Displacements and Transformations in Caribbean Cultures

Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth , Romero-Cesareo, Ivette

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The "Children of the Sea"

Uncovering Images of the *Botpippel* Experience in Caribbean Art and Literature

LIZABETH PARAVISINI-GEBERT AND MARTHA DAISY KELEHAN

> though of course they said nothing at all just
> went lobbying by with their heads up & down in the
> corvée of water & their arms still vainly trying to
> reach Miami & Judge Thomas & the US Supreme Court & their mouths wise
> Open drinking dream & seawater . . .
>
> Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Dream Haiti"

Botpippel—the Kreyol rendering of the term used to designate the undocumented Haitian immigrants who began attempting the treacherous voyage to the United States around 1972—are one of the most poignant symbols of the heartrending trajectory of Haitian history in the late twentieth century. Unable to afford exit visas or airplane tickets, the "boat people"—most of them rural Haitians—ventured on the 700–mile crossing, financing their dangerous undertaking with the proceeds of the sale of their land and belongings, and fleeing repressive political conditions, ecological devastation, and economic stagnation at home for freedom and opportunity abroad. Of the estimated 100,000 Haitian refugees who arrived illegally in Florida during the 1970s and 1980s—more than 55,000 between 1972 and 1981 alone—many attempted the treacherous sea crossing to Miami in unsafe boats, risking their lives in the hope of a better life and often falling into the clutches of unscrupulous smugglers (Arthur, 180). For those who made the crossing safely only to fall into the hands of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), flight often led to incarceration in refugee camps and, all too frequently, re-

patriation and death. Unknown thousands died in the attempt, disappearing into the oblivion of a watery grave.

For those who survived the crossing and escaped detection, the ghosts of those thousands lost to the sea, many of them their traveling companions, are a poignant reminder of the price paid for their own freedom and opportunities. Those remaining behind in Haiti, for whose sake the travelers ventured forth, remember them as the lost ones, irretrievable and gone. Their memories remain, like the haunting presence of a revenant, unburied and unmemorialized. Our question then is, what would be a suitable memorial for those who lack a place for a headstone? If they are not likely to be properly commemorated by the Haitian state, who will seek to immortalize their deaths? How can the horrors and losses of those many crossings be conveyed and remembered? How have the arts and literature sought to crystallize one of the most traumatizing chapters of Haiti's recent past?

In this survey of the art inspired by the plight of the Haitian *botpippel* we will argue that Haitian painters have developed a highly stylized and eloquent iconography to create history paintings that seek to synthesize onto canvas one of the salient experiences of Haitian history in the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. This iconography is built upon repeating elements—a sinking boat in a stormy sea to which people in rags cling desperately, an awaiting U.S. Coast Guard ship, the distant and unattainable U.S. shoreline, the Haitian flag, images of the Vodou *lwa* or spirits, menacing sharks, the Guantánamo refugee camps—which, although limited in themselves, have allowed for a broad and nuanced range of representations of the haunting *botpippel* experience. The creation of these nightmarish seascapes, often by painters with little formal education or artistic training, represents the most significant creative response to an unfolding drama that, although eloquently addressed by a handful of pan-Caribbean writers, has been slow to engage Haitian authors. The nuances of these artistic representations encapsulate a wealth of political, social, and cultural responses to the conditions that have driven so many thousands of Haitians to a risky and often fatal sea crossing.[1] In these images, historical memory operates through representation (Küchler and Melion, 7), as the paintings constitute the most salient vehicle for reconstructing an untold, often unwitnessed history. They posit "a dynamic of mnemonic processing" through which traumatic memory can be addressed personally and collectively (7).

For the refugees who survived the crossing, the Haitian people as a whole, and the world at large, these are images through which all "can come to know and process the collective experience" of the *botpippel* (Bennett, 31).

Botpippel art, however, is not, for the most part, public art. Public art—often supported and authorized by government institutions, well-funded organizations, or wealthy corporations—requires either official sponsorship or access to funding sources and systems of patronage that are far removed from the realities of the large majority of Haitian immigrants. Other than the occasional example of *botpippel*-related graffiti or unauthorized murals found in Port-au-Prince and the streets of Little Havana in Miami, we have come across only three examples of public *botpippel* art—one, a monument erected in 1995 on the Tabarre Road in Port-au-Prince; the other two, murals in the lobby of the office occupied by the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami in 1997.

The memorial, a stone and metal sculpture in the shape of a *kanntè*, one of the small rickety boats on which refugees have sailed from Haiti, is on the Tabarre Road—the only major new road built after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's return to power in 1994—just past the headquarters of his Foundation for Democracy in Port-au-Prince. The memorial, sponsored by the Aristide government, has been described as "a sculptor's rendition of a brick and concrete boat which was hurriedly constructed" to be unveiled during President Bill Clinton's visit to Haiti in March 1995 (Ruth). Its place of honor as the only state-sponsored memorial to the *botpippel* has been overshadowed by the violence that has taken hold of its surroundings, especially after Aristide's departure in 2004; it is now sited in one of the most troubled neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince and has not escaped being marred by the graffiti, slogans, accusations, and insults of Haiti's political turmoil. It stands amid the rubbish of a collapsed urban infrastructure. It is also infamously linked to the persistent rumor that it was built to conceal a "magic well" where Clinton was to be initiated into Vodou by Aristide himself. Aristide, according to the *Haiti Observateur*, had dedicated the sacred well by shedding the blood "of a newborn infant in gratitude to the gods whom he believes allowed his return to power," while Clinton's initiation was meant to "keep him impervious to Republican attacks and to guarantee his re-election" (McLeod). The superimposition of these two narratives—centered on the machinations required to gain and maintain political power—over what had been meant as a memorial to the victims of the failure of such power in Haiti, signals the

monument's inability to encompass and represent the national trauma of the *botpippel* experience.

The other two examples of *botpippel* public art are murals at the Haitian Refugee Center in Miami. One, titled *Haitian Tragedy*, depicts a shipwreck painted with broad brushstrokes that evoke the movement and danger of the boat crossing. It is a painting of a boat going down into the sea, the Haitian flag on its mast, with two female figures reaching into the water in an attempt to save their fellow shipmates by pulling them back into the boat. It encapsulates the narrative of the *botpippel* experience while reminding those coming to seek help that the center understands the dangers involved in undertaking the journey that brought them to the city and is willing to provide the services—be it personal, legal, professional, or educational—that the refugee needs to integrate successfully into American society. Like the female figures in the mural, the center is there to pull them metaphorically out of the water.

The second mural shows another group of Haitians spilling out of their shattered boat onto a Florida beach. The mural is centered against the backdrop of the Haitian flag, with the words "Haitian Refugee Center" appearing in both English and Kreyol. The red and blue of the Haitian flag is continued throughout the shipwreck scene in the people's clothing, anchoring the scene and offering a thematic continuity between the plight of the shipwrecked refugees and the center's mandate. The faceless human figures are scattered across the beach in various poses of extreme physical distress, but they are nonetheless alive. The mural also alludes indirectly to the center's role in helping Haitian refugees remain in the United States once they had set foot on land, since for Haitians there was no "wet foot/dry foot" policy. (Under this policy, put into effect in 1994, Cuban refugees intercepted while still at sea were returned to Cuba; those who had reached U.S. soil were allowed to stay.) The two murals are among the earliest, and certainly the most public, of a painting tradition that has produced primarily medium size paintings for display in museums and private collections. In "Art and Resistance: Haiti's Political Murals, October 1994," Karen McCarthy Brown identifies only one mural in Port-au-Prince that alludes to the *botpippel* experience, which she describes thus: "[A] group of Haitians, some light-skinned and some dark, are at sea during a serious storm. Their boat is made of the most sacred of Vodou drums, the *asotò*, the one believed to be the voice of the ancestors. Lasirèn, a Vodou sea spirit, here appearing in the form of a large pink fish, pushes the boat from behind while the radiant head and shoulders of Jesus hover benevolently above" (Brown 1996, 55).

One *botpippel* painting, nonetheless, fulfilled a public art role during a march organized in February 1993 to call for equality of treatment for Haitian and Cuban refugees. Organized by Miami's black leadership in "unprecedented support" for the plight of Haitian refugees, the march recalled the spirited demonstrations of the civil rights movement. The speakers, which included the Reverend Jesse Jackson, called for American help to restore deposed president Aristide and condemned the confinement of Haitian refugees at the Krome Detention Center in Florida and the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo. They also demanded "that Haitian refugees receive the same welcome to the United States as Cuban rafters and defectors, who under a special law are quickly freed and granted nearly automatic legal U.S. residency" (Viglucci, 2B). They linked the unequal treatment of Haitian refugees to the Jim Crow laws that limited the participation of African Americans in economic and political society before the civil rights movement.

The focus of the speakers' protest was what they saw as a double standard in U.S. policy toward illegal immigrants arriving from Cuba and Haiti. Official policy dictated that most illegal immigrants be detained on arrival, unless immigration officials judged that they met the criteria for release while awaiting a status hearing, which usually entailed local sponsorship and evidence of political persecution at home. Cuban immigrants, however, were rarely held in custody, as they qualified for special provisions under the law. Haitians were seldom released to the custody of friends and relatives and underwent detention while their cases were reviewed. Most were denied entrance into the United States; a significant number were repatriated to uncertain fates in Haiti.

Among the symbols displayed by marchers were a banner with a likeness of Martin Luther King and the words "Let my people go!" and "a man holding up a framed painting of a sailboat on a rough sea. Loaded with Haitian refugees, the boat is accosted by a Coast Guard helicopter and a Coast Guard ship" (Viglucci, 2B). Its date and artist unknown, the painting's deployment as a wordless political banner during such a demonstration attests to its power to represent through its elements the narrative of the Haitian *botpippel* and the urgency of their plight. Private art becomes public here through its insertion into an act of mass political expression.

The spirit of the march, during which ministers, veterans of the civil rights movement, and Haitian leaders expressed variations of the same message—"Just as segregation laws once kept blacks on one side of town, government policies now keep Haitians out of the country because of their skin color" (Vi-

glucci, 2B)—echoed feelings expressed in Felix Morrisseau-Leroy's 1991 poem, "Boat People." The poem invites Haitians to embrace the "boat people" term, despite its pejorative connotations in American society, since the *botpippel* experience is only one more stage in the Haitian migratory history.

> We don't bring drugs in our bags
> But courage and strength to work
> Boat people—yes, that's alright, boat people
> We don't come to make trouble
> We come with all respect
> It's them who calls us boat people
> We have no need to yell or scream
> But all boat people are equal, the same
> All boat people are boat people
> One day we'll stand up, put down our feet
> As we did at St. Domingue
> They'll know who are boat people
> (184–85)

Botpippel art belongs to a long established tradition of history painting that dates back to the Renaissance. Its defining characteristics as a genre—"its public and ethical form; its principles of historicity and narrativity; and its didactic intent" (Green and Seddon, 82)—have been characteristic of a subgenre of Haitian painting that includes Gary Dorsainvil's *Haitian Military Open Fire on Demonstrators* (1986), Etienne Chavannes' *President Aristide Returns to the National Palace October 15, 1994* (1994), and Paul Jean-Pierre's *Bill Clinton 30 Avril 95* (1995), among many. History painting, a genre particularly associated with French painting of the eighteenth century, placed its emphasis

> on the choice of a significant moment or action in the story chosen, one in which the immediate antecedents and consequences of the action depicted would be suggested in a clear, accessible and meaningful way. History painting displayed not only *narrativity* but a second characteristic as part of its ambition, that of *didactic intent*. History painting, in other words, had an ethical and moral dimension in which viewers would in some sense perceive virtue, a virtue both relevant to their own time and one of a universal timeless kind. (Green and Seddon 7)

The characteristic elements of history painting, as found in *botpippel* paintings, offer a point of departure for our analysis. If, as Green and Seddon argue, "it is only through the forms of its representation—'the thumb print on a glass wall'—that the past exists for us at all" (1), Haitian painters have taken the notion of history painting, with its connection to the bourgeois political sphere and its "suitability as a voice through which the very idea of the public could be spoken of and spoken for" (9), and appropriated it as a vehicle for recording, denouncing, and memorializing the plight of the forgotten *botpippel*.

Botpippel paintings are first and foremost encapsulated narratives of shipwreck. Shipwrecks were a common enough theme in Haitian painting before the *botpippel* phenomenon—one has only to think of Rigaud Benoît's masterpiece, *Shipwreck* (1965), which depicts a group of people lost at sea, making offerings to the Vodou spirit or *lwa* La Sirène in a plea for rescue. The painting is of interest in our context because it contains many of the narrative elements that will be combined and recombined in paintings of *botpippel*: the unstable, unsafe boat in which the people have ventured out, the collapsed sails, the flailing arms and naked torsos, the frayed flag, the menacing sharks, the offering to the *lwa*, and the rescue boat in the distance.

The basic narrative aspects of *botpippel* paintings can be read most vividly in Fritz Mistira's *Boat People Tragedy* (1987), a painting on masonite commissioned by the collector Jonathan Demme (see fig. 6.1). Mistira, a young college student at the time, elaborated his narrative through layers of action that become more dramatic and personal as the eye moves from background to foreground. The background depicts rolling brown hills—deforested and devoid of vegetation, an allusion to the desert-like conditions that have resulted from intense deforestation and soil erosion in Haiti. The central element of the painting is the large sinking boat that bears the Haitian flag—a sturdy looking but nonetheless capsizing boat in vivid red standing for the sinking nation of the last years of the Duvalier regime. The human figures (some of them children) assume one of two stances: they either face the viewer, arms extended in desperate pleas for help, or attempt to hold on to the boat, their backs to the viewer. One figure in the lower right corner has already drowned. The sharks surrounding the boat also encircle the viewer, who is invited to enter through a shark-free lower right corner into the world of the painting, either to assist, as we are compelled to do, or to share the shipwrecks' fate.[2] The position of the viewer is a puzzling one, as we look at this scene from what

Figure 6.1. Fritz Mistira, *Boat People Tragedy*. Jonathan Demme Collection of Haitian Art. Reproduced by permission.

could most logically be another boat (perhaps a U.S. Coast Guard ship). All hope of rescue comes from the viewer's perspective, since the desolate landscape of the background offers no hope and the sharks block all possible retreat.

The elements in the painting are similar to those woven together by Edwidge Danticat in "The Children of the Sea," the opening story in *Krik? Krak?* (1996), about two lovers, one of whom is on an over-packed and sinking boat headed for Miami. Forced to flee Haiti after speaking against the Duvalier government on his radio show, the young protagonist leaves with a handful of *gourdes* and a notebook in which he records his troubled crossing. His entries alternate with the narrative addressed to him by the girlfriend he left behind. "Children of the Sea" serves as a parallel text to *Boat People Tragedy*, fleshing out and giving voice to the narrative elements the painting encapsulates so economically. Political repression, exploitation, and the deepest poverty, like the barren hills of the painting, serve as push factors leading people out to sea. "You could fill a museum with the sights you have here," the man in

Danticat's story says of his companions, alluding to the potential effectiveness of art to express the tragedy of the *botpippel*'s crossing (15).

Danticat draws several poignant parallels between the *botpippel*'s crossing and the Middle Passage, a reference that is never far from the surface meaning of these paintings, elements as they are of the Haitian historical narrative. The *botpippel* narrative is also strongly anchored in culture and religion. In Haitian Vodou, the Africans who leapt to their deaths from the slave ships rather than accept slavery are said to reside under the water; upon death one follows the ancestors down to the depths of the ocean where the *lwa* or spirits reside (Brown 1991, 223). The young man in Danticat's story understands his experience as a refugee through the prism of Haitian history and religion: "I feel like we are sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinin, to live with the spirits, to be with everyone who has come and has died before us" (Danticat 1996, 14). This "walk back to Africa" across the water becomes a powerful metaphor when considering the risks of undertaking to cross the Atlantic on a frail boat or a makeshift raft. The phrase used to describe where the *lwas* and ancestors reside, *lòt boa*, "on the other side," is also used in common speech to refer to relatives living in America. They are only *lòt boa*, able to return at any time from across and below the water to their families (Arthurs, 205). "Walking back to Africa" parallels the potentially self-sacrificing act of fleeing freedomless Haiti for a chance at liberty in the United States, with the belief in the American dream as a sustaining element.

Danticat addresses the blind faith that Haitians place in the existence of the American dream and their ability to gain access to it in her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). Louise, a middle-aged Haitian street vendor, is willing to risk her life at sea in order to reach the gold-paved streets of the United States:

> "It is very dangerous by boat."
>
> "I have heard everything. It has been a long time since our people walked to Africa, they say. The sea, it has no doors. They say the sharks from here to there, they can eat only Haitian flesh. That is all they know how to eat."
>
> "Why should you want to make the trip if you've heard all that?"
>
> "Spilled water is better than a broken jar. All I need is five hundred *gourdes*. (1994, 99)

The day Louise finally scrapes together the last of the five hundred *gourdes* needed for the voyage she leaves the village and is never heard from again.

Other painters have added a variety of narrative elements to those that appear in Mistira's painting, complicating the emplotment of the *botpippels*' story as told through painting. Whereas Mistira's *botpippel* are drowning within view of the land, the land is that of Haiti and therefore not a refuge or a place from which to expect aid. They turn instead to the viewer, hinting at a possible intention to engage him or her in a participatory act of rescue. The sharks, therefore, have not come full circle, as an opening must be left for us to engage with the world of the *botpippel*.

Chavannes Jeanty's hauntingly beautiful *Boat People* painting closes Mistira's circle, thereby turning the viewer into a powerless spectator (see fig. 6.2). One of the three boats in the painting has already capsized, spilling its human cargo into the turbulent, shark-infested waters, where they are graphically depicted in a losing battle against these predators. Here the sharks surround two of the three boats—two of them moving away from their ready prey to encircle a second boat—as if actively and meaningfully seeking to capsize it. The proportions between the sharks and the boats are cleverly controlled by placing the sharks in the foreground, where they loom almost as large as the boats themselves. The composition allows them equal narrative and formal importance. Their circular motion contributes to the impression of a vortex in the center of the painting in which the hapless refugees are caught. The sharks' strength, movement, and apparent sense of purpose contrast with the comparative passivity of the boat's occupants, who sit in motionless stupor as waves crash against them from the right; their fear is more palpable than their horror. The strength of the painting comes primarily from the illusion of motion it creates—the motion of sharks, water, and clouds becoming the principal way of conveying the peril faced by the refugees.

The cross-like mast and flowing sails of the boats recall the voyages of discovery and the Middle Passage. Most significant, however, is the merging of the turbulent waters and the stormy sky, which eliminates the horizon, with all that conveys of hopelessness and despair. The viewer is not invited to enter into the scene; the sharks stand between us and any possible rescue. They also stand between the boats and any progress toward their goal. The point of view is somewhat ambiguous here, although the position of the jibs and fullness of the sails would indicate that the boats are moving toward the viewer. The figures in the boat and in the water, moreover, are not seeking to engage the viewer, anticipating no rescue from that direction. Here we are indeed witnessing the un-witnessable; the painting records what no eyes have seen.

Figure 6.2. Chavannes Jeanty, *Boat People*. Collection of Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert.

(Kedon Estigène, one of Haiti's best "jungle" painters, uses a similar composition in his 1996 painting, "Refugees," with the striking difference that his refugees are fanciful, multi-colored doves.)

Frantz Zephirin's *M'ap Cherche la Vie* (1998, acrylic on canvas), adds a new spatial dimension to the *botpippel* narrative. Zephirin, born in 1968 in

Cap-Haitien, started his apprenticeship as a painter under his uncle Antoine Obin, a master painter of the highly stylized Cap-Haitien school, which Zephirin has subsequently abandoned. He has met with considerable success as a painter and was featured in the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* traveling

Figure 6.3. Frantz Zephirin, *M'ap Cherche la Vie.* Collection of Janet Feldman, Waterloo Center for the Arts (Waterloo, Iowa). Courtesy of Janet Feldman.

exhibit (1997–98). In *M'ap Cherche la Vie*, the *botpippel* are almost indistinguishable in the middle ground, struggling in the water near their frail sinking boat, small and seemingly insignificant. The foreground is occupied by the menacing figure of an alligator framed by two tall and ominous rock outcroppings against which the boat in the background has crashed (see fig. 6.3).

The painting, by invoking Ulysses' dangerous crossing between Scylla and Charybdis, brings the focus away from the details of the *botpippels*' situation and onto the difficulties of the crossing and the harsh conditions of reception. The alligator, Cerberus-like, signals the lack of welcome for the *botpippel* in the United States through its connection to Florida's swamps and the monsters of *The Odyssey*. Here, as with the sharks in Chavannes Jeanty's painting, the placement of the menacing alligator in the foreground reinforces the threat to the comparatively powerless *botpippel*. The richly textured cliffs mirror the jewel-like rendering of the alligator's skin, unifying them as allied in their purpose of keeping the refugees from crossing through. The huge rocks, resembling menacing jaws, reinforce the idea of the devouring power of the sea and of the unwelcoming, rocky shores they will not be lucky enough to reach. There is no beach for landing and no shelter in these vertical cliffs.

Zephirin's contribution to the narrative of the *botpippel* experience links it to European mythology, thereby seeking to make the Haitian people's plight understandable to a non-Haitian audience. He works with another master narrative, that of the flood and Noah's Ark, in an untitled painting from Bill Bollendorf's collection (Galerie Macondo; see fig. 6.4). Here a menagerie of predominantly African animals, anthropomorphically depicted as dressed in their traveling best, are standing in the water, lowering a boat into the sea as they prepare to board with their scant belongings. A horse-headed figure (lower right) carries a box that reads "Boat People, Caution, Danger"; an elephant holds a bottle labeled "The Hope Water." Zephirin's weaving of the narrative of Noah's Ark (with its theme of hope emerging out of adversity) with the hopefulness of these travelers (as caught in their colorful attire and confident gazes, and in their almost jubilant hoisting of their newly built boat) speaks to a seldom-invoked aspect of the *botpippel* narrative, that of the dreams and anticipation of those setting forth toward new lives and greater prosperity, an optimism they will seek to sustain with the "hope water" they will be carrying with them in their travels. The painting is not without its irony, as one of the figures auto-denominates the refugees "dangerous" and

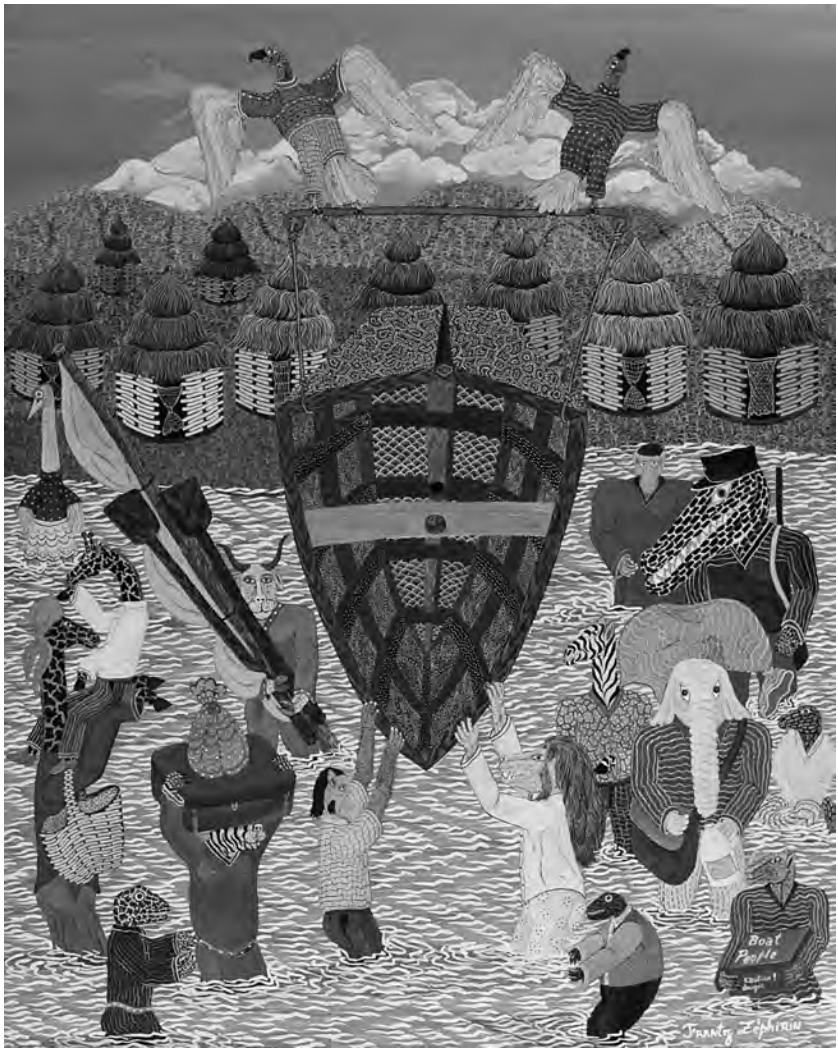

Figure 6.4. Frantz Zephirin, untitled painting. Collection of Bill Bollendorf at Gallerie Macondo. Courtesy of Bill Bollendorf.

counsels "caution." Nothing, however, could be safer that these domesticated anthropomorphic creatures with roots in the African plains.

Zephirin's juxtaposition of narratives as the means of increasing the viewer's understanding and identification with the situation of the *botpippel* is echoed in the concurrence of images in Ernst Louis-Jean's re-rendering of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the "Medusa"—Se sa ou se pa sa* (That or

nothing; not pictured), which takes its title from the Kreyol translation of Hamlet's initial question in his famous soliloquy, "To be or not to be."[3] Louis-Jean, an architect from Port-au-Prince now living in the United States, is drawn to significant historical moments as subjects for his increasingly popular history paintings. In *Misery*, for example, one of the early historical works that brought him to the attention of galleries and critics, he depicted his nightmarish vision of the election-day massacre in Haiti in November 1987.

In *Se pa ou se pa sa* Louis-Jean draws on the familiar images of Géricault's painting—one of the most famous of European history paintings, now at the Louvre—to draw attention to the graphic, thematic, and historical similarities between his work and that of the early nineteenth-century French Romantic painter. The shipwreck of the *Medusa* was one of the most glaring European scandals of the early part of the nineteenth century. The ship, a French government vessel, had sunk off the coast of Senegal in 1816 while bringing a new governor to take possession of the port of St. Louis, which had recently been ceded to France by the British. Of the 150 survivors who tried to hold on to life on a raft, only 13 were still alive when the raft was found, among them the ship's inept and cowardly aristocratic captain, later brought to trial for his criminal mishandling of the ship and its passengers and crew. They were believed to have survived by practicing cannibalism. Géricault depicts the moment when the survivors catch their first glimpse of the rescue ship.

In Louis-Jean's painting, there is no rescue ship in sight, but two contending mirages occupy the upper corners of the canvas showing the options open to the refugees. On the right side we see the architectural symbols of New York City (including the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building); on the left side we have a typical Haitian graveyard.[4] By including the symbols of New York City as representative of the refugees' goal, Louis-Jean underscores the ironic inapplicability of the words of Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" inscribed on the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free") to Haitian refugees who are not as welcome as earlier arrivals to the United States. The cemetery points to death as their only other option, either death at sea or death in Haiti if they are repatriated to the island by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Louis-Jean's interpellation of Géricault's masterpiece eschews the realism of the latter (who was said to have interviewed and sketched survivors in preparation and had a replica of the raft built) and accentuates instead

the perhaps forlorn hopes of reaching (and being allowed to remain in) the promised land that shines brightly ahead as a mirage floating in the sky like an unattainable illusion. By linking his painting to Géricault's famous work, however, Louis-Jean's painting resonates with the connection to another "headline-making" case, to the governmental ineptitude that lead to the *Medusa* tragedy, and most poignantly, to the human costs, despair, and suffering of the sea crossing with which Géricault's painting is identified. *The Raft of the Medusa*, through which Géricault sought to express "the predicament of the shipwrecked everywhere in the world" and to proclaim his "scrupulous respect for the truth," here becomes a vehicle for a new painting conveying the truth of yet another episode of historical shame (Géricault).

The perils of the *botpippel*'s sea crossing—brought to poignant life by Louis-Jean through his evocation of the *Medusa* tragedy in *Se pa ou se pa sa*—find a literary echo in Russell Banks's *Continental Drift* (1985). The novel narrates the travails of a young Haitian woman trying to reach the United States, Vanise Dorsinville, in quasi-Odyssean terms. All the money her family has saved to allow her to leave Haiti only takes her as far as North Caicos Island. In transit from there to the Bahamas she and her teenage nephew are brutally and repeatedly gang raped, after which she is sold to a house of prostitution. Only after the murder of her pimp is she able to save the necessary amount to secure passage on a charter boat that deals in small time tourism out of the Florida Keys with a sideline in illegal drug and immigrant trafficking. She arrives in Miami traumatized after her nephew and baby are thrown overboard and drowned during a U.S. Coast Guard raid, a mere hundred feet off the coast of Florida, by the Americans who had promised them passage. Of the sixteen Haitians on board, she alone makes it to shore and to a relative living in Little Haiti.

The power of Banks' narrative stems from the matter-of-fact, nonchalant style through which he conveys the unspeakable horrors of the *botpippel* experience. The utter plausibility of the story, which is rooted in so many real narratives of the dangers implicit in reaching the U.S. coast illegally, are exacerbated by the impossibility of redress, as his protagonist's illegal status shuts her off from any appeal to justice. Vanise is thus reduced to muteness, a speechlessness that reflects her inability to speak the unspeakable. Like the survivors of the *Medusa*, many of whom had descended into madness by the time they were rescued, Vanise must find a way to psychological wholeness. She looks for healing through her initiation as a *manbo* or priestess

in Vodou, healing her broken spirit through a return to the religion of her ancestors.

The lack of welcome on the part of the people of the United States and their institutions is further developed by Wilfrid Guerrier in a group of four paintings titled *Boat People #1* through *#4*. The series, which focuses on various stages of interaction between Haitian refugees and the U.S. Coast Guard, articulates the history of active interdiction of *botpippel* at sea following the intensification of the flow of refugees after the overthrow of the Aristide government in 1991, following which a flotilla of Coast Guard ships was deployed to block their passage. Guerrier worked on this series during the height of international awareness and most vocal opposition to American policies concerning the reception of refugees that the INS insisted on categorizing as economic refugees while many saw them clearly as political refugees. During the year that followed the coup—"as a United Nations economic embargo eroded living standards in Haiti still further, as political repression intensified and as hopes of return to democracy evaporated" (Arthur 181)—the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted about forty-two thousand refugees, more than the total for the previous ten years combined.

Figure 6.5. Wilfrid Guerrier, *Boat People #1*. Jonathan Demme Collection of Haitian Art. Reproduced by permission.

Guerrier understands the power of the narrative element in his paintings: "When I paint," he has said, "I tell a lot of stories . . . something that can help the country" (Lavaud). In this series he weaves and reweaves these elements in compositions that underscore the uneven dynamics of power between the boat people and the U.S. Coast Guard. His *Boat People #1, Haitian Refugees Encounter US Navy* (1995, see fig. 6.5), for example, revolves the perspective of Zephirin's painting. Here, the shipwrecks are struggling in pools of bloody, shark-infested water in the foreground of the painting, and the Scylla and Charybdis they must pass through are two U.S. Navy ships standing between them and the brilliant sun and verdant background that represent the promised land of the United States.

The painting is awash in motion—the refugees struggling in the water in the foreground, the waves crashing against the sinking boat, the tempestuous horizon, and the exploding rays of the setting sun. The eye is struck by the movement of all the elements in the painting except for the Coast Guard ships themselves, whose fixity recalls the immovable U.S. policies they represent. Guerrier works here with corresponding, parallel elements—not only the two American ships but also the two masts, one on the Coast Guard ship to the left of the painting (standing erect), the other on the sinking boat (ready to topple into the sea). The latter holds the last remaining shreds of the Haitian flag, while the U.S. boats display three flowing and intact American flags. The refugees are likewise divided into two groups; those in the foreground, struggling in blood-tinged water, appear to be beyond help while the refugees in the middle ground, those closest to the Coast Guard ships, are swimming energetically toward rescue. Their frantic activity contrasts sharply with the passivity of the Coast Guard vessels and their crews, who seem to be waiting for the refugees to come to them instead of providing the prompt and determined help that could save many from drowning.

The slowness and lack of energy of the Coast Guard rescue effort is a constant theme in this series of paintings, whose principal subtheme is the ambiguous nature of the U.S. response to the *botpippel* crisis. Underscoring this implicit critique in Guerrier's work are the repeating elements in his compositions, where the refugees are consistently placed in frantic motion in the foreground while the rescue vessels remain in the background, equipped and ready for deployment, but slow in undertaking any action. The discrepancy between the urgent plight of those whose boat has crashed against the waves and are now desperately flailing amid the remains of their vessel and

the comparative passivity of the boats and hovering helicopter in the background—as Guerrier depicts in *Boat People #2* (not pictured)—encapsulates the artist's emplotment of the elements of the *botpippel* narrative. Curiously, in *Boat People #4 (Helicopter Rescue,* not pictured), where the rescue helicopters have moved from the background to the foreground of the painting (one of them hovers over the figures struggling in the crashing waves) the human figures have turned their backs to the helicopter and look toward the viewer, as if true help were only to come from that direction. The painting, whose composition is very similar to that of *Boat People #2*, is particularly notable for the effects Guerrier creates with the light emanating from the helicopter's searchlights, as it dominates the center and upper left quadrant of the image.

E. Bien-Aimé's untitled boat people painting (fig. 6.6) also features a Coast Guard rescue helicopter on the upper quadrant, but here it remains behind the crumbling sailboat, whose frantic passengers face the sharks awaiting them in the tempestuous waters. The sharks, in turn, flank La Sirène, the

Figure 6.6. E. Bien-Aimé, untitled painting. Collection of Janet Feldman, Waterloo Center for the Arts (Waterloo, Iowa). Courtesy of Janet Feldman.

marine avatar of Erzulie, *lwa* or spirit of love, consort of Agwé, master of the seas. The presence of the *lwa* appears to offer comfort and protection, but most particularly it seems to counsel calm and patience. This is one of the few *botpippel* paintings to show passengers in the hull of a ship—visible here through a missing chunk on the side of the boat. The Coast Guard vessels—a helicopter and a ship—appear here as secondary elements in the painting. The ship is barely sketched, while the helicopter sports a clownish grin like a character in a children's animated show.

One of the most compelling images of the confrontation of Haitian refugees with the Coast Guard comes from Edouard Duval-Carrié's series *Milocan, ou La migration des esprits* (1996). Duval-Carrié, one of the best-known Haitian-American artists, evokes in his work "the magic and mystery of the Vaudou universe and comments on Haiti's history and socio-political realities with sharp, surreal wit" (Poupeye 89). In this series, now at the Bass Museum, the painter/sculptor addresses the departure of the Haitian *lwa* or spirits to follow the *botpippel* to their fate at sea. One of the paintings in the series (not pictured) shows the *lwa* in a dinghy arriving at the shores of the United States. In *Le Monde Actuel ou Erzulie Interceptée* (see fig. 6.7), Erzuli (Ezili), the Vodou spirit of sensuality and love, descends in tears from a Coast Guard ship, the stark steel and immutable expressions of the guards contrasting with her coquettish Creole dress with its diaphanous sleeves and her bejeweled fingers. Tucked in the sash of her dress is the small figure of a refugee symbolizing the failure to guide and protect, which explains her tears. The dagger piercing her halo recalls Cupid's love arrows (symbol of her powers to confer and withdraw love) but also the wounds inflicted on the Haitian people by the *botpippel* tragedy. The painting's composition, which places Erzulie in the very center of the canvas, uses the angularity of the boat's gangplank and the steely demeanor of the flanking guards to underscore the thematic contrast between the *lwa*'s distress and the soldiers' (and by definition the American nation's) indifference to her anguish.

Botpippel paintings include a number of canvases that address the encampment of Haitians in the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba and at the NIS Krome Center in Miami. Within days of the 1991 coup that toppled the Aristide government, President George H. Bush ordered the Coast Guard to take all Haitian refugees to the U. S. military base at Guantánamo where INS officials would determine whether or not they met the requirements for admission into the United States. The makeshift refugee camp soon proved

Figure 6.7. Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Le Monde Actuel ou Erzulie Interceptée*. Collection Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach. Gift of Sanford A. Rubenstein. Courtesy Bass Museum of Art.

catastrophically unsuitable to hold the thousands of refugees (up to twenty thousand of them) who needed processing at any one time. Ultimately, most of the more than forty-five thousand Haitians processed through Guantánamo were deemed to be economic, rather that political, refugees and repatriated to Haiti.

During the early stages of the *botpippel* migration in the 1980s, Haitian refugees had been held in Fort Allen, on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. They were the subject of a haunting short story by Puerto Rican writer Ana Lydia Vega, "La alambrada" (The barbed-wire fence), from her award-winning collection *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio* (*Cloud-Cover Caribbean and Other Tales of Shipwreck, 1989*).[5] Told from the perspective of a child who watches as layers of barbed wire were coiled into an impregnable fence around the camp's perimeter, the story describes the silent despair of the refugees in poignant terms:

> Rumors were spreading, strange tales: they had taken their clothes away, they had been forbidden to talk to each other, they had changed their names. We didn't know anything. We couldn't know anything. Perhaps we were making things up. We never heard anything except for their monotonous chant in the night. And even that merged with the distant chant of the sea.
>
> One thing was certain: they continued to arrive. The barbed-wire fence would swallow them one by one and we could do nothing but watch. (Vega 1982, 50, our translation)

Guantánamo—and to a lesser extent Fort Allen—are "imperial location[s], close to home, in the ambiguous border between the domestic and the foreign" (A. Kaplan, 12). As such it is *of* the United States, but worlds away from the intended place of arrival. Their place in the *botpippel* narrative transcends the mere fact of their having become the frustrating spaces of confinement for Haitian refugees, a way-station where U.S. immigration authorities can go through the motions of their performance of justice before returning them to uncertain fates in Haiti. As colonized spaces they link the *botpippel* story to the continuum of U.S. imperial history in the Caribbean. The power of Vega's narrative stems precisely from the young narrator's acknowledgment that as a colonial—as a Puerto Rican and a woman—she possesses no knowledge and is powerless to understand or address the pain she observes. In "Haiti, Guantánamo, and the 'One Indispensable Nation,'" Jana Evans Braziel ar-

gues that the U.S. naval base in Guantánamo "remains rooted, historically, militarily, and juridically . . . within the domain of U.S. policy, connected to legal and extralegal forms of violence (and militarized prison systems) as both deployed within the domestic borders of the U.S. (against citizens and immigrants) and imposed on foreign occupied terrains" (127):

> In the case of Haitian "boat people" seeking refuge in the United States, the period from 1970 to the present has witnessed an increasingly restrictive and even repressed policy of detainment and deportation, with few individuals actually granted asylum, despite evidence of pervasive forms of political retaliation and torture suffered by those applying. The U.S.-INS system—or *regime of control*, as [Michel] Laguerre accurately coins it—relies directly on five mechanisms of control: *departure or embarkation control*; *disembarkation* or *border control*; *maritime control*; *internal control*; and, as the ultimate mechanism of surveillance, *carceral control*. These "control procedures" of the U.S.-INS, Laguerre explains, operate as mechanisms of "exclusion and admission." (137)

Michelet, in *United States Soldiers Beat Protesting Detained Haitian Refugees at Confinement Camp, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba* (1993), brings together quite economically the salient elements of the Guantánamo narrative from the perspective of one who had himself fled the 1991 military coup against Aristide by sea and had been one of the camp's detainees (see fig. 6.8). Michelet layers his painting with a series of small narratives that together weave the story of the Haitian encampment in Guantánamo as a persistent nightmare of physical abuse, showing us the details of what takes place in those round enclosures encircled by barbed wire that make up the geographical boundaries of the military camp. Like in the circles of hell, here Michelet links the notion of enclosure with that of corporeal punishment—punishment that is visibly racialized and which recalls the restraints and poses made familiar by white dominion under slavery. Inscribed "GTMO God is Good," the painting underscores the very absence of God.

Michelet's multiple narratives of abuse are centered round a row of U.S. soldiers in riot gear deploying their collective and individual force against a number of hapless and unarmed refugees. Behind them, forming the painting's background, are the huts encircled by barbed wire from behind which young refugees embody their protests through poses that suggest yelling. The painting suggests sound as well as movement, since the acts of violence com-

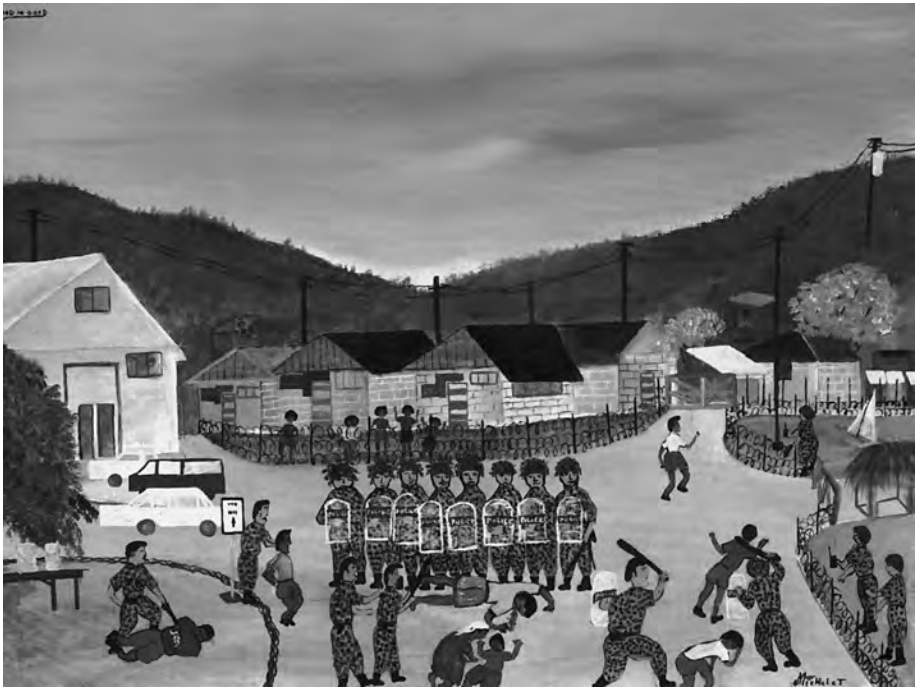

Figure 6.8. Michelet, *United States Soldiers Beat Protesting Detained Haitian Refugees at Confinement Camp, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba*. Jonathan Demme Collection of Haitian Art. Reproduced by permission.

piled here preclude silence. The actions against which the painting articulates its denunciation are made explicit through a series of pictorial vignettes arranged as a semicircle in the foreground of the painting, framing the central row of soldiers. Moving counterclockwise from the left corner of the painting, these vignettes include poses later made infamous by the Abu Ghraib prison photographs: a man with arms bound behind his back is being forced to kneel while a soldier holds him by the hair; a man lies on his side, arms and legs bound, while a soldier with a club poses in an attitude of mastery behind him; a man lies dead or unconscious at the feet of the row of armed soldiers, his blood flowing to the ground; a woman bends down to succor the wounded figure of what could be a child; a man cowers as a soldier aims his club at his head or back; another is in the very motion of collapse, having sustained a blow to the back of the neck. As an indictment of the violence perpetrated against Haitian refugees, Michelet's painting gathers narratives that stand here in place of the testimony to the mistreatment refugees like the

painter himself endured in Guantánamo. The images stand for that which words have conveyed but has fallen on deaf ears.

Colin Anniser, like Michelet a refugee at Guantánamo, produced a series of paintings of Camp Bulkeley, the section of the Guantánamo base reserved for HIV-positive refugees. Among those of the Guantánamo detainees who were declared by the INS to be political refugees in the early 1990s, there were approximately 310 refugees who had tested positive for the AIDS virus and whose detention at Guantánamo was continued under a 1987 law barring immigrants with HIV from entering the United States. The group, which included women and children, was held prisoner at Camp Bulkeley, "the world's first and only detention camp for refugees with HIV" (Dayan, 158).

Joan Dayan, in "A Few Stories about Haiti, or Stigma Revisited," described the HIV-positive refugees as "fenced in by barbed wire and guarded by Marines armed with automatic machine guns" while "living in tin-roofed huts, using rarely cleaned portable toilets . . . surrounded by vermin and rats" and "subject to disciplinary action and pre-dawn raids of their sleeping quarters" (158). She quotes from Judge Sterling Johnson's opinion in *Haitian Centers Council v. Sale* (1993) describing Camp Bulkeley's conditions:

> They live in camps surrounded by razor barbed wire. They tie plastic garbage bags to the sides of the building to keep the rain out. They sleep on cots and hang sheets to create some semblance of privacy. They are guarded by the military and are not permitted to leave the camp, except under military escort. The Haitian detainees have been subjected to predawn military sweeps as they sleep by as many as 400 soldiers dressed in full riot gear. They are confined like prisoners and are subject to detention in the brig without a hearing for camp rule infractions. . . . (158)

The 1993 judicial decision declaring that the refugees were "entitled to constitutional due process" (Goldstein) and forcing the Clinton administration to close the camps spoke of the "Haitians' plight" as "a tragedy of immense proportion." It was a welcome decision for the numerous activists who had taken up the Haitians' cause in the United States, among them actors Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon (who spoke against the camp at the 1993 Academy Awards), the Yale Law School students who had helped file the legal challenges against the government's policy and who had joined the

Figure 6.9. Colin Anniser, *United States Navy Haitian Refugee Confinement Camp, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba*. Jonathan Demme Collection of Haitian Art. Reproduced by permission.

detainees in a hunger strike to proclaim their solidarity, and legendary dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham, who had, at the age of eighty-two, staged a forty-seven-day hunger strike of her own to protest against the repatriation of the *botpippel* (Anderson).

Colin Anniser, himself an HIV-positive Guantánamo refugee, offers in *United States Navy Haitian Refugee Confinement Camp, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba* (1993), a disturbing "map" of the portion of the Guantánamo camp reserved for people with the AIDS virus (see fig. 6.9). Camp Bulkeley is seen here in all its well-ordered, barbed-wire brutality. As in Mistira's *Boat People Tragedy*, here the viewer approaches the scene from the sea, facing the refugees, some of whom, arms extended, clamor toward the viewer for help and release. Built around a series of enclosures that separate the soldiers from the refugees, the arrangement of the huts resembles that of the prototypi-

cal plantation barracks inserted into what can only be described as a prison compound.

At the center of Anniser's painting of Camp Bulkeley is an arrangement of huts whose architecture recalls that of the urban cemeteries of Port-au-Prince. For the prisoners encamped in this section of the base, the placement of these huts (halfway buried in the earth) reminds us that death hovers over them in many forms—from the threat of being returned to Haiti to the plight of being encamped without access to proper treatment after an HIV diagnosis that in many cases came as an unwelcome surprise during their confinement. (Anniser, diagnosed with HIV while in Guantánamo, died from AIDS in 1996, after he had been granted temporary asylum in the United States.) The importance to Anniser of this central image is underscored in another of his paintings (*Camp Bulkele* 1993), which concentrates exclusively on what here becomes the centerpiece, the very heart, of his composition.

Jean Ricardo Domond's *Under Glass*, from the collection of naval historian Marcus Rediker, is one of the few paintings that address the detention of Haitians at the Krome Center in Miami. The INS's Krome Detention Center is a sprawling complex on the edge of the Everglades, about thirty miles from Miami, which includes a shooting range for guards and Miami area police officers and two courtrooms for judges to hear immigration cases without refugees having to leave the facility. Over the years during which it has served as the main facility for detention of Haitian refugees seeking asylum, Krome has become synonymous with abuses of detainees. In *American Gulag: Inside U.S. Immigration Prisons*, Mark Dow details incidents of beatings, illegal searches, sexual abuse, violations of civil and human rights, and torture, which he sees as stemming from the increasing criminalization of refugees: "From the early 1980s, the beginning of what might be called the contemporary era of INS detentions, crucial inadequacies have been in place. . . . 'Processing centers' were prisons, and everyone knew it, even if they had to deny it in public. Pacification and repression were, therefore, in order and inevitable" (Dow 55). Giorgio Agamben, in his book *State of Exception* (2005), echoes Dow's concerns with the impact that extensions of power during times of crisis—which could range from measures to contain an influx of undesirable aliens to the post-9/11 Patriot Act—can have on the curtailment or suppression of citizenship and individual rights. Since these extensions of power, which he calls "states of exception," extend the rule and authority of certain persons, institutions, and governments well beyond where the law

had existed in the past, Agamben fears that they "mark a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference" (40). Dow would argue that the INS, particularly at Krome, has turned the incarceration of refugees—deemed necessary by the Reagan administration in the early 1980s to contain undesirable Haitian and Mariel-boatlift Cubans and extended by the Bush administration under the Patriot Act—into a quasi-permanent state of being.

Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat describes Krome as a place of "silent despair" that "had always seemed like a strange myth to me, a cross between Alcatraz and hell." "I'd imagined it as something like the Brooklyn Navy Yard detention center, where my parents had taken me on Sunday afternoons in the early 1980s, when I was a teenager in New York, to visit with Haitian asylum seekers we did not know but feared we might, people who, as my father used to say, 'could have very well been us'" (Danticat 2005). In 2004, the horrors of Krome spilled into Danticat's life in an ironic and tragic way when her uncle Joseph Dantica died while in the custody of Krome officials. Danticat, whose passionate commitment to Haiti and to Haitians in the diaspora has been in evidence through her writing and activism, has long been a critic of U.S. immigration policies toward Haitians. Her uncle had been forced to flee his church and school after it had been ransacked by armed gangs of youths, some of whom he had helped throughout the years. At the age of eighty-one, he had arrived at the Miami airport seeking political asylum and had been detained by the INS despite having a multiple-entry U.S. visa. He was held without being allowed to see Danticat or any other member of his family because of "security reasons." Deprived of his medicine and transferred to the prison wing of a local hospital, he died in custody five days later, in her words, a "casualty of both the conflict in Haiti and an inhumane and discriminatory US immigration system" (Jaggi).

Domond's *Under Glass* (see fig. 6.10) captures the hopelessness of imprisonment at Krome through the conflation of the experiences of the slave ship and the refugee boat. Seven refugees are shown trapped in a glass bottle looming large at the very center of the painting, dominating the space. The background shows cement-block walls in the process of being constructed—a reference perhaps to the growth the facility has undergone in order to handle a growing number of asylum seekers—and behind the walls the urban geography of Miami is depicted. Gourds hanging from steel rods in the construction speak

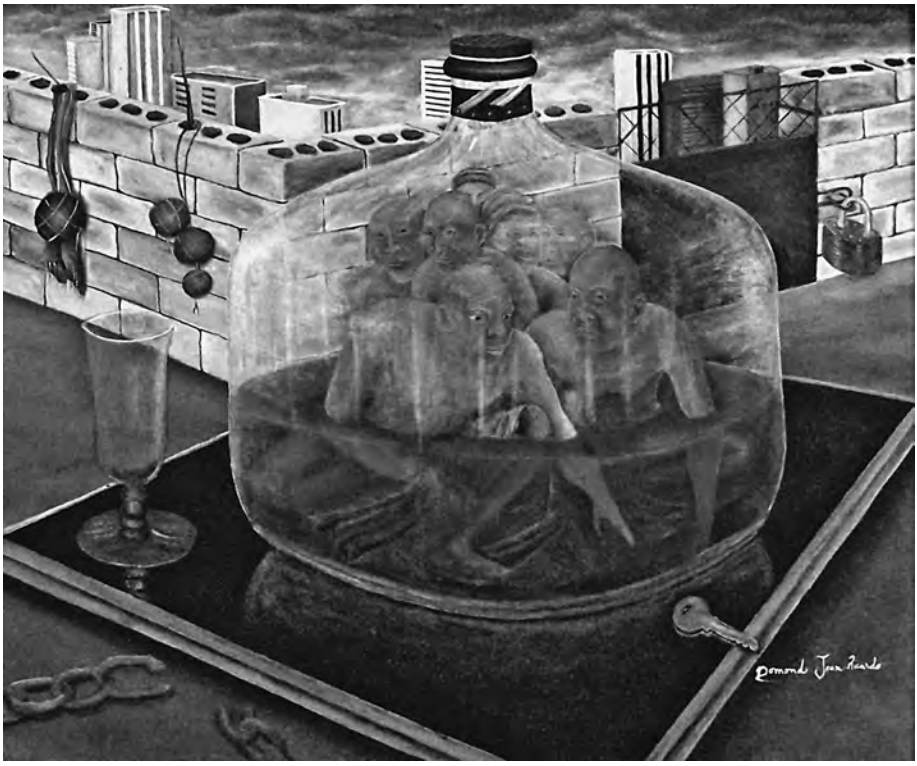

Figure 6.10. Jean Ricardo Domond, *Under Glass*. Collection of Marcus Rediker. Courtesy of Marcus Rediker.

to the Haitian provenance of the trapped refugees and hint at a connection to Vodou and the *lwa* or spirits. (Gourds are used for a variety of purposes in Vodou altars, among them for holding food offerings for the spirits.)

In *Under Glass*, Domond plays with the proportions of the figures and objects in the painting, thereby destabilizing the scene and underscoring the importance of the trapped human figures as they sit incongruently inside the small bottle resting on a tray, dwarfing the prison walls that form the background. The oversized padlock and key—the latter resting just outside the bottle, tantalizingly close but yet unreachable to the men and women trapped in the bottle—serve to underscore the impossibility of an exit already signaled by the entrapment of the human figures. The key, like freedom and an entry into the United States, is inaccessible. Confinement appears to be fixed and immutable, while the broken chain, which proportionately belongs

with the keys, points to the breaking of the chains of slavery only to see them exchanged for this entrapment under glass.

Domond plays with a multiplicity of elements to bring to the viewer the horrors of confinement. Chief among them is the use of a bottle that could serve both as a ship-in-a-bottle container or as a receptacle for the preservation of a laboratory specimen. Hallucinatingly trapped in a viscous reddish fluid that could be blood, amniotic fluid, formaldehyde, or a flavored liquor to offer a guest (hence the liquor glass resting on the table), the bottled figures look stupefied, as if zombified in their entrapment. Their entrapment in the bottle reminds us of the process of zombification itself, in which a *bokor* or sorcerer seizes the victim's *ti bon ange*—the component of the soul where personality, character, and volition reside—and traps it in a bottle, leaving behind the body as an empty vessel subject to the commands of others. *Under Glass*, moreover, speaks to the viewers' voyeuristic inclinations, reminding us that, like figures under glass, we can look at the situation of the refugees without really making a connection. And that the key to the refugees' freedom, sitting so prominently on the table, is within our reach—if we can only stir ourselves into action.

Today, more than a decade after the court-ordered closing of the Guantánamo refugee camps, the *botpippel* experience continues to resonate in Haitian art even though the tide of refugees had slowed down until Aristide's second ouster in 2004. We find the characteristic elements of the genre in a recent series of haunting, brooding works by Jean Idelus Edmé, a painter associated with the Centre D'Art in Port-au-Prince. Edmé has painted boat people since as far back as 1988, inspired by a relative who made the crossing to Miami by boat and is now a U.S. citizen. His recent work, particularly his *Botpippel* (2003), invokes both the breathtaking power of the sea and the memory of the Middle Passage, which he links to Christian symbolism (a favorite element being the mast of the ship used to symbolize a Christian cross). He is among a group of artists who have revived the *botpippel* genre in recent years, and that includes a number of young sculptors working in wood, such as Melio Jeanty, whose work can be seen at the Musée d'Art in Port-au-Prince and who produces relatively simple carvings depicting eight or ten people in a boat, typically accompanied by either a mermaid or a sea monster. Gabriel Volcy, a former policeman and native of Leogane who works with Galerie Monnin, produced in 2003 an impressive rendering in wood of a boatload

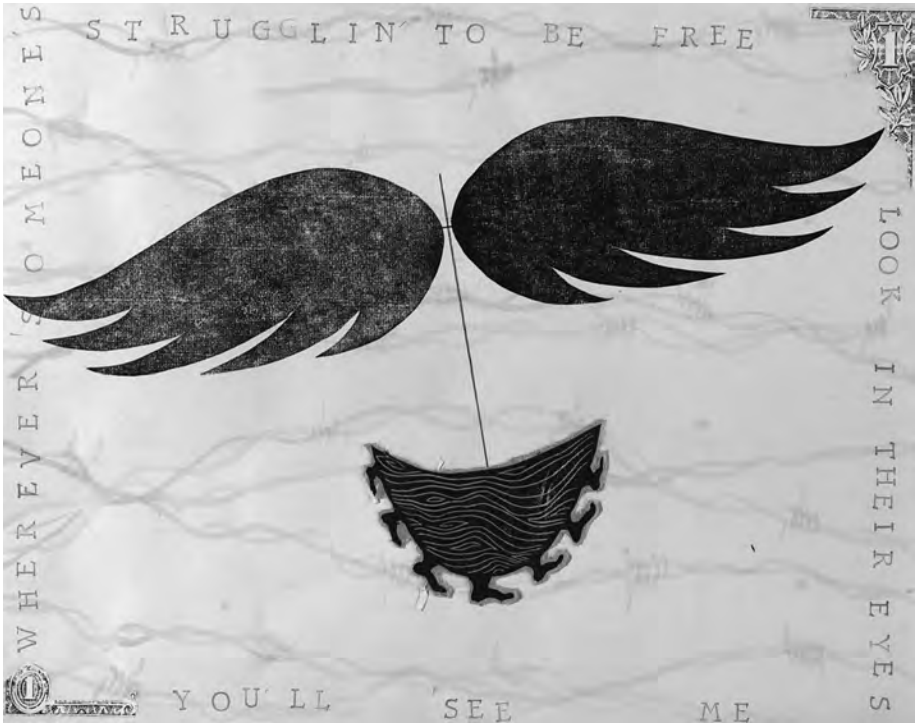

Figure 6.11. Rejin Leys *Wherever There's Someone Fighting.* Reproduced by permission of the artist.

of refugees in imminent danger of capsizing. Marked by the skill with which he has captured the almost palpable expression of horror on the faces of the boat's occupants, the work is a most impressive example of the possibilities of using sculpture to address the history of the Haitian refugees.

Haitian refugees, particularly those who had been held in Guantánamo Bay awaiting processing, are also the focus of the work of Rejin Leys, a Haitian artist living in New York. Leys is one of several young artists featured in a 1988 *New York Times* article on Haitian art in New York. Her *Wherever There's Someone Fighting,* an ink and paper work reproduced in the *2002 Social Justice Calendar* published by the Bread and Roses Cultural Project in New York City, brings the elements characteristic of the *botpippel* iconography to greater focus through their abstraction (see fig. 6.11). The work is part of a series of works on boat people that explores the links between labor and migration. Here, the refugees' dreams of financial prosperity in the United

States become the ragged corners of a dollar bill framing the drawing; the waves of the sea become blue veins on a polished white marble surface and in turn transform before our eyes into the barbed wire that restricted the refugees' movement within Guantánamo base. Reyes' boat, a stylized shape with seven protruding black feet, refers both to walking out of the sea onto the shore as well as to the myths of walking over the waters to return to Africa. Leys also meant the boat with feet to literally represent the "boat people." "If the terms boat people and illegal alien are used to dehumanize," she has said, "then what would this non-human creature look like?"[6] Textured to recall a wooden vessel, the boat has angel-like wings in lieu of sails, pointing to the lightness of flight. The words that frame the boat, "Wherever there's someone struggling to be free, look in their eyes, you'll see me," drawn from Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad"—adapted in turn from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—provide a link between the refugees' struggles and other migrations of the displaced and hopeful poor. Springsteen's song (1995) provides a suitable link to the *botpippel's* struggle through its exploration of "an America that has turned its back on the working class and the foreign-born" (Deming).

The unfortunate legacy of the Haitian refugee camps was revived following the attacks of September 11, 2001 against the United States with the arrival of the first prisoners of the war against terrorism at Guantánamo base. Less than a decade after the closing of the Haitian containment camps the nightmare they represented had returned as Guantánamo has once again become the space for confinement, torture, and death. Could it indeed be the case that people have forgotten that history has not opened a new chapter but is merely repeating itself? As Joan Dayan writes:

> Within a maze of chain-link fences, razor wire and guard towers, metal cages baked in the tropical heat, the inmates inhabited what was described in the early months of its existence in *The Guardian* as a "densely packed zoo." Soon afterwards the cages were replaced with a penal colony designed to hold indefinitely up to 2,000 prisoners. How do these images of incarceration tell a history of punishment and retribution in the United States? What is the standard for treatment of prisoners taken in the current "war against terrorism"? For the prisoners sent from Afghanistan and other sites to Guantánamo, mistreatment begins during transport. The prisoners are shackled by the hands and limbs,

> made to wear ear cuffs, blindfolded by blacked-out goggles, and then hooded. . . . At Guantánamo they were forced to kneel with their legs crossed for long periods of time. Exposed to the sun, they were held until September 2002 in cages measuring 1.8 by 2.4 meters. (Dayan, 158)

"Guantánamo is not a spa, but neither is it an inhumane torture camp"—so claimed Colleen P. Graffy, U.S. deputy assistant secretary for public diplomacy, seeking to contain the international backlash against the United States as stories of atrocities in Guantánamo poured out. "It is a prison," she has argued, "and as prisons go, it is well-run and humane" (Sweig). The world, it would seem, disagrees, as would those who like Michelet and Anniser left their paintings as testimony to the despair of a confinement that only ended when they and other Haitian refugees were vindicated by the courts. As the debate over immigration and the closing of the U.S. borders rages, threatening to become the dominant issues in current U.S. politics, the *botpippel* paintings remain to illustrate past efforts at the curtailment and deterrence of earlier waves of undesired refugees, many of whose voices were silenced by death.

Russell Banks, in *Continental Drift*, writes of the mysterious inability (or unwillingness) to speak of the Haitians fleeing to America. His Haitian characters had seen too much, gone through too much to speak of simple, everyday matters. Bob Dubois, his protagonist, describes the Haitians he brings on his boat to Miami as "a quiescent, silent, shy people who seem fatalistic almost, who seem ready and even willing to accept whatever is given them (Banks 305). It is an assessment shared by Karen McCarthy Brown, who while working with Haitian refugees in Brooklyn noted the same silence among those who, like Banks' Vanise Dorsinvile, had turned to Vodou for wordless comfort after their harrowing experiences at sea or in refugee camps (Brown 1996). Haitian writers have been equally silent about the painful experiences of the *botpippel* and the many losses of life their story contains. Marie-José N'Zengo-Tayo explains the difficulty of writing about the *botpippel* experience, arguing that "the reason for this 'absence' can be found in the impossibility of transforming this reality into a meaningful metaphor" (93).

It has been the painters, then, who have found the visual language and artistic metaphors to record the narrative of this tragic episode in Haitian history. As artists, they have also become memorialists, historians, witnesses who have brought to life on canvas a narrative that seems to many forgotten,

a story brought to life again only occasionally when the debate over containing immigration blazes anew or when the base at Guantánamo once again makes headlines. In *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennet asks how art can convey the force of trauma, how it can "register pain's call for acknowledgement . . . an antiphony of language and silence" (50). The *botpippel* painters, whose exploration of the narrative of the Haitian refugees—the lucky ones who made it to shore and the unlucky ones lost at sea or repatriated to a yet more inhospitable home—saw them become secondary witnesses to their national tragedy, have sought through their art to trigger within us an affective response, another mode of witnessing. They ask us to become, as spectators to the trauma of the *botpippel*, the living memorials—and the living memories—of another chapter in Haiti's tragic history.

Notes

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1. The plight of the *botpippel* also became a theme for young Haitian musicians. Magnum Band, a Haitian-American Kompa band based in Miami, recorded several songs that asked for better treatment and sympathy for the plight of Haitian refugees arriving in the United States. In "Liberty" (1982), they asked listeners to imagine what happened to the refugees who spent all they had to make the sea crossing, people who "sold everything they had at home/to look for a better life/when they arrive they're put in prison/some never arrive/sharks ate them en route/they sank in terrible weather" (Arthur 196).

2. Encircling sharks will be a leitmotiv in *botpippel* paintings. They figure most prominently in and black and white ink drawing by J. J. Georges (from Galerie Macondo) that graphically depicts sharks at the bottom of the sea feeding on drowned Haitian refugees. The constant presence of sharks in *botpippel* paintings and narratives contrasts sharply with the oft-repeated tale of Elián González, that most famous of Cuban proto-refugees, saved from the sharks that encircled him by dolphins that kept him afloat until he was rescued.

3. See Jan-Franns Gasyon's Kreyol adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Amlèt: Trajedi youn nèg ki pa ka deside*, where the soliloquy begins thus: "Se sa ou se pa sa. Men kesyon an. Èske youn nonm ki sere dan-l, ki kontinye ap soufri an silans tout move kou ke lavi a pote-l pi brav ke youn lòt ki pito touye tèt li pou-l fin ak sa? Mouri ak dòmi se menm bagay; epi, kalite dòmi sa a ede-n fini ak tout soufrans ki lan kè-n ansanm avèk tout doulè ke kò-n santi . . . se sa nou ta renmen ki rive, e byen vit tou. Mouri ak dòmi!" (22).

4. These elements are also present in an untitled watercolor painting by Jean Ernst Domond (Bill Bollendorf/Galerie Macondo) that juxtaposes a series of miragelike images whose central theme is that of death at sea. A cemetery occupies the upper left-hand corner and the eye moves counterclockwise to encompass a skeletal figure and a masked figure half-submerged in the sea, where small broken boats are dwarfed by a war ship (an allusion to the U.S. Coast Guard) over which armed military figures hover menacingly, blocking access to a city of skyscrapers.

5. Vega addresses "boat people" and their experience through humor in the title story from this collection, "Encancaranublado" ("Cloud Cover Caribbean"), where she places three potential refugees, a Dominican, a Haitian, and a Cuban trying to reach the United States, on a shaky raft in the middle of the sea. Her interest lies in highlighting how, despite their inter-island tensions and differences, they face similar challenges in their relationship to the United States. Their in-fighting capsizes the raft, at which point they are "saved" by an American fisherman who is unable to distinguish among them and sends his Puerto Rican crewman to deal with them. He, in turn, counsels against their naïve visions of the United States as paradise: "If you want to feed your bellies here you're going to have to work, and I mean work. A gringo don't give nothing away. Not to his own mother" (Vega 1989, 111).

6. E-mail exchange with author, January 19, 2007.