother who has not spoken since he witnessed God murdered by
his brother over a land dispute. The central event of the novel is the arrival of a pack of wolves,
anthropomorphized foreign animals who are, for all intents and purposes, the embodiment of ill-
intentioned foreign Development and aid. These creatures reclaim the villagers’ land and eruct a
factory in which villagers are forced to work, driving away the narrator’s family, who head to
Port-au-Prince to start again, where Orcel marries, has children, and is murdered by the police
due to a misunderstanding during a police-mandated curfew.

In what follows, I argue that Makenzy Orcel mobilizes the marriage of the marvelous and
the real in order to situate his novel in the liminal space between life and death, dream and
reality. In so doing, he displaces the real, forcing the reader to occupy this shaky ground of
uncertainty; to read this narrative is to join Orcel in displaced subjectivity and a murky textual
universe ungoverned by the binaries that we, the readers, use to organize our conception of
reality.

Notably, the protagonists’ names contribute to a continual displacement of the reader and
the author. Makenzy Orcel volunteers to occupy the positions of Makenzy and Orcel, while the
reader is invited to inhabit the perspectives of the narrator, only ever referred to as je, her mother
Toi, and later Orcel’s daughters Toi and Toi. The subject-pronoun names of the characters je and
Toi, coupled with the archetypal names of minor characters, lends to the marvelous aesthetic of

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1 In an effort to limit confusion due to the shared names of characters Makenzy and Orcel and the author, Makenzy
Orcel, I have opted to italicize the characters’ names.
the novel. The narrator, in reclaiming the subject pronoun of the inner monologue of the reader, invites the reader into the liminality that she occupies between life and death. Orcel’s multiple uses of the term toi compounds the slippery positionality of the reader and the characters. At the outset of the novel, the narrator speaks directly to her audience: "I chose to speak to you, and to no one else, because I won’t need to explain, clarify, exhaust myself by dotting the ‘i’ s, you demand, aspire to nothing, you only listen while I ramble” (12). When the narrator addresses her audience, thus the reader, as toi, Orcel blurs the diegetic bounds of the novel, bringing the reader into the universe of L’Ombre animale, not only as destinataire, but because of multiple, explicit uses of the designation toi, which become indistinct through repetition. Once this relationship of je, as narrator, and toi, as audience is established, all that attaches to Toi, je’s mother—her simultaneous victimhood at the hands of Makenzy and her culpability in failing to protect her children—slides easily onto the imagined experiences of toi, the reader. Complicating matters further, Orcel eventually has two daughters whom he names Toi as well. This choice frustrates Orcel since, "when we called one, the other objected, and every day was like that, he got angry each time, he had the impression he was being taken for a fool" (260). This tongue-in-cheek nod at the confounding impact of Orcel’s narrative choice, suggests that the essential impact of these characters’ names is the erosion of the clarity that accompanies Western concepts of individual identity.

Orcel opens his novel by situating his narrator in the liminal space between life and death: "I am the rare cadaverr here who was not killed by magic, a machete in the neck or a

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2 “j’ai choisi de te parler a toi, et à personne d’autre, parce que je n’aurai pas besoin d’expliquer, clarifier, me fatiguer à mettre des points sur des i, tu ne demandes, n’aspirez à rien, tu ne fais qu’écouter pendant que moi je radote” (Orcel 12)

3 “quand on appelait l’une c’est l’autre qui rechignait, et tous les jours c’était comme ça, il se mettait en colère à chaque fois, il avait l’impression de passer pour un imbécile” (Orcel 260)
vodou expedition, there will be no inquiry, no police prestidigitation, no breathtaking suspense as in the films and novels...there is no story—, I died a natural death” (11). If the particulars of her death do not merit recounting, her post-mortem status is essential to the narrative. She retains a footloose capacity to meander the imaginaries of others as well as physical spaces where her body never travelled. Thus, her narrative perspective contributes to the merging of memories, dreams, fears, and potential experiences of an entire community.

Because the narrator speaks from beyond the grave, in Haiti, the birthplace of the zombie, it is worthwhile to consider her relationship to the undead. In fact, there exist two variations on the zombie. The first, more familiar in the North Atlantic due to its popularity in Hollywood, is the “zombi corps cadavre”(Davis 8). This embodied variance of the zombie may most aptly be described by Erna Brodber’s phrase, “flesh that takes direction from someone” (108). The second variation is the “zombi astral” or “zombi éfface”, a zombie of the spirit (Davis 8). Both the “zombi corps cadavre” and the “zombi astral” are slaves to the bokor who captured them, a point which excludes the narrator from consideration as a zombie.

If a “zombi astral” is forever contained by the wishes of the bokor master, the narrator finds more freedom in death than she had in life. She claims that "finally I am free, a dead body has no father, is the slave of no one, free of the heaps of barriers which I did not have the right to oppose, free in my movement, to exist, just by crossing that line that separates here from elsewhere, the day from the night”(44). This passage puts the narrator at odds with the spirit-in-

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4 “je suis le rare cadavre ici qui n’ait pas été tué par un coup de magie, un coup de machette dans la nuque ou une expédition vaudou, il n’y aura pas d’enquête, de prestidigitation policière, de suspense à couper le souffle comme dans les films et les romans...ce n’est pas une histoire—, je suis morte de ma belle mort” (Orcel 11)

5 “enfin je suis libre, un cadavre ça n’a pas de père, n’est l’esclave de personne, libre de ces tas de barrières auxquelles j’avais pas le droit de m’opposer, libre de mes mouvements, d’exister, rien qu’en traversant cette ligne qui sépare ici et ailleurs, le jour et la nuit” (Orcel 44).
chains that is the “zombi astral”, while situating herself and her narrative within the bounds of a Vodou worldview that allows for “the permeability of the frontier between life and death—indeed, between the material and the immaterial” (Davis 58). Claudine Michel describes a Vodou weltanschauung as one which “ties together the visible and invisible, material and spiritual, secular and sacred. It is a philosophy, a way of life for the majority in Haiti that permeates and sustains their entire being and brings coherence where there might otherwise be chaos” (282). In fact, throughout the novel Orcel consistently undermines binaries—the dreamed and the lived, the marvelous and the real—and thus invites the reader to participate in determining the truth of his narrative, further disrupting the diegetic limits of the story.

We might consider Orcel’s to be an unreliable narrator; much of her account involves events and thoughts she would not have had access to. The entire final section of the novel, “là-bas” (over there) recounts the lives of Toi, Makenzy, and Orcel in Port-au-Prince, written from the perspective of the narrator, although we know that she never went to Port-au-Prince. The day of their departure, the narrator obstinately refuses to join them: "Makenzy, disappointed, ruined, dispossessed, ravaged, decided to leave once and for all the village, this wretched country, Orcel and Toi followed him, me no, I do not move, I told them. . . I will not leave, it was the first time that I said no" (124). Thus, when the narrator turns her attention away from the village to narrate the fate of her family in the big city, she does not claim to know, “I imagine, they stayed with the Distant Family” (247). Contradicting the fallibility alluded to by the inclusion of the verb imaginer, the events of Toi, Makenzy, and Orcel’s lives are recounted in the same dystopic,  

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6 “Makenzy, déçu, ruiné, dépossédé, ravagé, a décidé de quitter pour toujours le village, ce pays maudit, Orcel et Toi l’ont suivi, moi non, je ne bouge pas, leur ai-je dit… je ne partirai pas, c’était la première fois que je disais non” (Orcel 124)
7 “j’imagine, ils étaient logés chez la Famille Lointaine” (Orcel 247)
dreamlike fashion as those events that the narrator ostensibly lived through, suggesting that the boundary between the imaginary and the real is inconsequential.

The narrator’s un-grounded, spectral perspective frees her from terrestrial bounds, allowing her to access scenes and information, to inhabit the perspectives of others which she would not have witnessed in her embodied life. For example, she is able to describe her father’s internal life, "the memory of Makenzy was a tangle of dead-end corridors…it was so deep, so dark and remote that it was impossible to probe”(49). Yet she is able to travel through his memory to recount his child-like attention to detail at the time of his parents’ violent death, "for each life on the earth is connected to a star in the sky which falls on the eve of their death…he had never seen so many, so many lights go out at once, while, that night, the eve of the disappearance of his parents, he saw nothing at all, the sky kept all its stars” (58–59). The narrator’s liminal existence provides, for the reader, a uniquely unbounded voice that is not forced to obey the limits of what we collectively consider to be reality, a point which the narrator lucidly embraces: "I finally have the right to speak, a little bit of existence, I am going to talk, talk without stopping, let my words drift, go beyond their limit, nothing can stop me anymore, even the austerity of time, its tendency to restore everything”(11).

Because the novel only offers this one, unbounded perspective, the reader is brought to question, alongside the narrator, the limits of reality. In some moments, the narrator openly questions this herself. After the departure of her family, she considers that perhaps nothing she

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8 “la mémoire de Makenzy était un enchevêtrement de corridors sans issue…elle était si profonde, si sombre et reculée qu’il était impossible de la sonder” (Orcel 49)

9 “car chaque vivant sur la terre est branché à une étoile dans le ciel qui file la veille de sa mort … il n’en avait jamais vu autant, autant de lumières s’étendre à la fois, alors que, cette nuit-là, la veille de la disparition de ses parents, il n’avait rien vu du tout, le ciel gardait toutes ses étoiles” (Orcel 58-59)

10 “j’ai enfin droit à la parole, à un peu d’existence, je vais parler, parler sans arrêt, laisser mes mots voguer, aller au-delà de leur limite, rien ne pourra plus m’en empêcher, même la rigueur du temps, sa tendance à tout restituer” (Orcel 11).
knows has existed: "maybe my parents had not really left, that nothing had happened, the wolves, the gaguère, Makenzy’s dance, all of that was only the excess of my imagination, of my interminable dreams”(127).11 Her unreliability as narrator permeates the novel to the degree that the reader cannot know whether any aspect of the plot is a part of a dreamworld or a part of a fictionalized reality. The essential is that in the universe of L’Ombre animale, all of these possibilities, impossibilities, doubts and certainties co-exist. Her unreliability, rather than forcing the reader to collaborate in the production of meaning, requires of the reader to accept the opacity of the text, to accept what is impossible to know.

Dream and reality are never more difficult to distinguish than in Orcel’s chapter “la nuit des loups”, in which the wolves coerce the villagers to perform a Vodou ceremony. They utilize tafia, a sugarcane-based liquor, to convince Makenzy to dance for them, believing that “a drunk man is a zombie with no consciousness of his acts”(209).12 Orcel’s momentary, overt reference to the zombie suggests that even an ostensibly benevolent foreign presence in Haiti compromises Haitian opportunities to enact their agency.13 It seems that the wolves penetrate the intimacy of the péristyle, disarm the wills of their Haitian subjects all for the sake of the spectacle, taking a perverse pleasure in their own power to manipulate the villagers, languishing in their privilege even in the space of the Vodou séance.

As discussed above, the narrator’s liminal narrative voice lends an oneiric quality to the text as a whole. If her perspective contributes to the blending of dream and reality that constitutes the ethos of the novel, her uncertainty regarding her own reality is directly impacted

11 “peut-être mes parents n’étaient-ils pas réellement partis, que rien n’avait eu lieu, les loups, la gaguère, la danse de Makenzy, tout ça n’était qu’excès de mon imagination, mes rêves interminables” (Orcel 127).
12 “un homme bourré est un zombie sans aucune conscience de ses actes” (Orcel 209)
by the arrival of the wolves in the village. The narrator acts as a witness to the events at the
*gaguère* that night, her experiences are indicative of the marvelous disrupting the real. First, she
notes the function of the marvelous in bringing her to the scene: “I was thrown from the bed as
though an invisible hand had pushed me with all of its force”(210). Second, the language used
to describe the mundane and the real take on an wistful, even surrealist poetic quality: “my
thoughts, pirogues on the hips of the sea. . .the moon resembles an immense corn pancake, the
sky solidifies, indifferent”(212). The merging of inanimate objects and the intangible products
of the mind with concrete, anthropomomorphic actions in the material world situates even the
seemingly mundane aspects of this scene within the realm of the marvelous. Furthermore, the
personification of these natural elements contributes to a deeper sense of a willful natural world
which acts simultaneously as proof that the narrator was dreaming, and, as we will see below,
that she was not.

The natural world is revealed to conspire with the wolves, further blurring the line
between man and nature, dream and reality. Hiding on the edge of the séance, the narrator’s
presence is nearly found out when a fruit falls from a tree, threatening to reveal her temporary
haven. While she manages to avoid the attention of the wolves, this fruit leads her to meditate on
the laws of gravity, the wind, and the uncharacteristic separation of this unripe fruit from its
stem. When it falls, she assumes it must have been a very ripe fruit, but when she returns the next
day, “the fruit that I had in my hand was green and hard”(220). The unripe fruit and the nature
of the wind are incongruous, the narrator lingers on this unnatural event: “I would have bet that
the fruit was too ripe to stand up to the killjoy wind”; she goes on to inscribe this wind, and this

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14 “j’étais précipitée du lit comme si une main invisible m’avait poussée de toutes ses forces” (Orcel 210).
15 “mes pensées, pirogues sur les hanches marines…la lune ressemble à une immense galette de manioc, le ciel se
fige, indifférent” (Orcel 212).
16 “le fruit que j’avais dans la main était vert et dur” (Orcel 220)
fruit, in the context of her intimate knowledge of the wind and fruit of this place: “I grew up in the middle of the winds, and I promise you, the one that I felt travel across my body was not a wind to make such a fruit fall” “(220, 221).” This unripe fruit provides evidence, for the narrator, both of the veracity of her experience, and of the eerie control that the wolves seem to have over everything. She imagines that perhaps nature itself “was on the side of the wolves” (221). The juxtaposition of the narrator’s lived knowledge of the local winds and fruits, and the apparent pact between her world and these wolves underscores the betrayal she experiences and the comprehensive control of the foreigners.

While the narrator’s experience of witnessing “la nuit des loups” communicates an even more liminal, dreamlike aesthetic than much of the rest of the text, she asserts that this experience was, in fact, a part of her waking life. She is aware of the stakes of assigning an experience the status of dream or reality; she imagines that were she to tell her mother what she saw, her experience would be written off as a dream: “you must have been dreaming, otherwise how were you the only one in the entire village to hear the tambours, aside from you in your degenerate dreams, no one goes to the gaguère at such an hour” (221). The narrator thus admits the implausible nature of the “nuit des loups”; it is so unbelievable that it cannot be shared. Nonetheless, she further situates her experience as reality by setting it up in contradistinction to a nightmare she had been having just before she awoke to the sounds of the tambours. “In the dream I was having just before realizing the oppressive music of the tambours,” she recalls, "there was a monster who stood on multiple legs, each one longer, more hairy than the next”

17 “j’aurais parié que ce fruit était trop mûr pour tenir tête à ce vent rabat-joie” ; j’ai grandi au milieu des vents, et je te jure, celui que j’avais senti me parcourir le corps c’était pas un vent à faire tomber un tel fruit” ( Orcel 220, 221)
18 “était du côté des loups” (Orcel 221)
19 “tu as sans doute rêvé, sinon comment se fait-il que tu sois la seule de tout le village…à entendre des bruits de tambours, à part toi dans tes rêves de dégénérée, personne ne va à la gaguère à une heure pareille” (Orcel 221)
As though a meditation on the power of blending the marvelous and the real, this dream more clearly communicates the power dynamics at *la gaguère* than does the narrator’s waking testimony. In her dream, this monster has a transparent belly, within which reside angels with clipped wings holding children “locked in that reeking, slimy prison for two centuries” (211). The children, frustrated, beat on the belly from within, but this expression of anger only tickles the beast, causing him to laugh so hard that he shakes the earth. The narrator’s dream subtly indicates the social violence underlying the wolves’ duplicitous presence by offering a temporal landmark which locates a pre-revolutionary moment of enslavement by strange four-legged foreigners. The futility of the imprisoned children’s protests indicates an omnipotence on the part of the monster, a quality shared by the wolves who manage to influence even the laws of nature. Furthermore, the narrator’s insistence that these powerless children have been in the belly of the beast *depuis* two centuries leaves no doubt as to the neo-colonial essence of the wolves’ desires to “develop” this rural community. Orcel’s inclusion of the dream reveals the presence of structures often figured as past, and thus absent, in a Western worldview that would underpin the status quo.

Orcel’s narrator is profoundly disoriented. The effect of her haunting, the hold that she has on the reader, is one in which this disorientation is communicated and disseminated. Put another way, the narrator is a tool by which Orcel asks that his reader suspend her hold on a clear distinction between the real and the unreal. I return to Avery Gordon’s definition of the term, “haunting. . .describe[s] those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when

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20 “dans le rêve que je faisais juste avant de m’être rendu compte de l’oppressante musique des tambours, il y avait un monstre qui se tenait sur ses multiples pattes, les unes plus longues, plus poilues que les autres” (Orcel 210)
21 “enfermée dans cette prison puante, gluante depuis deux siècles” (Orcel 211).
what’s been in your blindspot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future” (xvi). The particular past evoked in *L’Ombre animale*, that of numerous moments of invasion and subjugation of Haiti by foreign powers, infiltrates the present of the novel in such a way that it disrupts a linear progression of time. The aesthetic that Orcel establishes, through the spectral voice of his narrator, is one that is more marvelous than it is real, leaving the reader altered, having waded through the simultaneity of possible and impossible, past and present.

Works cited


