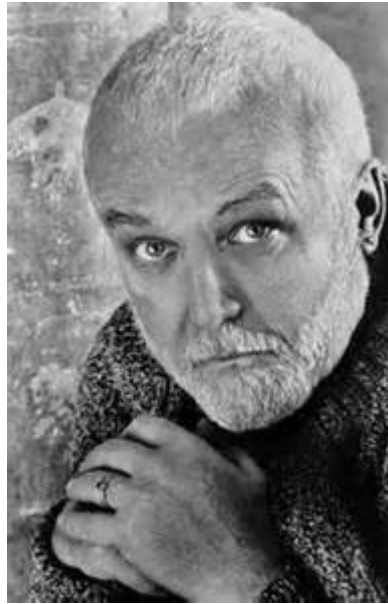


ANALYSIS

Continental Drift (1985)



Russell Banks

(1940-)

“The chance Russell Banks takes in *Continental Drift* (1985) is his attempt to blend opposing forces in the two tales he tells. He had a choice: he could have made them complementary or else he could have played them off against each other—in either instance, the position is full of pitfalls. In his effort to bridge both choices, Banks stretched the grounds of realism: he, in fact, established it with new lines, in his narration of two stories which, seemingly so distinct, can in some way become unified. The two tales are of Bob Dubois, an ordinary man, a New Hampshire oil burner repairer, who migrates to a small town in Florida; and a Haitian woman named Vanise Dorsinville, who migrates from Haiti toward the Miami area. Near the end of the novel, in an unlikely way, the two lives intersect.

Banks’s daring occurs not only in bringing the two lives together, but also in his effort to gain a realistic hold on cause and effect. For while there is some sense of inevitability, of doom, destiny, fate—all those realistic/naturalistic dimensions—there is also a contrast in lives which creates another dimension. Even as Bob Dubois (Bob of the Woods) heads toward an inexorable doom once he leaves a fairly secure (but narrow) existence in Catamount, New Hampshire, Vanise’s life begins to open up, despite the ordeals she must endure in order to make it to America.

The intersection of the lives, then, is both structural and interpretive. Writing in the 1980s, Banks captures an America that is failing lower middle class white men (perhaps *all* lower middle class families). This America seems to hold out promise if one moves, but it then closes down and the moves prove to be a chimera. The ‘dream’: comfortable house, new car, boat, and the rest are illusory. Yet even as this kind of America is beyond the reach of the Bobs of this class, so, too, it still seems a beacon of hope for those far worse off, Haitians, for example. But Haitians could be anyone of color from extreme poverty or oppression who views America as salvational. Although there is something stereotypical about this—America failing its own even as the disadvantaged from beyond cling to the country as hope and opportunity—there is also the element of truth; and the truth becomes more compelling when we see it fictionalized. Fictionalization provides reverberations lacking in the reality.

The way Banks avoids stereotype (most of the time) and stretches realism comes in the 'fantasy' subplots molded into the narrative. One of these involves Bob's brief affair with the physically alluring Marguerite Dill, black daughter of his helper in the liquor store bankrolled by Bob's brother, Eddie. The affair has something of master-slave, plantation owner and female worker, but it also carries Bob into a black world and prepares the text itself for the entry of Janise into his life. His drift into Marguerite Dill's routine is something of a fantastic leap—gathering up in its intensity some of the subconscious, his desire to break from a bourgeois life and move into supra-real sex (as portrayed), his need to live on the edge, even while maintaining some middle class surface. In the relationship with Marguerite, Bob can move outside himself, into an undefined 'beyond,' certainly outside of what his wife and children expect of him. And the affair takes on something of an idyll; besides great sex, there is the excitement of the subterfuge and the exhilaration that he is breaking through social bonds.

Another level of this 'fantasy' life comes when he meets Ted Williams in a fishing tackle shop, and he is thrown outside himself, into adulation and confusion. He almost loses speech, and he forces the former baseball player to mumble a few words toward him. These and similar episodes prepare the reader for the 'fantastic' tale of Janise, Banks's combination of Moll Flanders and Brecht's Mother Courage. As she moves from island to island in her journey to the American shore near Miami, Florida, she is abused sexually and physically, she is brought near death, she loses her baby, and she can be saved only through a kind of voodoo. The novel breaks all traditional realistic boundaries in these latter segments, where Janise is caught up in voodoo practices orchestrated by 'Brav Ghede,' whom she believes has saved her from drowning. This embodiment of Haitian mystery parallels Bob's belief in the 'awesome and mysterious' powers of the Haitians he is illegally smuggling on his boat. These mysterious powers are something implicit in Bob from the beginning, however; and while such powers make him test out the limitations of who and what he is, they are also the source of his decline and death, at the hand of Haitians.

Banks has moved us in and out of the undertow of realism and naturalism. He is fully aware that Bob 'has no conscious plan, no intent,' that he has given himself 'over to forces larger than himself—history, the unconscious, the future. And once he has done that, he has lost 'track of the sequence of events,' lost track of who and what he is. Having decided to forsake the security of a painfully provincial life in New Hampshire—where he is on 24-hour call to repair oil furnaces—he becomes a modern-day Columbus setting out into unknown territory. Haitians emblemize that unknown: the mysteries of the black, their supposed primitivism, but also Haitians as the geographical location of that unknown within Bob which he feels he must explore. Doubling Bob in some way is his brother, Eddie, who has moved into equally dark territory, dependence on mob money.

Eddie lives with dark secrets of his own, a surface of success, with failure, and worse, in the not too distant background. Each major character lurks in the shadows, with the possible exception of Bob's wife, Elaine, who yearns for stability even while she accompanies her husband into dark territory; even as he sinks ever deeper into what he had hoped would be 'life,' but which turns out to be merely another kind of living death. Ineluctably, he is drawn into one morbid enterprise after another, until his path closes in on Janise's, on what is in effect a slave ship. Then she, as slave, must survive what is an enterprise aimed at destroying her and everyone with her. She emerges from the shadows to survive; Bob emerges from the shadows to seek his own death.

Despite the stereotypical moments, Banks has grappled with something that was becoming apparent in the 1980s, when prosperity seemed to be just what Eddie, Bob's brother, thought it was: there for the taking. What was, overall, great for the upper part of the economy proved to be debilitating, even disastrous, for the lower middle class white man. Bob stands in for that entire generation of men in their 30s and 40s who found themselves buried in jobs with little or no future; where they could say they were alive, but not living. What made this so particularized in the 80s was the decade's appeal to those with panache and flash, and its gleeful dismissal of those who could not keep up. Bob's brother tries, but his façade rapidly crumbles; whereas Bob more slowly sinks, from furnace repairer to liquor store operator to driver of a boat smuggling in Haitians. It is impossible to read this novel without the background of the decade in which it was written and published.

The main characters, as if to emphasize their divisions from each other, all speak different languages: Janice, literally, cannot speak English; Eddie's English is a street language, punctuated by curses; Bob's is more neutral, but it is, nevertheless, the language of yearning doomed to failure; Marguerite Dill's is borderline, between standard and a so-called black English; Elaine's is the language of forbearance. Each addresses a different self in a different tongue; and part of their inability to connect is the fact they speak past each other. When Marguerite and Bob split, he asks if she has taken up with a black boyfriend, and she says she has, an indication she is trying to focus on a language and story she can identify with, whereas Bob never finds a language which fits because he cannot find an identity which gives him leverage.

Implicit in the novel, then, is Banks's manipulation of realistic factors, language and dimensions of fantasy being the most compelling, in order to reveal how the decade is splitting apart. Further, he reveals how white insistence on its traditional power, now under peril, results not in greater power (which is the prerogative of most realistic fiction), but in the demise of the participants. The one who comes through is Janise, bereft of all goods, caught in a strange land, language-less in that land, and yet a survivor. This break with realism has its message."

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