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The Interstitial Ecotones of Migration: Working Towards a Transdisciplinary Approach

(Adapted from Thomas Lacroix and Judith Misrahi Barak *The Interstitial Ecotones of Migration: Three Examples for a Transdisciplinary Approach*, conference paper presented at “Utopia and Migration: Renewing the Imagination of Borders in the 21st Century”, Oxford: Maison Française d’Oxford, April 2021)

Thomas Lacroix and Judith Misrahi-Barak

An ecotone is a term initially defined to designate an ecological transition zone. Its etymological root is composed of *oikos* (household, home) and *tonos* (tension). It is a contact zone between two ecosystems (sea and land, plain and mountain, forest and savanna...) (Hufkens, Scheunders, and Ceulemans 2009). It is a space of interpenetration, reciprocal adaptation, exchange, production of hybrid species, competition, disruption and relegation. Taking up this idea of interface, Florence Krall proposes to apply it to the analysis of spaces of cultural interactions:

[C]ultural ecotones are the pluralistic contexts out of which conflict and change emerge; they are places where society smooths the wrinkles in her skirt. (...) The ecotone, which, in the natural world provides a dynamics interchange, becomes exceedingly complex as a cultural metaphor and may represent a barrier that blocks some people from their rightful place in the scheme of things. (Krall 1994: 4-5)

It has only recently been introduced in the field of migration studies. The conference cycle ‘Ecotones: Encounters, Crossings, and Communities’¹ (2018-2022) has been, in this regard, a key moment of cross-fertilizing dialogue between social scientists and researchers in humanities around this notion and its application for the study of the migration and diasporas texts and contexts. By its format (co-written by a social scientist and a postcolonial literature scholar) as well as its content, this article can be regarded as an offshoot of this programme. Our aim is here to outline what we understand as migratory ecotones. We contend that ecotones can be conceived as heterotopic sites where encounters shape and reshape a plural humanity. These theoretical considerations will be supported by three literary examples: a raft and a construction site as they appear in ‘Children of the Sea’ and ‘Without Inspection’, two short stories by Edwidge Danticat, and a shop which serves as a stage in Shani Mootoo’s short story ‘Out on Main Street’. In the last section, the paper wraps up the argument

¹ <https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/valorisation-partenariats/programmes-europeens-et-internationaux/ecotones>

by relating the concept of migratory ecotone with Foucault's notion of Heterotopia.

Migratory Ecotones: outline of a concept

The notion of cultural ecotone was first applied for the study of insular spaces and literatures. It was used to encapsulate their unique ecosystems, between land and sea, between intimacy of isolated confines and maritime connections with far-flung harbours. They foster archipelagic connections and creole hybridities. But insular ecotones are also locales saturated with power and memory: the contemporary detention camps of migrants in Lesbos, Nauru or Guantanamo resonate as contemporary echoes of sugar plantations. These first explorations of insular ecotones cast obvious bridges with migratory dynamics: 'To focus on cultural ecotones thus implies looking into the process of transculturation related to migration, the processes of diasporisation and creolisation' (Arnold, Duboin and Misrahi-Barak 2020). Migratory ecotones are ambivalent spaces underlain by contradictory forces: an entropic principle of encounter and interaction, but also a negentropic principle of power, conflict, distribution, and hierarchy; a self-contained locus of social interactions *and* a crossroads where transborder flows and linkages converge. They combine three aspects: the cultural creativity induced by the co-presence of diverse populations; the visible and invisible presence of coercive powers; the human, economic and cultural connectivity within diasporic spaces. This section examines these three aspects and their interactions.

Migratory ecotones are nodal spaces. They are places of encounters between people with distinct cultural backgrounds, brought together by their respective life and migration trajectories. They are locales traversed by what E.K. Brathwaite calls the *tidalectics*, i.e. the ebbs and flows of people, goods, monies, ideas, memories, coming from afar. While locally embedded, people retain connections with and legacies from distant horizons. Their presence connects ecotones with diasporic universes spanning beyond times and borders. Ecotones are akin to what the geographer Michel Lussault calls 'hyper-places', i.e. places characterised by a high degree of social interactions embedded in the various scales of globalisation. They are places where the different scales of human experience, from the local to the global, are in contact (Lussault 2017). Migratory ecotones are places produced by globalisation. But this does not mean that ecotones are interchangeable spaces that exist only in the time of encounter and disappear when these are unravelled: ecotones do exist in their own right, through their physical and ecological materiality and through their own historicity. As ecological environment, they expose the human body in its biological journey between birth and death. As historical places, they carry the memory of the presence of the groups that occupied them, of the conflicts and alliances that were formed in the past, and still permeate present social relations.

They are places where power and coercion are exercised. As noted by scholars of insular ecotones, the formation of ecotonic spaces is also driven by the existence of coercive powers. The colonial hierarchy of the plantation have given way in contemporary migratory ecotones to the administrative power of immigration authorities on the one hand, to capitalist forces on the other. Whether embodied by the physical materiality of police assemblages or imposed by the diffuse (but not the less violent) constraints of market relations, these powers contribute to hierarchise migrants along class, gender, racial, national, or religious lines, which, in turn, is underpinned by an unequal allocation of spatial, economic, and other kinds of resources. It is a characteristic of migratory ecotone to transform people into rightless sub-human destined to be either disposed of, or reduced to 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). But ecotones are also platforms of political and cultural resistance, places where communities of suffering take shape by transcending communal belongings. In this regard, they can be understood as a form of Heterotopia (Foucault 1967). Ecotones are both within and outside the societies they are embedded in, as sites of assignation and rebellion. They are a geo-social interstice within the fabric of societies.

They are places of cultural emergence. Early postmodern scholars have theorised and documented the countercultural dynamics generated by migratory encounters. The notion of ecotones draws on Arjun Appadurai's 'ethnoscapes' (Appadurai 1995), Homi Bhabha's and Edward Soja's 'third spaces' (Bhabha 2004; Soja 1996). These authors have put the emphasis on the emergence of hybrid cultures whose grammar borrows from multiple repertoires. They highlight the building of ambivalent 'third' spaces. The notion of ecotone rather insists on the plurality of juxtaposed presence. People's connection retained with elsewhere and the power relations mentioned above are two reasons why a thorough and complete hybridisation cannot take place. There is an impossibility of encounter nested within the ecotonic encounter. Migratory ecotones favour instead the building of segmented identities, of what Bernard Lahire calls 'plural humans', i.e., people socialised in distinct social spheres (be they local, or diasporic, professional, gendered, sexual, or political...). The plural human is made of this aggregation of roles acquired along their life trajectories, when they grow up, get married, have a new job, adhere to a new cause. People may re-assort their multiple lives to accommodate new encounters, but the latter never fully override them. Not only hybrid cultural forms but also ambivalent hospitality, mutual ignorance, competition and segregation emerge from daily coping strategies. Altogether, these ecotonic interactions build up a plural humanity, forged by the daily interactions of individuals living a multi-scalar life.

Ecotones can therefore be understood from three complementary angles. A geographical angle first: they are all specific spaces, at the same time circumscribed places, endowed with an ecology and a history of their own, and open nodalities where links to distant spaces converge; a sociological angle second: they are meeting spaces where new social forms and identities are

elaborated; a political angle third: the ecotones are organized around power relationships that impregnate both the organization of places and the flows that cross them. We will now use this triple analytical grid to examine two types of ecotones from closer up: an ecotonic non-space, namely *the migration route*; the city and its interstices, namely *the market-space and the workspace*.

Methodological Note: the Analysis of the Fictional Text as a Support for Social Theory

The fictional text is another way to engage with the migration route, the workspace, and the market-space as ecotones. We do not use it as mere illustration of a social and political reality but as another gateway to approach a complex reality, another opportunity to grapple with the politics of the interstitial ecotone. Not only does the fictional text help us decipher what is at stake, it also diversifies the possibilities of engaging with the migratory ecotone as social, political, and psychological process, individually and collectively. It may not change the world, but it enhances our aptitude to shift our gaze and transform ourselves.

The short story characters to be encountered here stand at different stages of the migration journey that has displaced them from their homelands (Haiti or Trinidad). **'Children of the Sea'** opens Edwidge Danticat's first collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!* (1991) which is situated in the wake of the 28-year-long Duvalier dictatorship and after Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted from power in 1991.² The unnamed narrator of the story, who exchanges improbable letters with the lover he has left in Haiti, takes us back to the migration flows of the 1990s, when thousands of Haitians were pushed onto rafts, in the hope they would reach the US coast. **'Without Inspection'** belongs to Danticat's third collection, *Everything inside* (2019). The main protagonist and centre of consciousness, Arnold, is a Haitian migrant who enters the US illegally, 'without inspection', thus condemned to remain an 'undocumented' worker, more of a *g-host* worker in the *g-host* country than a *guest* worker. **'Out on Main Street'** is part of the eponymous collection of short stories by Shani Mootoo (1993). The unnamed female narrator and her girlfriend Janet are 'out on Main Street' Toronto, in a *meethai* (sweets) shop, far from Trinidad and even further away from their ancestors who had left India as indentured labourers between the 1830s and the 1920s to work on colonial sugar plantations in the 19th century.

Whether it is the unnamed narrator lost at sea between Haiti and Florida, or Arnold, working in Miami as an undocumented worker, or the two women who are documented Canadian citizens, they all go through experiences of displacement, forced or voluntary, hoping for a new *host* country that would not be *hostile* (see Derrida on the paradoxical filiation of *hospitality* and *hostility* through

² François Duvalier (1958-1971) was succeeded by his son Jean-Claude Duvalier until 1986 when he was overthrown by Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

the concept of *hostipitality*).³ They force us to reinvent the way we imagine borders and migration in the 21st century, and the words we use to speak of the ones who cross them (or not). Emigrants, immigrants, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and returnees are brought to the fore in Danticat's and Mootoo's stories.⁴ We will prefer 'refuge seeker' to avoid the discrepancy between the administrative meaning of 'refugee' (the one who *has* obtained a refugee status) and its usage in common parlance (the one who *has not* obtained a refugee status).⁵

The three figures of the refugee seeker, the undocumented worker, and the immigrant, travel the limbo spaces between spaces — the raft, the construction site, the shop around the corner. But all three stories describe displacement as it starts before departure and continues after arrival (Miami or Toronto), in the process of leaving and arriving, of leaving and never arriving, of forever migrating and seeking refuge. This is what could be called *the unfinished business of arrival*. Those refugee seekers are separated on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, as the couple in 'Children of the sea'; they are commodified and fill in the poorly paid or dangerous jobs nobody else wants, as Arnold on the construction site in 'Without Inspection'; they are spurned as Janet and her friend in the sweets shop

³ '[...] l'étranger (*hostis*) accueilli comme hôte ou comme ennemi. Hospitalité, hostilité, *hostipitalité*', Jacques Derrida, *De L'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2014), loc. 709 of 1492. Something is already lost in translation since the English word *host* only refers to the person who welcomes whereas in French *hôte* is both the person who welcomes and is welcomed. Derrida reminds us that *hospes* and *hostis* both derive from the Latin verb *hostire*, thus drawing the attention to the ambivalence between the one who is *hosted* but could turn *hostile*, or to whom one could turn *hostile*. One can also be interested in Michel Agier's *L'Étranger qui vient: repenser l'hospitalité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2018), where he revisits Derrida's conceptualization of hospitality to analyse it as enmeshed in a network of social, political, and legal conditions.

⁴ Many words speak of migration and of the one who leaves their native country: a refugee, an exile, a political asylee, an asylum seeker, a postcolonial *émigré*, a transnational corporate expatriate, an emigrant, an immigrant, a migrant, an Internally Displaced Person (IDP), an undocumented worker, an Involuntarily Relocated Person (IRP), a resettled person, a returnee, a stateless person, etc. If one refers to the UNHCR website, a refugee is 'a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.' <https://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html> Accessed on July 14, 2021.

⁵ This tension was already at the heart of Hannah Arendt's seminal essay 'We Refugees' (1943): 'In the first place, we don't like to be called "refugees." We ourselves call each other "newcomers" or "immigrants." [...] A refugee used to be a person driven to seek refuge because of some act committed or some political opinion held. Well, it is true we have had to seek refuge; but we committed no acts and most of us never dreamt of having any radical opinion. With us the meaning of the term "refugee" has changed. Now "refugees" are those who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugee Committees.' Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers on Exile*, Marc Robinson, ed. (Boston, London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 110.

in 'Out on Main Street'.

We will use the lens of Heterotopia and Ecotone to understand what those spaces *authorize*: we would like to posit that, in Danticat's and Mootoo's writing of those interstitial, ecotonal spaces, it is the 'plural humanity', the humanness, of the person that is *re-instated*, even as they have lost their national allegiance and are deemed to be what Guillaume Le Blanc (2010) would call *demonetized* ('démonétisés').

Migration routes: the raft as a 'non-place' ecotone

Migration routes have only recently received attention from researchers. Unlike cities and colonial islands, roads are places of passage that can be described as 'non-places' of migration (Augé 1992), places where the presence of migrants is sometimes fleeting, sometimes lasting, but always temporary. However, with the increasing complexity of migratory trajectories and the lengthening of arduous journeys, routes have become places that are saturated by different layers of memory, that of the country one has left, of the country one dreams of reaching, of previous attempts at migrating that did not lead anywhere, but also of circumstantial relationships made and broken as people cross paths in the interstitial spaces of migration. The refugee raft, for instance, is one such space.

The different sections of '**Children of the Sea**' can be read as the letters that are written, if neither sent nor received, by two lovers, or as diary entries, or, still, as log-book entries of a new genre, revisiting the slave ship captains' logbooks. They epitomize the long-distance connections maintained by the lead character beyond the here and now of the setting, thereby revealing the raft as a nodal ecotone. The two different scripts on the page, bold and roman, highlight the separation of the two characters whose voices cannot be heard nor uttered in the same landscape or soundscape. Time loses its contours: 'I don't know how long we'll be at sea.'⁶ Space has both shrunk and expanded with the absence of bearings: 'I can't tell exactly how far we are from [America]. [...] There are no borderlines on the sea. The whole thing looks like one.' (Danticat 1996: 6). The raft is the very symbol of precarious space that has been banished from society and literally cannot be *documented*, a speck lost in the immensity of the sky and sea.

Célianne is also one of the 'Children of the Sea', fleeing Haiti when she discovered she was pregnant after she was gang raped by the *Tontons Macoutes*. She gives birth on the raft to a stillborn baby that is eventually tossed overboard, thus joining the memories of all the other enslaved people who did not survive the Middle Passage. The limits of the boat are gradually blurred, just like Célianne's body with which it is fused. The physical environment permeates the very structures of the ecotone. The boat is leaking and Célianne's waters break, in a striking parallel that underlines

⁶ Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* (1991. New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 3.

how 'the boundaries of the boat and of the woman are crossed simultaneously so that the sea is configured as a kind of womb that is at once nurturing and deadly' (Shemak 2011: 75). Glissant's slave ship as the 'matrix' of the Caribbean is never far away.

A refugee raft is also what brings Arnold to the US in '**Without Inspection**'. As in the first story, everything points to (dis-)connection, severance, and loss. But the short story sheds a more comprehensive light on the power configuration in which the story unfolds. In '**Children of the Sea**', the sheer violence of the authoritarian regime that expelled the protagonist is alluded to by the body of Célianne and her unborn baby. Women are particularly exposed along their journey. Rape is a common practice in detention centres where immigrants are enslaved, sold and killed at will (Schmoll 2021). '**Without Inspection**' tells us about these migrants deprived of their future in their homeland. It also tells us about the conditions of their crossing and the exploitative role of the smuggling industry that makes these journeys possible. Migrants are for smugglers a de-humanised commodity they do not hesitate to get rid of to maximise their income: they can be 'ditched in the middle of the sea and told by the captain to swim ashore'.⁷

When he lands on the beach in Miami, Arnold is luckier than his companions who have drowned or been picked up by the police patrols. He leaves the elusive ecotone of the raft to enter a new one at arrival, its power configuration marked by the repulsive force of immigration enforcement authorities and the appeal of job opportunities for illegal immigrants.

Urban ecotones: the workspace and the marketspace

Borders closed by anti-immigrant policies (epitomised by the presence of police officers and their dogs waiting for illegal immigrants to be washed ashore) compel immigrants onto deadly routes. But people lured by the promise of safety and jobs keep on coming. Cheap undocumented workforce has become a powerful resource for Western economies. Entering this job market, they face another form of de-humanisation as it deprives immigrants of their name and identity. Arnold uses the ID card of a Cuban to access the construction site, thereby signalling the interchangeability of the workers. The construction site is an extension of the refugee raft but this time, it is a space *of* banishment settled *within* society itself and one that is essential to the functioning of that very society. Arnold's employer happily benefits from Arnold working illegally, so does the whole of American society, which could not thrive without undocumented workers hired as cheap labour. Whether the scaffolding and the safety harness meet conditions of security or not is not their concern, as Arnold's free fall shows at the opening of the story:

It took Arnold six and a half seconds to fall five hundred feet. During that time, an

⁷ Edwidge Danticat, *Everything Inside* (New York: Knopf, 2019), loc. 2358 of 2607.

image of his son, Paris, flashed before his eyes: Paris, dressed in his red school-uniform shirt and khakis the day of his kindergarten graduation. (Danticat 2019: loc. 2239 of 2607)

Those six and a half seconds during which Arnold falls from the scaffolding and into the cement chute constitute the story-time that gives the story its backbone and to which the reader is taken back regularly:

He was still falling, faster by the second. The wind felt increasingly resistant, each gust a hard blue veil to pierce through, even as the ground rose to meet him. His body veered farther left and directly below him was an open cement-mixer chute, attached to the truck, the kind that has always looked like a spaceship to him. (Danticat 2019: loc. 2347 of 2607)

It is made clear in the story that Arnold and all the other undocumented workers are perceived as less than human. Like the saltwater element on the raft, the cement of the urban ecotone possesses a dissolving power eroding the body. Immigrants are, quite literally, the cement our societies are built with:

This landing was even more abrupt than his last one. His free fall ended as his body slammed into the drum of the cement mixer. He was being tossed inside a dark blender full of grout. Every few seconds, his face would emerge from under the wet, pounded sand and pebbles, and he would keep his mouth closed, trying to force air through his nose and push away the grainy mix that his body was trying to inhale. (Danticat 2019: loc. 2453 of 2607)

And yet, at the fringes of this oppressive embedding in urban ecotones, the possibility of a new humanity germinates. Arnold is rescued by Darline, who gives him back what she had been given by somebody else years before, when she had also arrived on a raft. Darline being herself a former refugee, she reminds the reader that urban ecotones are made of the sedimentation of successive waves of arrival. They form the memorial soil out of which immigrants can connect to a new community. By hosting Arnold, she manages to turn a site of exclusion into a site of hosting / hospitality. She is the refugee seeker turned refuge, a host in the French double meaning of *hôte*, both hosted and hosting, as if one should always be a guest to know what a host should be like. In the chain of connection and *Relation*, Arnold, in turn, adopts Paris, Darline's son, whose father drowned when Darline had to choose whom she would rescue, husband or son.

'Out on Main Street' sheds a different light on urban ecotones. The short story leaves the realm of illegality and highlights the cultural dynamics taking place in diverse ethnoscapings. Cities are places of intercultural abundance and commercial dynamism. They are paradoxical places of both reproduction and reconfiguration of migrant cultures and identity. One thinks of the enclaves of American metropolises (Portes and Jensen 1989; Zhou 2004; Cedric Audebert 2006), of London's cultural mosaic, of the 'Asian', 'Turkish' or 'African' districts of Paris, Amsterdam, or Berlin. And this

is not unique to the cities of the North. Kolkata lives on its 'para' neighbourhoods, where people from the same rural areas, castes or professions gather, sometimes along several centuries (Hillion 2020).

The short story takes us to a *meethai* shop, i. e. an Indo-Caribbean-Canadian variation of the shop around the corner, in one of the diasporic Indo-Caribbean neighbourhoods of Toronto:

Janet and me? We does go Main Street to see pretty pretty sari and bangle, and to eat we belly full a burfi and gulub jamoon, but we doh go too often because, yuh see, is dem sweets self what does give people like we a presupposition for untameable hip and thigh.

Another reason we shy to frequent dere is dat we is watered-down Indians – we ain't good grade A Indians. We skin brown, is true, but we doh think 'bout India unless something happen over dere and it come on de news. Mih family remain Hindu ever since mih ancestors leave India behind, but nowadays dey doh believe in praying unless things real bad...⁸

To foreground the multistranded historical and social relations that immigrants and their descendants are involved in, Mootoo zooms in on the microcosmic space of the shop. The author brings to life these 'plural humans' populating urban ecotones. The general impression is that one never quite fits in — too Indian or not Indian enough, too Caribbean, or not Caribbean enough, too black, too white, or too brown. They always already exceed what they should be. Like Abdelmalek Sayad (1999), Mootoo asks the question of dis-placement (displaced, migrants never feel totally entitled to be where they are), of diaspora and of the continuation, or reproduction, of *community*.

I used to think I was a Hindu *par excellence* until I come up here and see real flesh and blood Indian from India. Up here, I learning 'bout all kind a custom and food and music and clothes dat we ever see or hear 'bout in good ole Trinidad. Is de next best thing to going to India, in truth, oui! But Indian store clerk on Main Street doh have patience with us, especially when we talking English to dem. Yuh ask dem a question in English and dey insist on giving de answer in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or Gujarati. How I suppose to know de difference even! And den dey look at yuh disdainful disdainful – like yuh disloyal, like yuh is a traitor. (Mootoo 1993: 47-48)

The story unfurls a series of encounters and incidents in the sweets shop, that push to the surface the question of who gets to decide who is what. Here, status assignation does not come from an external authority, but is nested within interpersonal encounters. Caribbean, Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Canadian, Indo-Caribbean-Canadian, Fijian, Sikh, Hindu, Moslem, etc., and of course man, woman, and anything in-between. On top of questions related to citizenship, religion, and gender, it is also the question of the space that is granted to second-generation immigrants. Ultimately, who does it fall on to reproduce and reinvent community in the diaspora?

⁸ Shani Mootoo, *Out on Main Street* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1993), p. 45.

The interstitial spaces of the refuge seekers: from Heterotopia to Ecotone to Utopia

All three nodal spaces at the centre of the three stories, the raft, the construction site and the *meethai* shop, could be read as heterotopias as defined by Foucault (1967, 1984).⁹ Those nodal spaces function with their own laws and power configurations (survival laws, labour illegality, diasporic displacement), while they are also connected to the space outside them. They are closed in upon themselves *and* connected to the outside. As such, they tell us about us and the societies we have made for ourselves. Neither of them would exist if we had not produced them.

All three texts point to the creation of an alternative space of connection, transformation and, possibly, reinvention. Through the concept of Ecotone, we can access the 'dynamic interchange' (see the etymology mentioned earlier: 'oikos', household, and 'tonos', tension) that is at work in those spaces and how they are *Related* to the space around them, in an unexpected, unpredictable way. Through the Ecotone we can also understand how the 'plural humanity', the *humanness* of the individual and of the group is recognized and *re-instated* symbolically. Systemic racism and daily encounters introduce seemingly irreconcilable fault lines between the different spheres of people's being. And yet, on these cracks, coping strategies and daily interactions fashion a plural humanity.

In '**Children of the Sea**' the creation of that alternative space happens through the exchange of letters, words, and stories. Three examples, briefly. First, the text performs the call and response between the two voices that are brought together in a utopian space that is soaked in *tidalectics*. The letters may never reach their addressees, but the reader is the one that pulls them out of oblivion and into a plural Relation, always in the Glissantian meaning of the word. Second, the refugees at sea tell each other stories to pass the time on the raft, abiding by the Caribbean Krik? Krak! injunction that opens and closes the space of the narrative. And third, the reconnection happens *between* the stories, not only *in* them. For instance, the song 'Beloved Haiti' that is hummed on board is sung again

⁹ See Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres', *Conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales*, March 14, 1967, in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, n°5 (1984): 46-49. The text published in the French journal is based on a lecture given by Foucault in 1967 and not reviewed by the author before publication. As pointed out on the website Foucault.info, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Foucault's death.

<https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.fr/> Accessed May 1, 2020.

See the same page in English, 'Of Other Spaces (1967). Heterotopias.' Transl. by Jan Miskowiec. <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/> Accessed May 1, 2020.

Foucault distinguishes 'crisis heterotopias' from 'heterotopias of deviation' (1967). The former heterotopias are 'privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.' The latter ones are 'those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons, and one should perhaps add retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation.' (Foucault 1967).

in 'Caroline's Wedding', the last story in the collection. The reader understands the funeral service is held for the pregnant girl, Célianne, who was on the raft in the opening story. Célianne will not be completely shrouded in silence and invisibility. Voice is used to connect the living, the dead and the living, the almost dead and the still alive, the ones here and the ones there — a plural humanity beyond the fault lines.¹⁰

In '**Without Inspection**' the creation of an alternative space happens through the production of images, and in the tension between story-time and text-time, story and text. The call and response of the letters is replaced by the *tidalectics* of his thoughts and memories in flux. The metaphor of the construction site will not be lost on the reader. Arnold constructs his own space of transformation, another form of 'plural humanity'. The power of imagination steers the text: '*What if he made himself float out of the cement mixer?*' (Danticat 2019: loc. 2471 of 2607, my emphasis). While Danticat underlines the exploitation he falls victim to, the power of imagination gives new contours to the *text* as it is being written *against* the *story*:

He was back at the construction site. Not wounded but whole, just as he had been when he left home that morning. He was still wearing his bright-orange overalls and matching hard hat. Was time playing with him, or was he playing with time? (Danticat 2019: loc. 2543 of 2607)

The story is predictable, the text is not. 'Without Inspection' cannot be reduced to those six and a half seconds of story-time, when Arnold crashes into the cement chute. Braided with story-time, text-time is what gives Arnold the 'kind of freedom he's never had before' (Danticat 2019: loc. 2463 of 2607). The freedom Arnold never had through *story* is granted back to him through *text*. Stretching the six and a half seconds of his fall through slow motion is an invitation for Arnold to remember, project himself, dream, reconstruct, giving the reader the time to take it in. It is because of the Relation that is reconstructed through thoughts, dreams, memories, and images that the plural and sedimented *humanness* of Arnold is reinstated and reclaimed, re-embodied.

'**Out on Main Street**' also enables a reshaping of a space that is enclosed yet porous to the outer world and to individual and collective history. The story shows how new alliances are drawn up and boundaries shifted. Janet and her friend receive scorn for not being 'grade A Indians' and not knowing their *meethai*. But when ignorant racists enter the shop, the loyalties shift to support the humiliated shop-owners. In turn, when the shop-owners show a sexist attitude towards the female customers, they lose the support they had just earned. And when the lesbian couple of Janet and her

¹⁰ To read more about the aesthetics and politics of the short story cycles in Edwidge Danticat's writing, see Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Reconstructive Textual Surgery in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* and *The Dew Breaker*', *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Edwidge Danticat*, Jana Evans Braziel and Nadège T. Clitandre, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 41-61.

narrator friend ‘blow their cover’ the same heterosexual women who had supported them against the white or brown racist or sexist men, turn against them. Conflict makes for strange bedfellows, and new solidarities and allegiances are constantly formed in the Ecotone. In the story, the alternative space takes shape through language, a ‘nation language’ to borrow E. K. Brathwaite’s words, powerful enough to upset the normative discourse of race, religion, class, and gender, and it far exceeds the elements that compose it (Indian Ocean history, Toronto, India, the Caribbean etc.).

The figures of the refuge seeker, the undocumented worker, and the diasporic immigrant as they feature in the short stories mentioned here, certainly point to the precariousness and vulnerability engendered by forced displacement and by the multiple forms of oppression. But the writing also points to the emergence of a dynamic interchange, an alternative, heterotopian, ecotonal space. The raft, the construction site and the shop around the corner also enable the characters to implement diverse forms of reconnection and cohesion: through letters, words, and storytelling; through visual images and the friction between the constraints of story and the freedom of text; and through language and the constant renegotiation of power relations. These new networks are ultimately activated by the reader who can make the connections, reflect on what has become possible, and potentially turn to action. The reader is also the one who becomes aware that the text, unexpectedly, *does* something that is different from what it *says* — it describes the toxic effects of borders, discrimination, and displacement, but it creates bonding, inter-dependence and a ‘plural humanity’ or *humanness*. To clear the infection, the text creates its own antibodies and does what Christina Sharpe calls ‘wake work’¹¹ — it makes us awake again and gives us a new space to inhabit and share, in the plural, a ‘mobile commons’, as Robin Cohen would say.

The three short stories thereby point to ecotones as sites of an utopian cosmopolitanism. Cities favour the exacerbation of creolization, a mechanics of hybridization so dense that it loses the sense of the spatial anchoring which still permeates insular cultures. But deterritorialized creolization will never be fully achieved. Systemic racism and daily prejudice hinder the upcoming of a humanist counterpart to neoliberal globalization. For thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (1997) or Michel Agier (2018), what remains of cosmopolitanism is a political project, a ‘cosmopolitics’, i.e. a relationship to the other, a form of citizenship deconditioned from its national gangue. In 1993, this literary and philosophical endeavour turned into a political project. Following the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the International Parliament of Writers created the International Cities of Refuge Networks¹² (ICORN), a group of 25 cities welcoming journalists and artists whose life and work is at stake in their

¹¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake – On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 17.

¹² <https://www.icorn.org/about-icorn> [Accessed 15 August 2021].

country of origin. ICORN transformed urban ecotones into cosmopolitan places of refuge. It now counts more than 75 cities around the world.

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