

**Translating the Short Stories of Alexis Wright:  
Sylvie Kandé Talks to Demelza Hall about  
*Le Pacte du Serpent Arc-en-Ciel*  
(with Postscript by Alexis Wright)**

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Sylvie Kandé is a Franco-Senegalese writer of poetry and fiction, and an essayist. Her first book, *Lagon, lagunes: tableau de mémoire* was published by Gallimard in 2000, with a postface by Edouard Glissant,<sup>1</sup> while her second, *La quête infinie de l'autre rive: épopée en trois chants* (Gallimard, 2011), was a finalist for two French literary awards, the Mahogany Prize (2012) and the Prix des Découvreurs (2013). Her third collection of poetry, *Gestuaire*, was just published by Gallimard in the 'Collection Blanche-NRF.' In addition, she is the author of *Terres, urbanisme et architecture 'créoles' en Sierra Leone, 18ème-19ème siècles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998). In 1999, she edited, under the title *Discours sur le métissage, identités métisses. En quête d'Ariel* (Paris: L'Harmattan), the proceedings of a conference she had organized at New York University (NYU). Kandé currently teaches at the State University of New York, College of Old Westbury. She is also a member of the PEN translation committee.

In 2002, Kandé co-translated with Marc de Gouvenain<sup>2</sup> *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*, the French translation of a collection of short stories by Alexis Wright, under the auspices of Actes Sud publishing house. *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* has not been published in English in the same format. This interview with Demelza Hall,<sup>3</sup> which was conducted via a series of emails in 2015, revolves around the genesis and the outcome of this translation project, and proposes an analysis of the 'writer in the text,' a term which highlights the author's role as both a wordsmith and a spokesperson for Indigenous silenced trauma while, at the same time, drawing attention to the double status of the translator as a reader and a co-writer.

**DH:** How closely did you and Marc de Gouvenain work with Alexis Wright on *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*?

**SK:** I believe that Marc de Gouvenain, who knew both Alexis Wright and Australia, initiated this translation project with Actes Sud. I came to the project in a more circuitous way. It began at the University of Western Australia, Perth, where I participated in a conference of the African Studies Association: right away, I began scouring local bookstores in search of Indigenous writings. In Kerry Davies's anthology entitled *Across Country: Stories from Aboriginal Australia* (1998), I found two fascinating stories by Alexis Wright: 'The Chinky Apple Tree' and 'When Devils Call.' I was also privileged to meet Sally Morgan, the author of *My Place* (1987).

Upon my return to New York, I received a request from Jean-Noël Schifano—the director of 'Continents Noirs,' a Gallimard collection devoted to black literature, in which my first collection of poems, *Lagon, lagunes: tableau de mémoire* (2000) had just been published—to sponsor

an author in a special issue of the journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. I thus translated ‘The Chinky Apple Tree,’ and sent this short story to the journal, along with an introductory essay. Eventually, the editorial committee decided that I should present Olympe Bhêly-Quenum, a superb writer from Benin whose new work was going to be published in ‘Continents Noirs.’ However, my interest in Wright’s work came to the attention of Actes Sud and I was asked to translate a series of her short stories. Marc de Gouvenain and I corresponded by mail. He edited my work and translated the last story of *Le Pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*; he may also have written the back cover page. I would be delighted to meet his friend, Alexis Wright.

**DH:** ‘The Chinky Apple Tree’ was the first short story by Wright that I read and it made a lasting impression on me. I am particularly interested in the way this story frames notions of trauma via the unspeakable (and also the fantastical). It seems that while Wright is intent on sharing aspects of Indigenous experience in her fiction, she is also alert to the problems which accompany communicative acts of sharing; such as the pain associated with the imaginative return to a scene of trauma. Was it difficult to bring these nuances to your translation?

**SK:** ‘The Chinky Apple Tree’ is a remarkable story in many ways, first and foremost because of the sharp contrast between the silence observed by the protagonist, an unnamed old woman on the brink of death, and the intensity of her inner life. In this liminal state, she makes a vain attempt to connect her fleeting present with moments of her childhood: this disconnect is where the narration rushes in, retelling in a flash her whole life as a ‘tangled web’ of traumatic events—her departure from her grandmother’s house after a (dust) storm, her heartbreak when ‘Love’ abandons her, the repeated rapes she suffers at the bridge, her lost struggle to keep her sons’ respect as they witness her descent into alcoholism, and ultimately the attack they launch against her as a revenge against her constant, taciturn presence by their side. Wright makes clear that the protagonist’s *identity-cum-gender* made her terribly vulnerable to those traumas, specifically to the hatred of her own children. It is tempting indeed to read this story as a comment of *métissage* in the Australian post/colonial context, and this is in part what attracted me to it.

Equally riveting is Wright’s unique manner of intertwining temporalities. While these entangled images, memories and aborted conversations make sense with regard to the predicament of the protagonist who, in her very last moments, ‘tries to piece together jumbled images of life from the images of dreams and place them together into a logical sequence of events,’ they also illustrate the author’s political and aesthetic stand. By rejecting the conventions of linear narration, Wright reclaims the right to use other ways of telling both the intricacies of a specific life itinerary and the porosity of the border between this world and the other/s. Moreover, these ways enable her to combat ‘the erasure of politically inconvenient historical memory’ (to borrow critic James Winders’s terms) at work in any situation of exclusion: abused by passing men, the woman in ‘The Chinky Apple Tree’ is, as it turns out, a mother ‘who once loved,’ a lonely but dignified heart who insists on ‘being treated as a lady’; ultimately, the plight of ‘Black Mole’ aka ‘Gin,’ who commands fish and grasshoppers, is emblematic of that of Indigenous lands at the hands of exploitative newcomers. To me, this piece, with times folding upon themselves in the image of the Serpent’s coils, best exemplifies Wright’s narrative art and illuminates the title of the collection.

Translating this magnificent story was a humbling experience: not only did I have to use tenses creatively to reflect those time lapses and convergences, but I had to accept the clash between the

silent woman's inner beauty and the boys' greed. I realized that I was sometimes inclined to shelter her from their cruelty by softening the language they used.

**DH:** Yes, the language used in 'The Chinky Apple Tree,' and the protagonist's internalized sense of shame, is confronting. Witnessing trauma must be particularly challenging when working as a translator. Could you talk a bit more about your desire to protect the protagonist of 'The Chinky Apple Tree' by 'softening' the language during the process of translation? Did this impact the words you chose?

**SK:** Yes, her story/history needed to be un-silenced, especially because it hurt, and the translator's task was to keep pace with Wright's epic Serpent of words and images that upset conventional representations of locations and temporalities.

In spite of my effort to remain at the needed distance from the protagonists in order to better re-draw them in another language (so to say), I could not help but identify with women characters. As a way of protecting women from verbal or narrative violence, I was sometimes reluctant, I guess, to use a very harsh slang. Let's take for example the dialogue in 'The Chinky Apple Tree' between the two young men who evoke childhood memories, and their growing hatred towards their mother, which they confuse with their rebellion against her rule to sell them one grasshopper per day. (They are of course unable to recognize this rule as her timid attempt to keep them near her.)

"Remember . . . must have been when we were seven? . . . was it seven?" "Yes! That's right. When I stole money that time and got into trouble."  
 "We were getting ripped off even then."  
 "Extortion, I reckon, making kids pay for grasshoppers."

While I had initially translated 'I stole money' by a rather neutral 'j'ai volé des sous,' Marc de Gouvenain suggested 'j'ai piqué du fric,' a stronger expression which better conveys the latent violence and bitterness that animates the whole passage. Similarly, in 'When Devils Call,' I had translated 'Pummelling the broken doll was easy' by 'Mettre des coups de poing à la poupée de chiffon, ça allait.' Marc de Gouvenain proposed 'Foutre des beignes,' a vulgar expression that better depicts the rawness of the situation.

Marc de Gouvenain was also more familiar than me with specific aspects of the Australian landscape and flora ('the spinifex,' for instance, a word that I could not find in a French dictionary); and with the language of the Waanyi region and the Aboriginal post-colonial culture of dispossession. He understood what a 'green box' was, could translate 'pujapujarr' or 'Pukkun-ji-nta'—adding a gloss to the term kept in italics in the French version. He also provided footnotes when needed for a French/Francophone readership, for instance, the acronym 'BRADAAG' which is used on pages 91–92.

**DH:** *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* is an interesting text because it combines Wright's short stories and literary extracts to form a larger, albeit fragmented, narrative. Could you discuss the book's layout, particularly the order of the stories? For example, the final story in the volume, 'Le serpent de feu,' is the only one in the collection which has not been published as a short story

elsewhere. Are you able to comment on why this particular narrative/extract was chosen to conclude the text?

**SK:** Although *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* was published in 2002 and *Carpentaria* in 2006, I feel that the first and last stories of the 2002 collection are excerpted from *Carpentaria*: they both seem to belong organically to this epic novel, which was certainly already in the making when Actes Sud expressed interest in Wright's work. In *Carpentaria*, Wright, with her volcanic imagination, combines elements of the history of oppression experienced by Indigenous Australians with material taken from a mythology whose presence animates specific places and features of the land, in an effort to give back to those she writes so empathetically about the elements they need to envision an alternative reality. All those elements are strikingly present in the introductory and closing stories of *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*: the collection's layout highlights the coherence of Wright's philosophical and political stand—a complex blend of postcolonial nativism, anti-segregation politics and pro-eco-guerilla posture. *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* is thus endowed with a circular flow, as if creation and destruction turned full circle over and over again; as if the conflagration of the international mine was the only way for the old landscape and ancient knowledge to resurface, and 'rebirth' Australia.

**DH:** When discussing Wright's short fiction I believe that one cannot overlook the significance of her literary extracts; the fictional fragments which have been taken/adapted from her longer works. For instance, one of Wright's most widely published short stories, 'The Serpent's Covenant'—entitled 'Le pacte due serpent' in her French collection—was featured in three different Australian anthologies and analysed by French academic Xavier Pons as a stand-alone short fictional work before it was revealed to be an extract from her novel *Carpentaria*.<sup>4</sup> Do you see all the narratives in *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* as distinctly connected? And would you argue that Wright's literary extracts can also be read as stand-alone short stories?

**SK:** Just like in Proust's, Faulkner's or Glissant's works, characters and events circulate widely in Wright's narratives: what readers know of each of them within the confines of a specific short story is often challenged in another one, or in a longer text, and through a different type of lens. In fact, 'The Chinky Apple Tree' offers a helpful metaphor to define, at least partially, Wright's literary vision and narrative strategy. Based on the description of the true companion of the protagonist—the grasshopper '. . . [whose] eyes were like glass, staring out through glass, and from inside the glass jar at her'—we can easily infer that the author too, sees characters and events through a variety of prisms that require a variety of genres or developments. Mozzie Fishman is a good example of this type of ubiquitous and multi-layered character who nomadizes in Wright's fiction: *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* pinpoints the special talent he has to galvanize the youth into committing an act of guerrilla warfare. He comes out as a prophet, imbued with a knowledge that is not just of the here and now. In *Carpentaria*, he turns into a Pied Piper of sorts, a post-colonial guru who has his followers cross the continent in a caravan of clunkers to learn from the sacred sites of the Dream. A polar opposite (politically speaking) of Normal Phantom, the leader of the Westside mob in the town of Desperance, he wreaks havoc in the latter's family by seducing Angel, Norm's wife, who ends up, lost and lonely, in a nightmarish Western metropolis.

Excerpts of Wright's works, like those of any literary masterpiece, can be read as stand-alone stories, and lend themselves to anthologization and close reading: 'When Devil's Call,' for instance, is a very sophisticated short piece that would deserve an in-depth formal analysis. Yet, I feel that

contextualizing those pieces, by studying either the historical circumstances they address, or their intertextual relation with other relevant texts of fiction (Marquez or Glissant's novels, for instance) or non-fiction (the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report, produced by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission) matters immensely.

To me, *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* brings together seven stories in a completely congruent way. The collection's coherence comes from Wright's clearly stated intention—to fastidiously explore the long-term effects of the trauma caused by colonization, and the ancillary loss and re-mapping of Aboriginal land. Indeed, several generations of Indigenous people exist in a relationship of 'postmemory' (to borrow Marianne Hirsch's concept) vis-à-vis those events since, even in the absence of first-hand knowledge of them, they nevertheless feel that these events 'were transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.' Wright is particularly attentive to the manner in which 'postmemory,' as a transferred trauma, undermines intergenerational and gender relationships in Indigenous communities. An additional textual coherence is brought to Wright's collection by readers themselves who fill the interstitial spaces between stories with their own imaginative and political sensitivities.

**DH:** Yes, postmemory seems to be a major aspect of a number of stories in the collection. For me, Wright's stories also implicitly reflect on the notion of Indigenous testimony (particularly the accounts of child removal in the *Bringing Them Home* report). Do you think fiction, like testimony, can be considered cathartic?

**SK:** All Wright's stories and novels address the dispossession experienced by Aboriginal people, their consciousness of it, their profound and often sarcastic despair, and/or their will to assert their agency in the shaping of a new Australia. The cruelest form of dispossession is certainly the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their parents' home, evoked in the *Bringing Them Home* report that pinpoints the causal link between this harrowing episode and the hardships that continue weighing Indigenous people down in today's Australia: 'The present plight, in terms of health, employment, education, living conditions and self-esteem, of so many Aborigines must be acknowledged as largely flowing from what happened in the past.' These state-sponsored kidnappings, recurrent over several generations between 1930 and 1970, are at the core of Wright's 1997 novel, *Plains of Promise*. They appear here and there in *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*—for instance, in Devy's sorrow over her lost daughter (47), as well as in the tremendous efforts displayed by Holly who runs after the police van to get her children back (88).

Each story in *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* contains a variety of anecdote-like passages, inspired by the daily violence encountered by Indigenous people, and by Wright's passionate effort to represent subalternity. Just like Aimé Césaire, she wants to be 'the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth.' Her fiction, packed with the stories of Micky's genocide museum, Lucas's last thoughts before he is run over by an angry driver, Dwayne's failed attempt at detoxification and Norm's humorous response to the renaming of the river, is all the more cathartic given the sober, spoken quality of the language she uses when alluding to the horrifying events these men and women are engulfed in.

**DH:** As I am sure you know, *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* is the only volume of Wright's short stories. The single-authored short story collection was very unpopular with Australian publishers during the early 2000s. Emmett Stinson argues, for instance, that while the short story

genre traditionally flourished in Australia ‘the early 2000s were its nadir’ as ‘from 2000 to 2006, the single-author short story collections virtually disappeared from the Australian literary marketplace’ (par. 9). So, I guess I am wondering if you know whether *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* was specifically commissioned by Actes Sud? Or if Wright was keen to have her various short stories published in one collection?

**SK:** In spite of its fragmented aspect, which seems so adapted to our fast-paced era, short-story as a genre is, by and large, not very popular. Today’s awards for short-story writers, for instance, are few and far apart. I do not know what the extent of Wright’s influence on the composition of *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* was. Yet it is crucial, for the sake of her stature and critical credibility on the national and international market, that a writer get her pieces—poems or short stories previously scattered in a variety of local journals—published in a book format. My general impression is that Marc de Gouvenain’s enthusiasm for Wright’s work was the main thrust for this publication, and that she entrusted to him her literary interests in another region of the world.

In addition, the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney and the expected but ultimately diffused Indigenous protest, had a major echo in France, and Actes Sud is a publishing house whose commitment to foreign literatures *engagées* is notorious. In fact, Actes Sud had already published her *Les plaines de l’espoir* (1999) and *Croire en l’incroyable* in 2000. As Wright’s narrative style is complex, elliptical and telluric at the same time, deeply rooted in both the Dreamtime and post-colonial sensitivity, it can be speculated that a series of short stories could have been perceived by the publisher as a sample of sorts of her literary talents for the French and Francophone readership.

**DH:** Yes, I agree, Wright’s short stories/extracts offer a great introduction to her work. As this is the only existing collection of Wright’s short stories, I also think that *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* is an important literary and cultural text. For instance, in the collection, Wright’s short story ‘Il y a de la lumière, mais personne à la maison’ is significantly longer than its English version—entitled ‘After the Storm’—which was published in an Australian newspaper back in 1999. Can you comment on the changes to the narrative?

**SK:** In the revised short story, minor editorial changes have been made to clarify that Gibbo was indeed the father’s name, to amend the negative portrayal of his wife and daughters’ behavior, and to make transitions sharper. More importantly, Wright reworked the plot to incorporate an historical event—the 2000 Olympic Games.

‘After the Storm’ was a tribute to a fisherman from the northern part of the country, intent on passing on to his children everything he knew about the sea, while exposing them to the world via a bunch of paltry mailbox advertising. He always kept with him, cut out from one of those pages, a photo of Sydney in which a phone box figured prominently. In the second version of the story, Gibbo learns of the Olympic Games through mailbox advertising and resolves to go to Sydney as a self-appointed Indigenous spokesperson. Though his project fails for lack of institutional support, the old man’s political consciousness is raised in the process: he wants the survival of the Indigenous people to be celebrated, on the eve of a new millennium and in the presence of the whole world, as a manifestation of their own genius, and he wants the silence around land expropriation to stop. The story has an ambivalent ending: the narrator, one of Gibbo’s children, remarks in a sarcastic manner that in the international limelight, his father would have looked like

a primitive old man, straight out of Prehistory. Between the lines, we can read that Gibbo's exclusion from the Olympic Games, that of non-commissioned Indigenous people, moreover unconvinced by the notion of Reconciliation, enabled Australia to look more like the modern and unified imagined community a nation is supposed to be. Yet, the narrator also suggests that Gibbo's children will carry on his dream to explore the reality behind the pictures, reclaim Sydney, and possibly represent themselves there.

With these new elements, Wright has brilliantly meshed local history with planetary events, and attended to the burning question raised by Gayatri Spivak: 'Can the subaltern speak?'

**DH:** The 'worlding' of Australian literature is now commonly assumed. I wonder, however, what it might suggest about 21<sup>st</sup> century postcolonialism (or perhaps, more specifically, Australia) when the short literary works of a revered Australian writer, such as Alexis Wright, are only available as a complete collection in Europe?

**SK:** Far from considering that colonization is over, postcolonial studies are concerned with the permanence of the Indigenous in the colonial and beyond, the construction of new subversive hybridities, and the residual presence of the colonial, both in the aftermath of political decolonization (when and where it occurs), and in today's planetary cultural reconfigurations. In my mind, Alexis Wright's writings are emblematic of those concerns.

The slow warming up of Australian institutions and audiences to the work of a revered author such as Alexis Wright—to her short literary works in particular—is a real quandary, considering the notoriety of Helen Tiffin's critical contribution to postcolonial studies. This initially lukewarm reception may reflect a disconnect between Wright's vision and the *episteme* of the times in the Australian context. In a similar way, the poetic and theoretical work of Édouard Glissant, today recognized as one of the most influential minds of our era, remained relatively obscure until the 1990s: the lingering effects of centuries of binary thought made his world view, his concepts of *Relation* and *Tout-Monde* specifically, difficult to grasp. Once accepted, they brought about a whole paradigm shift that has been instrumental in paving the way for an engaged reception of 'Littérature-Monde' (and Wright's works notably) by the European readership.

**DH:** Finally, are you able to comment on how your translation of *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* has been received in France?

**Sylvie:** I saw several references to this translated collection on the web, but, probably because I reside in New York, I do not know if and how the book was promoted. I never received an estimate of the number of copies sold, and did not have the opportunity to be part of the post-production process. But there are excellent signs of the recognition Wright enjoys in French/Francophone circles: *Carpentaria* was translated into French and short-listed in 2009 by *Courrier International*, a reputable French 'reader's digest,' as one of the ten best foreign novels of the year. Additionally, her latest novel, *The Swan Book*, originally published in 2013, just appeared in French with Actes Sud again.

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**Postscript from Alexis Wright regarding the details surrounding the publication of *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel*:**

*I have had a very good working relationship with Marc de Gouvenain since I met him in Sydney at a visiting overseas publisher event, and then he came to Alice Springs where I was living and stayed with my family while he and his wife Nellie were travelling through the Northern Territory. Marc worked for Actes Sud and the director agreed that he translate my first novel Plains of Promise for publication in France. Actes Sud makes a firm commitment to their authors and has continued to publish my works, including Carpentaria, and The Swan Book.*

*After Plains of Promise was published in French, Actes Sud were keen to develop a continuing interest in my work with French readers until Carpentaria was completed some years later, so they specifically commissioned a translation and publication of the short stories I had written. I had several of the short stories in the collection published in Australia, but this collection does not exist in an English publication. There was no great interest in my work at that time. I actually do not have a copy of one or two of the stories I sent to Marc for translation. These have been lost now.<sup>5</sup>*

Alexis Wright

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Edouard Glissant was a poet born in Martinique and a visionary thinker famous for his work on Métissage—Creolization. He coined and developed the concept of ‘Poetics of Relation’ that has now wide currency in post-colonial studies.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Gouvenain is a French writer and the director of collections at Actes Sud publishing house.

<sup>3</sup> Demelza Hall is an early career academic at Federation University Australia. Her research primarily focuses on scenes of cross-cultural exchange and reconciliation in contemporary Australian literature. Demelza has published two essays on the work of Alexis Wright: ‘The Isle of Refuse in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*: Reconstituting Heterotopic Space’ in *Southerly* 72.3 (2012), and ‘Framing the Unutterable: Reading Trauma in Alexis Wright’s Short Fiction’ in the forthcoming book for Camden House, *A Companion to the Works of Alexis Wright*.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Serpent’s Covenant’ is published as a short story in *A Sea Change: Australian Writing and Photography*, Sydney: Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, 1998 p. 180–91; *Australian Women’s Stories: An Oxford Anthology*, South Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1999 p. 273–83; and *Skins: Contemporary Indigenous Writing*, Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books, 2000 p. 115–22.

\*Pons’s analysis of ‘The Serpent’s Covenant’ can be found in his article: “‘That Migloo Shit’: The Clash of Cultures in Aboriginal Short Fiction’ in *Zeitschrift für Australianstudien: Quarterly Journal of Australian Studies* 20 (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Wright’s postscript to this interview stems from a series of emails she exchanged with Demelza Hall on 17/11/2016.

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