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Representations of Ambiguity

in Selected Writings by Women from Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Submitted for the degree of PhD to Trinity College, Dublin, in the year 2003 by Daria Mary Brennan.

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SUMMARY

This thesis looks at selected writings of women from Martinique and Guadeloupe through the complex theme of ambiguity. The novels and short stories of authors such as Mayotte Capécia, Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Maryse Condé are presented in terms of their representation of a certain type of ambiguity that is revealed either through the use of opposition or of a specific context. In chapter one the source of ambiguity lies in the treatment of space in the memoirs of a Martinican Békée¹ Élodie Dujon-Jourdain, and the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé's novel *Traversée de la mangrove*. In both of these texts space is used as a designated site of otherness and as a metaphor of constraint. Chapter two looks at the model of the *métisse* as it is treated in Mayotte Capécia's novel *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Michèle Lacrosil's novel *Cajou*, and Franciane Galou's short story 'Une simple question de couleur'. In both novels, the *métisse* is portrayed as an icon of racial ambiguity, a descendant of the tragic mulatto figure, while in Galou's story the becoming-black of the White master represents a challenge to the limits of colour-as-identity. None of these texts is free of negative stereotypes of blackness and the protagonists all suffer as a result of their skin colour. In chapter three the work of the Martinican author Suzanne Dracius is discussed in terms of her use of the themes of technology, otherness and the body. The concept of the ambiguity inherent in body boundaries and body markings is crucial to Dracius's writing. Her novel and three short stories discussed here represent a metaphor of *métissage* and otherness, and an insight into a sometimes oppressive and macho West Indian society. Chapter four focuses on the novels and selected short stories of the Guadeloupean writer Myriam Warner-Vieyra. Here, through the act of writing, the female protagonists of *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* and *Juletane* achieve a sense of release from the misery of daily life. Through these novels, and the short stories 'Sidonie' and 'Le Mur ou les charmes d'une vie conjugale', Warner-Vieyra also introduces a paradigm of female instability which questions the gestures that denote madness and

¹ A descendant of the White planter society.

the ambiguous relation of women to this label. Finally, in chapter five I have chosen selected novels and one short story by the Guadeloupean writer Gisèle Pineau. The focus of this chapter is on the transition, represented creatively in Pineau's writing, from crushingly negative stereotypes of West Indian women to new articulations of positive femininity. This transition is, however, ambiguous in nature as Pineau has not simply rejected or wiped out these stereotypes but re-used and re-shaped them in challenging ways. What we see in this chapter is thus the emergence of an image of West Indian femininity that gives expression to the complex and sometimes painful reality of women's experience in these islands.

I have used a flexible mode of literary analysis which relies on thinkers such as Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Susan Bordo and Hélène Cixous. I have also turned to the theory of psychoanalysis to facilitate certain arguments. This theoretical framework has allowed a structured reading of the texts while also creating an interesting layer of discourse.

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INTRODUCTION

*Latè karenm lan ka blanni dèyè sé bayè lonbray nou an! Woy!
Oswé tala! Ek pawól la nan bouch nou kon an rantchè.*

*Les terres sèches spéculent derrière nos boucliers d'ombre! Wo!
Le soir que voilà! Et la parole sur nos lèvres comme un ressentiment.¹*

Used as an instrument of resistance and power, the voice of the Caribbean slave has uttered its cry and communicated its name in defiance of the White master. Through Creole songs, tales and riddles told at night on the sugar plantation the slave-voice made itself heard throughout the diaspora. These are the nascent words, the fragments of a projected *parole* which will germinate and in time give voice to the broken history of the landscape. Now, in the twenty-first century as the diverse languages of French, Creole, Spanish and English are spoken in the islands of the archipelago by people of mixed race and mixed culture (a double *métissage*) the forceful voice of a collective history and memory is liberated, erupting in a discourse that is free-flowing and indeterminate.

This discourse is characterised by plurality and diversity, a creative chronicling of space, time and landscape. Within such a framework the boundaries of linear history and the single-voiced rhetoric of ideological periodisation are mere shadows. What is emerging in literature, rather, is the symbolic language of a collective unconscious marred by the four centuries of imperialist oppression. As J. Michael Dash comments: 'One tends to speak less of the individual author but rather of the authorizing power of the collective unconscious. The subject is constituted by the object observed; the author is the site where the collective subject manifests itself'.² In this thesis it is the

¹ Monchoachi, *Nostrom* (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1982), p. 52.

² J. Michael Dash, 'The World and the Word: French Caribbean Writing in the Twentieth Century' in *Callaloo* 34 (1988), 112-130 (p. 113).

voice of women writers from the French- and Creole-speaking Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe that is interpreted and analysed. Within the Caribbean basin, throughout the four centuries of domination, woman's voice has been silenced. In the past sixty years, however, this voice has grown louder and more confident. The history of the islands has been retold from a female perspective, and women writers have been allowed to situate themselves in fictional roles that are representative of the Caribbean woman's experience.

Within this context the role of the author, which involves gathering information (either imaginary or factual), distilling it and dispersing it, is particularised and highly subjectified. The author is deemed sociologist, historian and dramatist simultaneously. For the female author this journey into the writing-exercise is often a lonely and risky undertaking. The stories she chooses to tell and the manner in which she tells them, will be subject to criticism from all camps; her characters deemed inaccurate, too black or not black enough; her storyline too harsh or too redemptive; her political agenda too pronounced or not pronounced enough; her French too creolised or her Créole too gallicised. The reality of the woman writer from the Caribbean is thus ambiguous in itself. While held in reverence by one side, she is ridiculed by the other. Despite this, women have put pen to paper and have been applauded for it. The writings chosen for discussion in this study remain a testament to the Caribbean woman's ability to transcend the negative aspects of her ambiguous role as writer, and forge ahead with her stories. It is perhaps because of my recognition of this ambiguous role occupied by the West Indian woman writer, that I have chosen to view these texts through the *grid* of ambiguity. We are, however, constantly reminded that inherent in all language is a sense of ambiguity. Plato theorised in the *Cratylus* that the 'truth' of isolated words could not be decided given that naming did not exhaust the function of active speech. Even the *logos* of language (representing a unit of language, noun and verb) holds no claim to truth and is open to interpretation. In this way ambiguity and interpretation are closely linked. The type of ambiguity I wish to discuss here is what Empson refers to as the seventh type (although some of the instances of ambiguity I refer to are not of this type).³ This type involves the 'anthropological idea of opposition and the

³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930).

psychological idea of context' (p. 231). In chapter seven of this work, Empson explains how this seventh type of ambiguity is the most complex type, in that the opposites implied in the author's statement must be defined by the context. Empson refers to Freud, who regarded certain pairs of opposites as merely being a *unit* expressing conflict. Here, the opposite marks a centre of conflict: 'the notion of what you want involves the notion that you must not take it, and this again involves "the opposite defined by your context", that you want something different in another part of your mind' (p. 226). Essentially, Empson regards the presence of ambiguities of the seventh type as indicative of a fundamental division in the writer's mind.

The focus in this thesis on representations of ambiguity (whether spatial, racial or psychological) rests on a foundation or theoretical support which remains largely invisible within the text. This foundation is psychoanalytic theory, as it can be, and often is, applied to the critical analysis of literary texts.⁴ Making use of psychoanalytic theory is in itself an ambiguous exercise given the lack of scientific or tangible proof behind much of Freudian and Lacanian thought.⁵ In addition to this, much of the psychoanalytic writing from the English- and French language traditions is subjective, highly technical and intrinsically ambiguous. However, the *theoretical* notions of the individual unconscious, the collective unconscious, the meaning of signs and so forth, are what have been useful in the discussion of some of the themes in this thesis.

For Lacan, the use of a poeticised prose and a difficult, almost impenetrable writing style was a positive means of articulating the self-questionings of the analyst. Lacan thus placed an important valuation on ambiguity (in writing), and saw it both as an emancipatory exit from the structure of the unconscious and as a narrow window of entry into that same structure. As theorised by Lacan, the unconscious is built on a signifying chain and is structured like a language. As a person (the speaking-subject) goes through life s/he uses speech as a vehicle for desire and for relating to the Other. The theoretical material produced by psychoanalysis is similarly a product of linguistic meditation. For Lacan, all unconscious mental processes are linked to speech by the

⁴ For an interesting overview of the feminist use of psychoanalysis in literary theory see Toril Moi's *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988). For a discussion of Lacan's principal ideas see Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana Press, 1991).

⁵ The insistence on the existence of an unconscious, for instance, is a notion most biologically-minded neurophysiologists would dispute.

symbolic (a system of signifying practices). As 'masters of the signifier', poets and writers have immediate access to the symbolic order. Using Saussure's binomial definition of the sign as *signifier* (an acoustic image) and *signified* (a concept), Lacan developed an algorithm *S/s* which pointed to his essentially asymmetrical view of the splitting of the sign. Whereas Saussure had viewed the dual proponents of the sign as symmetrical and equal, Lacan's theorising of an imagined disproportion reigning within the sign pointed to his belief in the omnipotent or *colonising* power of the signifier (represented by the upper component).

Both the structure of language and the structure of the unconscious are similar in that both, according to Lacan, are articulations of difference. Both are static and neither possesses a centre. In opposition to these static fields, Lacan posits the Other, which is unstable and in perpetual motion. Essentially, although he saw language as an abstract system of differences, Lacan recognised speech as a *act* which presumed the presence of a speaker. Speech therefore gives an identity to the speaker involved. Speech also presumes the existence of a listener (an Other), or a place from which the speaker is heard. Hence the unstable and active quality of the Other. Lacan's theorising of the Other is crucial to his thinking but can remain confusing. At times the Other is the second member of the dialectical couple Subject-Other, while it can also designate the condition of alterity or otherness in which both members find themselves. Hence, the Other is either the opposite of Self, or refers to the psychological condition in which one is placed in opposition to sameness. According to Lacan, the Other is the driving force behind the signifier. In her study of race and psychoanalysis, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks uses Lacan's notion of the omnipotence of the signifier to construct a paradigmatic expression of 'Race', a master signifier which she calls Whiteness:

The inaugural signifier of race, which I term Whiteness, implicates us all equally in a logic of difference. By Whiteness, I do not mean a physical or ideological property [...] or a concept, a set of meanings that functions as a transcendental signified. By Whiteness, I refer to a master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain, that by a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organising human difference. This chain provides subjects with certain symbolic

positions such as “black”, “white”, “Asian” etc. in relation to the master signifier.⁶

If Whiteness is the master signifier (without a signified), then all other signifiers within the chain (and in symbolic sequence) exist in relation to Whiteness. Race is thus a ‘system of categorisation that [...] shapes human difference in seemingly predetermined ways’ (p.4). Seshadri-Crooks goes on to say that, as the master signifier (Whiteness) is emblematic of wholeness (the *jouissance* of oneness), a fantasy of Whiteness is always disruptive as it implies the annihilation of difference.

In the Caribbean context, where what Fanon calls the ‘petit hiatus qui existe entre la békaille, la mulâtraille et la négaille’⁷ protects the subject from seeing himself or herself as black, the visual signifier of Blackness is experienced less as a dependent of the signifying chain which has as its apotheosis Whiteness, and more as symbolic of a *degree* of Whiteness. In other words, the mixed-race population provides that no-one is entirely black or entirely white. As Fanon remarks: ‘le Noir n’a plus à être noir, mais à l’être en face du Blanc’ (p.88). Thus for Fanon, it is the white gaze which renders the subject black, and not the *visibleness* of Blackness. In any case, commentators on racial identity have frequently referred to the *invisibility* of Blacks. According to Freud, the act of seeing expresses a desire for mastery. Thus, the voyeur’s gaze enacts a desire for power (dominant), while the object of the gaze is cast as powerless (passive). Within such a scopic economy, the dominant male gaze renders the female passive. As an object of the White gaze, the Black is similarly passive.

Seshadri-Crooks’s theory of race based on the visibility of difference is reminiscent of Freud’s theory of sexual difference in which the *visible* lack of a penis negates female sexuality (this lack places her in negative opposition to the male). For Freud, female sexuality represented a ‘dark continent’ of non-knowledge. As Deborah Lupton comments in *Medicine as Culture*: ‘Medical writings on the dissection of women’s bodies for the purposes of furthering anatomical knowledge posited doctors as the explorers of the mysterious dark recesses of the feminine body; entering

⁶ Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-4.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p.89.

unknown territory like colonialists penetrating the wilds of Africa'.⁸ For feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray, the Freudian dogma of feminine 'lack' places woman outside representation. Thus women are coded as being in between signs or forbidden. Irigaray uses the image of the speculum⁹ to demonstrate the *specular* nature of Western philosophy. Within such a discourse, where women are represented as the negative reflection of man, the logic of the *one* and the *same* reigns supreme. In a similar way (within a White economy), the black man or woman is systematically rendered *specular* other by a discourse that categorises him or her as the negative reflection of Whiteness.

Neither Freud nor Lacan discussed the notion of race or racial identity in detail in their work. Aspects of their theories, however, have been used by other thinkers in discussions of this subject. What becomes clear as one reads this material is that there can be no answers to our questions on race, except those of a general sociological nature. As Seshadri-Crooks remarks: 'even as the scientific untenability of race is ever more insisted upon by scientists and anthropologists [...] race itself shows no evidence of disappearing or evaporating in relevance' (p.3). As we shall see in chapter two, Franciane Galou's story 'Une simple question de couleur' proves this point. Furthermore, as Deleuze remarks with regard to psychoanalytic theory, 'it had become interminable, interminable in principle'.¹⁰ From Freud to Lacan via Jung and transferring to Deleuze and Guattari, there exist semantic multiplicities which contain common elements with each thinker, but there also exists a relentless circling which always, somehow, returns to a combination of signs.

*

Central to the elucidation of the theme of ambiguity in this thesis is the implicit presence of the image of the female body. Through each text (excluding perhaps those discussed in chapter one) we see on some level, an image of the female body either in formation or complete in tableau form. In certain chapters I undertake a discussion of the female body as it is represented in a specific text (as in chapters three and four), but

⁸ Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), (p.134).

⁹ A gynaecological instrument incorporating a mirror which is used in medical examinations to view the birth canal.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), p. 85).

in others the image is merely alluded to. It is useful, therefore, to give a brief overview of the theoretical background influencing our perceptions of what 'body' is and how bodies are controlled and reproduced in society.

There are many assumptions prevalent in critical thought regarding the role of the body in cultural, medical, political, religious and sexual life. These assumptions are as diverse as the human bodies to which they are applied. There is one supposition, however, which has threaded its way through each of these varying disciplines and remains a solid notion in most discussions of body politics. This is the view that the human being is a subject made up of two opposed and separate characteristics: mind and body. Within this dualism mind is privileged over body, and body becomes the repressed and subjugated function. Inherent in all dualisms is a tendency for one term to be subordinated. The subordinated term is defined by its own boundaries which are not only separate from, but also separate it from, the privileged term. In turn the privileged term is bound by and encased in its own set of defining laws. In all cases, it is the role of the privileged term to protect its integrity and prevent infiltration by the subordinated term. Thus mind is completely separate from body, and indeed is governed by separate laws. The mind/body dualism gives rise to a host of other oppositional relations, such as inside/outside, reason/passion, self/other and even male/female. The correlation of male with mind and female with body is a central (and accepted) notion in Western philosophy.¹¹ Rational thought and the disembodied mind are regarded as male in character, which leaves little scope for the female function to be represented as anything other than an irrational and unruly body.

Throughout the history of philosophical thought the body has been considered both as a vessel or tool dissociated from consciousness, and as a signifying medium. Either way, the body is perceived and understood as a passive and transparent entity which exists simply to fulfil the will of the subject or consciousness. Thus, the body acts as a threshold between the exterior world of culture and the cosmos (a two-sided barrier), and the interior world of the self. The body is allowed to exist in this capacity on the condition (imposed by the will) that it remain pliable, conformist and

¹¹ Traditionally women have been associated with the body because of their childbearing role. Caring for, and nurturing children were seen as specifically feminine roles until well into the nineteenth century. The male-female/mind-body binary remained largely unquestioned because of this association of woman with the capacity to nurture at home, while man worked to provide for her.

predictable. Thus the desire to tame the body, to sculpt it, mould it, govern it and *reduce* it, while we simultaneously expand our minds, broaden them, liberate them and allow them to wander. The effects of this distinction between mind and body continue to reverberate in critical thought and popular culture even today. Despite an effort to exhort a monist dynamic within philosophy, the rooted tenets of dualism still pervade, if only emblematically.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the rhetoric of colonialist discourse which uses oppositional dichotomies such as master/slave, White/Black and self/other to justify an inhumane and devastating regime of subjugation and domination. In the context of transplantation, colonisation and slavery (the trade in human bodies), the mind/body split is extended to its extremes. While the slave represented the embodiment of baseness, animality and unruliness, the master became removed from all that was bodily and existed as a powerful disembodied 'will' which served to subjugate and suppress the slaves. The denial of adequate clothing, food and medical care coupled with the grinding work in the fields, drove the slave ever closer to the reality of his or her corporeality. In parallel, the comfort and privileged position of the master facilitated a detachment from the body that allowed supremacy of the will.

Within the microcosm of the plantation the mind/body and master/slave dichotomies became quickly affiliated to the male/female binary. As a result of this, the already subjugated female slave was to become grotesquely objectified and exploited. Within the plantation economy the female slave was literally *made body*. Thus the Black female body became an icon of objectified sexuality and reproduction, abstracted and removed from thought, culture and order. In other words, the Black female slave became the corporeal signifier of chaos. Within such a dynamic, Black women are problematised as knowing subjects. How then does the Black-woman-as-object resolve this split that confines her within the realm of the body? The hermetically sealed sphere of pure body which she inhabits, by definition remains separate from White male order. The process of aligning the body with the mind is therefore painstaking and slow, and yet this is the task West Indian women have undertaken. Through *métissage* (of mind and body, race, and culture) and *marronnage*, the cry of the slave songs, the bursting forth of *parole* and the process of becoming-subject, the West Indian woman has brought herself into the twenty-first century with dignity and harmony.

*

While chronology is in a sense respected in this study, this is not so much a primary concern as proof of the *emergent* nature of the figure of the Caribbean woman in literature. As Derek Walcott says of Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*: 'The scansion of time is as simple as the monody of waves or the rhythm of the two seasons [...] it is *l'histoire*, not History but the story, the fable, the rumour, as opposed to times, dates and places'.¹² This chronology is not intended to label the earlier writings 'old' or indeed, the later writings 'new', nor is it intended to impose a rhetoric of linearity or continuity on the works discussed. Through a poetics of ambiguity I would hope, rather, to employ what Dash calls a 'flexible yet diachronic principle' of literary analysis.¹³

*

Chapter one situates the plantation and the mangrove as loci of ambiguity which are particular to Caribbean space. In the memoirs of Élodie Jourdain (1891-1954), a Béké from Martinique, the sugar plantation is evoked as a space which is inhabited by both Black workers and White planters. Through Jourdain's eyes the reader gains insight into the complexities and ambiguities that arise when two such groups inhabit an enclosed space. Using an anecdotal form, Jourdain describes the often difficult relationship of master and servant who live and work in close proximity. As Henriette Levillain comments in her introduction to the recent publication of these memoirs: 'Ainsi, dans les meilleurs des cas, le contrat tacite entre le maître et le travailleur était celui d'un échange de services, ou, selon le vocabulaire de l'époque, de dévouements'.¹⁴ Thus the plantation represented in many respects a site, or hub of creativity where the raw material of sugar cane was grown and the end products of sugar and rum were produced, all in a self-contained environment. Much was achieved under circumstances which, to our eyes, seem ambiguous. As White master and Black employee worked together, what were the boundaries (either visible or invisible) that defined their relationship?

The space of the mangrove as a naturally-occurring phenomenon is in itself

¹² Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says* (London: Faber, 1998), p.219.

¹³ Dash, 'The World and the Word', p.114.

¹⁴ *Mémoires de Békées* ed. by Henriette Levillain (Paris: L'Harmattan, Autrement mêmes 7, 2002), p.xiii.

ambiguous. Neither land nor sea but existing somewhere in between, the mangrove is emblematic of the sometimes elusive and indefinable nature of Caribbean culture and history. In her novel *Traversée de la Mangrove* Maryse Condé portrays the small Guadeloupean village of Rivière au sel as a microcosm of the world. Here, the ever-present mangrove is as much a part of the community as it is a part of the natural landscape. Condé uses a non-linear narrative style to evoke the fragmented dynamic behind the seemingly unified village population. As some of the villagers struggle to escape the stifling shadow of the mangrove, so others locate in its roots an answer to their lost inheritance.

Chapter two discusses the idea of racial ambiguity as it is represented in Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Michèle Lacrosil's *Cajou*, published in 1948 and 1961 respectively, and Franciane Galou's short story 'Une simple question de couleur'. Little is known about Mayotte Capécia, the author of *Je suis Martiniquaise*, although the novel has been interpreted by some as an autobiography. There has been recent interest in her work, however, mainly due to Frantz Fanon's unsympathetic analysis of her novel in a chapter of his seminal text *Peau noire, masques blancs*, which looks at the psychodynamics of the woman of colour and her relationship with the White man. Fanon unashamedly ignored the difference between the author and her literary persona. Through his reading of Capécia herself as the heroine of *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Fanon lumbered the writer with his now infamous *lactification* complex — the neurotic obsession with *whitewashing* the race. Michèle Lacrosil's work has come to the fore recently, notably in the domain of feminist criticism.¹⁵ The focus in this thesis, however, is on both Capécia and Lacrosil's portrayal of the *métisse* as a symbol of racial ambiguity. In both novels the Janus-faced heroine becomes victim of an overwhelming sense of not belonging, either to the society into which she was born, or the society in which she lives. There is a similar theme in Galou's story where the White master, following his physical transformation into a slave, still believes himself to be White. These heroines bear witness to what one critic has called 'the ambiguity

¹⁵ Sam Haigh, for instance, devotes a chapter to Lacrosil's two novels in her study of Caribbean literature entitled *Mapping a Tradition: Francophone Women's Writing From Guadeloupe* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000).

of racelessness'.¹⁶ In the case of Mayotte, the urge to better herself takes her away from her family and into the arms of a white soldier who ultimately lets her down. Similarly, Lacrosi's Cajou, the daughter of a white woman and a black man, has also left her native Guadeloupe and become engaged to a white man whose domineering conduct only pushes Cajou towards further introspection and the contemplation of suicide. In these stories the mixed race heroine is represented as an insecure other in search of oneness with her surroundings but faced, tragically, with disappointing solitude.

Chapter three discusses the novel and short stories of the Martinican author Suzanne Dracius, who uses the themes of exile, otherness and identity to question the reality of the Caribbean woman's experience. Dracius's heroines, like Mayotte and Cajou, are also born into the culture of *métissage* that exists in the Caribbean. The short stories chosen for discussion here reveal the *métisse* as a mythic figure in quest of knowledge and her place in the world. Not only does Dracius portray the subtle ambiguities of racial *métissage*, in her short story entitled 'La Virago' she creatively represents a *métissage* of human and machine. This 'cyborg' figure, which is also seen in 'De sueur, de sucre et de sang', provides a figure of alterity and ambiguity that is central to the new genre of West Indian myths that Dracius has been instrumental in constructing. Dracius's novel *L'Autre qui danse* which was published in 1989 is a work of complex and interwoven themes. The two heroines Rehvana and Matildana together represent the core ideas of *métissage*, exile and otherness which are central to Dracius's writing. Dracius extends the narrative begun in *L'Autre qui danse* in an unpublished short story entitled 'L'Âme Sœur' which is printed in Appendix one of this thesis. Here, we see Rehvana returning to Martinique in search of the lost fragments of her dead sister. These sister-heroines each reflect what the other is not and exist in a twin realm (separate but connected) of dichotomous ideals and polarised values.

In a similar way chapter four looks at the themes of madness and exile as they are represented in the work of the Guadeloupean-born Myriam Warner-Vieyra. Here, the author's representation of women on the brink of violence brings to light the ambiguous nature of what are termed hysteria and madness. Warner-Vieyra's

¹⁶ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 'Sexist, Misogynist or Anti-Racist Humanist? Frantz Fanon and Mayotte Capécia' in the *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 1(1997), 19-32.

characters are often displaced and exiled women. Like Dracius, she uses this theme of cultural displacement to portray the deep sense of internal or personal exile that is felt by the Caribbean woman. In both of Warner-Vieyra's novels the exiled female character is brought through a series of psychologically harrowing events that terminate in death. These events, while clear in their description, are coded by the author as sites of textual ambiguity. Replications of these events occur in altered forms in the collection of short stories entitled *Femmes échouées*, two of which are discussed in this chapter. Warner-Vieyra's descriptions of female violence, hysteria and loss of control are challenging and yet remain in the domain of the stereotype. In this chapter I will tease out what I see as an ambiguous representation of the much described 'mad woman'. In the short stories Warner-Vieyra pushes the reader's engagement with the text to its limits, and one is obliged to go back to these passages and question the almost dead-pan tone of an author who, on the one hand questions the constricting domestic role of woman, while on the other (having symbolically released her from that role) quickly replaces her female characters within an ordered framework.

Finally, chapter five proposes a reading of the work of Gisèle Pineau from Guadeloupe which proposes a transition from the stereotypical forms of literary representation of women, to an innovative and empowering profile of Caribbean femininity that is emergent. This is not an exhaustive study of Pineau's work, however, as I do not refer to her most recent novels *L'Âme prêtée aux oiseaux* and *Chair piment*, or to some of the short stories.¹⁷ Although each of the woman writers discussed in this thesis has endeavoured to challenge the staid representations of the West Indian woman present in much of the fiction from this area, Gisèle Pineau has created a positive set of images which permeate her novels and short stories and bring together the stereotype and the emergent icon. In this last chapter I will discuss three novels and one short story written by Pineau. Here, I show that this author has made what I refer to as an 'ambiguous transition' from the use of accepted paradigms of femininity, to a more complex and interesting model-in-progress that gives full expression to the concerns and experiences of West Indian women. Pineau does not, as Mireille Rosello suggests, 'decline the stereotype', rather she incorporates *traits* of the

¹⁷ Gisèle Pineau, *L'Âme prêtée aux Oiseaux* (Paris: Stock, 1998), *Chair piment* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2002).

stereotype with her own more evolved and free-flowing images of femininity.¹⁸ In many respects this chapter represents both a chronological and a metaphorical (if not practical) resolution of many of the themes discussed throughout the thesis. While an image of ambiguity (by virtue of its essence) tends to resist rationalisation and teleological interpretation, there is much reason in the analysis of such images.

*

The theoretical thrust of this thesis is in Glissantian, Fanonian and Jungian systems of analysis. As Fanon, to some extent, represents an important figure in the history of Martinican psychoanalytic thought, his work provides a solid basis from which to interpret the psychosocial dynamics of Caribbean society as they are portrayed in fiction. Similarly, it is in Glissant's idea of *opacité*, and the emphasis on change and unpredictability that can be seen in his writings, that make of his theory an apt vehicle for the exploration of the theme of ambiguity. As Glissant's recurring character Papa Longué represents a type of storytelling that is ambiguous and digressive, so the female storytellers in the works of Dracius and Pineau weave unclear and multi-layered narratives or modern *contes*, of sacrifice, *jouissance*, disguise and revelation. Glissant's poetics of relation as discussed in chapter one acts as a medium through which aspects of the other novels can be viewed.

Maryse Condé's character Francis Sancher is represented as an infiltrator or stranger whose ambiguous role within the small community somehow propels its inhabitants to effect change in their lives. Sancher's separateness and difference, while symptomatic of the atavistic inheritance of being regarded as other, are also predictive of the disguised 'Virago' and mixed-race Emma B in Dracius's short stories. Both of these characters are distinctly separate and other within their respective realms of cityscape and plantation, and yet they manage to subvert the norm and bring about change. There is also a trajectory that links Dracius's character Rehvana from *L'Autre qui danse*, and Warner-Vieyra's anorectic Juletane from her novel of the same name — the exiled body of the self-searching *subnègre*.¹⁹ In the novels *Juletane* and *L'Autre*

¹⁸ Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (London: University Press of New England, 1998).

¹⁹ One of Suzanne Dracius's neologisms, the word *subnègre* refers to the *métis* who 'n'est rien tout à fait, ni noir, ni blanc; pour n'être pas tout à fait rien (rien n'étant jamais tout noir ou tout blanc)'. 'L'Âme sœur', p.179.

qui danse, the body of the female protagonist is used as the site of separateness and otherness that renders the heroines denigrated and disordered. It has been useful in these chapters, therefore, to turn to philosophers like Susan Bordo for insight into the constraints society puts on the female body. Bordo relies on her analysis of television advertisements, popular culture and the work of certain feminist critics such as Susie Orbach, to create a vibrant theory of feminine body politics. Other writers of critical theory not relating specifically to the West Indies have also influenced this study. Hélène Cixous, bell hooks, and Gilles Deleuze are examples of writers whose ideas I have used while in the process of founding my own.

One cannot discount the literary canon that precedes the work of contemporary writers. Saint-John Perse, Césaire, Senghor, Roumain, Zobel, and Damas have collectively constructed a textual scaffolding around which contemporary writers have built their imaginative worlds. Nor can women writers deny the positive presence of writings by contemporary male authors such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. While the works of these writers are not discussed in detail in this study, their stories are often alluded to and remembered. Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, winner of the *Prix Goncourt*, a novel '[whose] events are in the prosody of memory', has been particularly influential in the area as it represents in many ways a tangible reading of collective memory, of *histoire*.²⁰ Yet with what task is the Caribbean writer faced? To record and recount the history and culture of his or her island? To create characters that faithfully represent the street-seller, teacher, labourer, lawyer? Or to create in the manner of Chamoiseau's literary alter-ego, the bird-scribe, a community of characters that reflects symbolically the past, present and future of a society in constant flux? As Maryse Condé comments: 'Le statut du texte littéraire caribéen demeure ambiguë [*sic*]. Pour le lecteur et pour le critique occidentaux (et aussi, pour des raisons différentes, caribéens), il est considéré comme porteur d'une information de nature sociologique ou politique permettant une meilleure appréhension d'un monde perçu comme différent'.²¹ Condé goes on to say that it is often perceived as the Caribbean writer's duty to speak the truth, to portray colonial oppression and the people's resistance to it.

²⁰ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, p.231.

²¹ 'Femme, terre natale' in *Parallèles: Anthologie de la Nouvelle féminine de langue française* ed. by Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Jean-Philippe Imbert (Québec: Éditions de l'instant même, 1996), pp.253-260 (p.253).

However, if this were the case, the Caribbean text would simply be rendered sterile ground onto which this binary opposition of resistance and oppression is grafted. Instead, it is in the forms of the carnival spirit, the ruse and the subversion of stereotypes that the Caribbean writer can situate his or her cultural reality. These archetypes of subversion are located in the 'blind spot' or 'metaphoric hole' of what could be termed mainstream literature.²²

²² In his *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Martin Jay refers to this blind spot that exists due to a fault where the optic nerve connects with the retina. It is in this blind spot or empty space that Jay locates alterity.

CHAPTER ONE

Ambiguous Spaces

Images of the plantation and of the mangrove in Élodie Dujon-Jourdain's *Le Sablier renversé* and in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

*L'espace Martiniquais est un anti-espace,
limité au point de rogner sur l'être,
mais divers au point de multiplier infiniment. Ambiguïté.*²³

Amid our preconceived ideas of what Caribbean space represents, there exist two types of space which are beyond our realm of experience. The first of these is a historical space, namely the plantations, which are spread over the island, fragments of a colonial past which now exist as tourist attractions. The second space is a landscape feature, the mangrove which is a space full of plant and animal life, inaccessible (except by water at high tide) and impenetrable. The plantation and the mangrove are two quintessential features of Caribbean space, the former because of its historical importance and the latter because it is a geographical oddity. The texts I have chosen for discussion in this chapter highlight the inherent ambiguity in these spaces. The earlier text, *Le Sablier renversé* focuses on plantation life at the turn of the century.²⁴ This is a personal memoir, anecdotal in style, which describes in detail quotidian life in planter society. The author's invaluable descriptions of the *habitation* evoke an *espace clos* which is at odds with received perceptions of an expansive settlement spanning an open zone of sugar-cane fields. The restrictive nature of Béké society as described by

²³ Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 276.

²⁴ Élodie Jourdain's memoir is published along with other related material in the collection *Autrement Mêmes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002). I would like to thank Hernetta Levillain for lending me a copy of the typescript for use before publication.

Élodie Jourdain provides the reader with an image of the plantation as constraining and limiting. In a similar way Maryse Condé's evocation of the mangrove in her 1989 novel, *Traversée de la mangrove*, provides us with a metaphor of constraint which incorporates both the protagonists' restricted lives and the claustrophobic nature of island existence.²⁵ While the two texts could be seen to be vastly different in style and content, they both facilitate a reading of the plantation and the mangrove as loci of spatial ambiguity.

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In Élodie Jourdain's memoir the descriptions of daily life on the plantation reveal how the relationship between Blacks and Whites was lived out through the land. The land was marked by lines which divided the two groups and these lines were either visible, taking the form of solid walls and doors, or invisible and taking the form of conceptual boundaries. Each group had the ability to penetrate the other's space either legitimately or in a clandestine manner. For instance, a Black maid could occupy White space for the purposes of work but not for recreation, while historically, White males have invaded Black female space when seeking sexual gratification but in no other capacity. Thus the plantation, as described by Jourdain, was a place isolated from the rest of the community, while within it the inhabitants were divided along lines of race, class and gender. This is not an unusual portrayal of the colonial plantation, but what is more complex here is the sub-text of Jourdain's narrative and the insight this lends to a reading of the Black-White relationship as it is played out in the text.

Glissant describes the plantation in terms of the closed space motif: 'Un lieu clos: chaque Plantation est désignée par des limites dont il est strictment interdit de sortir, sauf si on en a la permission écrite ou si des exceptions rituelles, comme à la saison du Carnaval, y autorisent. Chapelle ou église, atelier de distribution de vivres ou plus tard boutique d'alimentation, hospice ou hôpital: tout s'y traite en cercle fermé'.²⁶ Against this closed space is posited the open word which, according to Glissant, is a transformative element. The silent cry of the plantation where slaves were denied knowledge of the written word but created the *biguine*, the calypso, salsa and reggae, gave birth to the 'long cri [...] transfiguré en parole du monde' (p. 88). For Glissant the

²⁵ Maryse Condé, *Traversée de la mangrove* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989).

²⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), p. 78.

plantation represents a second locus of generation (the first being the slave ship), and is a source of historicity, *métissage* and the Creole word. The plantation is regarded by Glissant as a generic form which has as its modern equivalent the metallic and concrete mazes of places such as Harlem and Jacmel. Thus Glissant traces a line from the slave ship to the plantation to the bidonville (Chamoiseau's *L'En-ville*) along which the opaque thread of history can be read. He refers to the plantation as one of the 'ventres du monde' (p. 89), thus linking it to the image of the belly of the slave ship, an image already used by Glissant in *Mahagony* to evoke the dreadful fear of the unknown experienced by slaves as they embarked on the crossing to the New World.²⁷ Central to Glissant's evocation of Martinique's fragmented past is thus the matrix of the plantation.

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There are many fictionalised accounts of life on the sugar plantation in the West Indies, for instance Raphaël Confiant's *Commandeur du sucre*, and Marie-Reine de Jaham's *La Grande Békée*, but in Élodie Dujon-Jourdain's *Le Sablier renversé* we find an account of plantation life told by the daughter of a rich Béké which is a personal memoir.²⁸ Jourdain was born in Saint-Pierre, Martinique just over ten years before the fateful eruption of Mont Pelé in 1902. This natural disaster was to contribute to the ruination of the sugar-cane industry, and would send many white families, including the author's, over to mainland France in search of a new life. The year of Élodie Jourdain's birth was also the year of one of the worst cyclones in the history of the island which destroyed most of the *habitation* and nearly wiped out her family. The Dujon family was fortunate to have emerged unscathed, as Élodie's sister remembers: 'nos parents se disaient avant tout que nous avons de la chance d'être sortis tous vivants de cette catastrophe; car pour le pays c'était une terrible épreuve. Outre les dégâts matériels, nombreuses étaient les victimes' (p. 13). At the time, the Dujon/Marry plantation would have been among the largest in Martinique. According to the historian Armand Nicolas there were twenty functioning rum factories in 1900, the largest of which were situated at Trinité, Sainte-Marie, Lorrain, Rivière-Salée,

²⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Mahagony* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

²⁸ Raphaël Confiant, *Commandeur du sucre* (Paris: Écriture, 1994), Marie-Reine de Jaham, *La Grande Békée* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989).

Lamentin, Le François, Fort-de-France, and Saint-Pierre. These factories were kept in the hands of a small number of Béké families who were inter-related through marriage.²⁹ Nicolas lists the principal families as Hayot, Laguarrigue, Despointes, Pompignan and Fernand Clerc. He makes no mention of Dujon or Marry, but we know from Jourdain that there were ties with some of these families and her own as she makes several references to ‘tante Adeline de La Garrigue’.³⁰ She also tells us that she is related to the Despointes family via her sister Juana’s marriage to Roger Despointes. For readers unfamiliar with the social hierarchy in the Caribbean it may be difficult to imagine how wealth was distributed or indeed how the economy functioned. According to Nicolas, ‘L’économie était fondée sur la canne à sucre qui occupait dix-neuf mille hectares et était devenue une véritable monoculture. La canne alimentait la première industrie du pays; la sucrerie et rhumerie [...] l’industrie sucrière était concentrée entre les mains d’une poignée de familles’ (pp. 151-52). Thus the Béké families represented the most wealthy and powerful group in Martinique at the turn of the century, owning most of the land and being in control of the economy.

This quasi-aristocracy was a tightly-knit and impenetrable group. Families inter-married and there was no question of forming official liaisons with members of the labouring classes. While Élodie Jourdain does not hide from her readers the fact that Békés inter-marry, due perhaps to the sensitivity of the subject, she makes no mention of the problems this may cause. After all, *Le Sablier renversé* was written as a family memoir and was never destined for public consumption. Fortunately, there are many references in Caribbean literature to the problem of consanguinity and Marie-Reine de Jaham, a Béké from Martinique and an author of popular fiction, is less circumspect than Jourdain. In her 1989 novel *La Grande Békée* referred to above, we see the impossibility of marriage between Béké and ‘nèg’. This novel is something of a colonial romp, with a storyline tracing the efforts of one Fleur Mase de la Jocquerie to (quite literally) bring her family’s plantation back from the ashes, having witnessed its destruction by the eruption of Mont Pelé. The narrator comments on the case of her

²⁹ See Armand Nicolas, *Histoire de la Martinique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), Tome 2 pp.151-52. There is a difference in Nicolas’s spelling of the name ‘La Garrigue’ but it is the same name and there are in fact Lagarrigue families still living in Martinique today.

³⁰ ‘Marry’ was the name Élodie’s paternal grandmother took from her second marriage to Eugène Marry. Her first husband was Dujon and her maiden name was Huc.

son André: 'André était amoureux d'une fille à la paume des mains sombre. Pas un béké n'ignore ce que signifient les paumes sombres, les gencives foncées ou la sclérotique jaunâtre. C'est "la goutte" qui ressort. La goutte de sang noir qui souille irrémédiablement une lignée de békés. Aucune famille respectable ne voudrait d'une telle alliance' (p. 50). We also learn that the narrator's husband died in a fire when he was intoxicated, leaving his wife to manage their business. Fleur explains how she married him with no knowledge of the hereditary burden he carried with him: 'Car on m'avait caché un secret: une très lourde hérédité pesait sur mon mari. La folie, le delirium tremens avaient, au cours des générations, marqué de nombreux membres de la famille la Jouquerie' (p. 35). In *Le Temps des madras*, a novel which was published in the same year as *La Grande Béké*, the Martinican writer Françoise Ega writes of the Béké girls who attended the convent school near her house: 'On nous les désignait au passage: "Voici M^{lle} Machin, elle possède toutes les usines du côté de Saint-Pierre", "Voici M^{lle} Untelle [*sic*], elle est fille de cousins germains, c'est pour cela qu'elle à l'air idiot"'.³¹ Another example of the effects of consanguinity among the Békés can be found in Raphaël Confiant's novel *Eau de café*, when the narrator explains: 'C'est quand il vit la tête du garçonnet retomber lourdement sur le côté qu'il comprit que le Blanc-pays avait été victime de son union consanguine'.³² By only marrying within the Béké circle this White elite was able to keep its wealth and land restricted to a small ownership. Sadly the consequences of this were a whole array of genetic disorders and hereditary disease. Because the Békés rigidly maintained tradition and could never marry outside their class, it was customary for first cousins to marry and produce families. This meant that congenital illnesses and genetic abnormalities were perpetuated from generation to generation. It is said that in every Béké family there is one child with some form of disability. In her study entitled *Life in the Caribbean, 1838-1938*, Bridget Brereton cites the example of genetic degeneracy in the Bahamian

³¹ Françoise Ega, *Le Temps des madras: récit de la Martinique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), p.50. Ega who was born in Case Pilote, Martinique, in 1920, travelled within the African continent before settling with her husband in Marseille. Her second novel entitled *Lettres à une noire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1978) has been the focus of studies on sexuality by critics such as Mireille Rosello and Arthur Flannigan. See for instance Rosello's *Infiltrating Culture: Power and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), and Flannigan's essay 'Reading Below the Belt: Sex and Sexuality in Françoise Ega and Maryse Condé' in *The French Review*, 62 (1988), 300-10.

³² Raphaël Confiant, *Eau de café* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), p. 149.

In the Bahamas there were scattered communities of poor Whites on several islands mainly at Spanish Wells and at Hopetown, Abaco. In 1903 a medical survey in Hopetown disclosed an inbred settlement of about 1000 'pure' Whites, virtually all descended from three original settlers' families. There was tragic evidence of physical decline among them. This included many cases of hopeless idiocy (in one family there were five idiots among eight children), inherited deafness, dumbness and blindness, Hansen's disease (leprosy) and frequent deaths of mothers in childbirth. Even those not affected by any of these tragedies were described by the doctors as possessing low mental abilities. This was the price of racial purity. (p. 16)

Thus the plantation represented in many respects a closed space wherein the Béké family lived, cut off from the outside world. All social interaction took place within the confines of the *habitation* and with people of the same social and genetic profile. The Dujon plantation was three kilometres from Saint-Pierre and represented for its inhabitants a self-sufficient 'royaume' which had little need of the surrounding 'outside' world. The *habitation* consisted of the master's house, the servants' *cases* and the various outhouses. Élodie Jourdain describes the milieu in the following way: 'C'était à l'origine un petit monde clos, isolé, qui devait se suffire à lui-même, les communications difficiles se faisaient uniquement à cheval, d'où la nécessité pour le maître d'entretenir à peu près tous les corps de métiers' (p. 6). For her this idyllic dwelling was like a small village in which she could circulate freely, uninhibited by the potential dangers of the outside world. She refers to the Béké child as 'l'enfant-roi [...] auquel la troupe de travailleurs accordait la même déférence qu'au chef de famille' (p.6). A more detailed description is given in the chapter entitled 'Le cyclone' where Jourdain relates the events of the 1891 cyclone and the destruction and subsequent rebuilding of the *habitation*.³⁴ In this section the author gives descriptions of the

³³ Bridget Brereton, *Life in the Caribbean, 1838-1938* (London: Heinemann, 1985). This text refers generally to the English-speaking Caribbean but the historical context is similar.

³⁴ Nicolas refers to this hurricane as 'le cyclone terrible du 18 août 1891 qui fit quatre cent vingt

employees' quarters:

Les domestiques étaient logés hors de la maison dans des communs où se trouvaient également la cuisine, la “case à l'eau” et une petite pièce de débarras [...] à droite deux modestes cases achevaient en quelque sorte la clôture [...] dans mon enfance l'une était occupée par Job, ancien serviteur et factotum de mon père et l'autre par notre Da [...] immédiatement derrière s'élevait la colline qui portait les cases des travailleurs. (pp. 17-18)

Jourdain also outlines in detail the layout of the various outhouses and stables which form an important part in this ‘royaume mi-industriel, mi-agricole qui s'offrait à nous’ (p. 20). What is interesting here is the distinction that is made within this microcosm, between the space outside the main residence, which is occupied by the Black workers, and the space inside the house, which is occupied by the Béké family. Even ‘privileged’ Blacks, like the *da*, although employed within the main house, were lodged outside of it. In *La Grande Békée* the narrator makes a similar distinction between the Béké's living space and the ‘cases des nèg’. Fleur refers to two separate worlds, ‘celui des békés et celui des nèg’, which are positioned one behind the other: ‘Devant, le monde des békés avec ses vérandas luisantes, ses berceuses en bois de mahogany, ses lits à colonnes voilés de moustiquaires blanches, ses plateaux à punch scintillant de cristaux, ses odeurs de vanille, de rhum et de citron vert. Derrière, le monde des nèg’, avec d'autres odeurs—café, morue salée, friture, coco ranci et, toujours, celle de rhum—d'autres couleurs plus denses, plus sombres, plus violentes’ (p. 54). Here, food and colour are used symbolically to highlight the difference between the two groups. The Békés are represented by light/fresh colour and texture (the white mosquito net, the gleaming veranda, the smell of lemons), while the Blacks are represented by an altogether darker and more unpleasant range of signifiers. The emphasis is on odour and colour. Smells and foodstuffs, such as salted-cod and coconut, which are

morts et mille quatre cents blessés’ (pp. 110-11).

traditionally associated with poor Blacks are given a negative twist when associated with 'bad' smells of frying and food turning rancid. The colours used to describe this world are dark and menacing, evoking the threat of violence that is systematically associated with Blacks. Again this description conveys the ambiguous nature of the plantation as a residential setting where two groups, one submissive and one dominant, lived on the same land in close proximity.

This must have been a tenuous position for the Békés who were intent on maintaining complete power at any cost. It was imperative from their point of view that any attempts by the Blacks to gain control of the island, by organised rioting or other means, be immediately aborted. According to Sander Gilman, 'Inherent in the slaveholders' perception of the institution [of slavery] was the "paranoid" fear of slave uprisings. Fear of seizure of power by the Other is inherent in all images of Otherness'.³⁵ In the same way, any type of behaviour on the part of the Blacks that was considered to strengthen the regime would be encouraged. For instance, during the period of slavery it was common for White masters to incite male slaves to abuse female slaves. In this way, any possible unity among the class of slaves was stunted via the gender split. In his comprehensive study of slave trading in the West Indies Clarence Munford refers to this practice of 'elicit[ing] the collaboration of one segment of the oppressed in the mega-subjugation and super-exploitation of the most downtrodden, most wretched segment of the oppressed'.³⁶ After the abolition of the slave trade in 1848 most planters continued to employ Black workers, but also engaged Indian immigrants. The Indian immigrants or *coolies* as they were called, were considered by the Whites to be the perfect worker because of their gentle nature, the pacifist doctrine of Hinduism and their cultural separateness. These immigrants may have been a source of new blood, but they were forced to live in dreadful conditions. According to Nicolas, many of the Indian labourers were worse off than the slaves they replaced: 'Casés sur l'habitation des propriétaires dans une misérable cabane, mal nourris, mal vêtus, avec des salaires symboliques, astreintes à de longues et épuisantes journées de travail sous la férule de commandants peu accommodants, ils vivaient là

³⁵ Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 214.

³⁶ Clarence Munford, *The Black Ordeal of Slavery and Slave Trading in the West Indies* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991), p. 852.

aussi une vie pas très différente, parfois pire que celle des esclaves d'avant 1848' (p. 57). Between the years 1853 and 1863 the Martinican authorities employed almost twenty-two thousand immigrants, of African and Indian origin. During this period there were seven thousand six hundred and fifty-four deaths, in other words, one in three immigrants died.³⁷ There was no sense of unity between the East Indian and Black labourers. They were not enemies but they held different religious beliefs and spoke a different language. The existence of these fundamental differences worked to the advantage of the Whites who, of course, feared joint mutiny on their estates. Brereton quotes a Guyanese planter from this period as saying: 'They are totally different people; they do not inter-mix. That is, of course, one of our greatest safeties in the colony when there has been any rioting. If the Negroes were troublesome every Coulie on the estate would stand by one. If the Coulies attacked one, I could with confidence trust my Negro friends for keeping me from injury' (p. 8). One of the most powerful tools to which the dominant Whites could have access was the natural language barrier that separated the two groups. During the period of slavery, White masters would often segregate slaves who spoke the same language, thus ensuring the complete physical and psychological isolation of their victims. Glissant interprets the silence surrounding slavery ('l'implacable univers muet du servage'³⁸) as another sign of the traumatic evolution of Martinique's past, and suggests that the journey from Africa to an unknown place and the violent act of transportation in the slave ships, rendered the slaves speechless. This muteness was a psychosomatic manifestation of the rupture caused by the subject's alienation from his or her own body as they were sold into slavery.

Thus any potential unity between Blacks and Indians was successfully prevented by a system that sought out differences between these two groups and capitalised on them. In *Histoire de la Martinique*, Nicolas cites the governor of Martinique (Bruat) in 1850 as condemning the proposed influx of African indentured workers: 'peut-être le recrutement d'immigrants de la Côte d'Afrique serait-il infructueux parce que les nouveaux engagés de cette provenance ayant une similitude d'origine et de caractère avec les noirs des colonies ne tarderaient pas à faire cause

³⁷ See Nicolas pp. 59-60.

³⁸ *Le Discours antillais*, p. 238.

commune avec eux' (p. 56). The authorities were intent on maintaining a cultural divide within the workforce in the same way as the planters had enforced a divide along gender lines among the slave population. Fifty years later, at the onset of the famous strike of February 1900,³⁹ during which ten strikers were killed and twelve injured, the government sent reserves of thirty *gendarmes* and two battleships to the island. According to Nicolas 'il y eut des troupes dans toute l'île' (p. 159). Whatever their reasons, the White minority were right to be cautious. Under the circumstances, the attitude of the Blacks towards their White employers could only have been one of ambiguity, tainted as it was by their shared memory of slavery. In fact, there existed between these two parties a very definite and established relationship: one of dominance and submission, and we see examples of this again and again in the novels and memoir here mentioned.

In due course the society of workers became more integrated with the arrival of Chinese and Portuguese labourers, but the Indians generally kept to themselves. The quality of life experienced by the workers depended entirely on the character of the planter. Again I quote from Brereton: 'The worst White employers treated their workers with barely concealed contempt, seeing them simply as units of production like a mule or an ox—or a slave. But the better ones showed a genuine concern for their labourers' welfare and in fact might see them almost in the same light as their own children, an attitude we call "paternalism"' (p. 20). We find similar evidence of this kind of attitude in Élodie Jourdain's text, if not explicitly in her anecdotes, then certainly implicitly in the evocation of the atmosphere prevailing on the Dujon *habitation*. In the chapter entitled 'Nos Nègres', the author remembers her privileged status as a child surrounded by indulgent Black employees: 'Que ce fut [*sic*] au Marry, à la grand'case, ou à la Rivière Blanche, cette protection invisible pleine de complaisance déférente des "Travailleurs" s'étendait toujours sur nous' (p. 32). This

³⁹ On the 5th of February 1900 on several plantations between Marigot and Sainte-Marie in the north east of Martinique, sugar cane workers went out on strike. During the next few days the 'grève marchante' spread upwards to Macouba in the north and downwards to the Lamentin region in the mid-western part of the island. State Troops were employed to prevent it spreading to the south, but by February 13th hundreds of strikers had brought the plantations surrounding Fort-de-France to a standstill. The workers were granted a 50% pay-rise and the right to strike. News of the strike travelled to France where certain parties requested the urgent dispatch of troops in order to prevent a massacre of the white population. See Nicolas p. 156.

protection allowed the Béké children to live in complete harmony with their surroundings, and in relative freedom. This was not a luxury the labouring masses enjoyed. The paternalistic attitude of certain White employers may have made life more comfortable for some workers, but this attitude could also be interpreted as a more subtle system of control. By holding their workers in a paternalistic embrace, the Békés led them to believe that they were safe and cared for, and had no need to rebel.⁴⁰ In this way the White master's atavistic fear of mutiny among the Blacks was somewhat assuaged. It is interesting in this context to consider Clarence Munford's view of medical care on the plantations: 'The more developed plantations set up rudimentary infirmaries for ailing slaves. Their aim was anything but humanitarian—cold-faced slaveholders were anxious to isolate the contagiously ill in order to protect healthy workers from infection' (p. 678). In this way, the systematic control of illness (through the localisation of those who are ill) is symbolic of the control of the Black population through the code of slavery and plantation life.

In her article discussing the representation of the Béké in *Le Sablier renversé*, Henriette Levillain problematises the ambiguous relationship between the bourgeoisie and the dependent labouring class: 'On ne s'étonnera pas que ces récits, si près de la réalité qu'ils soient, taisent, ou minimisent lorsqu'ils en parlent, les violences, les révoltes et le marronage de certains travailleurs: aux yeux des narrateurs, ces actes appartiennent à la zone obscure de la psychologie de l'homme de couleur qu'ils ne cherchent pas à expliquer et qu'ils craignent confusément'.⁴¹ Interestingly Levillain refers to the psychology of the Blacks as a 'zone obscure', a kind of dark continent—the term which Freud applied to woman—which is beyond the Béké's realm of experience. An act of revolt on the part of a respected worker revealed the underlying discontent and *dis-ease* that would eventually corrupt the Béké-Nègre relationship. In the case of Élodie Jourdain's memoirs, a questioning of this kind of behaviour would consequently require a reviewing of relations between the employees on the estate and

⁴⁰ Patrick Chamoiseau aptly describes this paternalistic bind in *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). When referring to Esternome's release from slavery, Marie-Sophie says: 'Il n'osait ni partir ni vraiment demeurer. Bagage bizarre, l'habitation était pour lui devenue une sorte de havre' (p. 61).

⁴¹ Henriette Levillain, 'Les Békés vus par eux-mêmes autour des années 1900: Élodie Jourdain, *Le Sablier renversé*' in *Black Accents: Writing in French from Africa, Mauritius, and the Caribbean* edited by J.P. Little and R. Little (London: Grant & Cutler, 1997), p. 10.

her own family. Any reluctance on the part of Jourdain to disclose facts relating to tensions between the Békés and their employees is probably due to her desire to portray life on the plantation in an idyllic light, and also to convince her readers of the devotion bestowed on the Whites by their solicitous employees. After all, if a Black worker decides to rebel, it is because he has a mind of his own, the will to incite rebellion in other workers and the potential to destabilise the power dynamic on the *habitation*.

Jourdain does, however, give ample examples of happy times on the plantation, as she endeavours to show that the two communities lived in relative harmony so long as the rules of their unusual relationship were respected. Referring to the return from Paris of her young stepbrother, Raymond Marry, Élodie Jourdain writes:

Au Marry, ce fut du délire: les nègres qui l'avaient connus enfant lui témoignaient une admiration et je dirai une tendresse débordante; il la leur rendait en gentillesse, et en bienveillance familière et tout le monde était content. Etonné d'abord par ces rapports entre noirs et blancs, parce que cela n'existait pas ainsi dans son pays, Maurice Lange s'y était très vite accoutumé et il se plaisait beaucoup lui aussi à ces assemblées nocturnes qui évoquaient si puissamment les premiers temps de la colonisation et peut-être l'Afrique lointaine où étaient nés ces contes, ces chants, ces danses et les éternels "titims".⁴² (p. 134)

It is interesting that Jourdain evokes not just the complicity she perceives to exist between the servants and their employers, but also the songs, riddles and dances that she associates with Africa. Is it with nostalgia that Jourdain is referring to the early days of colonisation? If so, then the author's romanticised version of events covers up her underlying fear of recording the past using the written word. Earlier on in the text, the author dismisses the desire to lament times past: 'nos vieux travailleurs dont quelques-uns avaient connu l'esclavage, quand notre génération à nous aura disparu, l'image qui en subsiste au fond de notre mémoire s'éteindra pour toujours et la

⁴² Riddles.

“Rivière Blanche” ne sera plus qu’un nom vide de sens. N’est-ce pas un vain souci que d’essayer d’en prolonger la résonance?” (p. 6). This shows a reluctance on the part of the author to write down her past experiences, as she asks herself if her readers will understand the world she came from or if they will misinterpret that world. The above passages thus display the ambiguous status of the Béké *vis-à-vis* the highly subjective act of telling and re-telling the history of the island.

Jourdain’s anecdote conveys the mutual understanding which undoubtedly existed between two groups who were dependent on each other, emotionally and materially. Another example of this complicity can be found in the chapter entitled ‘1905’ when Julien, the employee of Élodie’s uncle Raoul, urges his master to return to Fourniols to see his family: ‘Allé oué béké, ou ka palé trop nèg ici a, ou pa ké save palé francé enco’ (p. 121).⁴³ The implication here is that, if the White man does not return to his own people, he will end up forgetting or losing his own language and essentially his identity. However, Jourdain is also at pains to emphasise the solicitousness of her uncle Raoul’s manservant, and the selfless attentiveness of the Blacks on her estate. It is interesting that throughout the text when Black characters are quoted, the language used is Creole, although Creole was also spoken by the Békés and their accent in spoken French was hugely affected by the nuances of Creole. This is consistent with a set of ideas that perceived the Black population as being incapable of expressing themselves in the French language.

Even though there was no social interaction at this time between White employers and their workers, most Béké men had Black mistresses with whom they produced offspring. In his enlightening volume *Two years in the French West Indies*, Lafcadio Hearn observes that:

The moral standard in Martinique was not higher than in other French colonies. Outward decorum might be to some degree maintained, but there was no great restraint of any sort upon private lives: it was not uncommon for a rich man to have many ‘natural’ families; and almost every individual of means had children of colour. The superficial nature of race prejudices was

⁴³ Va voir les blancs, tu parles trop le créole ici, tu ne sauras plus parler français.

everywhere manifested by unions, which although never mentioned in polite converse, were none the less universally known; and the 'irresistible fascination' of the half-breed gave the open lie to pretended hate.⁴⁴

Munford confirms the existence of this double standard and suggests that although in practice miscegenation was common, in theory the West Indian bourgeoisie 'bowed in worship of "pure" white blood strains untainted by darker racial admixture'.⁴⁵ In his study of sexual practices in the British empire Ronald Hyam refers to the recognition among historians that such sexual activity among White rulers and their female slaves existed. According to Hyam 'it was almost customary for white men of almost every social rank (but especially of the lower classes) to sleep with black women. Coloured mistresses were kept openly, and the practice was integral to West Indian life. Informal liaisons were common even for married proprietors and their teenage sons. It was not reprehensible for a young white to begin his sex life by seducing a slave woman'.⁴⁶ Hearn's remarks cited above pertain to the latter half of the nineteenth century when, according to him, the population had already become largely *métissée*: 'Only a small element of African descent really exists: yet when a White Créole speaks of the "gens-de-couleur" he certainly means nothing darker than a mulatto skin' (p. 343). This supports the claim that laws prohibiting miscegenation were largely ignored. Sexual exploitation of Black women was an important dimension of slavery, and although a veneer of disdain regarding this practice was maintained, ironically there was no hesitation when it came to satisfying the lust of the White men in power. It remains an unchallenged fact that Black women were systematically subjected to the sexual advances of White men. As Hyam attests, 'The stark fact was that a slave-master had absolute rights over his slaves and could appropriate his sexual assets' (p. 93).

The same does not hold true for White women and Black men, however, and all such unions were violently crushed by the chauvinist code of the White males. This would be explained much later by Frantz Fanon, who believed that while it was a given that White men would take Black women by force, if a White woman had sexual

⁴⁴ Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (Harper & Brothers, 1890), p. 342.

⁴⁵ Munford, p. 699.

⁴⁶ Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 92-3.

relations with a Black man it was fuelled by romantic love: 'Le Blanc étant le maître, et plus simplement le mâle, peut se payer le luxe de coucher avec beaucoup de femmes [...] mais une Blanche qui accepte un Noir, cela prend automatiquement un aspect romantique. Il y a don et non pas viol'.⁴⁷ While this is an insightful response it does not explain the sense of anathema White men felt at the idea of 'their women' having sexual relations with Black men. Hyam believes this phenomenon to be a genuine taboo based in the notion of an aggressive Black sexuality and a belief that the Black man has a larger sex organ and a heightened sensuality. He suggests that 'Sexual fears are obviously capable of manipulation for political ends, such as the maintenance of white control. But sexual fears are not (as has often enough been argued) a mere rationalisation of political and economic fears, and white men were genuinely apprehensive of the erotic competition' (p.204). As such this taboo existed on the one hand to allay the fears of sexual incompetence ingrained in White men and, on the other, to justify the denial of Black male independence (granting political freedom was equated with allowing Black men access to White women's bodies). As Roger Little suggests in his *Beyond Totem and Taboo*:

[...] the *Blanche/Noir* couple traditionally encapsulates the more radically scandalous transgression of perceived power relationships, with emancipation involved for both parties, thereby reversing received notions of dominance by White and male over Black and female, a precedence which is further problematised in the white female's relationship with the black male. Each party flies in the face of the mores of his or her community by taking the genetically desirable practice of exogamy "too far".⁴⁸

It is indeed Hyam's thesis that sexual dynamics was the driving force behind the operation of British empire and expansion. He suggests that 'Without the easy range of sexual opportunities which imperial systems provided, the long-term administration and exploitation of tropical territories, in nineteenth-century conditions, might well

⁴⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 37, Fn.5.

⁴⁸ Roger Little, *Beyond Totem and Taboo: Black Man, White Woman in Francographic Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), p. 4.

have been impossible' (p. 1). Thus inter-racial sex between White women and Black men remained taboo, while sex between White men and Black women, although disapproved of on the surface, remained in reality a practice which had many advocates, and any high-ranking planter had at least one Black concubine, not to speak of the many Black slaves he nonchalantly raped at his convenience. As Hyam concedes 'Sex on the slave plantation was in essence part of a system of gross and indefensible abuse' (p. 206-7).

Such themes are, however, absent from Jourdain's memoirs and one is compelled to wonder if this was due to shyness, prudery or the desire to keep such sensitive details off the written page. Only on one occasion does the author allude briefly to the sexual dynamics of plantation life. This occurs in Jourdain's section concerning her *da*, Rosina. Rosina was the result of a union between her mother and a White planter and was brought up on the 'Fourniols' plantation at Sainte-Anne. After the abolition of slavery in 1848, Rosina and her mother were given their freedom. At the age of sixteen Rosina was in her turn sexually harassed by her White employer. In order to escape what would have undoubtedly resulted in an unwanted pregnancy, she decided to leave for Saint-Pierre. There she found work as a domestic servant with the de Ponteves family, and two years later with Élodie's grandmother Huc, as a 'bonne d'enfant' and then as the *da*, which was her official status until her death at the age of seventy-eight. This single reference to the sexual vulnerability of young Black women neither problematises the issue of sexual dynamics between slave and master, nor seeks to excuse the behaviour of the White male. Jourdain merely glosses over something which she obviously believed did not concern her.

Élodie Jourdain was often labelled a tomboy in her youth, and even regretted the fact that she had not been born male: 'mais souvent ravivait chez moi le regret enfantin de n'être pas un homme' (p. 44), but it was obviously less acceptable in the late 1800s for a girl of her class to take an interest in sport or other outdoor activities, than it is now, and the author realises that 'trente ans plus tard [...] je n'aurais pas, pendant dix ans, encouru l'éternel reproche d'être trop garconnière' (p. 44). These children were of course brought up in an entirely different way from their European equals. Firstly they lived an exterior rather than an interior existence, being as they were, as near to nature and the sea as is possible. Secondly, they were surrounded by

countless Black and Indian workers who voluntarily watched over them, thus ensuring the freedom that was so characteristic of their lifestyle: 'J'ai dit en commençant dans quelle liberté grandissait l'enfant blanc des campagnes, cela ne pouvait être possible que si les parents le savait protégé par tous, et, en fait c'est bien ce qui existait' (p. 31). Béké children were, however, not often left in the company of their parents, as it was usually the *da* who saw to their needs. The *da* was a live-in nanny or servant who would have been employed by the family as a young girl and kept on to look after up to three generations of children, never marrying or having any children of her own. In *Yette* a novel spanning a similar if slightly earlier historical period to Jourdain's memoirs, the *da* is simply described as 'la vieille bonne qu'on nomme "da" en ces parages' (p. 7) but Élodie Jourdain is much more effusive regarding her *da* and even dedicates a chapter to her, 'cette humble seconde mère' (p. 31).⁴⁹

The *da* would have doted on the children in her care, and her love was always reciprocated, even by strong-willed children such as Élodie, who, despite her independent spirit, admits to resorting to the help of her *da* on several occasions. Writing as an adult, the author reverts to the paternalistic attitude mentioned earlier when referring to this woman who once meant so much to her: 'tout en elle se rapprochait de l'enfance: sa douceur, son inépuisable dévouement et jusqu'à son manque d'intelligence' (p. 36). We see a similar attitude in *Yette* where the narrator comments on the simian-like posture of her *da*: '[elle] se balançait d'un pied sur l'autre, à la façon des jeunes singes' (p. 191). The association of Blacks with animals is loaded with negative ideas of inferiority, sexual precocity and stupidity, and therefore can never be used innocently. That such an association is made here in a seemingly jocular manner is only evidence of the insidiousness of the culture of racism that was so casually submitted to in the early 1900s. Although Blanc's treatment of Blacks in her novel is no different from that seen in other material from the same period, she has been quite strongly criticised recently. In her study entitled *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* Alice Finch accuses the author of 'reproducing with shameless condescension stereotypes of gambolling piccaninnies and feckless blackmen

⁴⁹ Marie-Thérèse Blanc, *Yette: Histoire d'une jeune Créole* (Paris: Georges Chamerot, 1880).

with rolling eyes'.⁵⁰ Admittedly, writers like Blanc and Jourdain used words which we now read as pejorative. From the above descriptions of the Black *da* there emerges a sub-text which in some respects negates the good intentions of the authors. While Jourdain and Blanc are at pains to portray the positive aspects of the relationships they observed between the Whites and their Black servants, the reader is aware of an undercurrent of unease that exists between the two groups. This is due in no small way to the obviously unequal status of both parties. While the Black workers did the hard labour, the White masters amassed fortunes.

Yette's *da* was a wonderful storyteller and, in chapter two of the novel, the narrator explains how every evening the children and domestic staff would assemble to hear her fabulous stories of Compère Lapin and Compère Tig (*Konpè lapin è konpè tig*). The author gives a detailed account of one of these *contes*, its moral, and the positive effect it had on its audience. It is interesting to note that Élodie Jourdain was also entertained with these same stories as a child, although it was not the *da* but her paternal grandmother, 'Maman Nènène', who was the storyteller in this instance. Élodie seems to have been enchanted by the tales and writes: 'mais combien plus vivants et plus amusants étaient les récits créoles de Maman Nènène! Celle-là ne dédaignait pas le folklore local et puisait largement dans les exploits de Compè Lapin et de Compè Tig. Mimant leurs actions, chantant avec verve les refrains, parfois sans queue ni tête, inventés par les noirs, Maman Nènène nous rendait parfaitement l'atmosphère de son enfance à elle, bercée par ces récits d'esclaves' (p.24). Here again there is a nostalgic tone to the author's recollection of the colonial era. There is also a slightly condescending note of ridicule in her reference to the slave songs as having 'ni queue ni tête'. The author's interpretation of the songs as inscrutable or nonsensical can be read as indicative of the *opacity* of the Blacks' use of language, rather than of a 'lack' on their part. Glissant describes this nonsensical use of language in terms of a *ruse*, or a form of resistance. In her critical analysis of Glissantian thought and its relevance to postcolonial theory, Celia Britton explains that 'Camouflage is inherent in the basic structure of the language. An emphasis on loudness and a jerky, accelerated delivery that appears to be meaningless or even nonsensical in fact serves to

⁵⁰ Alice Finch, *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 59. I am grateful to Roger Little for bringing this study to my attention.

communicate, secretly, the real meaning'.⁵¹ Glissant highlights the ambiguity inherent in Creole, whose origin and development is inextricably linked to the ruptured past of the island and the conflictual encounter with the White Other. In order to make the language their own and develop it as a form of resistance, the Blacks deliberately exaggerated aspects of the language that the Whites rejected (for instance simplicity and the use of concrete images) and used them as camouflage to mask their real meaning. In this way 'the language functions through its pervasive ambiguities, simultaneously expressing and hiding its meanings'.⁵²

Élodie Jourdain pays homage to her two grandmothers in a chapter entitled 'Nos Aïeules', saying how different they were but how much she depended on each of them as a child. 'Maman Loulou', who saw to the children's religious instruction and discipline, had been exiled to Paris, and subsequently widowed on her return to Martinique. Maman Nènène was livelier and charmed the children with her Creole songs and stories; she also ran the plantation 'hospital', and saw to the medical needs of children and workers alike, but both women were loved equally by their family and their employees: 'ils [les Noirs et les Indiens] les appelaient indifféremment l'une et l'autre "Maman". Quel autre mot pourrait mieux que celui-là, résumer les rapports qui unissaient en ce temps les travailleurs des habitations à la plupart de leurs maîtres?' (p. 29). In fact it was usual in Béké families during this period to have several generations of women living under the same roof. As women often lost their husbands at a young age, they were in need of company and assistance in rearing their children, and so grouped together in these matriarchal 'communes' where there may have been only two men for six or seven women.

It is also instructive to note here the attitudes of Béké children to their Black contemporaries. Élodie states that her parents forbade her to frequent the children of their Black employees on the plantation. The objection of Élodie's family to her having Black playmates was perhaps based on some kind of sexual taboo (the author mentions 'la précocité des races noire/indienne en ce qui concerne l'amour') or the need to maintain boundaries, but the young Élodie admits to disobeying her parents. The

⁵¹ Celia M. Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 25.

⁵² Britton, p. 26.

reason she gives is the following: ‘cette défense elle-même ajoutait à l’attrait qu’ils avaient pour nous et qui était fondé, on le devine, sur le sentiment que nous avions de notre supériorité sur eux. Dès sa naissance l’homme aime à commander et nous avons là sous la main de quoi satisfaire ce goût: les petits nègres nous obéissaient aveuglément, comment résister à une telle tentation?’ (p. 41). It would seem, then, that from a young age, Béké children are aware of a racial and a social difference which separates them from their Black contemporaries, and that they are willing to engage with this dynamic by constructing a ‘master-servant’ type relationship. Similarly, Yette is portrayed as being of an equally disobedient disposition and her parents threaten that: ‘il faudrait au plus tôt t’envoyer en France, dans quelque pensionnat où l’on viendrait à bout de tes entêtements, de tes colères, de tout ce qui fait de toi une fille plus insupportable que deux garçons mal élevés’ (p. 6). Later in the text, the narrator refers to the ‘paradis terrestre’ in which Béké children live in comparison to the confined lives of children born in France: ‘La vie de famille tel que nous l’entendons en Europe suppose, quelque douce qu’elle puisse être, un peu de répression et de contrainte. Yette n’avait connu rien de semblable. Tout ce qu’elle voulait, elle avait ou parvenait à se le procurer’ (p. 13). As I mentioned earlier, the White child, ‘l’enfant-roi’, had the constant care and attention of the Black domestic and outdoor staff, and thus trusted them completely: ‘Jamais un noir ne nous inspira la moindre arrière-pensée de crainte: nous les sentions si bien si proches de nous’ (p. 31). In other words the Békés relied on their Black workers to take care of their children, entertain them with their music, and even provide them with a second language, and yet they continued to refer to the Blacks as ‘ces humbles’, ‘ces nègres’. In *Le Sablier renversé*, the Black population is portrayed as hard-working, eternally devoted to the white masters, selfless and unquestioning in the face of White dominance. Herein lies the ambiguity of the Béké–Nèg’ relationship.

In a sense this relationship was one of interdependence. The Béké relied on the Blacks for low-cost labour, and the Blacks were bound to work on the plantations. We know that the sugar-cane industry was thriving during the period covered by Jourdain’s text, and that there was little or no other industry functioning on the island at the time. It is possible then that there was simply no other option for uneducated Blacks but to work on the same plantations where their forefathers had been slaves.

Also, it was in the interest of the Whites to maintain a high level of illiteracy among the Black population. By restricting their literacy, denying them access to knowledge, or indeed suppressing the knowledge generated by that group, the White elite were empowered to subjugate the Black population. This was because the presumed absence of knowledge or independent thinking on the part of the oppressed group was taken to indicate that they were willing to collaborate in their own victimisation. The association in the White subconscious of Blacks with domestic service, cannot be ignored in this context. The supremacist code of the plantation-era succeeded in establishing the requisite split or division between master and slave along lines of race, class and gender. This split placed the slave in the role of domestic servant at best, and field labourer at worst. Spatial-dynamics dictated that while the field workers be kept outside (an area reserved for White males and both Black males and females), domestic workers be kept inside (a domain which was essentially White and female, although White male 'decision-making' would also have taken place in the interior).⁵³ The interior domain of the plantation, (possibly because of its association with the categories White and female) was regarded as being clean and ordered. Thus a slave who worked in the interior was forbidden from carrying out duties in the exterior. In fact, for the most part those working inside the main house were not pure Blacks but mulattoes. In his novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, André Schwarz-Bart alludes to this type of colonial etiquette. Referring to the mixed-race child Solitude, the narrator comments: 'Lorsque naissait un tel produit, digne de servir à la table des Maîtres, on l'enlevait avant qu'il ne prenne les maladies, souvent mortelles, les tours d'esprit et de langage, les mains squameuses qui caractérisent les bêtes des champs'.⁵⁴ There is a similar reference in Maryse Condé's novel *Moi, Tituba sorcière...noire de Salem* where Tituba is instructed by her White mistress that she will not be allowed to prepare food because 'je ne supporte pas que vous les autres nègres touchiez à mes aliments

⁵³ It must be stressed that all slaves were confined to the inner boundaries of the plantation walls. Except during times of celebration (during carnival for instance), slaves did not have the right to venture outside the habitation. Again we see this expressed in *Texaco* where Marie-Sophie reveals that 'Mon Esternome qui n'avait jamais dépassé les zones de son habitation, découvrit le pays: une terre jamais plate, dressée en verdure vierge [...] excepté dans les habitations orgueilleuses, solitaires, alimentées de leur propre nombril, le pays était désert' (p. 70).

⁵⁴ André Schwarz-Bart, *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 51.

avec vos mains dont l'intérieur est décoloré et cireux'.⁵⁵ The focus in both passages is on the colour and texture of the palms of the hands, and again, we see an observation based on difference at the centre of the White elite's analysis. Being chosen to work in the interior world of the Whites was thus determined by physical health and a set of aesthetic criteria.

According to the African-American feminist Patricia Hill Collins, one of the most insidious images imposed on Black women is that of the 'mammy' (an almost identical image to that of the West Indian *da*), the faithful and obedient domestic servant. The typical characteristics of the mammy are benevolence, attentiveness and an ability to nurture. Physically she is overweight and dark-skinned with African facial features. For Hill, this stereotype of the Mammy symbolises the White ideal of submissive Black femininity: 'Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the Mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behaviour. [...] even though she may be well loved and may yield considerable authority in her White "family", the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination'.⁵⁶ Thus by restricting their access to knowledge and restricting their movement in a process that was certainly passive-aggressive, the White elite managed to maintain the slave population, and later the population of Black and Indian workers, in a rigid but cosy state of submission. We have seen how the complex nuances present in this unusual relationship of interdependence can be unravelled to reveal an almost unchanged dynamic of inequality pervading the Black-White partnership. Jourdain has painted a factual picture of the sugar plantation complete with its White planter family and troop of Black and Indian workers. However, we have seen that it is in fact through this almost stereotypical description that we view the emergence of a politics of separation that is ambiguous, and has at its root the unequal and ambivalent relationship of master and slave.

The ambiguities within these binarised relations (master-slave, interior-exterior, human-land) merit further discussion, which can be appropriately facilitated through

⁵⁵ Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba sorcière... noire de Salem* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1986), p. 40.

⁵⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Boston: Unwin, 1990), p. 71.

the image I evoked earlier of the plantation as matrix. This image has at its centre the notion of womb as microcosm. Just as the womb nestles the unborn child, so the plantation holds within its walls a human population. We cannot ignore, however, the association of the womb with femininity, and by extension, the attendant metaphors of fertility and reproduction on the one hand, and bareness and infertility on the other. The womb is a feminised and medicalised subject, the locus of hysteria and the habitat of female disorder. Thus the image of the plantation as an enclosed space, a matrix, reveals a walled-in and cave-like feminised terrain, laboured by man and waiting to produce a harvest. We are also reminded of Miller's image of the womb in his novel *Tropic of Capricorn* as a languageless and mute object.⁵⁷ Apart from the shouted orders of the *contremaître*, the resounding silence of slaves muted by the crossing rendered the plantations devoid of human sound, although not entirely languageless.

Jourdain's representation of space is portrayed implicitly in her descriptions of designated areas on the plantation. The Black and Indian workers, for instance, are allowed a space (*une case*) on the side of the hill behind the big house and at a safe distance. This designation of space is systematically rationalised on the basis of race. The whiter the person, the closer he or she is allowed to the master. Mulattoes were allowed, during work time, to inhabit the space of the Whites (according to a strict code which regulated work practices) but this was restricted to certain areas of the house. The omission on the part of Jourdain of any reference to those zones of communal use one presumes existed (paths, meeting-points, thresholds) adds a layer of ambiguity to her transparent descriptions of the plantation's topos. Let us take William Empson's theorising of the various types of ambiguity (in poetry) referred to above, the seventh type of which involves both opposition and context, and apply it to this discussion of space. Here we see that Jourdain has introduced an opposition (albeit by omission), that of the concealment of common zones in opposition to the evidence of separate zones. The specific context is that of the plantation. Jourdain has therefore created an instance of ambiguity (of the seventh type). The reader must ask what lies behind these rigid boundaries and where are the points of crossing? Encounters within shared zones would, however, imply a destabilisation of the dominant-submissive

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Cline, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Spatial and Social Organization* (MIT Press, 2011), 231.

⁵⁷ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (Paris: Obelisk Press, 1939).

dynamic and a fleeting recognition of equality. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, these common spaces (the *in-between*) lack a formal identity and yet they facilitate all substance and all identity into being. For Grosz, the *in-between* is a locus of social and cultural transformation and a destabilising force in that it is a 'potential that always threatens to disrupt the operations of the identities that constitute it'.⁵⁸ Thus shared-zones or common spaces exist as loci of disruption in relation to the disparate and binarised spaces of the larger matrix. As Grosz suggests: 'The in-between is what fosters and enables the other's transition from being the other of the one to its own becoming, to reconstituting another relation, in different terms' (p.94). Within shared-zones (the *in-between*) such ephemeral encounters (between master and servant) are perhaps not expandable over time and therefore not worthy of mention. Such omissions, however, create an interesting sub-text in Jourdain's writing and point to a possible confusion on her part regarding the psycho-social dynamics of the plantation where she lived. This we will never know. By using the concept of ambiguity as a grid, however, we have been able to tease out the unspoken possibilities in this text and decipher some of its subtleties.

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Maryse Condé's portrayal of the mangrove as an ambiguous space also has at its centre the idea referred to above of space as matrix. Here, the characters of the small village are cramped together like the tangled roots of the mangrove. The reader is given the impression that the mangrove is the creator of these characters who are so desperate to escape from its cloying embrace. Condé alerts us to this atmosphere of uneasiness in her title, which implies an action of crossing that is impossible. It is in fact only as a result of the death of the character Sancher that the village inhabitants manage to break free psychologically from the mangrove/matrix. Sancher is writing a novel entitled 'Traversée de la mangrove' which remains unfinished. It is interesting to make a comparison here with Jacques Lovichi's novel *Mangrove*, in which the narrator of the story is himself writing a poem about the mangrove.⁵⁹ Lovichi, like Condé, brings forth the mangrove's primary characteristic of impenetrability: 'Maintenant, la

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), p. 93).

⁵⁹ Jacques Lovichi, *Mangrove* (Moulins: Ipomée, 1982). I am grateful to Roger Little for bringing this novel to my attention.

mangrove, insidieusement se referme [...] Rétiaire multiforme et implacable, la végétation se déploie comme une aurore boréale' (p. 37). In this novel the mangrove is referred to as 'man's grave: la tombe de l'homme' (p. 147), thus linking it with the closed space and the same restrictive atmosphere we see in Condé's novel. Lovichi also links writing with the mangrove image as he declares: 'Ma page devenait mangrove' (p. 53). This is a reference to the narrator's inability to restrain his racing thoughts as he remembers his escape from a prison camp. Much like Lovichi's narrator, Condé's character struggles to write his own life story as it becomes increasingly complicated and impenetrable.

One of the more disconcerting features of Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* is the evocation of the cloying atmosphere in which the inhabitants of Rivière au sel live. The place itself, a compact village situated on the border of a dense forest, is humid and overcast, while the miniscule population consisting of two principal families, the Ramsaran (of Indian descent) and the Lameaulnes (wealthy *mûlatres*), some smaller Black families, plus some Haitian and Dominican immigrants, is sufficiently inconsiderable for each villager to share intimately in the life of his or her neighbour. As the narrative progresses, however, Rivière au sel becomes a microcosm (containing people of all ethnic origins and religious beliefs), a mangrove which harbours half-told truths and ancient secrets, and ultimately with the arrival of the ambiguous character Francis Sancher, an open space expanding into the wider Caribbean and the limitless world. It is this outward movement, a turning away from the confinement of the island, that opens up a new space in Condé's writing.⁶⁰ This deflection is symbolised in the phrase 'voici venu le temps de mon re-commencement' (p. 214) spoken by Dodose Pélagie, one of the novel's female characters whose life is transformed by the death of Sancher.

Many critics interested in the literary career of Maryse Condé have commented on how most of her novels from *Hérémakhonon* to *La Vie scélérate* are situated in continents as diverse as Africa and the United States, but not until the publication of *Traversée de la mangrove* in 1989 and *La Migration des cœurs* in 1995 has Condé

⁶⁰ *Le Discours antillais*, p. 28.

used her native Guadeloupe as a background for her stories.⁶¹ For instance, in her essay focusing specifically on *Traversée de la mangrove*, Françoise Lionnet writes that ‘a form of wandering characterizes Condé’s life and literary output in the 1970s and 1980s’.⁶² This is an accurate remark but is it necessary to look for a return to the ‘pays natal’ in Condé’s work? According to the critic Mireille Rosello this amounts to what Glissant calls ‘l’obsession de l’un’.⁶³ In an interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé herself has suggested that there are no specific periods in her work that correspond to particular times in her life. She stresses that it is always the same human story of the continuous search for happiness that reappears in each of her novels: ‘Moi, je crois qu’on écrit tout le temps le même livre et je n’ai pas l’impression qu’il y ait tellement de différences entre un livre et un autre [...] Les thèmes profonds de ces livres sont les mêmes bien que les thèmes superficiels soient différents [...] Je ne vois pas de périodes dans mon œuvre, je pense simplement que mes livres disent tous la même chose avec des cadres différents’.⁶⁴ More importantly, Condé highlights how in *Traversée de la mangrove* she endeavoured to experiment with the narrative structure: ‘Dans *Traversée de la mangrove* j’ai voulu expérimenter une structure circulaire. Un récit qui n’aurait pas vraiment de début ni de fin’ (p. 107). This circular structure is reminiscent of Faulkner’s structure as seen in particular in the novel *As I Lay Dying* where there are several narrative voices which each contribute to the unfolding of the story.⁶⁵ Condé has acknowledged the similarities between the two texts: ‘Évidemment j’ai beaucoup lu Faulkner [...] et surtout *As I Lay Dying* où tout s’organise autour du corps de Addie Bundren’ (p. 109). This narrative structure is also reminiscent of that used by the Canadian author Gérard Bessette in his novel *Le Cycle*. Here, there are seven different narrative voices (corresponding each to a family member), with each voice contributing to the description of a family dynamic as they all mourn their dead

⁶¹ Maryse Condé, *Hérémakhonon* (Paris: Union Général d’Éditions, 1976), *La Vie scélérate* (Paris: Seghers, 1987), *La Migration des cœurs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995).

⁶² Françoise Lionnet, ‘Toward a New Antillean Humanism: Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*’ in *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 71.

⁶³ Mireille Rosello, ‘*Les derniers rois mages et Traversée de la mangrove: insularité ou insularisation?*’ in *Elles écrivent des Antilles: Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), pp. 175-192, p. 179.

⁶⁴ Françoise Pfaff, *Entretiens avec Maryse Condé* (Paris: Karthala, 1993) pp. 111-12.

⁶⁵ William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935; repr. London: Vintage, 1996).

Grandfather.⁶⁶ For Condé every literary effort has at its heart the quest for self-knowledge and all authors are fuelled by the need to find meaning within themselves. With *Traversée de la mangrove* Condé has achieved not just this 'vision intérieure' but a kind of 'nomadisme circulaire' which propels her towards a more fulfilling poetic vision.⁶⁷

In this section of the chapter I shall endeavour to decipher the dense image of the mangrove and its attendant spectrum of ambiguities. I will also address Condé's portrayal of Francis Sancher as a stranger and infiltrator, and her innovative reworking of the narrative structure of the Caribbean novel. Throughout this section I will be making cross-references to the literary and philosophical works of Edouard Glissant, whose theoretical ideas I believe to be eminently complementary and relevant to Condé's novel.

Traversée de la mangrove is a novel without action or plot. The characters in the story are the inhabitants of a small village who have gathered at the wake of Francis Sancher, a newcomer to Rivière au sel. The narrative progresses in fits and starts without any concrete beginning or ending, suspended in this one moment that is Sancher's wake. Each character is drawn from a universally recognisable model, and each has his or her role to play within the community: Mademoiselle Léocadie Timothée the retired school teacher; Émile Étienne the historian; Dodose Pélagie and her son Sonny; Lucien Évariste the writer; Man Sonson the herbalist; Xantippe the maroon outcast; Aristide and Mira, brother and sister and incestuous lovers; Isaure the prostitute; Emmanuel Pélagie the engineer. Sancher's brief stay in Rivière au sel is reflected in the lives of the villagers as each character contributes a 'fragment' of the narrative in the form of a reflection on their own existence or the past lives of their predecessors. The reader comes to know more of the loves, grievances, friendships and prejudices of the villagers than s/he does about Sancher. Although each character manages to preserve his or her individuality within the community, they enjoy a shared

⁶⁶ Gérard Bessette, *Le Cycle* (Montréal: Éditions du jour, 1971).

⁶⁷ For Glissant the Caribbean novelist/poet must possess a 'vision prophétique du passé' in order to perform his or her role as writer. As Glissant rejects a linear view of Caribbean history in favour of what he calls 'un nomadisme circulaire', it is the task of the writer to inhabit the past, present and future simultaneously. See Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, and Debra L. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text: Glissantian Readings in Caribbean and African-American Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

humanity which forces them to come together at Sancher's wake. From the start of the novel Condé provides us with a glimpse of this community spirit. Léocadie Timothée's damning cry when she discovers a dead Sancher at her feet includes not just her own dislike of the man but the whole village's: 'comme tous les habitants de Rivière au sel, elle avait haï celui qui gisait là à ses pieds' (p.14). As is the case with all rural communities, there are blood ties linking certain families. Léocadie refers to the Ramsarans in particular: 'nombreux étaient ceux qui s'étaient mariés dans des familles nègres ou mulâtres de la région. Ainsi des liens de sang s'étaient tissés' (p.23). But these blood ties, however rooted, are only symbolic and it is more the common spectacle of death and the reality of the wake which bring the people of Rivière au sel together to contemplate humanity.

In this way death can be seen as a binding mechanism within the novel. The death of Sancher has a positive effect on the community by allowing Mira and Vilma, both the mothers of Sancher's children, and Loulou and Sylvestre, their respective fathers, to come together on neutral ground and commence dialogue. But this is not the only way in which Sancher's death can be seen as cathartic. For Dodose Pélagie,⁶⁸ who lives in a loveless marriage and single-handedly cares for her son with a learning disability, the death of Sancher offers a chance to reflect on her life and place in the community. Although she strongly objected to Sancher's presence in Rivière au sel, she comes to realise that he was perhaps the only person to communicate with Sonny, 'qui essayait de déchiffrer ses borborygmes' (p. 116). The death of Sancher marks a definite turning-point in Dodose's life as she decides to start afresh. Aristide Lameaulnes, Mira's brother, is also symbolically released by Sancher's death. He vows to leave the small island where men are measured in terms of their sexual prowess, and acknowledges internally his debt to Sancher: 'Oui, il quitterait cette île sans ampleur où, hormis les dimensions de son pénis rien ne dit à l'homme qu'il est homme [...] Dans le fond, est-ce qu'il ne devait pas être reconnaissant à Francis Sancher puisqu'il lui avait donné la liberté, le délivrant de Mira?' (p. 79). Similarly, both Sylvestre Ramsaran and Émile Étienne are made aware of their unfulfilled desires as they observe the rituals of the wake and each man receives a sign that will encourage him to effect

⁶⁸ It is interesting to note the meaning of 'Pélagie', coming from pelagic or pelagian: of the open sea.

change. Émile Étienne is compelled by ‘un courage immense, [...] une énergie nouvelle qui coulait mystérieuse dans son sang’ (p. 237). Sylvestre is unable to prevent his mind from wandering to the place of his dreams, ‘un pays lointain, murmurant, odorant comme la mer’ (p. 133). For Mira, the mother of Sancher’s child, the stranger’s death signals the beginning of her life: ‘Ma vie commence avec sa mort’ (p. 231), while Lucien Évariste is filled with a new sense of adventure at the prospect of leaving their small community: ‘Ragaillardí, il se sentit l’âme d’un conquérant en partance pour une grande aventure’ (p. 227). As the narrative progresses it becomes obvious that although Sancher arrived as a stranger to Rivière au sel and was viewed in a suspicious light by its inhabitants, his brief stay among them made a tangible difference. In this way the character of Sancher can be seen as a catalyst or a symbol of transformation within the novel.

Françoise Lionnet points out that Sancher’s death is not a heroic event which saves the community. Instead it allows the community to indulge in ‘a “punctual” response to a given crisis’.⁶⁹ The villagers congregate at Sancher’s wake not as a collective but as individuals who are willing to share in this man’s death for the duration of the wake. Although Rivière au sel is a small community, the inhabitants lead quite disparate lives. As Rosa Ramsaran, Vilma’s mother, comments rather cynically: ‘Nous autres, nous vivons, nous continuons de vivre comme par le passé. Sans nous entendre. Sans nous aimer. Sans rien partager’ (p. 171). Racial and social differences are not eradicated but the author does convey a sense of ‘equality before fate’.⁷⁰ The wake does not bring closure or resolution, rather a renewed sense of shared humanity among those still living. As Lionnet comments, it is interesting that Condé has used death in this manner, that is, as a catalyst for change.

In chapter two below, the discussion of Michèle Lacrosil’s novel *Cajou* brings to light how death can become a positive choice or a necessary means of escape. In chapter three a discussion of two novels by Myriam Warner-Vieyra will expose a similar necrotic ideology, where, in order to achieve enlightenment, the two female protagonists must experience death. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, however, death becomes a positive force in itself and not a means to an end. Sancher knew his death

⁶⁹ Lionnet, ‘Towards a New Antillean Humanism’ p. 84.

⁷⁰ Lionnet, p. 83.

was imminent and refers to himself as 'mort-vivant' (p. 88) and 'presque zombi' (p. 221) but the reader is left ignorant of the cause of death. What remains, however, is a legacy of self-reflexive energy which is shared among the villagers and initiates many positive consequences: Mira's honour is saved and she can begin a new life with her child; Aristide has the strength to end an incestuous relationship with his sister and make plans to leave the island; Dinah and Dodose are both moved to leave their incompatible spouses; Émile Étienne vows to complete his history of Rivière au sel.

In Condé's text Sancher is neither hero nor anti-hero. A writer himself, his nomadic lifestyle mirrors that of many Caribbean intellectuals.⁷¹ Sancher's origins are merely hinted at and this unclear genealogy makes of him what Lionnet terms an 'everyman' (p. 85), a cultural and ethnic hybrid who has the ability to 'traverse' zones within the Caribbean community, and who can travel from one island to the next, retaining no attachments and leaving no tangible trace. Although Françoise Lionnet and Patrick Chamoiseau (quoted in Lionnet) have both referred to Sancher as having 'uncertain origins', in her interviews with Pfaff referred to above Condé actually suggests that Sancher is a descendant of the European coloniser: 'Donc Francis Sancher, appartenant au monde européen, est solidaire de cette faute et toute l'histoire de sa famille est un effort pour expier et pour échapper à cette culpabilité. Mais personne n'y arrive et Francis meurt comme son père et comme son grand-père avant lui. Lui aussi aura deux fils qui connaîtront sans doute le même sort' (p. 106). This ties in with Xantippe's intimation at the end of the novel that Sancher had a part to play in 'un crime [qui] s'est commis ici dans les temps très anciens' (p.244). This is obviously a reference to crimes committed by slaveholders during the period of colonisation. However, the character of Sancher is the archetypal infiltrator. As the author builds an image of him using fragments supplied by the other characters in the novel, the reader has the impression that Sancher inhabits a unique space. He belongs to no group, owns no land, is son to no father, and yet he has allied himself with the inhabitants of Rivière au sel and infiltrated their lives.

In her work exploring identity in contemporary women's writing, Mireille

⁷¹ To cite some examples, Condé herself lives between the United States and Guadeloupe, and has lived in both France and Africa. Myriam Warner-Vieyra has 'migrated' to Senegal, while the author Suzanne Dracius spends a significant amount of time in both France and Belgium.

Rosello refers to the phenomenon of infiltration:

Infiltration would thus be one of the ways in which a relatively powerless or underrepresented [*sic*] group manages to 'pass', to transgress official and invisible barriers, and to enjoy (at least temporarily) the privileges supposedly inherent in the condition of belonging to a hegemonic group. Like water going through a layer of sand, the infiltrator must never have his or her own land, nation, origin from which to speak.⁷²

Rosello points out that the infiltrator does not reclaim the border or rehabilitate the ghetto, but rather creates around him or her a new space which is not even a border (because it cannot be defined as the juxtaposition of separate elements), but what Rosello calls 'a network of interstices' (p. 11). A Glissantian equivalent would be 'rhizomic' space. In *Poétique de la Relation* Glissant uses Gilles Deleuze's concept of the rhizome to elucidate his poetics of relation. The rhizome, referred to in Deleuze's conversations with Claire Parnet, can be described thus: 'There are lines which do not amount to the path of a point, which break free from structure (lines of flight, becomings, without future or past, without memory, which resist the binary machine) woman-becoming which is neither man nor woman [...] Non-parallel evolutions, which do not proceed by differentiation, but which leap from one line to another, between completely heterogeneous beings; cracks; imperceptible ruptures [...] The rhizome is all this'.⁷³ In *Poétique de la Relation* then, Glissant opposes the totalising aesthetics of the root to the fluidity of the rhizome: 'le rhizome [...] est une racine démultipliée, étendue en réseaux dans la terre ou dans l'air, sans qu'aucune souche y intervienne en prédateur irrémédiable. La notion de rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l'enracinement, mais récuse l'idée d'une racine totalitaire. La pensée du rhizome serait au principe de ce que j'appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre' (p. 23). This network of interstices escapes all oppositions because it is neither fluid nor solid but rather *viscous*. For Rosello, humidity is an obvious form of infiltration which occurs naturally, but it has negative

⁷² Mireille Rosello, *Infiltrating Culture: Power and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing*, p. xi.

⁷³ Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*, p. 26.

connotations and is 'culturally attached to a whole cluster of seemingly unrelated evils: death, disease, the jungle, and why not the feminine? (p. 11). Such a reading of Sancher as infiltrator allows the reader to transcend ideologies of sameness and rootedness, to bypass gender and sexual differences, and to consider a counter-poetics or, in the words of Françoise Lionnet, a 'New Antillean Humanism'.

Interpreting Sancher as infiltrator can also enable us to decipher further the image of the mangrove. When Sancher tells Wilma that the title of the novel he is writing will be 'Traversée de la mangrove', Wilma reacts by exposing the impossibility of such an action: 'On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s'empale sur les racines de palétuviers. On s'enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre' (p. 191). Wilma realises that this novel is symbolic of Sancher's life, and that the image of the mangrove is significant. The mangrove is a suffocating place which harbours all kinds of creatures, just like Rivière au sel with its comprehensive collection of human beings. In other words, the mangrove is an allegory for the village which Sancher cannot leave, not only because he will die there, but also because he has become a part of it. Towards the end of the novel Sancher declares 'moi, presque zombi, j'essaie de fixer la vie que je vais perdre avec des mots' (p.221). Because he is an infiltrator, Sancher has no land or property to leave behind. He has little choice but to leave a trace of his life via the written word. However, all he leaves are fragments of an obscure history, and his son will be as ignorant as he was of his ancestry. The only person who seems to possess such knowledge is Xantippe, the self-proclaimed 'nég mawon'. Xantippe sees in Sancher's evasive look remnants of guilt for a crime committed long ago. Sancher's death prevents him from completing his life-story as he would wish, but even if his life was prolonged this would still be impossible as there are events in his history of which he is ignorant. This shows a rejection on the part of Condé of a linear view of history. This refusal to lay down a chronological set of events is also reflected in the narrative style, which is dotted with lacunae. Again the author is casting aside the hegemony of the one and placing emphasis instead on a fluid, chaotic, diverse vision of humanity.

The rejection of totalising ideologies so prominent in western thought is a theme which has preoccupied Édouard Glissant in his novels and critical writings.

From his first novel *La Lézarde*⁷⁴ to critical work such as *Poétique de la Relation*, we see a continuously evolving system of thought which eschews imperialistic ideologies of uniformity and oneness (what Glissant calls 'l'universel généralisant') in favour of 'l'identité rhizome', a complex network of intertwining roots much like the tropical mangrove. The image of 'herbage' prominent in Glissant's novel *Mahagony* is a literary extension of the ideas of relation expanded in *Poétique de la Relation*, where the dominant and rooted mahogany tree gives way symbolically to a swirling mass of grasses. Glissant describes relation as 'le dépassement qui fonde leur⁷⁵ unité-diversité'. This 'overstepping' is reminiscent of Mireille Rosello's poetics of infiltration, where the infiltrator (like Deleuze's rhizome) transgresses official and invisible boundaries in a move to extend its relationship with the other. Thus Glissant proposes a poetics of relation in which all identities are potentially extendable through an encounter with the Other. When applied to *Traversée de la mangrove*, the idea of relation works to open up the novel significantly. Rather than rooting the narrative in an 'espace-clos' which a more traditional reading of the text itself and the image of the mangrove might imply, the relation motif expands the reader's encounter with Sancher and the mangrove.

Mireille Rosello has remarked that in *Traversée de la mangrove* 'Maryse Condé semble avoir complètement modifié cette image de l'île prison'.⁷⁶ While I agree to some extent with Rosello, it must be noted that Condé has, on the contrary, in certain sections of the novel evoked images of the island as prison or as imprisoning.⁷⁷ In a striking passage near the end of the novel Dodose Pélagie reacts against the stifling and engulfing tropical foliage:

Je hais ce lieu d'ombre et d'humidité! L'œil cherche le ciel et ne le voit pas, barré qu'il est par les pois-doux, les génipas ou les immortels géants protégeant les bois d'Inde [...] Toutes ces créatures sans âge enfoncent leurs pesantes racines dans le sombre sol spongieux tandis que balancent à hauteur de visage les lianes pointant leurs langues bifides et que, voraces, les

⁷⁴ Édouard Glissant, *La Lézarde* (Paris: Seuil, 1958).

⁷⁵ 'leur' here refers to 'les cultures en évolution' (p. 13).

⁷⁶ 'Les derniers rois mages et *Traversée de la mangrove*: insularité ou insularisation?' (p. 181).

⁷⁷ This is not an unconventional twist but one which follows a trend launched by Daniel Defoe in his *Robinson Crusoe*.

épiphytes se repaissent des troncs et des branches. (p. 210)

This is a sinister rendering of the dense tropical forest. Condé uses images of feasting and parasitism to describe Dodose's surroundings which are in contrast to her rather unsensuous existence. Here the 'pesantes racines' and the 'langues bifides' of the plants symbolise the wagging tongues and deep-rooted prejudices of the villagers. The dark, soggy soil is an extension of the image of the mangrove (as described earlier by Rosello) which is occupied by 'toutes ces créatures sans âge', the inhabitants past, present and future of Rivière au sel. This idea of the suffocating quality of Rivière au sel is carried through to passages relating to other characters. Loulou Lameaulnes's wife Dinah, for instance, vows to leave the confines of Rivière au sel and move to a brighter place: 'Je quitterai Loulou et Rivière au sel. Je prendrai mes garçons avec moi. Je chercherai le soleil et l'air et la lumière pour ce qui me reste d'années à vivre' (p.109). The sun, light and air of 'ailleurs' are in direct contrast with the humid and dusky atmosphere of her own village. Similarly, Lucien Évariste expresses a desire to leave 'cette île étroite pour respirer l'odeur d'autres terres' (p. 227).

In describing how Condé has deconstructed the image of the island-as-prison, Rosello is referring to the depiction of outward movement mentioned earlier in this chapter. During the course of the novel several characters decide to move away from the small village and extend their horizons. There is also the inclusion in the text of Haitian and Dominican labourers, which demonstrates that Rivière au sel is a locus of immigration. In this way we see not a prison but an open space containing an ever-changing population. Although this is a valid reading of the text, it is not an exclusive one.

Traversée de la mangrove enjoys a certain impenetrability which in many ways refuses analysis. This is a result not just of the unusual narrative structure but also of the author's use of Creole,⁷⁸ or what Françoise Lionnet calls a 'hybrid vocabulary' (p. 76). Creole words in the main body of the text are rendered in French in footnotes. This creates a *texte/hors-texte* motif which brings about linguistic impenetrability and

⁷⁸ While this is not the first time Creole has been used in the French-language Antillean novel, Condé's use of Creole is innovative in that she does not *gallicise* Creole in the way Schwarz-Bart does, nor does she *creolise* French in the manner of Confiant. Condé uses an undistilled form of Creole, as it would be spoken by members of a small Guadeloupean community attending a wake in the village.

limits the non-Creolophone reader's engagement with the text. Glissant refers to this kind of inscrutability as *opacité*. In *Le Discours antillais* he declares: 'Nous réclamons le droit à l'opacité' (p. 11). This is a reaction against critics who have censured his works because they view them as being too difficult (impenetrable) and not *engagés* enough.⁷⁹ Debra Anderson cites the critic Selwyn Cudjoe as being guilty of such censure. According to Cudjoe, Glissant minimises the impact of his critical capacity by adopting a demanding and poeticised prose style. Anderson rejects this criticism and reveals it as another example of the inconsistency of literary critics with regard to Black writers: 'Literature by Black writers is not expected to be merely committed or *engagé*. It must manifest an *engagement transparent* [...] Cudjoe comes to the reading with the expectation or demand, that the revelation of reality be done through immediately understandable unpoetized prose'.⁸⁰ Glissant contrasts Antillean *opacité* with the lure of universal culture and hegemonic transparency, but also rejects the romantic idealisation of cultural essence: 'Contre cette transparence réductrice, une force d'opacité est à l'œuvre [...] Nous appelons donc opacité ce qui protège le Divers'.⁸¹ For Glissant the West Indian folk tale, episodes of everyday life and orality all encompass a counter-poetics of creolisation that is *opacité*.

To return to *Traversée de la mangrove*, as Lionnet remarks: 'The narrative aesthetic of the novel evokes a fragmented, dispersed consciousness, distributed among the characters. Each character gives his or her own perspective on a diverse and ever-changing reality' (p. 80). This is perhaps why Michael Dash has lauded Maryse Condé as 'one of the quintessential practitioners of the postmodern narrative in the Caribbean'.⁸² Condé has certainly transgressed systems of standardisation and linearity, and has indeed paved the way for a creative overhaul in the narrative aesthetic of the Caribbean novel.

⁷⁹ For a comprehensive explanation of Glissant's notion of *opacité* see J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸⁰ *Decolonizing the Text*, p. 34.

⁸¹ *Poétique de la Relation*, pp. 74-5.

⁸² J. Michael Dash, *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 120. In the same chapter entitled 'Fields of Play: Parody and the Postmodern', Dash makes the claim that 'Condé may be the only major female novelist other than Chauvet to pursue the postmodern vein in Caribbean writing' (p. 118). Has Michael Dash not considered the 'carnival spirit' in the work of Gisèle Pineau, or Martinique's Suzanne Dracius whose short story 'La Virago' surely represents a 'vision of corporeal multiplicity'?

Another literary stronghold that Condé has undermined in *Traversée de la mangrove* is that of the omniscient author. As I mentioned earlier, the novel is constructed around a multitude of narratives which give varying perspectives on a perpetually evolving reality. Because there are several narrative voices, the idea of one omnipresent and truth-bearing authorial voice becomes redundant. Moreover, the text is full of gaps and uncertainties pointing to a view of history as an emerging (rather than static) form. The characters of *Traversée de la mangrove* each relate a version of events which is continually modified (much like folktales which are altered over time and in the re-telling) in a way that requires the reader to visualise a process of relating and accept what Lionnet refers to as ‘zones of non-knowledge’ within the text.⁸³ Sancher himself is an author, as is Émile Étienne the historian who dreams of immortalising in words the buried memories of his countrymen: ‘Je voudrais écrire une histoire de ce pays qui serait uniquement basée sur les souvenirs gardés aux creux des mémoires, aux creux des cœurs’ (p. 231). However, Sancher never completes his novel and it is only at the moment of Sancher’s wake that Émile Étienne feels courageous enough to undertake such a task.

In Glissant’s novels we see a similar rejection of the omniscient authorial voice. In *Le Quatrième siècle* for instance, the protagonist, Mathieu, quests an ordered sense of history.⁸⁴ He approaches Papa Longoué, an old storyteller from whom he hopes to elicit a clear vision of the past. Papa Longoué, however, speaks ambiguously and fails to deliver the teleological chronicle sought by Mathieu, whose quest for origins remains unfulfilled. Papa Longoué, as a symbol of truth and history in the novel, represents a *collective memory* and not just one voice from the past. In the words of Michael Dash, Papa Longoué invokes ‘dialogic connections that exist between him as an individual and voices from the past’.⁸⁵ Glissant’s evocation of such a multiplicity of voices suggests a rejection of authorial omniscience. What Papa Longoué evokes for Mathieu is a process of creolisation rather than a conclusive and domineering historical truth. For Glissant it is the landscape which is the real repository of truth. Much like Condé’s depiction of the mangrove, his scenes of luxurious tropical landscape often

⁸³ Lionnet, ‘Towards a New Antillean Humanism’ (p. 80).

⁸⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Le Quatrième siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).

⁸⁵ Dash, *Édouard Glissant* p. 79.

conceal a sense of rupture and impoverishment. In *La Lézarde*, for instance, the red earth is associated with the bloodshed of slavery, while in the novel *Mahagony* the huge mahogany tree can be seen as a force of resistance. For Glissant land and history are inextricably linked. In *Le Quatrième siècle* he declares: 'Toute notre histoire s'éclaire dans la terre que voici' (p. 46). Trees have a particular importance in Glissant's novels as they usually represent a centre or hub but are also part of a network of trajectories.⁸⁶ In *Mahagony* the child Garin is born on the same night as the mahogany tree is planted. As Garin grows up to lead a life of *marronnage*, the tree takes on human configurations and symbolises Garin's spirit of resistance when Garin dies and is buried at the base of the tree. Another character, Mani, encounters the same mahogany tree many years later. Mani dies and he and the tree become one in an atavistic gesture that brings to a close this relation between maroon and tree which was started by Gani in the year the tree was planted.

The character Xantippe in Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* has a similar relationship with the trees surrounding him: 'J'ai nommé tous les arbres de ce pays [...] j'ai crié leur nom et ils ont répondu à mon appel [...] Les arbres sont nos seuls amis. Depuis l'Afrique, ils soignent nos corps et nos âmes. Leur odeur est magie, vertu du grand temps reconquis' (p. 241). Here the tree is represented not just as a symbol of ancestral knowledge but also as a connection with a past that is emergent. As a character who is associated with the land, Xantippe represents a way of life which is slowly becoming obsolete. Towards the end of the novel Émile Étienne discovers a charming Creole garden which Xantippe has cultivated: '[il] avait remarqué que sur le bout de terre qu'il squattait il avait planté un vrai jardin créole, à la manière oubliée des vieux' (p. 238). This allows Xantippe who, in the eyes of the villagers, is a deranged outcast, to become a source of local wisdom and a reminder of forgotten customs. In this way Xantippe can be read as a two-sided character, either outcast or sage.

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We have seen here how the inherent ambiguity in spaces such as the plantation and the mangrove, when represented in the literary context, can symbolise the hidden

⁸⁶ Generally speaking the tree is a very complex and ambiguous symbol. Its opposing attributes of roots and branches make it a universal symbol of axis or centre, while it brings together the polarised worlds of the ouranian and the chthonian.

uneasiness that exists in the Caribbean psyche. As a family memoir, Élodie Jourdain's text gives great insight into daily life on a sugar plantation, but it also evokes (through Jourdain's portrayal of the master-servant relationship) a deeply damaged past that is submerged under layers of protocol. Maryse Condé's text is as impenetrable as it is innovative, and in many ways *Traversée de la mangrove* can be regarded as a novel that revolutionises the Caribbean narrative aesthetic. Condé's depiction of Sancher as someone who transcends the blockade of gender differences, coupled with a non-teleological narrative, makes for fascinating material, even for those whose interests are confined to feminist or 'post-colonial' interpretations. From a critical perspective one could offer many contrasting points of view regarding the various themes in the novel. What is clear, however, is that Condé's use of the mangrove image creates a network of possible interpretations which refuses linear analysis. Similarly, Jourdain's description of the plantation coupled with Glissant's image of plantation as matrix allows for a reading of an *event* in Martinique's past (the plantation era) that is fluid, and evokes a process of creolisation rather than a static moment in history. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, Condé's use of Creole, which forms a kind of sub-text, adds another layer of inscrutability. In Jourdain's text, use of Creole is reserved for Black characters, a practice that reveals an implicit inequality in language use on the plantation. When we bear in mind that *Le Sablier renversé* was written many years before *Traversée de la mangrove*, it becomes even more striking how relevant the issues it addresses still seem. A close reading of these texts reveals that, not only have the authors described and utilized the spaces of mangrove and plantation in their writing, they have also created from them archetypes of ambiguity which can be used to symbolically portray the complex nature of the Caribbean experience. Just as Jourdain describes in detail the plantation as it exists in her eyes, in a similar way Maryse Condé's description of the mangrove space as it exists in the Caribbean is characteristically exact, and yet there is hidden within these texts the nascent and intrinsically ambiguous image of plantation and mangrove as cosmos and repository of history.

CHAPTER TWO

Racial Ambiguity

Colour Complexity in Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Michèle Lacrosil's *Cajou* and Franciane Galou's 'Une simple question de couleur'

In his essay discussing *métissage* in the Caribbean context, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink refers to the origins of the word and its negative connotations: 'La signification négative des termes "métis" et "métissage", profondément ancrée dans l'imaginaire des sociétés de l'Amérique coloniale (notamment celles de l'espace caraïbe), se retrouve dans les dictionnaires des XVIIIème et XIXème siècles, mais aussi dans un nombre de textes littéraires et théoriques'.⁸⁷ First linked in the early eighteenth century with the notion of race, the term *métis*, by representing the dichotomous opposition of impure to pure, has long held negative connotations. As Roger Toumson remarks in his *Mythologie du métissage*, 'Indifféremment appliqué aux animaux et aux êtres humains le mot est, au propre et au figuré, d'emblée péjoratif, synonyme de "basse extraction"'.⁸⁸ According to Toumson the word *métis* was first used in the early 1700s to designate the offspring of a Spanish man and an Indian woman, or *vice versa*. The date 1604, however, is cited as a starting point in the use of the word *mullat* or *mullatre* to designate the offspring of a union between a White man and a Black woman. The word *mulatresse* or *mulâtesse* (without an *r*)⁸⁹ only appeared in 1681. The word *métis* was associated etymologically with canines while the word *mulâtre*

⁸⁷ Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, 'Métissage: Contours et enjeux d'un concept carrefour dans l'aire Francophone' in *Études Littéraires*, 25 (1992), 93-106 (p. 94).

⁸⁸ Roger Toumson, *Mythologie du métissage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998) pp. 88-89.

⁸⁹ The forms *mulat* and *mulate* were in existence prior to this.

was associated with the equine family. In short, the ideological link was with the animal world. The *métis* was seen as being the direct site of separation between White and Black during the period of colonisation and slavery. During the plantation-era the mulatto acted as a mediator between the two groups. From this time until well into the nineteenth century, the *métis* represented paradigmatically the three states of animality, sterility and hybridity, while duplicity, duality and disease characterised them. In his novel entitled *Le Négrier*, the nineteenth-century novelist and voyager Édouard Corbière writes of the *mulâtresses*:

Rien en apparence n'est plus fait qu'elles pour éprouver beaucoup d'amour. Mais, en réalité, rien n'est moins susceptible d'un long attachement. Elles peuvent bien avoir des sens passionnés; mais cherchez-leur le cœur, mais cherchez à leur inspirer ces sentiments intimes et délicats qui sont les délices, et les seules peut-être de l'amour, et vous serez désespéré de ne rencontrer dans ces femmes si piquantes que des êtres faits pour le plaisir, peut-être bien pour la volupté; mais non pour ce que vous concevez de si exquis dans les voluptés de l'âme.⁹⁰

The *mulâtresse* is thus cast as a duplicitous figure. She is capable of giving physical love but, because of her greedy nature (which is elaborated on later by Corbière), she is unable to attend to the less bodily, and more sentimental needs of her White lover. As Toumson attests: 'Né pour le mal, sous le signe de Satan, le Métis est un monstre' (p. 94). Chateaubriand remarked that 'le métissage biologique crée des individus vicieux, ambigus, dépravés'.⁹¹ Given that historically Black women were used as sex objects by their White masters, when children of mixed-race were conceived, it was more often than not through an act of rape. Was it this traumatic event which rendered the *métis* or *métisse* a figure of ambiguity and depravity?

As an individual who was caught between two different cultures and belonged to neither, the *métis(se)* was traditionally cast as orphan, bastard or hybrid. Mireille

⁹⁰ Édouard Corbière, *Le Négrier: aventures de mer* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Baudinières, 1979), p. 144. Corbière's novel was first printed in 1832.

⁹¹ Quoted in Lüsebrink, p. 94.

Rosello points to André Schwarz-Bart's portrayal of the historical figure Solitude in his novel *La Mulâtresse Solitude* mentioned above.⁹² Here, the young *métisse* named Solitude, who was conceived through an act of rape, is caught between the conflicting worlds of slave and master. Named differently by both sides ('Deux-âmes' by the slaves, and 'Rosalie' by the master) she chooses the name 'Solitude' as an emblem of her separateness, and, as Rosello suggests, as a ruse or means of challenging the limits of identity. Solitude is thus described figuratively as: 'une Sapotille, du nom d'un fruit indien à l'épiderme rougeâtre, à la chair douce-amère comme tissée d'ambiguïtés' (p. 50). Possessing one brown eye and one green eye, Solitude personifies the split that characterises the *métis*. While still an infant she is brought to the *Grand-Case* where she would be brought up 'à la façon des êtres jaunes qui servaient d'intermédiaires entre les Noirs et les Blancs' (p. 51). As an intermediary she bridges the divide that exists between the two races, but it is in her conception through rape that the old sages locate her disharmony, 'qu'il en va ainsi quand le mélange des sangs s'est fait trop vite' (p. 50). Interestingly, Maryse Condé takes up this theme in her novel *Moi, Tituba Sorcière*, which begins: 'Abena, ma mère, un marin anglais la viola sur le pont de *Christ the King*, un jour de 16** alors que le navire faisait voile vers la Barbade. C'est de cette agression que je suis née. De cet acte de haine et de mépris'.⁹³ Thus, in both stories the *métisse* is born under the sign of violence and rape, 'les yeux entre deux mondes'.⁹⁴ The fear of the White master, the threat of sexual violence, the act of rape, the emptiness of never belonging and the knowledge of his or her own namelessness are the legacy of the *métis*.

Much earlier Madame de Duras told the story, in *Ourika*, of a Black Senegalese girl who is adopted into White society in the late eighteenth century.⁹⁵ The young woman, Ourika, is quite literally 'mal dans sa peau' and dies of her neurosis. Mme de Duras's short tale was the first of its kind to portray a Black character outside the mould of the *bon sauvage*. While there had been a marked tradition of representing

⁹² Mireille Rosello, *Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles* (Paris: Karthala, 1992).

⁹³ Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba Sorcière*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ *La mulâtresse Solitude* p. 50.

⁹⁵ Mme de Duras's *Ourika* was first published anonymously by the 'Imprimerie Royale' in Paris in 1823. The edition I refer to here is that prefaced by Roger Little (University of Exeter Press, 1993, 2nd edition, 1998). My citations are from the first edition.

Blacks in literature, Mme de Duras's predecessors were content to use the figure of the Black as either 'couleur locale' or as a support in the pro/anti-slavery debate. Mme de Duras, however, chose to avoid the cult of exoticism that simply used Black characters as props in plot development but gave them no voice. In this novel Mme de Duras has placed her Black character in centre stage. The novel is introduced by a narrator but proceeds in the first person as Ourika tells her unfortunate story. Having absorbed White culture and the White consciousness, Ourika lives like a White aristocrat, and *assumes* the persona of a White woman, but she is Black. A *négresse blanche*,⁹⁶ the only thing that prevents Ourika from actually *being seen to be* white is her skin. In other words were she to hide behind a screen, Ourika's interlocutor would undoubtedly take her to be a White gentlewoman. Hence Ourika's desire to disappear from the world, and to hide herself *so as not to be seen*. Like Fanon who comes to the realisation that in the White world he is not a man but a mere object, Ourika too experiences ontological aporia after which she can never conceive of herself as anything other than an impostor: 'je me vis négresse, dépendante, méprisée, sans fortune, sans appui, sans un être de mon espèce à qui unir mon sort, jusqu'ici un jouet, un amusement pour ma bienfaitrice, bientôt rejetée d'un monde où je n'étais pas faite pour être admise' (p. 7). However, with her black body out of sight Ourika can still carry through the illusion (to herself if no-one else) that she is White. Ourika's *malaise* is thus manifested in her body, which is described by the young doctor who comes to see her as 'détruit' (p. 3). Ourika's unconscious desire to become physically White has led to a psychosomatic illness which quite literally eats away at her. While Ourika is not a *métisse* in the proper sense of the word (she is not of mixed-race) she experiences an existential split (between her white self and her black self) which renders her, quite literally, psychologically and culturally *métissée*.

Since the 1960s the term *métissage* itself, plus the notion of cultural *métissage*, have been reconsidered. The traditional portrayal of the *métis(se)* as 'poisoned with the blood of both',⁹⁷ has given way to a revaluing of the notion of *métissage* by certain

⁹⁶ Literally, a white Negress, used here to signify the split between Ourika's white self and her black self. The term *négresse blanche* or *negre blanc* has been used historically to refer to Blacks with albinism. See Roger Little, *Nègre blancs: représentations de l'autre autre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

⁹⁷ Derek Walcott 'A Far Cry From Africa' in *Selected Poems (1948-1984)* (London: Faber & Faber,

writers from the African diaspora. Lüsebrink cites the Senegalese writer Ousmane Socé as being one of the first authors to refute the racist ideology of nationalist-socialism,⁹⁸ but it was the founders of the *Négritude* movement, the Guyanese poet, Léon Gontran Damas, the Martinican poet and playwright Aimé Césaire, and the Senegalese writer Léopold Sédar Senghor, who would subsequently reclaim and rename the traditional values of Mother Africa. The three founders of the *Négritude* movement eulogised the grandeur and dignity of an African civilisation that had greatly suffered at the hands of White imperialist power. Although denying an essentialist belief in racial purity, Césaire saw the search for liberation through the African past as the only viable means of cultural survival for the Caribbean people. For Césaire, a Caribbean person, whether Black or of mixed-race, was in essence an African. Ironically, Aimé Césaire's wife, Suzanne, has been credited with a much less polarising view of Caribbean reality. Her seminal essay 'Le grand camouflage', which appeared in the literary magazine *Tropiques* in 1941, is seen by some critics as embodying many of the ideas Edouard Glissant would much later develop in his theory of *Antillanité*. Maryse Condé, for instance, has commented that: 'In her refusal of the separation of cultures, in her anti-essentialist way of thinking and her newfound sense of the ambivalence of cultural and racial identity, Suzanne Césaire is certainly the founding mother of all the postcolonial critics'.⁹⁹ In fact Condé is not the only critic to bring Suzanne Césaire's visionary thinking to light. The Guadeloupean writer Daniel Maximin's novel *L'Isolé Soleil* is a eulogy to Césaire, while more recently an essay written by Clarisse Zimra focuses specifically on her ideas.¹⁰⁰ According to Zimra, 'Le grand camouflage' has become 'an apt definition of the hybrid identity that moves from an oppositional Fanonian grid to a polyphonic, almost Lévi-Straussian "bricolage" (block building) that heals the dia-spo-ra'.¹⁰¹

1992), p. 18.

I who am poisoned by the blood of both
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

⁹⁸ In Germany, in the 1930s, the mixed-race children of German women and Black soldiers from the French West Indies, were subjected to forced sterilisation.

⁹⁹ Maryse Condé, 'Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the construct of a Caribbean identity' in *Winds of Change* ed. by Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek (New York: Peter Lang, 1998) p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Maximin, *L'Isolé Soleil* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

¹⁰¹ Clarisse Zimra, 'Daughters of Mayotte, sons of Frantz' in *An Introduction to Caribbean*

More recently the notion of *métissage* has been given a veritable conceptual overhaul by the so-called *Créolistes*. In their manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* the three writers proclaim: 'Du fait de sa mosaïque constitutive, la Créolité est une spécificité ouverte' (p. 27).¹⁰² While acknowledging Césaire as the father who restored to the Caribbean people their African history, the *Créolistes* have rejected the polarising aesthetics of *Négritude*. In a radical move to carve an identity for the people of the West Indies, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant have created an intellectual anchor which will facilitate a more empowering representation of 'Caribbeanness'. For the thinkers behind the *Créolité* movement, a rejection of oneness, transparency, and unity is necessary to reconstruct what Glissant would call the ruptured past of Martinique. The *Créolistes* have sought to put into place a politics of diversity, opacity and transculturation, which will override the totalising code of colonialism.

In this chapter the notion of *métissage*, as it is represented in two novels and one short story from the Caribbean, is discussed in terms of its ambiguity. Each of the texts chosen depicts the *métis* or the 'becoming-*métis*' in terms of their psychopathology or psychological unease, as the characters depicted experience neither affirmation nor empowerment through their state of *métissage*. In other words, there is no sense of redemption in these texts where the protagonists are all victims of their racial admixture. The idea of the *métis* as tragic orphan or cultural misfit has come full circle. What is complex here, then, is the source of ambiguity. In each of the texts discussed, the protagonists suffer as a direct result of their skin colour. They are marked in their bodies by Blackness. In Franciane Galou's story it is the fact of becoming Black that prompts the former master-turned-slave to question his very existence. Similarly, in Capécia's novel, even though Mayotte is a *mulâtresse*, she is singled out for her racial and cultural difference. As Toumson remarks: 'un Mulâtre est un Nègre qui n'a pas la peau noire'.¹⁰³ The heroine of Lacrosil's novel on the other hand, like Ourika, has attained a higher degree of whiteness in that she is *culturally*

Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique ed. by Sam Haigh (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 177-194 (p. 192).

¹⁰² Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

¹⁰³ *Mythologie du métissage*, p. 95.

white. However, in her eyes she is still Black. This veneer of Blackness that she wears is enough to remind her of her *métissage* and to eventually push her towards suicide.

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In his seminal text on the psychology of the colonised, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Frantz Fanon made some remarks about the Martinican author Mayotte Capécia which have brought her to the attention of contemporary feminist critics. The said remarks, namely, that she is a cut-rate author whose preoccupation with marrying a White man, Fanon perceives as an espousal of racist ideology, are to be found in the chapter entitled 'La femme de couleur et le Blanc'. Here, in an attempt to analyse the mixed-race couple (Black woman/White man) Fanon takes as his literary yardstick Mayotte Capécia's autobiographically influenced novel *Je suis Martiniquaise*.¹⁰⁴ The autobiographical tag has been the cause of much consternation among critics. Sam Haigh, for instance, points in her study of Guadeloupean writing, to the fact that, while Fanon perceives the male writer René Maran as *objectively* representing the Antillean neurosis in his novel *Un Homme pareil aux autres*, it is beyond his ability to see Capécia as anything other than an autobiographer, i.e. as *subjectively* representing her own neurosis.¹⁰⁵ In other words *Blackness* is a vehicle through which Maran's character externalised his neurosis.¹⁰⁶

Capécia's first novel, which was published in 1948, was critically acclaimed in Paris and the same formula would be used again in her second novel *La Nègresse blanche*.¹⁰⁷ *Je suis Martiniquaise* is the story of Mayotte who grows up in an idyllic Martinican village where her father is the mayor. Following her mother's death, however, Mayotte is taken out of school and given the responsibility of keeping house. When her father takes home a mistress as young as Mayotte she decides to claim her independence. She moves to the capital, Fort-de-France, where she works as a seamstress before opening her own laundrette. From an early age Mayotte dreams of meeting a white man with blond hair and blue eyes, just like the *curé* from her village.

¹⁰⁴ Mayotte Capécia, *Je suis Martiniquaise* (Paris: Corrêa, 1948).

¹⁰⁵ René Maran, *Un Homme pareil aux autres* (Paris: Arc-en-ciel, 1947). In this novel the hero, Jean Veneuse, an educated Black, falls in love with the White Andrée. Sam Haigh, *Mapping a Tradition*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of Maran's novel in the context of the *Blanche/Noir* debate, see chapter five of Roger Little's *Beyond Totem and Taboo*.

¹⁰⁷ Mayotte Capécia, *La Nègresse blanche* (Paris: Corrêa, 1950).

Thus, she falls in love with André, a French soldier, who, despite his declaration of love and Mayotte's pregnancy, does not choose to marry a Black woman who 'n'est jamais tout à fait respectable aux yeux d'un blanc' (p. 202). Capécia's novel, however, does not just depict the life of one woman. Her narrative also spans a historical period which encompasses both the eruption of Mont Pelé and the outbreak of World War I. Mayotte's life, set as it is in the early part of the twentieth century, is an accurate representation of life as it would have been experienced by many women of Mayotte's class during that period. In fact Capécia, despite her flaws, has given us a faithful representation of the attitudes, largely influenced by colonialism, that would have been prevalent in the period referred to here.

In her article 'Who is that masked Woman? or The Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*', the feminist critic Gwen Bergner gives an interesting analysis of the sexual politics underlying Fanon's castigation of Capécia's novel.¹⁰⁸ Drawing on Luce Irigaray's idea of the 'scopic economy' (*économie scopique*) where order is maintained through the circulation of women among men according to the rule of the incest taboo, Bergner proposes that such an economy exists also to construct and perpetuate *racial* groupings: 'In the colonial context, the operative "law" determining the circulation of women among white men and black men is the miscegenation taboo, which ordains that white men have access to black women but that black men be denied access to white women' (p. 81). Within such a one-way system, women become 'fetish-objects' representing the circulation of male power. In the colonial context Black men are stripped of the power to control 'their' women. According to Bergner it is such a politics of loss which pushes Fanon (in a bid to reclaim the patriarchal authority of Black men) to condemn Capécia's expression of sexual desire and economic autonomy. Such an analysis is interesting in that it reveals how Fanon, by restricting his investigation of Capécia's text to a criticism of her economic and sexual choices, is effectively re-colonising part of the conceptual territory he had succeeded in deconstructing in much of *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

Capécia's narrative gives insight into many aspects of life in rural Martinique pertaining to the period. For instance, at a party hosted by her parents, Mayotte

¹⁰⁸ Gwen Bergner, 'Who is That masked Woman? Or the Role of Gender in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*' in *PMLA*, 110 (1995), 75-88.

recounts how the guests were dressed: 'ils avaient mis leurs plus beaux habits et des souliers—ces souliers que la plupart portaient à la main jusqu'à l'entrée de l'église lorsqu'ils allaient à la messe—ce qui leur donnait une démarche de canards' (p. 36). The wearing of shoes was obviously reserved for special occasions, but Capécia shows her gift for the comic image here, as she ridicules the social niceties of the more well off mulattoes. The social structure of the island is also an important point of reference for Mayotte, who was keen to better herself. At the time it was European Whites and Békés who held most of the power, but there were also some mulatto families who occupied a position of authority in the community. According to Capécia these mulattos were treated as Whites: 'mais nous appelions blancs aussi certains sangs-mêlés qui avaient de l'argent, à condition que leur teint fut [*sic*] assez clair' (p. 23). Thus, *White* would equate with both skin colour and social status. Being almost White is as good as being White if one has financial security and social status. What has become the subject of debate, however, is Mayotte Capécia's unflinching avowal of her belief in the superiority of White men. From an early age it seems Mayotte has developed this preference for European men: 'j'étais tombée amoureuse du nouveau curé. Jeune, grand, très blond, très beau, il faisait tourbillonner dans ma tête d'enfant mille petits papillons' (p. 22). Mayotte's childish love does not fade and time and again she expresses her adulation in the face of this blond god in whose presence she feels like 'un ange [...] tout rose et blanc' (p. 62). So besotted is Mayotte with Père Amboise, whose 'sourire éblouissant, un sourire de soleil' (p. 96) warms her heart, that she decides early on to love only White men, and never 'ces hommes de couleur qui ne peuvent s'empêcher de courir après toutes les femmes' (p. 131). As an adult Mayotte follows through her preference for Whiteness in her relationship with André. As the love-object of a White man Mayotte imagines that she herself will become White. For Mayotte, a *métisse*, the notion of the Black and the White are dialectically opposed and imply different systems of reference. As White is to pure and good, so Black is to impure and evil. Thus Mayotte wonders: 'Comment imaginer Dieu sous les traits d'un nègre' (p. 65). As a child she would throw ink over any classmate who was disrespectful to her 'en me traitant de négriïllonne par exemple' (p. 9). By her own admission this was her way of 'negrifying' the world. For the child Mayotte, all bad things should be coloured Black, and therefore her revenge on anyone who wronged

her was to turn them Black. As Mayotte grows up, the futility of this becomes apparent, and following the advice given to her by older women, of the kind 'la vie est difficile pour une femme [...] surtout pour une femme de couleur' (p. 20), Mayotte becomes convinced instead of the necessity to 'whiten' the world.

By loving Mayotte, André proves to her that she is worthy of White love. Because she has been loved by a Frenchman, Mayotte believes that *she* is French. However this is not the case. Mayotte has deluded herself, and the kind of love she is experiencing is aptly described by one critic as a 'self-deluding resource of emancipation from blackness'.¹⁰⁹ André's love humanises Mayotte but it does not change her identity. As Mayotte finds out when she embarks on a trip to Guadeloupe, not only does her *r*-eating dialect set her apart, 'je suis F'ançaise tout comme une aut'' (p. 178), but, as the French officer remarks, 'Vous oubliez que vous êtes une femme de couleur' (p. 181). Mayotte is not *Française* (which really translates as White Frenchwoman) but *Martiniquaise*. Thus, there are two things separating Mayotte from her goal of Whiteness. One is her use of language and the other is her skin colour.

According to the linguist Marina Yaguello, any pronunciation of the letter *r* which is perceived as different puts the speaker in the role of *stranger* (*étranger*, which can also mean foreigner): 'Le *r* est un son qui connaît des réalisations très différentes selon les langues. Il est particulièrement distinctif dans un accent perçu comme étranger et se prête plus que d'autres à la caricature'.¹¹⁰ Blacks are traditionally represented as being incapable of pronouncing the French *r* and we see many examples of this in literature. In Édouard Corbière's novel *Le Négrier*, for instance, Black characters are represented as omitting the *r*, in particular when they are being quoted by the White sailors: 'Non, non, criaient mes deux nègres; vous pas *maïte nous! Nous pas tini maïte, nous libes* (italics in original).¹¹¹ According to Yaguello this is a mere stereotype. As she points out, the letter *r* has a different status in French and in Creole: 'dans un mot créole dérivé du français, le *r* peut soit tomber soit être réalisé comme un *w* [...] Quant aux langues africaines, la plupart possèdent le son *r*, même s'il est

¹⁰⁹ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 'Sexist, Misogynist or Anti-Racist Humanist?', (p. 20).

¹¹⁰ Marina Yaguello, *Catalogue des idées reçues sur la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) p. 43.

¹¹¹ Édouard Corbière, *Le Négrier: aventures de mer*, p. 155. Yaguello points to the Black characters in the comic book *Tintin au Congo* as a more recent example of the representation of Black speech in French.

prononcé différemment du *r* grasseyé français' (pp. 43-44). In endowing Mayotte with this *r*-eating dialect, Capécia was using a stereotype that was already in existence. What is interesting, however, is that, in contrast to authors who either avoided attributing direct speech to their Black characters, or else had them speaking Creole, Capécia has deliberately highlighted Mayotte's Black-sounding pronunciation of the letter *r* and her use of creolised French. Mayotte tries to appear more White by speaking French, but fails in her attempt. If she had been portrayed as speaking Creole, Mayotte would undoubtedly have appeared equally non-French (read: non-White), but also non-Black (because of her pale skin). The consequence of Capécia's use of a Creolised French here serves to highlight further Mayotte's estrangement from both her fellow Martinicans and the White society she seeks to frequent. It also highlights her ambiguous relationship with what is perceived as her native (Martinican) culture and language.

Hence the identity crisis typical of the *métisse* which Mayotte's son has also inherited: 'Lui qui avait la peau si blanche, il ne pouvait comprendre certainement, pourquoi son grand-père était noir' (p. 188). As a source of redemption, therefore, the couple's love is a failure. While André returns to France to pursue his career in the military, Mayotte returns home to her village where she is barely tolerated and her light-skinned son is treated as an outcast. It is not enough therefore to be loved by a White man and give birth to a White child. As a barely educated, working-class Black woman Mayotte has never fully internalised the White identity. Fanon's surprisingly sympathetic analysis of René Maran's character, Jean Veneuse, in chapter three of his text, here becomes relevant. According to Bergner, Fanon is sympathetic to Veneuse (a West Indian living in Bordeaux) because he sees him not as a Black with a colour-complex, but as a neurotic who happens to be Black. As Fanon comments: 'Jean Veneuse est un névrosé et sa couleur n'est qu'une tentative d'explication d'une structure psychique'.¹¹² What Fanon seems to have ignored (either consciously or unconsciously) is that the character Veneuse is a thinly disguised autobiographical projection of Maran. It becomes clear then that Fanon has employed a double standard: what he tolerates from Maran, he cannot tolerate from Capécia. Maran's character

¹¹² *Peau noire, masques blancs* p. 63.

Veneuse is a man of ideas, an intellectual, an introvert and this is what makes him different from the heroine of *Je suis Martiniquaise*. Jean Veneuse has aspired to whiteness *intellectually* whereas Mayotte has done so *corporeally*. According to Bergner: 'In Fanon's terms Capécia—as a working-class Black woman—can aspire to an unattainable Whiteness only by aligning herself with a White man, whereas Veneuse has successfully internalised a White European identity through intellect, acculturation, and class privilege' (p. 84). In contrast, Mayotte by her own admission is at times incapable of understanding her lover: 'je n'étais pas assez instruite, peut-être même pas assez civilisée pour pouvoir le comprendre' (p. 138). Unlike Veneuse, she has no instruction in Western thought and even her language is the 'parler-nègre' of the Caribbean. In his chapter entitled 'Le noir et le langage' Fanon had already theorised that language structures culture. In the colonial context acquisition of the language of the coloniser gives the West Indian 'honorary citizenship' among whites.¹¹³ *I speak therefore I am*. In other words, Veneuse, who lives in France and has mastered the French language, has become more White, while Mayotte with her creolised French has remained 'une négresse'. As Sharpley-Whiting suggests, it would seem that the victims of colonisation become convinced that 'the burden of his/her corporeality can be purged through the acquisition of the French language' (p.20). In other words, if the individual assumes White culture intellectually, then s/he becomes White. However, as we have seen in *Ourika*, the corporeal reality of Blackness cannot be erased. Perhaps this then is the cause of Fanon's infamous but accurately observed neurosis.

Fanon's association here, of man with mind, and woman with body, is difficult to ignore, and it becomes quite obvious that he has come headlong into the mind/body split. In chapter one of her study on Francophone women's writing from Guadeloupe referred to above, Sam Haigh points to Fanon's blunder: 'Though Fanon succeeds in reversing the colonial, racialised binary of "mind/body" (by showing black men to be equally capable of intellectual "civilisation" as are their white counterparts), he succeeds merely in repeating the attending sexualised binary' (p. 26). Haigh is not the only critic to have pointed this out. In her previously mentioned essay, Clarisse Zimra also finds fault with Fanon who, she stresses, 'reinstates familiar boundaries in the very

¹¹³ Sharpley-Whiting, 'Sexist Misogynist or Anti Racist Humanist?' p. 20.

process of questioning their legitimacy: as white to black, so self to other, so Caribbean man to woman'.¹¹⁴ Fanon's analysis of the character Mayotte in *Peau noire, masques blancs* reduces Black women to their sexual relationships with men (where desire of sexuality is equated with a desire for sex). As a result Black women are kept firmly in the realm of the corporeal. Unfortunately, Fanon has allowed the question of racial difference to overshadow the question of sexual difference, despite his dedicating an entire chapter to the psychosexuality of the woman of colour. This implementation of a hierarchy of difference disempowers Black women while objectively destabilising unity within the Caribbean community along gender lines.

Although it is conceded by many critics interested in the Capécia-Fanon debate that *Je suis Martiniquaise* reflects accurately a set of attitudes that prevailed in colonial times,¹¹⁵ Clarisse Zimra has quite scathingly accused the 'empty-headed high yellow woman' of 'exhibiting rather nakedly in her work the racial strictures of her colonial society'.¹¹⁶ I think a writer such as Capécia drawing her representation of Black women from a circumscribed canon of doudouism and exoticism had little choice but to bring back fragments from her colonial past. But this is an uncomfortable realisation for many specialists working in the area of either literary criticism or feminist studies. In her article on Capécia and the Haitian author Marie Chauvet, Joan Dayan comments: 'For contemporary academics in quest of the lyrical compromise so fitting to the dehistoricised arena of the race, class and gender trinity, the reconstruction of what could be deemed embarrassing stereotypes of colour and servitude forces readers into a past unalleviated by a redemptive spiritual vision'.¹¹⁷ Dayan is certainly correct in her statement, which I believe could be applied to many works of fiction written by West Indian writers as late as the 1990s. Capécia has drawn a portrait of the *métisse* who, in the tradition of the nineteenth-century tragic mulatto figure, is torn between two different value systems. Her life experience has shown her

¹¹⁴ 'Daughters of Mayotte, Sons of Frantz', p. 181.

¹¹⁵ Notably Beverley Ormerod and Joan Dayan, both contributors to Sam Haigh's text, also Mary Ann Doane, 'Dark Continents' in *Femmes Fatales* (New York: Routledge, 1991) and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Gwen Bergner mentioned above.

¹¹⁶ Clarisse Zimra, 'Righting the Calabash: Writing History in the Female Francophone Narrative' in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Carole Boyce-Davies and Elaine Savory Fido eds. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 143-159, p. 149.

¹¹⁷ Joan Dayan, 'Women, History and the Gods: Reflections of Mayotte Capécia and Marie Chauvet' in *An Introduction to Francophone Caribbean Writing*, pp. 69-82 (p. 70).

that Black men are fickle womanisers (like her Father) while White men are steadfast and respectable (like Père Amboise). Dayan proposes that the stereotype of the *mulâtresse* (represented in the character of Mayotte) was necessary to the colonial fantasy, for she ‘operated as a dream of whiteness superimposed on the fact of blackness’ (p. 76). The *mulâtresse* was either adored or denigrated as she came to represent all that was luxurious, seductive and sexually exotic. Dayan explains further how the stereotype of the *mulâtresse* was needed to distinguish between groups of Whites and Blacks: ‘The necessity to separate materially the double categories—slave and free, black and white—even as they mixed and became more indistinct, meant that the very idea of “free” and “white” had to be qualified and transformed’ (p. 76). The luxurious *mulâtresse*, an icon of Black sensuality and White unattainability served in the popular imagination as a metaphorical partition between the two groups, while partaking physically of their characteristics.

Capécia has neither deconstructed nor gone beyond the limits of prescribed representation in her portrayal of the *métisse* in *Je suis Martiniquaise*. Rather she has retraced the steps of colonial history with its legacy of ‘mimicry, contamination and violation’.¹¹⁸ It is important to approach the novel bearing this in mind. Critics who embark on a reading of Capécia with the expectation of finding a redemptive model of psychological balance and social integration can only be disappointed. That Gwen Bergner has found in *Je suis Martiniquaise* ‘a rare, unapologetic, and invigorating representation of a black woman’s effort to carve economic and sexual autonomy out of a society that narrowly circumscribes women’s self-determination’ is perhaps more a reflection of her own literary skill than that of Mayotte Capécia.¹¹⁹ However, that Bergner goes so far as to suggest that Capécia ‘deconstructs racial identity in the colonial context’ takes away somewhat from an otherwise informative study of Fanon’s reaction to Mayotte Capécia. It is interesting that while Bergner has rightly pointed out how Fanon has reinscribed gender stereotypes in his discussion of Capécia and René Maran, she has failed to see how Capécia has reinscribed racial stereotypes in *Je suis Martiniquaise*. Commenting on Bergner’s eulogising of Capécia, Sharpley-Whiting responds: ‘To romanticize *Je suis Martiniquaise* as simply a black feminist

¹¹⁸ Dayan, p. 70.

¹¹⁹ Bergner, ‘Who is that Masked Woman?’ p. 87, footnote 23.

manifesto on gender and class that “sometimes lapses into valorizing whiteness”, to pretend that this is not on a profound level “unhealthy behavior”, is to decontextualize the colonialist framework out of which Capécia was writing’.¹²⁰ To write off Fanon as anti-feminist because he does not subscribe to liberal feminist paradigms is simply to misread him. However, to dismiss Capécia as ‘second-rate’ or ‘best forgotten’ because she similarly does not conform to contemporary critics’ expectations, is equally inappropriate.

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Michèle Lacrosil’s novel *Cajou* was published in 1961, many years after *Je suis Martiniquaise* and yet the two novels are literary cousins, not least because Lacrosil was prompted by her editor to capitalise on the successful Capécia formula.¹²¹ *Cajou*, like *Mayotte*, is a woman of mixed race. She has been living in France for a while and is expecting the child of a White man who loves her and wishes to marry her. She works as a biologist in a prestigious laboratory where she has been offered promotion, but her feelings of unworthiness prevent her from accepting. Her fiancé argues with her but she will not be convinced and instead plans her suicide.

From the first page of Lacrosil’s text we see that *Cajou*’s obsessions are deep-rooted and numerous. Since the age of ten *Cajou* has been dissatisfied with her body-image. As the Black child of a White mother she cannot come to terms with the difference between them. She confides in her mother: ‘Tu es belle. Je serai jamais comme toi. À cause de ce qui me manque [...] Ce qui fait que je te ressemble pas. Quand les gens nous voient ensemble, ils secouent la tête’ (p.40). *Cajou* is the shadow, the opposite of her mother, whose ‘nez fin’ and ‘traits purs’ are a reminder of what she is not. *Cajou* imagines that she resembles her father, ‘un homme de couleur’ from an inaccessible tropical place. But in reality *Cajou* does not know who she resembles or where she belongs. She declares that: ‘Cette impression de n’être nulle part à ma place m’est venue avec l’adolescence’ (p. 41).¹²² A victim of acute ontological insecurity,

¹²⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) p. 157.

¹²¹ Michèle Lacrosil, *Cajou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

¹²² There is a striking similarity between *Cajou*’s expression of displacement and that described in Kim Lefèvre’s novel *Métisse Blanche* (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, 2001). Here the protagonist, a mixed-race Vietnamese girl, relates how ‘Je n’ai gardé aucun souvenir des premières années de ma vie, hormis ce sentiment très tôt ressenti d’être partout déplacé, étrangère’ (p. 15).

Cajou, like the tragic mulatto figure, is destined to search in vain for her own space.

Cajou is a novel which is peopled with mirrors, looks and reflections. In a cruel subversion of the magic fairytale mirror, Cajou sees only ugliness reflected back at her: 'toute la laideur du monde se réfugie dans le miroir qu'elle interroge' (p. 31).¹²³ This use of the mirror as an object which inspires fear or disgust is also evident in *Ourika*. The genteel Black girl, Ourika, is repulsed by her own reflection: 'je n'osais plus me regarder dans une glace; lorsque mes yeux se portaient sur mes mains noires, je croyais voir celles d'un singe' (p. 9). Ourika's reflection fills her with self-pity as she is reminded of how it is her Blackness that sets her apart from the world: 'cette couleur me paraissait comme le signe de ma réprobation; c'est elle qui me séparait de tous les êtres de mon espèce' (p. 9). Cajou, like Ourika, feels an intense loneliness, and a heightened sense of being separate from the people surrounding her. This idea of the *métisse* as separate is also used in Lefèvre's novel mentioned above, where the protagonist, Eliane Tiffon, who describes herself as 'à proprement parler une monstruosité dans le milieu [...] où je vivais' (p. 14), lives her *métissage* as 'une tare existentielle' (p. 15). Portrayed as an unglittering Cinderella, Cajou convinces herself that she will never turn into a beautiful princess: 'j'étais restée la Cendrillon du début du conte', and morosely wonders if the fairytale character did not shudder at the memory of how dirty she once was: 'Qui sait si, après la noce, à côté du Prince Sérénissime, Cendrillon ne garde pas sous ses bijoux l'horreur d'avoir été sale, et si son âme ne demeure pas pauvre?' (p. 103). What preoccupies Cajou here is the transient nature of the physical change undergone by Cinderella. Although she is wearing a beautiful dress and looks like a princess, the implication is that her soul cannot undergo such a rapid transformation. Like Fanon, Cajou has focused on the *spiritual* or intellectual attainment of Whiteness, which is perceived to be more difficult and thus of more value, than the simple *corporeal* transformation. For Cajou, not even love can light up her dark soul. While reminiscing about her childhood friend Stéphanie, Cajou comments: 'Stéphanie devint pour moi la mesure des choses et le miroir où je lisais combien j'étais laide' (p. 34). Here Cajou is projecting her self-image

¹²³ In his essay on the theme of drowning in *Cajou* and Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris*, Roger Little makes the interesting phonetic link between the words 'miroir' and 'mourir'. See his 'Death by Water: Socé's Fara and Lacrosil's Cajou' in the *ASCALF Bulletin* 23 (2001).

onto Stéphanie who in turn reflects it back to her. Cajou is repulsed by this reflection and projects her revulsion onto those with whom she comes into contact. Interestingly, Capécia makes a similar use of this mirror motif in *Je suis Martiniquaise*, where Mayotte confirms to herself that she is pretty by using her twin sister Francette as her guide: 'je devenais très jolie [...] je n'avais qu'à regarder Francette. Nous nous ressemblions si parfaitement que, lorsque nous échangeions nos robes, les gens nous prenaient l'une pour l'autre' (p. 83). Here the twin/mirror is viewed positively, however, as Mayotte sees not a shadow but a viable image of herself reflected in her sister.

Like Mayotte, Cajou rationalises her world using a prescribed set of dialectical opposites. As White is to Black so good is to bad. Stéphanie is White, the symbolic colour of goodness and virtue. Cajou is Black, the traditional colour of badness and concupiscence. Lacrosil also uses themes of light and dark to evoke Cajou's state of mind. She is an 'ombre', the personification of darkness, while Germain is portrayed as being surrounded by light: 'Toute la lumière se réfugie dans ses cheveux' (p. 14). The centre of Cajou's world is the gaze: the White gaze which renders her spec(tac)ularly other, and her own gaze with its legacy of the fragmented diaspora. Her reflection in the mirror tells her: 'Tu es de la race des esclaves, Cajou. Subis, ma chère!' (p. 165). Her hands too show evidence of her ancestors' manual labours, 'mes paumes rêches gardent le souvenir des callosités des pauvres diables dont je descends'(p. 193), as her shoulders bear 'des siècles de tristesse' (p. 175). As the eye of the world focuses on Cajou, she is transformed into the descendant of the slave. She is no longer the educated, middle class, not-a-negro Monica (her given name), but the Black-skinned, noix-de-cajou negress. *Un nègre quoi!*

The theories developed by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* give a remarkable insight into the type of Antillean neurosis presented in *Cajou*. According to Fanon such a neurosis occurs as a result of a European collective unconscious or set of aesthetic values being imposed on the West Indian psyche through colonisation: 'Dans l'inconscient collectif de l'homo occidentalis, le nègre, ou si l'on préfère, la couleur noire, symbolise le mal, le péché, la misère, la mort, la guerre, la famine [...] il est normal que l'Antillais soit négrophobe. Par l'inconscient collectif, l'Antillais a fait siens tous les archétypes de l'Européen' (p. 154). The West Indian who has inherited the

European collective unconscious believes him or herself to be other. The process of colonisation served to obliterate completely the colonised people's sense of self, and replace it with its own set of aesthetic values. In his study of *Négritude* poetry and aesthetics in the Caribbean, René Ménénil echoes Fanon's ideas.¹²⁴ Ménénil sees this phenomenon as a form of cultural oppression which inhibits the development of a collective identity:

La caractéristique fondamentale de l'existence humaine dans la société coloniale, c'est d'être séparé d'elle-même, d'être exilé d'elle-même, d'être étrangère pour elle-même. Le phénomène de l'oppression culturelle inséparable du colonialisme va déterminer dans chaque pays colonisé un refoulement de l'âme nationale propre (histoire, religion, coutumes) pour introduire dans cette collectivité ce que nous appellerons "l'âme-de-l'autre-métropolitaine". D'où la depersonnalisation et l'aliénation. Je me vois étranger, je me vois exotique, pourquoi? (p. 19)

In France, however, where the complex colour gradations of the Caribbean have disappeared, the *mulâtresse*, *chabine* or *câpresse* will find herself face to face with simply *une négresse*. Such is the power of the White gaze. Cajou, it would seem, needs the White gaze 'in order to have something against which, constantly and obsessively, to judge herself'.¹²⁵ The White gaze objectifies Cajou (via what Gwen Bergner would call a 'scopic regime of othering') whose *Blackness* is a mere construction of the difference it generates against a prevailing *Whiteness*. Fanon's synthesis of Adlerian and Freudian theories of the collective unconscious is helpful here as it enables us to see that Cajou has internalised a 'White consciousness' which is in perpetual conflict with the Black image that is reflected back to her by mirrors and the White gaze. Fanon explains how, having encountered the White gaze, the Antillean has two choices: to become 'un nègre' with the attendant clichés, or to allow the desire for Whiteness to become 'reactional' via miscegenation and the lactification complex.

Cajou's boyfriend Germain expects that she will marry him and produce their

¹²⁴ René Ménénil, *Tracées: Identité, négritude, esthétique aux Antilles* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981).

¹²⁵ Sam Haigh, *Mapping a Tradition* p. 20.

child, but Cajou's instinct tells her that to do so would render her utterly passive, 'la femme de Germain', 'un aspect de [sa] personnalité' (p. 21). She must choose then, between merging into the snowy Whiteness of Germain's world, or the Black depths of the Seine. Towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that Cajou will reject this 'logical marriage' which would signal a refusal to disappear into his White/male identity.¹²⁶ Cajou's presumed suicide (the novel ends on an ambiguous note), however, poses a problem for readers expecting a redeeming feature in the author's vision. Lacrosil's representation of Cajou's suicidality can be seen as the manifestation of what Françoise Lionnet calls a 'necrotic ideology' whereby death is seen as the only way out of an unhealthy or painful situation.¹²⁷

The fact that Cajou is pregnant points to a narrative twist that owes much to the historical truth of slavery and colonialism. The systematic sexual abuse of the Black female slave served to control and intimidate her, but also to ensure a future generation of slaves. For many female slaves abortion or infanticide were the only forms of resistance. When the economic viability of the slave trade depended on the constant supply of free labour, to terminate a pregnancy was to deprive the White master of a valuable investment. This is a fact to which Glissant attests in *Le discours antillais*: 'Accouplement d'une femme et d'un homme pour le profit d'un maître. C'est la femme qui a murmuré ou crié: "Manjé tè pa fè yich pou lesclavaj";¹²⁸ la terre pour être stérile, la terre pour mourir. C'est la femme qui a ainsi parfois refusé de porter dans ses flancs le profit du maître' (p. 166). Abortion or infanticide were also ways of protecting an innocent child from a life of hardship and cruelty. Maryse Condé's fictional character Tituba, mentioned above, gives a literary example of the slave's attitude to maternity: 'Pour une esclave la maternité n'est pas un bonheur. Elle revient à expulser dans un monde de servitude et d'abjection, un petit innocent dont il lui sera impossible de changer la destinée' (p. 83). In this instance then, the Black female subject-made-object is left with little choice but to dispose of her own life and that of her child. Therefore what could be construed as a negative portrait of Black womanhood in Lacrosil's novel is perhaps a constructive reworking of a paradigm of Black femininity which was

¹²⁶ For Robert Smith's masculinist view of the situation, see his article entitled 'Michèle Lacrosil: Novelist with a Colour Complex' in *The French Review*, 47 (1974), 783-90.

¹²⁷ Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations*, see chapter 4.

¹²⁸ Literally, 'Mangez de la terre, ne faites pas des enfants pour l'esclavage!'

already in existence. Because Cajou is so deeply unhappy living in a society that *alienates* her and is *alien* to her, she can not allow her child to suffer the same fate and instead fixates on killing them both. Cajou's choices are limited, to marry Germain and raise their mulatto child, or to end her desperate life and the potential life of her baby. Lacrosil merely makes the reader aware of these options, but the outcome of events remains ambiguous. Either way, the Black heroine is put in a quandary as the choices left open to her are neither liberating nor enhancing.

Thus, there is no resolution, psychological or otherwise, within the narrative and the reader is left stranded with the uncomfortable weight of many layers of racial and gender stereotyping. Cajou is convinced of her inferiority, her ugliness and her undeserved betrothal to a White man. Because she is Black, she believes herself to be ugly, disgraceful and aberrant. Cajou's self-denigration is not double (as *métissée* and female) but multi-layered 'as a product of historical uprooting [...] miscegenation and [...] the masculinist imprint on the social hierarchy'.¹²⁹ Towards the end of the novel, in a section entitled 'Le dernier soir', Cajou looks at herself in a mirror, perhaps for the last time: 'Que je sois maigrelette, ou au contraire obèse et difforme, cela ne signifie pas grand chose et n'influerait pas sur ma place dans la société. Ce qui compte c'est la couleur' (p. 225). Here, the stereotype is implacable. In fact, Cajou sees herself not as a *métisse* who bears both her mother's and her father's features, but as a *Black* woman. Earlier in the text she declares: 'Aucun de mes traits ne rappelle ceux de Maman. Je ressemble à mon Père' (p. 63). For Cajou the divide is clear, and physically she resembles her father whom she never knew. Her Blackness is not a mere mask but a part of every cell in her body. In other words, Cajou has undergone a psychological transformation, and has mutated from what she is, a *métisse*, into Fanon's quintessential *négresse*.

*

It is generally accepted that the oppositional binary of Black to White (both in terms of colour and race) is deeply rooted in our collective psyche. This binary is stable and its elements are fixed, in that one element cannot usually take on the attributes of the other. Under normal circumstances, Black cannot become White, nor can White

¹²⁹ Roger Little, 'Death by Water', p. 22.

become Black. However, if this does happen (in a literary or imaginative context for instance) then the becoming-White or becoming-Black, as action or entity in the Deleuzian sense of a *becoming*, is invested with the power of subversion.¹³⁰ In Franciane Galou's short story 'Une simple question de couleur', the polar opposites of White and Black are used as norms against which to posit the subversive entity or phenomenon of White-becoming-Black.¹³¹ There is no Black-becoming-White in this story where the redemptive notion of bad (Black) becoming good (White) is somehow absent. The story is told in the form of a moral tale, and the author uses archetypes to create a framework of *known* or perceived points of reference with which the reader can identify. The narrative is set in the 1770s on a sugar plantation in Guadeloupe, and centres on its cruel owner, Georges Méry. Méry is bitten on the arm by one of his runaway slaves, a 'nègre Ibo' named Barabbas, and begins to change colour. He eventually turns completely Black, whereupon his sons mistake him for a demon who has taken possession of their father's spirit. Méry pleads with his family to believe that he has simply changed colour and is still their father. The sons cannot accept that the Black man in front of them is their father, and vow to kill him. Mme Méry pleads for the man's life, and, instead of being murdered, he is sent out to the fields to work with the other slaves. The impostor/Méry, re-named Candide,¹³² has great difficulty accepting his role of slave on the plantation and makes several attempts to escape. Each time he maroons he is subjected to the appropriate punishment as dictated by the *Code Noir* of 1685, article 38, which is cited at the beginning of the story.¹³³ This article states that the runaway slave, on being caught after the first attempt, shall have

¹³⁰ In his introductory note to Giles Deleuze's collaborative text with Claire Parnet entitled *Dialogues*, Hugh Tomlinson describes Deleuze's notion of *becoming* in the following way: 'Deleuze uses compounds of the verb *devenir* such as *devenir-femme* or *devenir-animal*. The sense is not of something which 'becomes woman' where 'being woman' is the result of the becoming but rather of a 'pure woman becoming' without subject or object', *Dialogues*, p. xiii.

¹³¹ Franciane Galou, 'Une simple question de couleur' in *Paroles de terre en larmes* (Paris: Hatier, 1988), pp. 47-65.

¹³² It is worth noting that the Latin *candidus* means white. Similarly, Voltaire's character, Candide, is a paradigmatic representation of Whiteness.

¹³³ The *Code Noir* refers to the disciplinary code which existed to regulate the lives of slaves inhabiting the French colonies. The code set out in the strictest manner the expected standard of behaviour in relation to the slaves and their masters, and the punishment deemed necessary for any transgression thereof. See Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir: ou le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), which includes the actual text of the *Code Noir* along with a commentary.

his or her ears cut off and be branded with the *fleur de lys* on one shoulder. A slave who makes a second attempt at escape will have his or her hamstring severed and be branded on the other shoulder. The slave who maroons a third time will be put to death.

The pivotal characters here are the master (Méry), the slave (Barabbas), the go-between (Mme Méry) and the impostor (Candide). These characters represent in some ways basic archetypes, which can be simply described as figures or primitive images present in dreams or in the unconscious, which reflect aspects of the human personality. In a similar sense the four characters could be seen to represent the divine trinity, with the addition of the female figure in the form of the Mother of God. The use of a biblical name like Barabbas obviously has connotations. According to three of the gospels Barabbas was one of the prisoners flanking Christ during the trial before Pontius Pilate. Barabbas was freed by Pilate at the request of the rabble. He was 'for a certain sedition made in the city, and for murder, cast into prison'.¹³⁴ Although Barabbas had committed a violent crime, he was *chosen* by the people above Christ. Barabbas gains his freedom only at the cost of Christ's death, and not by his own merit. This makes of him an ambiguous character, not least because very little is known of him. The slave, Candide, who has assumed the persona of Méry is in fact his shadow (in the Jungian sense), while Barabbas is also Méry's shadow. The idea of the shadow is important here in terms of colour (as a shadow is by definition dark) and of extended interpretation. Jung uses the term 'shadow' to refer to so-called negative aspects of the personality which the conscious self disowns. The shadow is an archetype which, in the dreams of Europeans, often appears as dark-skinned, primitive or alien. In certain circumstances the shadow can be cast or *projected* onto others. In the context of this story, the Black slave, Barabbas, embodies the sum of the negative traits that are present in Méry, but of which he is unconscious or which he is unwilling to acknowledge: laziness, stubbornness and an inability to obey. Méry, in other words, has cast his shadow onto Barabbas, the most reviled and impudent slave. Therefore in becoming-Candide, Méry takes on the form of his own shadow.

Barabbas confuses his master and the *contremaître* by remaining mute and

¹³⁴ Luke 23:19.

refusing to eat, and not even the most inventive punishments will rouse him. In this respect, the slave Barabbas is portrayed as an ascetic, or a being who is *beyond human*. This is in direct opposition to the rhetoric of colonisation which categorised the slave population as *sub-human* and allowed slaveholders to both view and treat their slaves as animals. Moreover, in the eyes of some of the White slaveholders, the slave was *soulless*.¹³⁵ By soulless I do not mean without soul, where soul is taken to mean *spirit*,¹³⁶ but rather lacking in the Christian interpretation of an exalted form of the soul as that which distinguishes man from other creatures and renders him *in the image and glory of God*.¹³⁷ Man or humankind is made in the image of God, though imperfectly so, for it is Christ who is the express image of the Father. St. Paul terms man (not woman) *the glory of God* since God's glory shines directly through man, who is after all the origin and generator of the human race. Woman, on the other hand, is termed the glory of the man, rather than the image and glory of the man. This is because woman is also the image of God, although less so given that she is not the origin of the human race but rather *of the man*,¹³⁸ in the sense of belonging to or born of the man. One can certainly deduce from this that the soul of woman, although reflective of the image of God, is not symbolic of the glory of God.

This leads to an interpretation of the soul of woman as somehow lesser than the soul of man. By extension, and if we are to consider the thoughts of Jung on this matter, the soul of the feminised man would be perceived as being less *glorified* than that of the dominant or masterful man. A submissive, subservient, feminised society, therefore, would, again, be merely reflective of God's image but not of his glory.¹³⁹ However, the Black slave was not perceived as being cast in the image of God, but merely representative of a soul in need of redemption. In other words, the slave is rendered neither in the *image*, nor the *glory* of God, and is therefore indistinguishable

¹³⁵ The Catholic church took the view that slaves were heathens in need of enlightenment, and thus upheld the system of slave trading. Others took the view that the Blacks were simply savages devoid of a soul and resistant to reformation.

¹³⁶ Spirit as in *spiritus* or *pneuma*, a mixture of air and heat making up the Pauline trinity of spirit, soul and body.

¹³⁷ I Corinthians 11.7.

¹³⁸ I Corinthians 11.8.

¹³⁹ Because colonised, the slave society is conceptualised as feminine. This notion is developed by Edward Said in his text entitled *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978). According to Said, in order to justify their subjugation of the cultures they colonised, White Imperialist powers were obliged to feminise those cultures. This is discussed further in chapter 5.

from an animal. Hence the belief among certain Whites in either the absence, or the blackness of the soul among the slave population. In his study of the *Code Noir* mentioned above, Louis Sala-Molins refers to this belief and quotes the views of the ethnographer Rousselot de Surgy who says: 'Tous les voyageurs qui les ont fréquentés, tous les écrivains qui en ont parlé, s'accordent à les représenter comme une nation qui a, si l'on peut s'exprimer ainsi, l'âme aussi noire que le corps. Tout sentiment d'honneur et d'humanité est inconnu à ces barbares.'¹⁴⁰ Here, the soul of the heathen is not absent but tainted black, which points to the inhumanity inherent in their characters. Although the author of this statement explicitly acknowledges the presence of a soul in the 'savage', by juxtaposing this view with the view that these people are incapable of human sentiment, he is implicitly categorising them as animals who, to all intents and purposes, are without a soul. In Galou's story, the heathen slave is placed in direct contrast to the 'bon chrétien', and in fact represents his antithesis.¹⁴¹ As Méry's son exclaims to his mother: 'on n'a jamais vu un bon chrétien devenir un nègre' (p.58). This is an ironic twist on an idea widely held in the eighteenth century, namely that *on n'a jamais vu un nègre devenir un bon chrétien*. In Galou's story then, one could consider that the received image of the soulless slave is subverted, in that by his muteness and asceticism mentioned above, the slave Barabbas is represented in an exalted or religious state (i.e. as having a soul which is reflective of the *glory* of God). The muteness of Barabbas, his state of fasting and his violent death which is witnessed by the people, all point to an image of him that is Christ-like. This is problematic, however, for although the Christ-symbol is a symbol of the self, it cannot represent the contradictions that exist within human nature (i.e. light and dark, good and evil). The Christ-image is unilateral, representing only good, light and so on, with Satan being its dialectical opposite.

On the other hand, it is not quite clear who Barabbas is. The name Barabbas

¹⁴⁰ Sala-Molins quotes (p.55) from a text entitled *Mélanges intéressants et curieux, ou abrégé d'Histoire naturelle, morale civile et politique de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et des terres polaires* (Paris 1763-1765).

¹⁴¹ It is interesting to remark here that the slave being the lowliest of humans is not without a redemptive image which can be found in St. Paul's reference to Christ taking the form of a servant' (Philippians II.6). This is an allegorical interpretation of the Christ as both human and divine. As such Christ assumes the form of man (God's servant) but does not *become* man. Thus the assumption by the self of a persona does not imply a *becoming* of that persona.

(undoubtedly a reference to the biblical figure) is not the slave's given name. This is suggested by the sentence: 'On l'avait surnommé Barabbas' (p. 51). When Barabbas escapes, he does so without leaving a trace and again Méry is left perplexed. It is presumed that Barabbas has reached a place called the 'Grands-Fonds', probably a dense part of the Guadeloupean forest, where he will remain hidden in the manner of a maroon. Glissant has referred to these zones of concealment and the important place they occupy in collective memory. The forest, the hills and the deep countryside were *opaque* spaces where maroons took refuge. These dense spaces were in direct contrast to the *transparency* of the plantation. Thus, for Glissant, the forest is an image of opacity, which can here be interpreted as a mythic image. The forest is a symbol of sanctuary, but also reveals itself to be ambiguous (creator of serenity and anxiety, being both friendly and oppressive). According to Jung, by virtue of its obscure nature and its association with *the root*, the forest is symbolic of the unconscious. Thus, while the character Barabbas can be seen as undertaking a mythical journey into the forest (the 'Grands-Fonds') under the guise of maroon, a Jungian interpretation would suggest that he is embarking on an encounter with the unconscious.

This brings us back to a reading of the figure of Barabbas as *shadow*. According to Jung, in order to become aware of one's shadow, one must recognise 'the dark aspects of the personality as present and real'.¹⁴² Essentially, the shadow is made up of inferior qualities or so-called *dark* characteristics. Although the author does not state that the slave Barabbas is Black (we are told he is a *nègre*¹⁴³), his colour is made known via his position of contrast to the White Georges Méry. Barabbas is Black, therefore, in both a physical and a metaphorical sense. As Méry's shadow, he is dark and is representative of that which is dark (the unknown, the impenetrable). But again there is an ambiguous note to this reading as we know that the shadow is also symbolic of the soul (when expressed pictorially, for instance). As Méry's son Benjamin reasons: 'Le démon qu'on a retrouvé dans la chambre de notre père a pris son enveloppe charnelle et aussi son âme' (p. 59). In this way we see Barabbas as assuming the form of Méry's body and possessing his soul. Thus Méry's shadow (in the Jungian sense) or Barabbas, has overwhelmed his soul (in the Christian sense),

¹⁴² C. G. Jung, *The Essential Jung* (London: HarperCollins, 1983) p. 91.

¹⁴³ In Creole the word *nègre* or *nèg* simply means 'man'.

which leaves him void and bereft. As such Méry's physical transformation from White to Black is an allegorical representation of a deeper and more ambiguous notion of the *dark* aspects of the personality overpowering the light or good aspects. However, throughout the story, it is Méry who is portrayed as the bad character. He is greedy, he treats his slaves and his wife badly, and he is a bully: 'C'était un homme retors, cruel, sans qualités de cœur. Tout le mouvement de sa vie tendait vers un seul but: amasser de l'argent, encore et toujours plus de l'argent' (p.50). Ironically, in this respect it is Whiteness that characterises evil.

Mme Méry, on the other hand, because she is invested with the blood of both races (White and Black) represents the *psychopompe*,¹⁴⁴ the mediator or the conduit. As an archetype she is an allegory of Our Lady the mediatrix. Mme Méry saves the slave Candide from death, but ostracises herself from her sons in the process. As a mediator between the two groups, the Black slave and her White sons, Isabelle Méry has no camp, and yet she is a positive expression of the character of the *métisse*. The twin races of White and Black, along with their attendant physical and moral attributes, are present in her both *corporeally* and *spiritually*. Her *métissage* is an asset which she uses to achieve a common good. While the sons are represented as fools, being 'vaniteux, cupides et méchants'(p. 50), Mme Méry is portrayed as being intelligent, sensible and humane. This portrait of the *métisse* as mediator is a subversion of the image of the mixed-race character as misfit or outcast. Mme Méry's humanity is linked directly in the text with the fact that she has 'du sang nègre' (p.50). Being of mixed-race, therefore, allows her to experience both sides in a given duality, and to give a fair and balanced opinion.

Méry's becoming-Black, however, poses a problem in terms of the *moral* of the story. Although Candide experiences first-hand the very punishments that he meted out to his slaves when he was Georges Méry, at the end of the story he shows no remorse for his actions, nor does he accept or understand his transformation. Instead he asks God: 'Que t'ai-je fait, Mon Dieu, moi qui ai toujours été un bon chrétien, qui ai toujours respecté ta loi, pour me réduire à une situation si honteuse et infâmante?' (p.65). For Méry, the shame of his situation lies in his *negrification*, and interestingly

¹⁴⁴ A *psychopompe* or *conducteur des âmes* (from Greek and Roman mythology), is a driver of souls, a mediator between this world and the next.

his transformation is referred to in terms of *becoming a Negro*, rather than just becoming Black: 'il était en train de devenir un nègre' (p. 56). For Méry, being a Negro forcibly excludes being a Christian. Because he believes himself to be a good Christian, he cannot identify with himself as a Negro. This brings us back to the point made earlier regarding the spiritual state of the slave. Although the *Code Noir* stated that all slaves should be baptised Catholic, there still persisted the idea among many slaveholders that a slave had no soul. While slaveholders were bound by law to have their slaves baptised, they continued to treat them like animals. As article two of the *Code Noir* indicates: 'Tous les esclaves qui seront dans nos îles seront baptisés et instruits dans la religion catholique, apostolique et romaine'. At the same time, the code declared slaves to be *meubles*, and 'comme tels entrer dans la communauté'.¹⁴⁵ This would imply that while slaves were initiated into the Christian tradition, they were not really perceived as Christians. In order to be regarded as Christian, one had to have a soul (in the sense explained above), which the slaves did not given that they were mere *meubles* or chattels (essentially put into the same category as livestock). Hence the ambiguity present initially in the *Code Noir*, and by extension in Galou's short story.

In this way, it becomes evident that Méry's transformation from White to Black was merely physical in that he assumed the form of a slave, but retained the character of the master. Whether Candide, Barabbas or Georges Méry, the White man-becoming Black represents a challenge to the limits of colour-as-identity. Franciane Galou's representation of the ambiguous nature of what society perceives to be colour difference is effective, in that the reader is compelled to question the notion of what it actually means to be Black or White.

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In her analysis of the characterisation of women in literature from the Caribbean basin, referred to above, Françoise Lionnet states that: 'The characters created by these novelists suffer the fate of victims because in that tradition there is not yet a literary model which allows the female subject genuinely to conceive of herself as both a speaking and an acting subject' (p. 97). Ernest Pépin has also commented on this lack

¹⁴⁵ Article 44, p. 166.

of viable literary models of femininity.¹⁴⁶ When West Indian women are depicted solely in a social context in literature, they are effectively rendered invisible. The 'femme invisible' is not vital to narrative progression, but exists as a background figure: 'La littérature pour sa part, donne une large place à la femme, mais souvent elle ne prend en compte que le rôle social de la femme. L'écrivain antillais ne regarde pas la femme antillaise, il ne la contemple pas, craignant sans doute de tomber dans l'exotisme' (p. 193).

Much of the critical work done on the representation of women in Caribbean literature refers to the dearth of positive models of femininity available to writers. Beverley Ormerod, for instance, points to the figures of the old woman, witch or matriarch, that are so prevalent in well-known works such as Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* and Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres*.¹⁴⁷ These older female characters often portray a type of femininity that is physically unattractive. The older woman is desexualised and almost always stripped of her femininity. Ormerod also refers to the *femme matador* (*matadò* in Creole), a model of femininity celebrated by the *Créolistes*, who is usually a strong and domineering woman who confronts life with energy and stoicism. It has been suggested that the Caribbean woman has been deprived of the role of cultural sage and storyteller, which has been bestowed, certainly by the writers of the *Créolité* movement, on male characters, generally in the form of the *conteur*. However, the female characters discussed in this chapter, while not necessarily positive models of femininity, both embody the ambivalence and sense of confusion that a nascent role model represents. Neither character signifies the older desexualised woman or the woman-as-repository-of-truth figure. They are young women, both searching for acceptance and security. Cajou embodies some of the paradigms of Black femininity already in existence, but these are at times subverted. Because the story ends ambiguously and without a sense of closure, Lacrosil has, at least, constructed a framework that eschews the prescribed notions of teleological perfection. Similarly, Mayotte Capécia, through her examination of the hierarchy of

¹⁴⁶ Ernest Pépin, 'La femme Antillaise et son corps' in *Présence Africaine*, 141 (1987), 181-193.

¹⁴⁷ Beverley Ormerod, 'The Representation of Women in French Caribbean literature' in *An Introduction to Francophone Caribbean Writing*, pp. 101-117. Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), Joseph Zobel, *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1950).

colour present in Martinique, has contextualised the problem of colour complexity and made of the character Mayotte a symbol of the racial divide that split colonial society into Black and White.

In many ways both novels discussed in this chapter have continued in a tradition of writing which represents women in a certain way (as powerless and dependent). There is no doubt that there is a dearth of positive models of Black femininity available to writers for representation. However, Mayotte Capécia and Michèle Lacrosil were among the first Black women writers from the Caribbean to break into the literary scene. In fact these women writers from the West Indies made advances in literature markedly earlier than their sisters from French-speaking Africa. As we shall see over the following chapters, the transition from models of Black femininity which are limiting for Caribbean women, to more positive systems of representation will take place slowly and over time. In their representation of the ambiguous nature of the *métisse* both Capécia and Lacrosil have exposed to some extent the need to redefine this figure. While Franciane Galou's short story is essentially the characterisation of a masculine identity, the problems she unveils are universal. What is 'une simple question de couleur'? In many ways this short story encapsulates the ambiguous and complex nature of the human psyche as it veers between light and dark, good and evil and Black and White.

CHAPTER THREE

Ambiguous Imprints

Images of the body, technology and otherness in Suzanne Dracius's novel and selected short stories

*Métissage et marronnage
sont les deux mamelles de mon En-France*¹⁴⁸

In order to define himself, man has always endeavoured to exclude that which is other. He has sought to define himself by opposition: to nature, to the spiritual world, to technology and even to woman. As regards technology, this state of reciprocal seclusion is becoming more acute. In the introduction to his novel *Crash*, James Ballard proposes that 'Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft-drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography. Over our lives preside the great twin leitmotifs of the 20th century – sex and paranoia'.¹⁴⁹ Here, as in Kubrick's film '2001, A Space Odyssey', or Huxley's *Brave New World*, technology is represented as a dark and threatening force, a danger to man.

In fact, what we fear most is not technology itself but the inexorable blurring of the boundaries that exist to separate man from machine, and the sense of ambiguity inherent in the production of machines that could almost be human. The characters in Ballard's novel, with their scars and steel-sculpted joints are the new proletariat in

¹⁴⁸ Suzanne Dracius, cited from her note in appendix one.

¹⁴⁹ J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995).

Mark Dery's 'age of engineered monsters'.¹⁵⁰ In the twenty-first century the human body has welcomed into its crevices such technical devices as cochlear implants, pacemakers, neuro-stimulators and artificial kidneys, while new trends in plastic surgery include genital reconstruction, buttock implants and limb-lengthening. The association of body with machine became rooted in popular belief in the eighteenth century when Descartes showed that animals are complicated machines and that the human body can also be imagined as such. Descartes and his contemporaries popularised the notion of giving mechanical explanations for bodily functions (the circulatory system, for instance, would be explained using an image of a pump and tubing), but were careful not to *describe* men as machines. In a text entitled *L'Homme machine*, Julien Offray de la Mettrie made this heretical link between man and machine and crystallised the mechanical metaphor.¹⁵¹ Medical discourse would later use this image to highlight the technological imperative in medicine: the need to use machinery to fix machinery.¹⁵² In his introduction to the modern edition of *L'Homme machine* cited above, Justin Leiber credits La Mettrie with a protean vision and an almost pantheistic spirituality: 'La Mettrie eroticizes nature as a world of colour and joy, a blooming and budding kaleidoscopic biosphere' (p. 8).

Dery refers to the body as a site of 'what might be called *micropolitical* power struggles' (p.507). Such power struggles can no longer be named simply in terms of the dialectics of the binary machine, but should encompass a politics of hybridity, multiplicity and infiltration. The biochemist and feminist writer Donna Haraway brings together this image of the human bionaut with her own politico-scientific analysis. Haraway, before Ballard and Dery, saw the twentieth century as a mythic time wherein humans have become 'theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism'.¹⁵³ Haraway's friendly cyborg can claim ancestral links to fictional prototypes such as Frankenstein's creature in Mary Shelley's dark tale, and even the wooden toy Pinocchio in the fairytale of the same name. Kafka's short stories are an obvious

¹⁵⁰ Mark Dery, 'Cyberculture', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 91 (1992) 501-23, p. 506.

¹⁵¹ Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *L'Homme machine* translated by Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994). La Mettrie's text was first published by the Leyden publisher Elie Luzac in 1747.

¹⁵² See Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture*.

¹⁵³ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-181 (p. 150).

source of cyborgs with the transformation of man into bug in 'The Transformation' and of course the dreadful instrument of torture in 'In the Penal Colony'. Here a prisoner is subjected to a grisly sentence that is literally written onto his body using a machine designed by the prison officer who cherishes the apparatus and is obeyed by it.¹⁵⁴ An example of a later, more refined cyborg prototype appears in Charles Bukowski's short story 'The Fuck Machine' where the narrator of the story is unsure whether the character Tanya is a machine as her creator claims, or a 'real' woman: 'it was simply the most beautiful machine and so-called woman they had ever seen'.¹⁵⁵ Here the inventor's model has not just attained human perfection, it has surpassed it.

What Haraway's cyborg politics essentially involves is a rethinking of boundaries: 'a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (p. 154). She also stresses the fact that the cyborg has no formal incarnation in the Western sense, and no origin myth: 'The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history. Nor does it mark time on an oedipal calendar, attempting to heal the terrible cleavages of gender in an oral symbiotic utopia or post-oedipal apocalypse' (p. 150). This is an important deconstructive element in cyborg theory. As the critic Jana Sawicki comments: 'Haraway's vision emphasises the significance of story-telling for liberatory politics, indeed for the very survival of oppressed groups'.¹⁵⁶ Haraway's description of cyborg writing excludes all reference to origin, the one or the *logos*. She rejects 'the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language' (p. 175). Instead Haraway advocates the reappropriation of the tools which were once used to *mark* members of oppressed groups as other. These are the tools of writing, stories and tales that can be retold and rewritten in order to deconstruct and displace the rotting origin myths of the West. Jana Sawicki interprets Haraway's vision as a means for (marginal) writers to retell their history and 'explore the theme of identity on the margins of hegemonic groups and thereby deconstruct the authority and legitimacy of dominant humanist narratives

¹⁵⁴ Franz Kafka, *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman's Library, 1993).

¹⁵⁵ Charles Bukowski, 'The Fuck machine' in *The most beautiful woman in town and other stories* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988).

¹⁵⁶ Jana Sawicki, 'Foucault, Feminism and Questions of Identity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* ed. by Gary Gutting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 286-313 (p. 306).

by exposing their partiality' (p. 306).

In this chapter I propose to draw from the literary fiction of Suzanne Dracius a kind of cyborg vision which deconstructs the old narratives and rebuilds a new set of stories that reveal the specificity of the Caribbean experience. When Dracius approaches the subject of woman and her place in the modern world it is with sensitivity and insight. Her novel *L'Autre qui danse* in particular exhibits a sense of ambiguity in its exploration of the themes of identity and difference, as they are experienced by the Caribbean woman. Dracius's short stories 'De sueur, de sucre et de sang' and 'La Virago' explore the idea of crossing boundaries, and use the image of the body-as-machine to reveal new ways of being-in-the-world, while her unpublished story 'L'Âme sœur' returns to the themes and characters exposed in *L'Autre qui danse*. Her latest published short story 'La Montagne de feu', which recreates the apocalyptic event of the eruption of Mont Pelé, also explores the themes of identity and otherness.¹⁵⁷ The short stories in particular use a mixture of archetypal themes and classical imagery to spin modern myths that re-create lost fragments of the Caribbean experience.

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Suzanne Dracius was born in Martinique where she lives today. She was educated at the Sorbonne in Paris and has also lived in Atlanta, Georgia. Her first novel *L'Autre qui danse* traces the life of a Martinican woman named Rehvana as she tries to unravel the identity imposed on her by her Caribbean history. Rehvana and her sister Matildana are portrayed as two halves of the one woman, with Matildana as the mature, stable and sensible aspect, and Rehvana as the emotionally immature, impulsive and unstable aspect. The first part of the novel is set in Paris where Rehvana is living in a squat with a group of militant young Paris-born West Indians who call themselves 'les fils d'Agar'. Rehvana is in love with their leader, Abdoulaye, and is completely taken with his belief in a return to 'Mother Africa', and the ascetic rituals of

¹⁵⁷ Suzanne Dracius, *L'Autre qui danse* (Paris: Seghers, 1989), 'De sueur, de sucre et de sang' in *Serpent à Plumes*, 15 (1992), 35-38, 'La Virago' in *Diversité: La nouvelle francophone à travers le monde*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1994) 74-78, 'La Montagne de feu' in *Diversité* (2000), 68-75. The above short stories are to be republished in a collection entitled *Rue monte au ciel* in 2003 along with new material. This will include an extended version of 'La Montagne de feu'. I am grateful to Suzanne Dracius for allowing me to include the unpublished version of 'L'Âme sœur' in an appendix to this thesis.

the cult. It is only when she is required to submit to one of the violent rituals of the group that involves cutting the face that Rehvana rebels and leaves the squat. She subsequently becomes pregnant by a friend, Jérémie, who loves her but cannot hold her interest. Rehvana quickly meets another mate, this time a flashy Martinican named Éric who brings her 'home' to the Caribbean, but soon abandons her in the old and rotting colonial residence he inherited from his father. Éric spends his time carousing in the city with his sinister friend Chabin, only to return intermittently to beat and subjugate the already emaciated and dejected Rehvana and her ill baby, whom he almost murders during one of his binges. The last part of the novel shows the heroine in an impoverished state, living in an H.L.M. in Paris, without heat, light or food, praying for someone to come, but slowly dying with her baby as her sister boards the plane to return and take care of them. Throughout the narrative there are glimpses of the older sister Matildana as she tries to reason with Rehvana and even plead with her to return to Jérémie and a more comfortable life. Her efforts are of course in vain and we see once more the evolution of a female character who, in the words of Françoise Lionnet 'represent[s] a type of Caribbean woman who is both passive and masochistic [...] having abandoned all rights and agency to the sovereign male'.¹⁵⁸ What is interesting here is the author's expert rendering of the protagonist's struggle to interpret her past and present as she learns them through her body. Dracius uses Rehvana's body as a script onto which cultural and historical truths are imprinted. As Lionnet remarks: 'In postcolonial literature the gendered and racialised body of the female protagonist is consistently overdetermined; it is a partial object on which are written various cultural scripts and their death-dealing blows' (p. 87).

Throughout the text there are references to Rehvana's diminishing health which mirrors her state of exile. As the heroine becomes more alienated from what her sister (or *other self*) perceives to be a healthy and stable way of life, so her body develops new markings which reflect her psychological state. It is certain that Rehvana represents the search for a traditional way of life. In the first part of the novel she immerses herself in the cult of the 'fils d'Agar', a group which advocates a return to

¹⁵⁸ Françoise Lionnet, 'Inscriptions of Exile: The Body's knowledge and the myth of authenticity in Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie' in *Postcolonial Representations*, pp. 87-100 (p. 90).

traditional African ways of dress and food preparation, and of course male dominance. The second part of the text, set in the Martinican countryside, shows Rehvana struggling to preserve the old ways as expressed to her by her elderly neighbour Man Cidalise. A large part of the heroine's day is spent in the preparation of labour-intensive dishes that are 'traditional' in their flavour, and conversing in a jagged Creole which is ineffective in ridding her of the tag 'la dame de France'. In the last section of the novel, Rehvana has returned to Paris where she is subsisting on welfare, without a partner or employment and dressed pathetically in the traditional African *boubou* and open-toed sandals. The three sections of the novel thus show the heroine in three very typical female roles: the traditional African woman, the servile mistress and the immigrant welfare mother. All three attempts to become settled and rooted fail, and in a shocking development, Rehvana dies of hunger at the end of the novel. Dracius's message here seems clear: the search for origins is a futile exercise. However, the reader is also aware of the author's intention to convey the idea that there are in fact no roots and no origins in Caribbean history. Rehvana's Creole dishes are mere reproductions of old recipes resurrected by Man Cidalise. Her stories and Creole phrases stem from hearsay and interpretation. As Mathildana¹⁵⁹ comments in 'L'âme sœur': 'La petite sœur se noyait dans un océan de mythes' (p. 178). The collection and assimilation of Creole recipes, folktales and idioms by Rehvana do nothing to reveal her true identity, which is in any case destined to remain opaque. In this way the author has made clever use of Rehvana's domestic situation to compare the *transparency* of these rituals we call local customs, with the *opacity* of the Caribbean identity.

The author's juxtaposition of the stable and healthy Matildana to the nomadic and diseased Rehvana shows how those who are happy use those who are discontented to act out their negative desires. In many ways Matildana and Jérémie benefit from Rehvana's search for origins as it makes them aware of the necessity for security. The end of the novel shows a pensive Matildana responding to some primitive call within her to go to her sister. Here we see an ambiguous attitude towards this theme of the quest. The character Matildana is grounded in her identity as a middle-class and educated woman from the Caribbean, yet she is joyfully nomadic in her choice of

¹⁵⁹ The author uses the spelling 'Mathildana' for this character in 'L'Âme sœur', but I can only presume the name refers to the same character.

lifestyle which takes her from Paris to Martinique where she was born and back again in search of her sister. In contrast to Rehvana who is perceived as other wherever she situates herself, Matildana represents an instance of West Indian femininity that is anchored or resolved, and yet it is *through Rehvana's suffering* that she gains insight into her stability. As I suggested above, one could regard the two characters as parts of a whole or a self divided, with Rehvana falling into the sub-normal or psychopathological domain and Matildana representing the stable and healthy aspect. The author herself has alluded to this fact in an interview: 'C'est normal que dans le roman on parle plus du personnage de Rehvana qui va mal que de Matildana qui va bien. Mais en même temps celle sur laquelle j'insiste et qui est une espèce de figure idéale, c'est celle qui est une image de la réalisation, de la plénitude, donc du positif, de l'optimisme'.¹⁶⁰

In addition to this we see in Dracius's short story 'L'Âme sœur' how after Rehvana's death, Matildana is 'Totalelement vidée de son être par la fin étrange de sa sœur' (p. 177). The story in itself represents a continuation of the plot of *L'Autre qui danse*, having the same characters (Man Cidalise, Mathildana and Rehvana) and in a sense developing some of the themes exposed in the novel. The text retains the form of a short story, although it could also be perceived as an appendix to the novel. The thread of the narrative is taken up exactly where it was left off, that is, with the death of Rehvana in a Parisian H.L.M. The short story, however, focuses on Mathildana and her relationship with a young man named TERENCE whom she meets in Orly airport while travelling back to Martinique a few months after Rehvana's death. Dracius weaves both a story of sisterly loss and a story of ancestral remains which culminates in a twist typical of her style and which leaves the reader wondering if TERENCE too, is an *âme frère*. The story explores the ideas of nearness and separation, as they influence Mathildana who spends the holidays 'côte à côte' with TERENCE as she endeavours to understand this 'opaque héritage sororal'.

As an alternative to interpreting the two characters of *L'Autre qui danse* as the two aspects of the one character, they could also be viewed as the conscious and sub-conscious self, with Matildana representing the unconscious voice of truth or morality

¹⁶⁰ Interview given with Jean-Pierre Piriou in 1994 while the author was in Atlanta. The quotation is from her transcript.

as it reasons with the conscious Rehvana. With such a reading, however, the reader is made aware of the author's ambiguous portrayal of right and wrong in the context of lifestyle choice. In fact there are several instances in the narrative where Rehvana's noble posture and silent protest mark her as a kind of modern-day martyr fighting the establishment in a bid to save the old ways of her people. In the second section, for instance, we see Matildana trying to dissuade Rehvana from breast-feeding her starved and sickly baby. Matildana insists that she has not sufficient milk in her breasts and that she should use a manufactured substitute. She badgers Rehvana whose silence is indicated in the text by three dots, but Matildana is infuriated and views her sister's stubbornness as merely symbolic of her dysfunctional personality: 'Qu'est-ce que ton bébé en a à faire si tu l'allaites en "fille d'Agar"? Tout ce qu'elle veut, c'est manger à sa faim! Tu es grotesque et criminelle, dans ton égoïsme fanatique' (p. 205). As Matildana spits out her insults, Rehvana is portrayed as calm and Madonna-like, gently feeding her child: 'Sans prêter le moindrement l'oreille à ce que lui disait sa sœur, les yeux baissés vers l'enfant, Rehvana avait continué à lentement dégrafer son corsage et, lentement, dignement, présenté à l'enfant un superbe mamelon dressé, comme érigé de colère et d'affirmation de soi' (p. 205). Rehvana then quietly enforces her own logic: 'Je suis Antillaise, j'ai du lait et j'allaité mon bébé'. Her solemn protest leaves Matildana 'littéralement médusée'. The author uses the phrases 'tourner mon lait' and 'gâter mon lait' to emphasise the physical effect Matildana's arguments have on Rehvana, that is, the effect they have on her femininity. Rehvana's retaliation then, is a visceral silencing of her sister. The Medusa image is not used benignly. In Matildana's eyes, her sister is grotesque, a parody of subjugated femininity, a monster, and as such she has the power, Medusa-like, to petrify anyone who meets her gaze.

A psychoanalytic interpretation might find Rehvana dissatisfied with the image reflected back at her by society. As a *négropolitaine*¹⁶¹ desperate to live the authentic Caribbean lifestyle, she is constantly disappointed by her failure to fit in. One example shows Rehvana in a bar in Fort-de-France. Having entered she is made aware of how out of place she is: 'Elle n'a rien à faire dans cette gangue d'animosité lubrique, sous ces charges de désir haineux [...] elle n'est pas à sa place, visage et corps de femme,

¹⁶¹ A West Indian who has lived in France, or adopted French customs.

carnation bien trop claire, comme une involontaire, ô combien!’ (p. 249). Here again Rehvana’s otherness is discernible in her body, and it is because of her physical difference (her pale skin, her feminine form) that she is rejected. This rejection by the other customers manifests itself both in their refusal to speak to her, and in their refusal to speak Creole in front of her: ‘les mots qu’on n’a pas voulu lui dire, et ce créole, ô Seigneur, ce créole! Qui s’est tu quand elle est entrée. Elle reste un instant sur le seuil, le temps que lui cingle le dos la parole refusée’ (p. 250). While Rehvana desires to be one of them (‘elle aurait tant voulu connaître une communion’), the customers in this local bar view her as strange and outside their world. Rehvana’s rejection by her own people and her ensuing malaise reflect beautifully the ambiguous status of the Caribbean woman who, alienated and other, roams in search of selfhood.

Rehvana’s search for selfhood is also alluded to in ‘L’âme sœur’ as Mathildana tries to come to terms with the death of her younger sister, and decipher the meaning of what Dracius calls *le cri*, emitted by Rehvana before death. Here Mathildana describes the difference that separated them in terms of the difference in their *cri*, their voice: ‘si proche et obscur à la fois, si plein de ses accents à elle et pourtant étranger à elle, si créole, si perdu, si pur’ (p. 177). Perhaps this *cri* is a reference to Glissant’s idea of the *cri du poète*, the symbolic cry of the *Négritude* poets as they strove to liberate the oppressed self through a return to Mother Africa. Dracius’s image of the last cry as an expression of the self, is also emblematic of the soul leaving the body of the dead ‘petite déesse’. The *cri* here is essentially indicative of breath (or *souffle*), which of course is a symbolic representation of the soul. Although they had a similar voice, the two sisters possessed a different essence or personality: ‘La où elle n’était que ferveur, assurance, ouverte au monde, elle, Mathildana [...] Rehvana s’était perdue, chaque jour davantage, dans une quête abolie’ (p. 177). As two sides of the same character, or two aspects of the one persona, Rehvana and Mathildana represent the ambivalent nature of the double-sided soul comprising both *anima* and *animus*, and referring to both the terrestrial and the supernatural. More specifically, Rehvana is described in this story as inhabiting another world, a ‘troisième monde’, which exists somewhere between the two worlds of myth and reality. From Mathildana’s perspective one must inhabit either the world of myth or the world of reality, but Rehvana is in search of what Deleuze would call a *multiplicity*. This can be described

as a phenomenon or state in which it is not the separate elements or terms that are considered, but what is *between*. The *between* is a set of relations which are not separable from each other (much like a rhizome that develops from the middle, rather than from polarised opposites) but acts as a kind of trajectory. This *third* world or multiplicity has an almost alchemical signification in that it reveals not just Rehvana's search for the meaning of her half of the shared soul, but also her state of being neither one thing nor the other, neither Black nor White, 'à mi-chemin entre les deux mondes'.

L'Autre qui danse is littered with religious references and draws heavily on the archaic dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. As Rehvana's health deteriorates she relies more on Man Cidalise, a witch or mother figure who initiates her into the lore of the Martinican countryside. Together they attend the Easter stations of the cross. Rehvana's slow and painful ascent of the pebbled path with a heavy Cidalise leaning on her, is reminiscent of Christ's passion as he carries the cross to Calvary: 'Une sueur sacrée ruisselle sur son visage; la pente est de plus en plus rude, les cailloux se font plus nombreux, blessent ses pieds nus dans les sandales sénégalaises et Cidalise pèse à son bras' (p. 218). The focus here is on pain and suffering as it is manifested in the body. The cuts on Rehvana's feet mirror those Christ suffered as he ascended Calvary. As they reach the summit Rehvana is struck by the assembly of vendors selling local delicacies as if to cinema-goers on a Saturday night. The vulgar hypocrisy of a culture that simultaneously worships Catholicism and Materialism mirrors the heroine's own misguided ideology. Although she blindly accepts the dubious local 'customs' and creolisms evident in the Martinican way of life, Rehvana is unwilling to refer to her own upbringing. Earlier on in the text Dracius describes in great detail the cuts on the heroine's hands received in the process of preparing food: 'Ses ongles n'ont pas fui la morsure de la râpe quand elle a rapporté, du fond de la ravine, les prunes de Cythère vertes et qu'elle s'est mise en devoir de les réduire en cette fine poudre [...] La peau fragile de ses mains n'aura craint nul hachoir, ses bras minces ne repoussent nulle fatigue' (p. 120). These thankless tasks impose on Rehvana's body a set of markings that reveal her state of subjugation. Not only are her hands cut and blistered, her legs and arms also bear the signs of neglect and abuse: 'la peau tavelée de meurtrissures bleuâtres, bras et jambes ulcérés de blessures mal soignées, ou si peu, laissées aux soins hasardeux, voire ineptes, de remèdes de halliers pas toujours bien choisis, employés

sans discernement et de toute façon impuissants à vaincre le pouvoir de l'air humide et chaud' (p. 126). Rehvana's spirit soars as she wears herself out preparing meals for Éric, and when he deigns to eat at home she waits on him, needing no sustenance herself: 'elle reste debout les mains jointes, le dévore béatement des yeux et se repaît du spectacle de l'homme mangeant' (p. 126). The Christian idea of redemption through suffering is here evident, and the tableau drawn by Dracius is reminiscent of sacred paintings in which feasting, suffering and prayer are depicted simultaneously. Here the suffering body achieves gratification through the spectacle of the beloved eating. Rehvana's desire to eat is projected onto her lover. But Dracius has also created the image of the ascetic who, through mastery of the body, gains spiritual enlightenment. Pain is lived through the body, and Rehvana's body is a text on which pain can be read as an indication both of her state of exile and of her spiritual fulfilment. Like the ascetic who deprives herself of food in order to be closer to God, Rehvana starves herself so that she can focus fully on her lover. The basic human response to hunger is eliminated and all she feels is exaltation. As a Caribbean woman Rehvana has internalised the totalising systems of colonisation and patriarchy which have deprived her of the ability to nurture herself. She is marginalised and isolated wherever she tries to sow roots. As other, her pathology is always revealed in her anatomy and it is through her body that she becomes aware of her separateness. In her portrayal of Rehvana as a devastated and denigrated woman, Dracius has created a true icon of otherness.

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Suzanne Dracius's second short story 'La Virago' is essentially the description of an encounter between the narrator and a mysterious leather-clad figure on a motorcycle. The narrator sees this motorcyclist three times, once when it jumps onto the bonnet of someone's car (an act of revenge), secondly in a car park when the figure is stealing money from an unlocked Mercedes, and lastly when the motorcyclist tears down the hill in front of the school where the narrator teaches, stops at her feet and removes the dark-visored helmet to reveal that she is in fact a woman. The title of the story is itself ambiguous; the reader thinks of a man-like woman, a female warrior, but also of this motorbike manufactured under the name 'Virago'.

From the beginning the author brings together the images of man and machine.

In the first line of the story the words 'gens' and 'moto' are juxtaposed. In the third sentence the author describes the motorcyclist as being 'un centaure d'aujourd'hui', and then in the fourth sentence as one who is almost at one with or part of his/her vehicle: 'Il y a d'un côté les assis, de l'autre les motocyclistes qui font corps avec leur machine' (p. 74).¹⁶² The energy or even essence of the story lies in this matching of man and machine, and in the description of the motorcyclist as a creature enveloped in leather from the neck down, with gloves, boots and helmet so that it is impossible to distinguish its gender, race or even whether it is human: 'La créature de cuir vêtue, de ses pieds bottés jusqu'au bout de ses doigts gantés, a sauté de sa monture de métal. Pas moyen de distinguer le moindre bout de chair, encore moins de connaître son visage, complètement masqué sous la protection d'un casque intégral brillant au soleil. Même ses yeux je ne pouvais les voir.'

A traditional reading of the story would perhaps pinpoint the final scene as the denouement, where the narrator finally comes face to face with the unveiled motorcyclist. In other words there is a build-up of suspense centring on the 'Virago', and then a resolution where the irrational becomes, or gives way to, the rational. Such a reading provides the reader with a set of recognisable reference points (motorcycle-human-disguise-woman), and reassures her/him with a comfortable outcome, a return to normality. However, a second reading is also possible. If one considers instead the content of this short story, its movement, and the creation of this mythological being, then the *coup de théâtre* instead becomes a pretext for engaging the reader in a liaison between the 'normal' world and the literary reality of fantasy and delirium. Such an engagement requires the reader to accept the story as an independent entity, but also as a locus of creation. This mythological being can be seen in Deleuzian terms as the centre of many *becomings*. According to Deleuze, as someone *becomes*, what he is *becoming* changes as much as he does himself.¹⁶³ *Becoming* does not simply refer to the fact that the self is in constant flux. More precisely it refers to an objective zone of

¹⁶² 'les assis' is probably a reference to Rimbaud's poem of that title. In this poem Rimbaud depicts his vision of the metamorphosis of man into chair, where man becomes a *corps-chaise*.

Ils ont greffé dans des amours épileptiques
 Leur fantasque ossature aux grands squelettes noirs
 De leurs chaises; leurs pieds aux barreaux rachitiques
 S'entrelacent pour les matins et pour les soirs!

¹⁶³ See Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*.

indistinction that exists between multiplicities. In 'Virago' there is the 'becoming-machine' of the human (the motorcyclist is described as 'faisant corps avec une Virago de marque Yamaha'), 'becoming-animal' of the machine (the motorcyclist is a 'centaure' or a 'drôle d'oiseau rouge et noir'), 'becoming-movement', 'becoming-speed'. These becomings fuse together as if in a chemical reaction and make of this mythological being (which is 'it', 'him' and 'her' simultaneously) a creature of pure-becoming. In other words, the character (if it can so be called) with which we are being presented is unstable, unattainable, in constant movement and ever-changing. As a being who is 'hors des normes, loin des conventions' (p. 77), it defies definition and is therefore challenging. Like Haraway's cyborg, the Virago character embodies the ambiguity that characterises the modern machine which is neither natural nor artificial, neither of mind nor of body.

The focus here is not so much on the simple motorcyclist as on the heterogeneous elements integrating with her: the disguise, the machine and above all the narrator who acts as an anchor or point of stability (both within the story and for us as readers) around which this mythical being evolves. When these elements cease to interact with each other as happens at the end of the story, everything returns to normal, there is no centaur and no fantasy. It is clear then that the strength of the story lies in the merging of these elements. If we as readers react (either positively or negatively), it is not because the author has provided us with a well-told urban fairytale, but because she has provided us with the means to transform daily mechanical incidents into new legends, and to believe in mythological creatures without subject or object. What Dracius has done here is to invest in the notion of fabulation and myth-making.

Let us consider this time Deleuze's idea that minority writers¹⁶⁴ are surrounded by the ideology of a coloniser, the discourse of intellectuals and the information of the media which all threaten to subsume them. Creative storytelling or fabulation, however, is the obverse side of the dominant myths and fictions, an act of resistance that creates what Deleuze and Guattari call 'a line of flight' on which a minority people

¹⁶⁴ 'Minority' here is not defined in quantitative terms, as sometimes the minority is larger in terms of numbers than the majority. The minority for Deleuze is evaluated (some would think perversely) by an ideal constant, e.g. white, western, male, reasonable, residing in cities, adult, heterosexual, speaking a standard language etc.

can be constituted. 'La Virago' falls into the category of this kind of creative storytelling. The conjuring of the ambiguous leather-clad centaur who turns out to be female guides our imaginations away from the male-dominated and concrete myths of Western culture and encourages us to review some of the stereotypes to which we are attached.

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The first story 'De sueur, de sucre et de sang', uses the same elements of man-machine-nature. Already in the title, the body's essences (blood and sweat) are equated with sugar which is a man-made product. In this story the heroine Emma B is a sixteen-year-old newly-wed *mulâtresse*. Alone and bored in a big house run by servants, Emma B is drawn to the male voices of the workers in her husband's distillery. Despite (or even because of) her husband's warning to keep away from the factory, Emma rebels, but at a price. She catches her hand in one of the machines and loses three fingers. This mutilated hand then becomes a symbol of Emma B's rebellion. However, the moral of the story here is not that we should keep to our own quarters, but rather that we should explore the unknown. As the narrative reaches its climax it becomes obvious that the heroine is empowered by this one act of rebellion: 'Grâce à cette frénésie de sueurs, de sucre et de sangs mêlés, Emma B eut une sensation forte au moins une fois dans sa vie' (p.38). Not only is Emma B not de-humanised by this violation, she is energised by it: 'au fond des yeux une lueur qui jamais ne devait s'éteindre. De jubilation, oui la lueur dans les yeux d'Emma...' (p. 38).

Again Dracius has focused on specific elements throughout the story in order to validate or 'realise' the final outcome. The first element is Emma B herself. Young, beautiful, and almost white ('laiteuse comme un corossol') she is surrounded by whiteness: 'les lys, l'organdi, le damas, le tulle, et la vertigineuse mousseline, et jusqu'aux orchidées royales qu'on fait venir de Balata, toutes palpitantes de selve humide, le tout blanc, immaculé' (p. 35). Her white world however is confined to the inside of this special house which has been restored for her, as her husband has been restored or renewed for her ('il était neuf pour elle seule'). The implication here is that while Emma B is virginal and white, her husband is not: 'il y a un joli lot de chabins [...] qui peuvent se targuer d'être les bâtards de B' (p. 35). These 'enfants-dehors' also belong to this outside world to which Emma has been denied access. Although her

husband goes outside to work, Emma must stay inside 'avec les femmes de la maison'.

This interior/exterior duality is the second important element in the development of the plot. The heroine is for the greater part of the story in the interior, but desires and wishes to be outside: 'Emma est dans ses pensées. Emma est hors de la maison' (p. 37). She knows that to the men working in the distillery she is 'la femme du mulâtre, l'épouse du patron, mulâtresse elle-même', distinctly other. These men, 'aux beaux corps noir-bleu' are also significantly other, for they are separate from Emma not just in the domain of gender, race and class but also and more importantly in the domain of language: 'On a dressé une barrière entre Emma et ce monde-là. Entre Emma et ce créole-là' (p. 37). To Emma, a *mulâtresse*, almost White and yet Black, Martinican and yet perceived to be French, this language her husband's employees speak is eminently mysterious. From her bedroom window she hears them speaking together with a conviviality and complicity which is alien to her interior world, and yet she feels compelled to approach them. The smell of the sugar, the sweat of the men, the lure of this shared secret language, 'ces mots créoles', combine to drive Emma from her white interior, outside and into the distillery, and towards the symbolic act of bloodshed that will change her life both literally and metaphorically.

Emma's act of bloodshed is archetypal in its representation of the historical truth of slavery. The cane-cutting machine is symbolic of the process of slavery which used human blood in the production of a marketable product. We are reminded here of the passage in chapter nineteen of Voltaire's *Candide*, when, on their way into Surinam, Candide and his friends meet a Negro who is missing a hand and a leg. When questioned by the little group about his injuries, the man replies: 'Quand nous travaillons aux sucreries, et que la meule nous attrape le doigt, on nous coupe la main; quand nous voulons nous enfuir, on nous coupe la jambe. Je me suis trouvé dans les deux cas. C'est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe'.¹⁶⁵ This scene painted by Voltaire exists to remind us of the evil of slavery. There is a similar scene depicted in a novel by Hugues Rebell, in which a slave is entirely sucked into the cane cutting machine: 'tout à coup, son bras s'est retrouvé engagé dans les tambours. Avec une rapidité effroyable nous l'avons vu se jeter, disparaître entre les pressoirs, un cri

¹⁶⁵ Voltaire, *Candide* (Oxford: Clarendon French Series, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 106.

perçant s'est fait entendre puis un horrible hurlement étouffé par le ronflement de la machine'.¹⁶⁶ This anecdote is, however, not intended as a reminder of the hardship endured by the slaves, but rather as a humorous portrayal of shallow White planters who viewed such accidents as proof of the imprudence of the Blacks. Dracius uses elements such as those described above to remind the reading public of the ruptured past of the Caribbean. Together the three words in the title, 'sueur', 'sucre' and 'sang' portray metonymically the historical realities of colonisation and slavery. In this way the title symbolises an event (slavery), but it also *signals* an event (Emma's accident). Thus, instead of seeking a linear view of history, Dracius is interpreting the past in a prophetic way.¹⁶⁷

The barriers which had been constructed between Emma's world and that of the workmen, between her speech and theirs, between her skin and theirs, between her sex and theirs, have not been broken down, but rather displaced as Emma 'becomes' another Emma. Just as the narrator of James Ballard's *Crash* is irrevocably altered following a road accident in which he sustains serious physical injuries, so the heroine of this story enters a process of *becoming* which is distinct and separate from her previous existence. For Ballard, the car crash has the ability to engender in its victims new feelings of eroticism, self-awareness, and even love: 'These feelings existed within my relationship with the dead man, within the reality of the wounds on my chest and legs and within the unforgettable collision between my own body and the interior of my car' (p. 36). In other words, during an event such as a car crash, man and machine are connected, and the injuries which the victim sustains are the imprints of the *body of the machine* onto the *body of the man*. In the context of this short story, the cane-cutting machine has marked Emma B in her body, both as a result of its physical impact upon her, and as an indirect result of the symbolic force that this machine possesses in relation to the shared memory of slavery.

Again we are reminded of Kafka's penal colony. Here, a machine consisting of a bed on which the prisoner lies and a harrow with needles which is lowered onto the prisoner's body, is used to carry out a sentence of which the prisoner is ignorant. As

¹⁶⁶ Hugues Rebell, *Les Nuits chaudes du Cap Français* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1978) p. 82.

¹⁶⁷ Glissant speaks of the Caribbean writer as having 'une vision prophétique du passé'. See Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*.

death approaches and the needles deepen the inscription, the prisoner 'learns' his sentence 'on his body', and there is a moment of truth when man and machine are connected.¹⁶⁸ For Ballard, when a person is involved in a crash, he or she undergoes change as new scars develop on his or her body like map-lines tracing the events of a future continually becoming past. When Emma B puts her hand into the cane-cutting machine, woman and machine are momentarily connected. In response to her cries for help the strongest man in the group 'se cramponnait au corps d'Emma de toute la puissance de ses muscles' (p. 38). In this way woman and man are connected. Therefore, woman, man and machine are connected for a split second in this ultra-violent act of rebellion. Just as Ballard views his protagonist's scars as being the markers of his existence, so Emma can trace a new identity in the space where her fingers once were.

What Dracius has achieved by bringing together these diverse elements (woman, technology, otherness) is to create a fluid event (and I use the term 'event' in the Deleuzian sense of event not as historical happening but rather a process of becoming, not a day but perhaps an hour in the day, not the self but one of the infinite moments in becoming self) which can occur in real time and which makes change possible. Emma's 'accident' takes place in a split second, and yet during that short moment she is at one with her perception of otherness as it is represented to her by the men in the distillery and the distillery itself. The author ends her story with the words 'Ni krik, ni krak. Tout cela n'est pas un conte'. The traditional formula of the Creole tale gives way to a new representation of the story in which threads, lines or elements converge, and disperse ad infinitum. This could also be a reference to Diderot whose 'Ceci n'est pas un conte' challenges the reader to question whether what is set out in the story is fact or fiction. Diderot also uses a system of interacting elements: the storyteller, the listener and the reader. This method is effective in giving the reader the impression that the author is telling a good story in that the presence of the listener adds credibility, while at the same time suggesting the relativity of the fictional data. What Diderot desires is to reproduce the actual conditions under which a story is told. In *Diderot: A Critical Biography*, P.N. Furbank suggests that 'Fiction for him signified

¹⁶⁸ 'In the penal colony', p. 136.

not a story, but the spectacle of somebody telling a story'.¹⁶⁹ While Dracius does not present us with a spectacle as such, her use of the Creole formula evokes the idea of a spectacle, that of the *conteur* entertaining his audience. However, having successfully engaged the reader in the story, Dracius ends her tale on an ambiguous note, leaving the audience to wonder whether what they have read is really fiction or a fragment of the author's family history.

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Suzanne Dracius's most recently published short story 'La montagne de feu' brings back some of the classical and religious imagery already seen in *L'Autre qui danse*. The story centres on a young domestic servant called Léona who takes advantage of the eruption of Mont Pelé to leave Saint-Pierre and her abusive mistress and return to her native village, Le Lorrain. Léona, who is carrying the child of her employer, has an admirer, a stone engraver, who also escapes the disaster and follows her to the countryside. The author introduces the story with four characters who preempt the volcanic eruption and are preparing to leave Saint-Pierre: the Carib Indian, the slave, the bishop and the Black nanny. Each character represents an important or prominent group in Martinican society: the indigenous ancestor, the slave, the cleric and the paid worker. One could also regard each character as being representative of a fragment in the fractured history of the island. Such an interpretation would facilitate a reading of the story that shows the forces of nature and the past coming together to seek restitution for those who have suffered under colonisation.

The happy outcome of the story of Léona and 'le petit marbrier-graveur' is a direct consequence of Léona's vision of the Virgin Mary on the day of the volcanic eruption. Thus nature, spirituality and humanity represent a symbolic trio in the tale. 'La montagne de feu' echoes the biblical narrative on several counts. The principal parallel however is with the Christian nativity story. The appearance of the Virgin Mary to Léona, and her hasty departure from Saint-Pierre to another town, echo the visitation to Mary by the angel Gabriel and the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt. Léona's future husband, who is a tradesman like Joseph, joins her having crossed the

¹⁶⁹ P.N.Furbank, *Diderot: A critical biography*, (London: Secker & Warburgh Ltd., 1992). We are also reminded here of René Magritte's work 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', which of course is not a pipe but rather the pictorial representation of a pipe.

countryside 'à dos de mulet' (p. 74). The Christian creation myth is also reinterpreted to a degree as together Léona and the stonecutter, representing Adam and Eve, are credited with the emergence of a new mixed-race population. Léona gives birth to a mulatto boy, 'd'un jaune doré' (her first-born) named Dartagnan after the Musketeer. This child is a symbol of leadership and possibly a Messiah-figure. This gives rise to a vision of multiplicity, hybridity and the regenerative power of nature. Rather than negating the Christian myths, Dracius creatively reworks them. Such adaptations supply us with new imaginative spaces that will enable more positive representations of Caribbean culture and history.

The author portrays Léona's body as a specular object controlled by man and history. As a Black woman Léona's sexuality is claimed as the property of her White employer who subjugates her and threatens to decapitate her if she speaks of his deeds: 'D'ailleurs Monsieur lui a juré qu'il lui décollerait la tête d'un coup de coutelas, d'un seul! si jamais elle en disait un mot à quiconque' (p. 74). Here again the author evokes Medusa symbolically. This is the second time in the text that the author evokes the image of Medusa, the first being when Léona refers to her mistress as 'la vieille méduse' (p. 70). The White mistress silences Léona ('Léona n'a pas dit un mot'), obstructs her gaze ('Baissez les yeux insolente!'), and paralyzes her ('elle doit rester là à subir'). Thus Léona is petrified both literally and metaphorically. In the second instance, Dracius links the threat of decapitation directly to the man's fear of castration. In her essay focusing on the work of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones and Bessie Head, Françoise Lionnet relates a story told by Hélène Cixous about Chinese women who, like Léona, have to choose between decapitation and remaining silent.¹⁷⁰ Freud's interpretation of the story of Medusa assumes a link between castration anxiety and female decapitation, but for Cixous female decapitation is an *effect* of male castration anxiety. In his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Off With Her Head*, Howard Schwartz takes this theory a step further. According to him: 'Cixous can be interpreted as saying that male fears about losing their manhood (and their power, which is much the same thing) are frequently dealt with by removing or covering the female head, that is, by denying women the power of identity,

¹⁷⁰ Françoise Lionnet, 'Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones and Bessie Head' in *Postcolonial Representations*, pp. 101-128 (p. 114).

language, thought and selfhood'.¹⁷¹ Thus the White master's threat to decapitate Léona can be read on a symbolic level as an attempt to enslave her completely and also as an indication of his fear of loss of power.

Léona's blackness is always reflected back at her (via the white woman's gaze) in negative terms. The psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray argues that Western philosophical discourse systematically represents the feminine as the *negative* image of its own reflection. Woman is specifically man's other, his negative reflection. Thus for Irigaray woman is situated outside representation.¹⁷² In a similar way the Black woman has been placed outside representation and rendered *specularised other* by institutionalised racism and sexism. As the Black American feminist bell hooks comments: 'Although they were both subjected to sexist victimization, as victims of racism black women were subjected to oppressions no white woman was forced to endure. In fact, white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimised by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to black women and black men'.¹⁷³ This statement is important in our analysis of the author's portrayal of her character Léona, who in many ways represents the archetypal Caribbean woman. Dracius does not present her reader with an exceptional figure who turns history around. Rather, she invents a very ordinary woman, an 'everywoman' who lives out her life in the most ordinary of ways. However, what is striking about Léona is that her past and future are inscribed in her body as a lived experience rather than as an abstraction. One is reminded here of the main female characters from novels such as Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Telumée Miracle* or Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit*. Léona, like Télumée or Zétou, is sexually violated by the White master and subjugated and silenced by her White mistress. In other words she is victimised by sexism and racism. In 'La montagne de feu', however, Léona is endowed with agency. At the end of the story she is symbolically linked to the holistic power of nature and the positive force of regeneration. While the volcanic eruption wipes out (quite literally) the problem of race and class, Léona represents the renewal of the Caribbean population in the form of children of mixed race: 'Ensuite, la lionne

¹⁷¹ *Off With Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion and Culture* ed. by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 8.

¹⁷² Let us assume here that Irigaray is referring to White women.

¹⁷³ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London: Pluto, 1982), p. 123.

de marbre-noir fit pour son béké-goyave une fille café au lait, des jumeaux tchololo au lait, une série de filles café noir, puis une ribambelle de garçons couleur café, avec plus ou moins de lait, et, pour finir, un garçon tchololo sans lait' (p. 75).

In Dracius's text Léona is continually described in terms of her reflectiveness. The engraver sees her as 'la petite lionne de marbre noir, d'un noir plus beau que l'ophte, plus chatoyant que l'onyx, plus brillant que le mica' (p. 73), while her friend Lusinia 'aimait se glisser dans son ombre pour s'épanouir à son soleil, avec l'espérance secrète que quelques éclats des succès de Léona rejaillissent sur [elle]' (p. 72). This idea of *reberverating* or *reflecting back* is reminiscent of Schwarz-Bart's image of the drum in *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. Here the image of a drum (an important musical instrument in the Caribbean) is used to describe symbolically Télumée's heart which has been battered by life's difficulties: 'un vrai tambour à deux faces, laisse la vie frapper, cogner, mais conserve toujours la face du dessous'.¹⁷⁴ The drum/heart has the ability to reverberate and therefore avoids internalising negative experiences. The drum is also double-sided and can 'turn over' its good side when appropriate. Similarly, Léona has the ability to reflect back any negative experience that befalls her. She is neither shadow nor reflection but a radiating and diverse entity who is open to the world. Thus Dracius subverts the idea discussed in chapter two (in relation to Lacrosil's *Cajou*) of the Black character absorbing the negativity reflected back at her by the White gaze. In a similar way the character of Léona is a subversion of the image of the Black character as shadow which was also discussed in chapter two.

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And so, to conclude, we can say that in her novel and short stories Suzanne Dracius has succeeded in weaving a web of diverse themes or fragments. *L'Autre qui danse* reveals an ambiguous representation of woman and the search for selfhood. Her portrayal of the two sisters in this novel creates a portrait of femininity that shows the many sides and multiple histories of the Caribbean woman. As the two sisters live out their lives, they are each affected (or marked) differently by the shared memory of their upbringing. In 'La Virago' the separate elements of disguise, machine and narrator can be unravelled to become simply woman, but they can also exist independently of each

¹⁷⁴ Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (Paris : Seuil, 1995) p. 62.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Acts of revolt or acts of madness?

Images of the exiled body and psychological ambiguity in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's novels and selected short stories

*L'écriture, c'est en moi le passage, entrée, sortie, séjour,
de l'autre que je suis et que je ne suis pas,
que je ne sais pas être, mais que je sens passer, qui me fait vivre.*¹⁷⁵

Given the material and ideological practices of patriarchal control (from rape and the threat of rape to forced sterilisation, to domestic violence, to denial of knowledge) which have been imposed on all women, the female body has been, quite literally, shaped into a politically inscribed entity.¹⁷⁶ As Andrea Dworkin comments, 'not one part of a woman's body is left untouched'.¹⁷⁷ The female body is a medium of culture, on which the rules, routines and practices of culture have been inscribed. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, culture is 'made body'.¹⁷⁸ From table manners to toilet practices, and straitlacing to the 'wonderbra', women's bodies have become the direct site of social control. To quote the philosopher Susan Bordo, 'viewed historically, the discipline and normalization of the female body [...] has to be acknowledged as an amazingly durable and flexible strategy of social control'.¹⁷⁹ Throughout history women have also been *associated* with the body. All that is fleshy, curved, moist,

¹⁷⁵ Hélène Cixous et Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Général d'Éditions, 1975), p. 158.

¹⁷⁶ Unless specified, the term 'woman' should be read to signify both Black woman and White woman.

¹⁷⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman-Hating* (New York: Dutton, 1974), p. 114.

¹⁷⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 94.

¹⁷⁹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 166.

‘wiggly’ and ‘mushy’ is feminine. What Sartre calls the ‘viscous’ (*le visqueux* which is understood as the slimy or sticky), is situated in the realm of the feminine: ‘Il y a dans l’insaisissabilité même de l’eau une dureté impitoyable comme l’acier. Le visqueux est compressible. Il donne donc d’abord l’impression d’un être qu’on peut *posséder*. [...] je veux lâcher le visqueux et il adhère à moi, il me pompe, il m’aspire; son mode d’être n’est ni l’inertie rassurante du solide, ni un dynamisme comme celui de l’eau qui s’épuise à me fuir: c’est une activité molle, baveuse et féminine d’aspiration’.¹⁸⁰ Here water is a gendered element, characteristically male like ‘metal’ or ‘steel’. Slime on the other hand is female; ‘Revanche douceâtre et féminine qui se symbolisera sur un autre plan par la qualité du sucré’ (p. 656). According to the critic Mark Dery it is the ‘slimy’ or ‘gooey’ aspect of femininity which is most often seen as evil.

In his essay on cyberculture Dery analyses the role of the female in contemporary sci-fi films like Ridley Scott’s ‘Terminator 2’.¹⁸¹ In this particular film, ‘soft, squishy evil pours itself into the mercurial shape of the T-1000, a polymorphous perversity made of “mimetic polyalloy”. The T-1000’s quicksilver quality speaks loudly in Jungian and alchemical terms, of mercury – a lunar, mutable element associated with androgyny, hermaphroditism, and more often, the feminine’ (p. 505). According to Dery, although attempting to eschew modern gender stereotypes, the film ‘Aliens’ instead portrays a masculine fear of the ‘glutinous feminine goo that will gum its gears’ (p. 505). In the end of this film the ‘tough-guy’ heroine Dr Ripley manages to kill the alien only by encasing herself in a ‘mammoth robot-exoskeleton, which – powerful and dry – allows her to crush the shrieking mother-figure as if it were a giant, juicy bug’ (p. 505).¹⁸²

Women are thus body, and associated with body. That is White women, for Black women are seen as being even more *bodily*. The popular myth that Black women have highly developed sexual organs and an attendant lasciviousness and voluptuousness, has contributed to the racist construction of Black woman as sexualised savage. Weighed down by the powerful systems of patriarchy and

¹⁸⁰ Jean Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), p. 655.

¹⁸¹ Mark Dery, ‘Cyberculture’ in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 91 (1992), 501-523.

¹⁸² Here Dery is quoting from Mark Crispin Miller’s study entitled *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston, Ill, 1989), p. 306-7.

colonisation, the Black woman 'carries a triple burden of negative bodily associations'.¹⁸³ Her sex represents unbridled lust, a temptation to the White man. Her race makes her an instinctual animal, while the legacy of slavery has rendered her property, with a status of 'thing-hood'.¹⁸⁴ As sexualised and commodified woman the Black female has been literally and metaphorically harnessed to her body for the last four hundred years. The Guadeloupean writer Ernest Pépin comments: 'On ne saurait oublier que le corps a une histoire qui s'insère dans la trame plus large de l'histoire de la colonisation. Histoire à travers laquelle le corps va subir de nombreuses métamorphoses'.¹⁸⁵ In all countries where Africans were sold into slavery and put to work, the body of the slave was seen as the property of the slaveholder. The body of the female slave was divided into parts, each part having a particular use: 'Her head and her heart were divided from her back and her hands, womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labour where she was forced to work with men and work like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man as domestic servant whether she was technically enslaved or legally free. Her vagina used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment – the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus worth money on the slave market'.¹⁸⁶

This systematic misuse of her body has denied Black women all forms of agency and power. Black women are trapped between various negative images: the obese and desexualised 'mammy', referred to in chapter one, the masculinised matriach and the objectified whore. These stereotypes result from the rhetoric of colonisation which saw the Black woman as other, that is, as embodying the antithesis of White European beauty and sexuality. In his study on sexual and racial stereotypes Sander Gilman comments: 'It is thus the innate fear of the other's different anatomy that lies behind the synthesis of images. The other's pathology is revealed in her anatomy, and the black and the prostitute are both bearers of the stigmata of sexual difference and

¹⁸³ Bordo, p. 11.

¹⁸⁴ Bordo, p. 11.

¹⁸⁵ Ernest Pépin, 'La femme antillaise et son corps' (p. 173).

¹⁸⁶ Barbara Ormolade, 'Hearts of Darkness' in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), quoted in Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 22.

therefore pathology'.¹⁸⁷ According to the American writer bell hooks, the only positive images of Black women made available to us are those that show her to be 'a long-suffering, religious, maternal figure, whose most endearing characteristic is her self-sacrificing self-denial for those she loves'.¹⁸⁸

It is these controlling images which place Black women in a position of extreme opposition to White women and ultimately to White men. Even though the feminist movement claimed to fight for reform in matters relating to all women, the experiences recorded were synonymous with White women's experiences. Black women's experiences were left out of the equation. Racist and sexist patterns in language have similarly served to exclude Black women. When faced with the words 'Black' and 'woman' most people make the assumption that 'Black' means Black man, while 'woman' means White woman. Again, hooks proposes that not only did White feminists *not* oppose such linguistic misuse, they supported it: 'For them it served two purposes. First, it allowed them to proclaim white men world oppressors while making it appear linguistically that no alliance existed between white women and white men based on shared racial imperialism. Second, it made it possible for white women to act as if alliances did exist between themselves and non-white women in our society, and by so doing they could deflect attention away from their classism and racism' (p. 140).

White men have encouraged the rift between Black and White women, thus ensuring the total absence of solidarity between the two groups and therefore preventing any kind of mutiny which might overturn women's status as a subordinate group within the system of patriarchy. According to hooks, White men have allowed for change in the status of White women only if there is another female group available to assume the role that she has vacated. In this way the White male does not have to alter his sexist assumption that women are inferior humans. Nor does he have to relinquish his position of dominance. By maintaining Black women specifically in this position of *exclusive* inferiority, White patriarchal power has guaranteed its own position of sublime superiority. It has also guaranteed the impossibility of any real sisterhood between Black women and White women.

¹⁸⁷ *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 107. Gilman's 'synthesis of images' refers to the representation of the Black female in the visual arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

¹⁸⁸ bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, p. 66.

Bearing in mind these images of Black womanhood, how then can the relationship of the Black author to her body be interpreted?¹⁸⁹ For critical theorists such as Susan Gubar, a woman is obliged to interpret her body as both her own and as other. The artistic paradigms and role models which are made available to women artists almost always redirect her to her own corporeality. The cultural script is imposed on the body which in turn textualises it. The author may write or narrate her story, but it is already written in her body. Writing can be interpreted as a means of liberating the body from the grip of culture. This line of thought leads us directly back to Cixous's idea which locates in writing the expression of otherness (that is or is not the self / *l'autre que je suis et que je ne suis pas*) and the locus of life (*qui me fait vivre*). This idea of writing as liberation is a central theme in many works of literature written by Caribbean women authors. In her essay on the uses of the metaphors of island and journey in Caribbean literature written by women, Elizabeth Wilson cites the act of writing as the only means of liberation for female characters trapped in damaging situations: 'The female protagonists are destroyed both by the strictures of their society and by their futile attempts to escape, their "tentatives d'évasion" only serving to entrap and alienate them further, and their only effective liberation being implicit in the act of writing, explicitly portrayed in several works as the means to achieve relief through a symbolic reunion with the self, with other women, and with the mother (land) from which they have been exiled'.¹⁹⁰

This theory applies well to the novels I will be discussing in this chapter, where the state of exile is directly related to violent acts or acts of madness. Warner-Vieyra describes these acts of revolt using archetypal images which speak to the reader and effect a symbolic (and known) link between women and madness. This link was made in the early nineteenth century when psychiatry was just developing as a speciality within medicine. Although its classification and diagnostic systems were rudimentary, psychiatrists were already devising a set of specifically female mental disorders. In her study of women and madness, Denise Russell discusses the inconsistencies present in

¹⁸⁹ From here on I will simply refer to 'the author' and to 'the body' as opposed to 'the Black author' etc.

¹⁹⁰ Elizabeth Wilson, 'Le voyage et l'espace clos: Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Woman's Experience in the works of French Caribbean Novelists' in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, pp.45-57 (p. 45).

And what these specifically female maladies—unmatched by male equivalents—serve to justify is paternalistic intervention on the grounds of both medical and moral incompetency. In consequence, the health-care encounter is a paradigmatic site of male power concerned with the control of a largely feminine irrationality which results not just from the compromised rationality caused by the pain and anxiety of ill health, but is supposedly rooted in our very natures.¹⁹²

Shildrick suggests that the modern equivalents of hysteria and neurasthenia, namely the eating disorders, are gender-linked and rooted in the association of woman with a loss of control.

Zétou, the heroine of *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...*, tells her story in the form of flashbacks and reminiscences as she talks to a psychiatrist in the Parisian hospital where she finds herself after a violent outburst.¹⁹³ Zétou's story is about exile and adjustment. The vehicle she uses for the purpose of relating her story is the psychiatrist (as in *Juletane*, it is the heroine's diary) but, as becomes apparent at the end of the novel, the story is already *inscribed* in her body. The heroine of *Juletane* travels from the Caribbean, to Paris, to Senegal, where she dies in exile, but not without leaving a written memoir.¹⁹⁴ As her journal progresses so her health deteriorates, and she dies having written the last line. I will also be referring to two of Warner-Vieyra's short stories, 'Sidonie' and 'Le mur ou les charmes d'une vie conjugale', which are part of a collection entitled *Femmes échouées*, in which Warner-Vieyra focuses on the Caribbean woman in diverse contexts.¹⁹⁵ These stories do not depict women in a state of exile, but rather show the Caribbean woman on the brink of madness. This psychological instability is related to the constraints of society and the patriarchal system to which the female protagonists are bound.

Like the female protagonists of *Le Quimboiseur...*, *Juletane*, and the short stories, Myriam Warner-Vieyra was born in the West Indies (Guadeloupe). She was

¹⁹² Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 27.

¹⁹³ *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1980).

¹⁹⁴ *Juletane* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982).

¹⁹⁵ *Femmes échouées* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1988).

many of these illnesses, notably hysteria, which was, according to some doctors of the time, a biologically-based condition, and by others, a disorder of the emotions:

Maudsley claimed that hysteria was a physical disorder which could take many forms. He said that some hysterical women were morally perverted and rather inconsistently accused them of malingering. He wrote about young women believing or pretending that they cannot stand or walk, who lie down, sometimes for months when their only paralysis is paralysis of the will which an opportune lover could cure. [...] The moral tone of this description is backed up by references to subtle deceit, fraud, and ingenious lying of hysterical patients. [...] The vacillation between the medical and the moral is capped by his claim that hysteria is sometimes cured by marriage.¹⁹¹

Russell goes on to say how, in the late nineteenth century, the renowned psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin attached hysteria and neurasthenia to a list of mental disorders affecting mainly women. In his 1907 text book Kraepelin insists on a heightened sense of emotion in women which weakens them and renders them more susceptible to such complaints. He suggests therapeutic bed rest, walks and diversion, which will help the patient gain strength and return to her feminine duties. Russell points to Kraepelin's moral tone: 'The idea is that she has to gain in emotional strength so that she is better able to meet the demands of motherhood or other work. [...] He says that the women sufferers have no appreciation of the burden which they create by becoming ill [...] and that they can soon pull themselves together if they are relieved of work or have jolly company' (p. 25). Some feminist scholarship has focused on the link between the insistence of the medical profession on the biological nature of specifically female mental disorder, and the need to maintain women in a strictly defined role. Female protests against societal constraint were viewed as 'symptoms' of hysteria. The 'cure' for hysteria, therefore, focused less on alleviating the discomfort of the patient and more on rehabilitating her into her prescribed role (as mother, daughter, wife). In her study entitled *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, Margrit Shildrick comments:

¹⁹¹ Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 19.

educated there and in France and now lives and works in Sénégal. It is easy to see how the author's own life-line is intertwined with those of her characters. Guadeloupe-France-Africa. Which country is home, which country will tell her story? In both of her novels she questions the ambiguous nature of madness (the otherness of self?), which she depicts less as a debilitating state of non-being and more as a temporary reprieve from a painful situation. Both Zétou in *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* and Juletane in *Juletane* are presented as 'mad' or in a state of mental disintegration. They both share a history of parental rejection (or absence in the case of Juletane), physical displacement, and betrayal, to which they react with varying degrees of anger and frustration. Both inhabit a hostile world where they are denied friendship and social interaction. In a similar way, the two female characters from the short stories are each driven to a violent act of rebellion which is symbolic of their need to escape from a damaging or stifling situation. In both stories the protagonists are either imprisoned in their bodies or within their social circumstances, and as a result are silenced. Their rebellious acts which border on madness, allow them a momentary reprieve, a brief sense of exaltation, but death (in the case of Sidonie) and normality quickly return and, as *order* is restored, so is their symbolic incarceration.

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Le quimboiseur l'avait dit... tells of an island girl, Zétou, whose desire to further her education leads her to Paris where her estranged mother has promised to house her and arrange for her schooling. Zétou's world crumbles when she realises that she has been duped. Her mother expects her to keep house and has no intention of sending her to school. Later she learns from her mother's boyfriend, Roger, that she is to be married off to a rich widower. Instead of comforting the distressed Zétou, Roger rapes her. In this moment, as Zétou realises that she has been deceived, her historical past (characterised by oppression and assimilation) is locked into her present reality. In an attempt to come to terms with her circumstances Zétou decides to confront her mother and Roger. She explodes with anger and strikes her mother. The police are called, Zétou is sent before a judge who deems her 'mad' and sends her to a psychiatric unit. It is here that the story is related, at the end, as it were, and yet at the beginning.

In her essay on the representation of 'madness' in Caribbean fiction, Evelyn O'Callaghan uses R. D. Laing's model of 'ontological insecurity' as a possible reading

of Zétou's presentation in *Le Quimboiseur*.¹⁹⁶ For Laing the self can be experienced as autonomous only when paralleled with the other (the not-me). In effect the experience of the self is as a conscious subject integrating with the outside world (which is made up of similar autonomous subjects). The 'schizoid' person, however, does not experience the same sense of integral selfhood (ontological security) and therefore avoids relationships with other subjects and becomes socially isolated. With reference to his study of madness entitled *The Divided Self*, Laing states that:

This study is concerned with the issues involved when there is the partial or almost complete absence of the assurances derived from an existential position of what I shall call *primary ontological security*: with anxieties and dangers that I shall suggest arise *only* in times of *primary ontological insecurity*; and with the consequent attempts to deal with such anxieties and dangers. [italics in text]¹⁹⁷

There is a schism of mind and body where the latter becomes objectified leading to the sense of 'depersonalisation' experienced by many people labelled 'schizophrenic'.¹⁹⁸ In her article O'Callaghan examines the historico-cultural factors which, she believes, reproduce this sense of a 'divided self' as portrayed in several novels written by Caribbean women writers.¹⁹⁹ According to O'Callaghan: 'Apart from the general phenomenon of female socialisation into submissiveness [...] certain stressful patterns recur. For example [...] grow[ing] up in changing societies with increased societal mobility and [...] subject[ion] to some degree of conflict in their choice of

¹⁹⁶ Evelyn O'Callaghan 'Interior Schisms Dramatised: The Treatment of the 'Mad' Woman in the Work of Some Female Caribbean Novelists' in *Out of the Kumbla*, pp. 89-109. R.D.Laing was a Scottish psychiatrist who, during the 1960s, was instrumental in founding the anti-psychiatry movement and is most famous for his account of mental illness entitled *The Divided Self* (London: Tavistock, 1960).

¹⁹⁷ *The Divided Self*, p. 39

¹⁹⁸ Laing's interpretation of schizophrenia (which is based on a theory of psychodynamics rather than on neuroscientific evidence) is very different from how the disease is diagnosed and treated today. His model of 'ontological insecurity', however, is useful here to describe what could be otherwise termed as an adjustment disorder.

¹⁹⁹ O'Callaghan cites among others Antoinette in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Tee in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*. Examples in the Francophone tradition which are discussed in this thesis include Cajou in Michèle Lacrosil's *Cajou*, Rhevana in Suzanne Dracius's *L'Autre qui danse*, and Angela in Gisèle Pineau's *L'Espérance Macadam*.

social/sexual roles' (p. 96). Zétou, for instance, is not content to become the wife of a fisherman and remain in her village to rear their children. Instead, she dreams of making a career for herself as a teacher. Her father, on the other hand, conceives of education as a waste of time for a girl who, in his view, should be properly socialised into wanting no more than a husband and children. Ironically, at the end of the novel when Zétou is facing death, it is precisely such an image of parochial bliss which soothes her: 'Quand j'atteignis le fond, j'eus conscience d'être couchée au fond d'une barque. Tout ce que je pouvais voir au fond de la barque, c'était le large dos d'un homme au torse nu – ses muscles luisants de sueur évoquant une puissance qui me rassurait – et un tout petit nuage blanc accroché à un ciel bleu' (p. 137). In this image Zétou is reunited with her past self. Within the closed space of the fishing boat she is cushioned from the outside world, focusing only on her father's strong back (symbolic of the traditional values of manual labour, dependability and constancy) and the small piece of sky she can see from her perspective (symbolic of containment and the 'island mentality').

Zétou's act of narrating her story to the doctor is the direct result of her cathartic collision with those in power. In her essay 'Castration or decapitation' Hélène Cixous speaks about 'submitting feminine disorder, its laughter [...] to the threat of decapitation'.²⁰⁰ She locates this idea in shared knowledge between women which tells us that if we don't keep quiet then we will be decapitated. Women can only keep their heads providing they lose them to silence. In other words, women are denied the privilege of speech, and consequently women's speech is regarded as idle chatter. Freud believed that it was the fear of losing his penis that led the boy to renounce his incestuous desires for the mother and identify with the father. There is, however, no equivalent concept for female development. The suggestion therefore is that because women do not fear losing an organ their superego does not 'develop' to the same extent. If women fear losing an organ in the same way as men, then the Freudian model of passive femininity (incorporating the famous 'lack') can no longer be applied. By suggesting that women too fear losing an organ (their head) Cixous is redressing the

²⁰⁰ Hélène Cixous 'Castration or decapitation' in *Signs* 7 (1981), 41-55.

imbalance that exists within psychoanalytic theory.²⁰¹ When Zétou loses her head she is effectively silenced by those in power: her mother, Roger, the police and the judge. It is interesting to note here Foucault's assertion that towards the end of the seventeenth century, as madness was increasingly theorised as *unreason* (the negative side of reason), and confinement (read: correction) played a large part in the treatment of the mentally ill, the language of madness was erased and silence reigned.²⁰² However, this silence is only temporary, it is a silence which precedes a deluge of words. As we know from Sartre, to be quiet does not necessarily mean to be silent. On the contrary, the act of not speaking *speaks*: 'Ce silence est un moment du langage: se taire n'est pas être muet, c'est refuser de parler, donc parler encore'.²⁰³ In this way, Zétou's silence can be read as an act of resistance. By metaphorically losing her head Zétou is rendered speechless but this 'lapse of reason' results in an eventual act of speech.

When Zétou leaves for Paris she undertakes a mythical crossing, a quest for a better life and, of course, an education. In the process, she leaves behind her family, her beloved and her sense of identity within the Caribbean community. In Paris she becomes her mother's domestic slave and Roger's sex-slave. Here the twin dynamics of White supremacy and sexual imperialism are at work together to guarantee her status of subordinate Black woman. Zétou's mother obviously despises her dark-skinned daughter, whom she believes to be uneducated and uncultured. Having internalised the prescribed bourgeois standards of femininity, she sees in Zétou the threat of a lapse into the backward ways of her homeland. In Jungian terms Zétou's mother has repressed her own feelings of inferiority and projected them onto Zétou (the other). This is what enables her to guiltlessly push Zétou into servitude and maintain her in a position of powerlessness. Roger, on the other hand, as a White man, cannot resist acting out his internalised fantasy of colonising the other (in this case taming the 'wild Black woman'), a fantasy which is grounded and passed on in a routine system of race and gender oppression.

²⁰¹ I am not, however, referring here to literal decapitation, but rather to a symbolic process of removing/covering women's heads by denying them power (language, identity, thought).

²⁰² See Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1964).

²⁰³ Jean Paul Sartre, 'Qu'est-ce que la littérature?' in *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), pp. 74-75.

The memory of slavery is indeed hovering over Zétou. Her exile to Paris and her subsequent enslavement and submission to sexual violence are a re-enactment of the historical truths of slavery.²⁰⁴ An imprint of the past that had been left in her body. As Gisèle Pineau comments in her essay discussing Black women writers from the Caribbean: 'Les griffures de l'esclavage, la morsure des fers, les flagellations et les services de l'asservissement dans les champs de canne ne sont jamais loin, à peine étouffés'.²⁰⁵ As a child in the West Indies, Zétou had no idea who her ancestors were. She accepted without question the prescribed 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' dictum and believed that the African slaves had died off centuries ago. In fact, she had invested in what Edouard Glissant calls the 'non-histoire' of the Caribbean. Glissant describes the Caribbean in these terms 'because of the complete break or rupture brought about by the uprooting of the African peoples by colonization and the slave trade'.²⁰⁶ When her friend Charles lends her a book which proposes a more accurate reading of Caribbean history, Zétou is quite naturally overwhelmed. However, when she rushes to share this knowledge with her teacher, she is quickly cast out. Zétou's expulsion from primary school and subsequent departure from her island is symbolic in many ways. Not only is it concurrent with a theme of loss of Eden, the symbolic expulsion from the Father's paradise, but the consequences of this act will bear out the buried truth of her ancestor's lives.²⁰⁷

The journey to Paris, a veritable *tracée continentale*, will be inscribed on her body in the form of a shutting-down of her psychical capacities.²⁰⁸ Here the body becomes a 'text on which pain can be read as a necessary physical step on the road to a moral state'.²⁰⁹ The search for this new way of being is facilitated by the figure of the psychiatrist (the symbolic sage or wise old man, the witness and repository of truth) who encourages Zétou to engage in a mythical discourse which will result in an end to

²⁰⁴ Rape functioned throughout the history of slavery as a means of controlling slaves. See Clarence Munford *The Black Ordeal of Slavery*.

²⁰⁵ 'Écrire en tant que Noire' in *Penser la Créolité* ed. by Maryse Condé and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage (Paris: Karthala, 1995), p. 295.

²⁰⁶ Debra L. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text*, p. 23.

²⁰⁷ See for instance Beverley Ormerod, *An Introduction to the Caribbean Novel* (London: Heinemann, 1985).

²⁰⁸ According to Patrick Chamoiseau, the word *tracée*, which translates as track, evokes both the path of the runaway slave and the Creole act of crossing.

²⁰⁹ Fnançoise Lionnet *Post-colonial Representations*, p. 88.

struggle. The reader presumes that Zétou dies having unburdened herself to the doctor, and having established a kind of psychical order to her life. Zétou's journey to Paris and the events that took place there represent a symbolic 'digging down deep into the collective historical memory in an attempt to re-establish order and chronology' to this non-history.²¹⁰ Here, the notion of temporality is questioned when the protagonist is forced to return to the past in order to find truth in the present. But this is a painful process (albeit an enlightening one), for in order to attain knowledge and truth the protagonist has been forced to suffer hostility and intolerance. Zétou's quest for truth has resulted in her 'ontological insecurity'. In other words, she gains enlightenment through suffering. This is an interesting equation which presumes a link between what is termed madness and the spiritual gift of enlightenment. Indeed, many theorists would maintain that the ramblings of people labelled 'psychotic' are viable and even enviable manifestations of psychic insight.²¹¹ For instance, in their study on capitalism and schizophrenia, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose a theory of schizophrenia as human process, a 'breakthrough' (as opposed to a breakdown) and a realisation of truth. Deleuze and Guattari use the term schizophrenia to designate a particular psychic model: 'a specific mode of psychic and social functioning that is characteristically both produced and repressed by the capitalist economy [...] in the best cases the process of schizophrenia takes the form of viable social practices and the joys of unbridled, free-form human interaction'.²¹² Most critics interested in Caribbean writing, however, would be more circumspect in their approach. Elizabeth Wilson, for instance, writes: 'French Caribbean women's writing, in general, reveals rather a pattern of rejection, resistance, and attempted liberation, followed by failure and a deeper alienation because of the aborted attempts at revolt'.²¹³ I would, however, argue that Zétou's 'liberation' was successful in that she gained enlightenment, but this again

²¹⁰ Anderson, p. 23.

²¹¹ The term 'psychotic' has now come into common usage, in the same way as the term 'mad' or 'mental', as in 'x person is mad.' 'so-and-so is psychotic.' In other words the term is used for people who are behaving strangely or who are eccentric. A distinction should thus be made between this and the clinical term psychotic which has other implications.

²¹² Eugene W. Holland, *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. x (preface). It must be stressed that Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term schizophrenia has little in common with the medical model of mental illnesses like paranoid schizophrenia or hebephrenic schizophrenia which are manifestations of organic brain dysfunction, and not simply caused by problems of psychological development.

²¹³ Wilson, 'Le voyage et l'espace clos' p. 45.

is ambiguous as her liberation was only momentary, and in fact resulted in her death. As we shall see in the next novel, the protagonist, Juletane, also dies (having become enlightened) but this time leaving a legacy, her journal, which in turn passes this knowledge on to a woman in a similar situation.

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As a second novel *Juletane* re-explores some of the themes of *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* using a new narrative structure. Here Warner-Vieyra has created a text in which there are two narratives intersecting in a 'contrapuntal relationship'.²¹⁴ When Hélène, a social worker from Guadeloupe, finds Juletane's diary in an old pile of papers, she is at a crossroads in her life. Having left her homeland she feels acutely the isolation of living in a country unknown to her. She is also independent and feels ambiguous about sharing her life with a man. As she reads the diary, Hélène realises that Juletane shares a similar history. While studying in Paris Juletane met and fell in love with Mamadou, a Senegalese muslim. Juletane had emigrated from Guadeloupe following her parents' death, and at the time of her meeting with Mamadou was living with her aunt. When the aunt died, however, she decided to marry Mamadou and move with him to Senegal. But love had blinded her and, on arriving in Senegal, Juletane was met with the reality of her situation. Mamadou already had a wife, a woman from his village, chosen for him by his family. Juletane was trapped in a polygamous marriage, in exile, powerless, and dependent. When she miscarries her baby, and then finds out that she will never have children, Juletane has a nervous breakdown. After her discharge from hospital she isolates herself within the household, cuts off her hair and restricts her food intake. When Mamadou takes a third wife, Ndèye, Juletane withdraws even further. She eventually murders Mamadou's three children and disfigures Ndèye. Awa the first wife drowns herself in a well.

In this novel Warner-Vieyra questions the reality of living in exile as she questions the nature of madness. For Juletane, the truth of her cultural exile manifests itself in her body as a gradual decrease in her mental and physical strength. By cutting her hair and reducing her food intake she is subjecting herself to physical mortification in an attempt to gain some control over the only thing she has left to control: her body.

²¹⁴ Betty Wilson, introduction to the English translation of *Juletane* (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. xi.

Juletane is *incorporating* the sentence of exile which has been imposed on her. In her text entitled *Medicine as Culture* cited above, Deborah Lupton suggests that: 'The control of diet is a central feature of the government of the body, predominantly traditionally expressed in the discourses of religious asceticism and medical regimes, but in contemporary Western societies now evident in secular discourses'.²¹⁵ Here, Juletane controls her body via her diet in a response which is akin to that of women diagnosed with anorexia nervosa as theorised by Susie Orbach. Here the subject is engaged in a 'hunger strike' which expresses with the body what the anorectic cannot articulate using words.²¹⁶ The anorectic is fearful and disdainful of the *female* which, for her, conjures up images of voraciousness and insatiability. Susan Bordo proposes that it is not just the traditional domestic role that the anorectic fears but a 'certain archetypal image of the female: as hungering, voracious, all-needing, and all-wanting'.²¹⁷ She therefore sees her *female* body as needful of control by her *male* will. It is interesting that Juletane is repelled more by Ndèye, the gluttonous, dolled-up third wife, than by Awa, the serene, traditional co-wife, who is content with her children and her small shady spot under the mango tree. Together, Ndèye and Awa²¹⁸ represent the two poles of prescribed femininity, but as a trio Mamadou's wives symbolise the nameless state of *thinghood* that has been imposed on these female characters. As Françoise Lionnet comments, the *specular* structure of the relationship that exists between the three co-wives 'points to Juletane's implicit recognition of their shared predicament as faceless and nameless women occupying the position "wife", and hence easily substitutable or permutable within the familiar economy'.²¹⁹ Juletane, caught within the duality of whore/wife, is battling to control her body and gain autonomy. Instead of struggling with the outer world (where defeat is already predestined) Juletane struggles to master her own bodily urges. In this way, she produces a *corps-langage* which gives voice to her suffering.²²⁰ As well as using the image of the

²¹⁵ Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture*, p. 40.

²¹⁶ See Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age* (London: Penguin, 1993).

²¹⁷ See Susan Bordo, p. 160.

²¹⁸ Awa was Mamadou's first wife, and interestingly the name means Eve in Arabic.

²¹⁹ 'Geographies of Pain', (p. 113).

²²⁰ This term is borrowed from *Unbearable Weight*. The reference is to Gilles Deleuze's idea of body-as-language: 'il ne s'agit pas de parler des corps tels qu'ils sont avant le langage, ou hors du langage,

anorectic, Warner-Vieyra is also evoking the image of the self-denying saint.²²¹ With her 'rire absurde et démentiel' (p. 75), her cropped hair, her wasted body and her reclusive ways, Juletane is the stereotypical madwoman, and yet this stereotype is deconstructed by the author's questioning of the ambiguous nature of madness.

Interestingly, in their study of the theme of madness in nineteenth-century literature written by women, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar posit the duplicitous and monster-like (the negative of the angelic, good woman) madwoman as the author's double.²²² According to Gilbert and Gubar, in reaction to the constraining customs of patriarchy, these nineteenth-century authors channelled their anger and dissatisfaction into witch-like characters which represent, on a symbolic level, the dark-double of the writers themselves. Within the matrix of Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*, it is certainly valid to view Juletane's 'madness' as a reaction to her confined situation and her lack of psycho-social support. Her murderous acts and physical appearance code her as 'mad', yet within the text this premise is questioned. Juletane is referred to as 'la folle' by Ndèye and yet she refuses to accept this label: 'Si toutefois je peux être considérée comme folle. Pour l'instant je ne suis ni la folle du village, ni la folle du quartier. Ma folie est la propriété très privée de la maison de Mamadou Moustapha' (p. 112). Here madness is represented as property. In this case, Juletane's madness is the property of Mamadou who manages and contains that madness (in that it is partly as a result of his treatment of her that Juletane has behaved in this way, and is given the label 'mad'). At another point in the text Juletane articulates a wish to wake up in another world where madness is seen as wisdom: 'Me réveiller dans un autre monde où les fous ne sont pas fous, mais des sages aux regards de justice' (p. 141).

In both novels Warner-Vieyra questions the nature of the temporal, which often holds a precarious position within the narrative, especially in *Juletane* where the

mais au contraire, avec les mots, de former un "corps glorieux" pour les purs esprits'. *Logique du sens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 326.

²²¹ See for example Rudolph Bell's work *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 19-20. 'The girl, that she may become more beautiful in God's eyes, may cut off her hair, scourge her face, and wear coarse rags. To be more mindful of the passion she may walk about with thirty-three sharp stones in her shoes or drive silver nails into her breasts. She stands through the night with arms outstretched in penitential prayer and stops eating, taking her nourishment from the host [...] to be the servant of God is to be the servant of no man. To obliterate every human feeling of pain, fatigue, sexual desire, and hunger is to be master of oneself.'

²²² See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

protagonist's wandering mind sometimes confuses past and present, the real and the imaginary. As Juletane's mind wanders, so the link between the temporal and the intemporal becomes increasingly blurred. Once, while daydreaming, she meets her dead father, who takes her to the graveyard: 'Mon attention fut attirée par une tombe abandonnée couverte d'herbe. J'arrachai quelques touffes pour dégager un emplacement et allumai une bougie. En la regardant se consumer j'eus l'impression d'être à la fois au-dessus et en dessous' (p. 139). This is not the first time Juletane is represented as living in the in-between. Earlier on in the novel while thinking about her death she states that 'je suis une épave à la dérive dans le temps et l'espace' (p. 109). Here we have the image of the soul hovering between life and death. In the graveyard Juletane knows that the tomb is hers, and yet the name had not yet been carved on it. But Juletane's name is unfamiliar even to herself, for 'personne ne l'avait prononcé en ma présence depuis des années'. As a woman in exile, she has had her name and her identity stripped from her. Juletane knows that death is imminent because as someone without name or identity 'je n'existe déjà plus' (p. 109).

At a crucial moment in the text when Ndèye refers to Juletane as a 'toubabesse' she experiences the Fanonian *écroulement du moi*²²³: 'Elle m'enlevait même mon identité nègre. Mes parents avaient durement payé mon droit d'être noire [...] Je n'aurais jamais imaginé à ce moment-là, qu'en terre africaine quelqu'un m'aurait assimilée à une Blanche' (pp. 79-80). Faced with the gaze of the other, Juletane is rendered an object among other objects. In what Clarisse Zimra calls a 'Sartrean moment' Juletane is forced to take on board that part of her which is White.²²⁴ Juletane perceives herself as Black, but the society in which she lives sees her as White. Instead of being welcomed 'home' to Africa, the motherland, the heroine is rejected as a foreigner. At another point in the text she likens Awa's plight to her own: 'Nous avons connu toutes deux la solitude de "l'étrangère", qui n'a que des souvenirs à ruminer pendant de longs jours, qu'une voix à écouter, la sienne, jusqu'à l'obsession' (p. 140).

²²³ I am referring here to Frantz Fanon's famous account of his encounter with the objectifying White gaze which forces him to see how he has been constructed as Black. See *Peau noire, masques blancs*, pp. 90-91.

²²⁴ Here Zimra is referring to Fanon's experience mentioned above where 'the Caribbean subject [is] rendered specular object by the ready-made identity assigned him'. See Clarisse Zimra, 'Daughters of Mayotte. Sons of Frantz' in *An Introduction to Francophone Caribbean Literature*, p. 184.

In this instance, what the two women have in common is their femininity. As the opposite or other of man, living in a world ruled by man, this is a precarious position to occupy. The author emphasises the solitude accompanying this position where memories are the only distraction. As a stranger to Senegal, a stranger to Mamadou's house, and a stranger within her own body, Juletane is posited firmly in the realm of the other.

Again it is writing which gives expression to this state of otherness and brings 'life' to her existence: 'Écrire écouterà mes longues heures de découragement, me cramponnera à une activité et me procurera un ami, un confident, en tous cas j'espère' (p. 18). Even though Juletane dies, her journal remains a testament to her plight. At one point in the text Juletane asks herself: 'Ma vie, valait-elle la peine d'être vécue? Qu'ai-je apporté, qu'ai-je donné?' (p. 141). Here she is both expressing her disappointment at an unfulfilled life and acknowledging the fact that her life is ending. For Héléne, the reader of the diary, however, Juletane represents a mirror in which she can find truth. By spending the night reading the journal, Héléne is creating a bond with Juletane. The act of reading is itself cathartic and symbolises a spiritual cleansing which revitalises Héléne and offers her closure. Here we see again the idea of life as quest with its attendant pain and suffering which eventually give way to happiness and fulfilment.

In *Juletane* death can be read as a passage to freedom or a form of rebirth and exemplifies the idea explored in chapter two in relation to *Cajou*, of a necrotic ideology. In literature this translates as 'passive and exploited female characters, often incapable of escaping unhealthy or degrading situations'.²²⁵ This is certainly the case with Juletane, but Warner-Vieyra has created a flip-side to her character in the form of Héléne. At the end of her all-night vigil (the end of the novel) Héléne has resolved her conflict. She has decided to accept Ousmane's love and move to a bigger apartment. This change of attitude can be seen as symbolic of the positive nature of writing, where writing is voice, presence and origin.

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Warner-Vieyra's short story 'Le mur ou les charmes d'une vie conjugale' draws

²²⁵Lionnet, 'Inscriptions of Exile', p. 88.

a powerful link between silence and hysteria. In this story a domestic situation is evoked in which the female protagonist is silenced and constrained. The story is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator who refers to her husband as simply *le mur*. The narrative gains momentum as the narrator recounts how her husband maintains a cold silence in their home: 'La dernière fois que nous avons échangé trois mots remontait à je ne sais plus combien de temps: plusieurs jours, une ou deux semaines' (p. 60). But in contrast to this external world of silence, the internal world of the narrator is overflowing with unexpressed frustration and anger: 'Je sens gronder en moi une sourde révolte' (p. 67). While the male character is not portrayed as violent, unfaithful or abusive, it is his complete lack of interaction, his tacit denial of his wife's presence that pushes her over the edge. The violence here is implicit or imagined rather than acted out. As the narrator remarks: 'j'ai envie de le détruire à coups de marteau' (p. 62). The climax of the story sees the narrator exploding with laughter and throwing herself on her husband in an attempt to make him notice her: 'Plus de sagesse, de bon sens, de conformisme, je veux du bruit. J'éclate de rire. Dépassée par ma propre excitation je rejette les draps, arrache ma chemise de nuit, saute sur le lit en criant, gesticulant' (pp. 67-68). Here the woman's noise, cries and gesticulations are placed in direct opposition to the man's silence and indifference. The narrator's act of revolt has liberated her for a moment but order is quickly returned as the man resumes his reading 'sans un mot'. Thus the narrator's moment of liberation, while gratifying, was short-lived. Her act of revolt signifies a moment in time, an event, rather than a process of destabilisation. Here, the structure of domination (in the form of the male character, the *wall* of silent domination) regains stability having been only momentarily undermined by feminine disorder. While Warner-Vieyra certainly questions the state of confinement and silencing of her female protagonist, in the process of achieving literary closure she reinstates the very framework of dominant discourse she had sought to undermine. As Lionnet suggests '[Warner-Vieyra's texts] disown on a constitutional level what they embrace on an ideological one'.²²⁶

There is a similar ambiguity in terms of ideological intent present in the story entitled 'Sidonie'. Here the title character is bound and objectified by her disability and

²²⁶ Lionnet, 'Geographies of Pain', p. 116.

her status as woman. Having been paralysed and confined to a wheelchair following a car crash, she marries the shallow and philandering Bernard. When he announces that the young cousin who had come to help in their home is expecting his child, Sidonie retreats into a silent rage. In an act of revenge, she castrates her sleeping husband with a kitchen knife, and he in turn strangles her. This double act of violence signifies the gendered nature of the crimes of castration and decapitation. As Sidonie castrates her husband, so he effectively decapitates her.²²⁷ Cixous's theory of castration anxiety discussed above in reference to *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* is also relevant here where Sidonie's 'visage luisant de sueur, déformé par un rictus démentiel' (p. 142) pushes Bernard towards the atavistic gesture of silencing the laughter of the *disordered* female.

Set in opposition to the able-bodied, child-bearing cousin, Sidonie represents a paradigm of femininity that is damaged and diseased. Her past is etched into her body and her body (redundant and barren in the eyes of society) is the site of her pain. In this context Sidonie is rendered voiceless, as speaking is associated with a position of dominance. Although her story is related by the other characters, the voice of Sidonie is absent completely. It is the voice of the narrator who remarks: 'Toute la nuit Sidonie bouillonna, se consuma dans une rage sourde et muette qui lui coupait le souffle et la faisait haleter' (p. 127). Sidonie's silence predicts her death, for, as I mentioned above, silence is symbolic of absent speech. It is Sidonie's feminine fear of decapitation that prevents her from speaking, but as her madness drives her to castrate her husband her fear is overcome.

The only means of true expression that Sidonie possesses is the act of writing. We learn from her sister-in-law that she is preparing a novel in which, via a fictional female character, she depicts 'sa propre souffrance, ses sentiments de frustration, de solitude, de femme incomprise' (p. 122). However, the reader is denied access to this text and learns of it only through the commentary of the other characters. As Lionnet remarks: 'we are never allowed into her own consciousness, and it is truly her silence that is resounding here' (p. 115). As the narrative draws to a close the horrific scene is surveyed by Sidonie's brother Septime. But as Sidonie's body is taken away, and

²²⁷ Although Sidonie is not literally decapitated, her strangulation is symbolically representative of the act of decapitation.

Bernard lies unconscious, we see that order has in fact been restored. Herein lies what one can only interpret as Warner-Vieyra's ambiguous attitude to both feminine *disorder* and the opposing systems of dominant *order*.

In the stories discussed above, the portrayal of feminine disorder or madness is characterised in terms of a transitory or momentary act of rebellion or violence. The 'rational' nature of Septime as he sympathises with Bernard's mutilation, and the measured countenance of *le mur* as he continues with his reading, indicate a triumph of male order over female hysteria. We see again in 'Sidonie' that while Warner-Vieyra has questioned the nature of male order she has tacitly reinscribed the objectives of that order into her texts. And yet, much like Emma B, the heroine of Suzanne Dracius's short story, 'De sueur, de sucre et de sang', who experiences liberation in one single moment of violence, it is certain that Sidonie and the female character of 'Le mur ou les charmes d'une vie conjugale' both find release and repose in their acts of revolt.

Warner-Vieyra's representation of madness in the novels and short stories discussed above reveals two interesting features of the author's literary treatment and characterisation of 'mad' women. The first feature is the act of rebellion (the acting-out) of the heroine as it is described with an almost cinematic-like process of image-superimposed-on-image. The work of Sander Gilman shows that historically, it has been the via the image of the patient labelled mad that early psychiatrists transferred clinical knowledge and diagnostic skills to their students. In *Health and Illness* Gilman explains how the use of visual representations of psychiatric disorders came into vogue in the early nineteenth century in order to maintain the trend of creating a visual epistemology, a trend that existed in the major fields of bacteriology, radiology and microscopy but also had roots in an older tradition of representing physiognomically the mentally ill.²²⁸

The early psychiatrists used the visual image as evidence of the scientific (read: truthful) basis of their new speciality. The most notable specialist in this tradition was the French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot. For Charcot, the visual image of the mental patient provided a readable text which the physician could then use as a major diagnostic tool. According to Gilman: 'having subconsciously established patterns of

²²⁸ Sander Gilman, *Health and Illness: Images of Difference* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995).

description rooted in classical iconographies of insanity, it was relatively easy to find these patterns replicated within the visual record of Western civilisation. This became true even to the degree that the patients of such physicians learned an adequate visual vocabulary so as to reproduce the visual traditions from which the description of their illness stemmed' (p. 21). Although Charcot's somatic approach to mental illness and his reliance on visualisation went into decline after his death, there is still a perceived visual link with portrayals of mental illness both in popular culture and in medicine.²²⁹

Thus within Warner-Vieyra's description of these rebellious acts or acts of madness, there is a coded sub-text which triggers in the reader a mental image of a hysterical or mad woman. In 'Sidonie' for instance, the description of the actual act of castration takes place over two lines and is told unemotionally. The horrifying reality, the driving-home of the act is revealed only when the narrative focuses on Bernard. It is thus from his point of view that the image of Sidonie as mad is crystallised. Again, this description is related in less than three lines of text using the visual metaphor of 'rictus démentiel' and the more loaded but again sensory metaphor of 'fou rire hystérique' (p. 142). Here, the observer (Bernard) is marking his distance from the observed (Sidonie) by articulating the difference between them in terms of pathology. This pathology is not just coded as psychological in nature, but more importantly as feminine in origin. Through an economy of words the reader is presented with an image of insanity that has its roots in both popular perceptions of psychopathology and the medical model of hysteria and dementia.

The second interesting feature in Warner-Vieyra's description of insanity is her subtle use of the figure of the observer as witness or judge of the 'insane' heroine. Let us consider here the character Juletane who, as I mentioned earlier, is represented as mad through the author's descriptions of her actions (the poisoning of the children, the disfiguring of Ndèye) and of her appearance (her shorn hair, her emaciated body, her glassy eyes). In other words Warner-Vieyra, like Charcot, uses a set of known visual signs to create a portrait of Juletane as mad. Although Juletane is conscious of the change in her appearance ('j'ai une tête de désespérée, d'affamée' p. 120) she has no

²²⁹ Even today photographic images of people diagnosed with psychiatric disorders (or actors portraying people with these disorders) are used by drug companies to advertise in medical newspapers. There is also the ongoing research into the presence of MFAs (minor facial anomalies) in patients diagnosed with schizophrenia.

insight into her unstable state of mind. Over the last pages of her diary she repeats: 'ma conscience des faits est très lucide' (p.120), 'je suis très calme et lucide' (p. 130), and it is only through the reaction of Juletane's observer (again through a description of body language) that the image of madness already conveyed via the *visualisation* of Juletane as mad, is reiterated and reinforced. Although Juletane relates the events that lead to her hospitalisation in the first person, the tone used is one of distance and detachment. Juletane blames Ndèye for provoking the attack and convinces herself 'j'étais innocente de tout crime, victime d'un destin que je ne maîtrisais pas'(p. 132). The author's use of the hospital and medical staff as signifiers of Juletane's 'insanity' is crucial here. Although the treating psychiatrist (referred to as 'un jeune et sympathique médecin' p. 136) is not given a narrative voice, his observations as they are related by Juletane herself, reveal Warner-Vieyra's conflicting attitude towards mental illness: 'Il me demanda si je me souvenais du début de ma maladie. Je n'ai pas pu lui répondre, ne m'étant jamais considérée comme malade, ce qui le fit sourire. [...] Avais-je jeté de l'huile chaude sur la troisième épouse? Là je me souvenais de tout. Néanmoins je répondis non' (p.137). Juletane does not consider herself sick, but in the eyes of her doctor (the observer) she has acted in a manner that suggests instability. Here, it is the smile of the doctor that distances him from the heroine and leaves the situation open to interpretation. Either he knows Juletane is lying or he thinks she really is sick but has absolutely no insight. Much clearer is the later distinction that is made between Juletane and the medical staff, where clinical metaphors such as 'observations cliniques' and 'examens habituels' are reassuringly coded as being outside the realm of the heroine. Although the author uses the trappings of medicine (the hospital, the medical staff) to add textual credibility, and complete the image of Juletane as mad, this image is ultimately destabilised by Juletane's reticence to accept this role. There are of course instances where lack of insight is interpreted as a sign of mental illness, but in this case the pre-meditative aspect of Juletane's crimes (which is made clear in the text) and her subsequent denial of her acts point less to illness and more to a behavioural disorder. In other words, although Juletane *looks* 'mad', behaves irrationally and is taken to hospital for treatment, she does not fit the medical model of someone with an affective or psychotic disorder. While Juletane represents a paradigm of unstable femininity, the stereotype somehow harbours a fault. It would seem that

although the author seeks to portray an image of insanity on a textual or metaphorical level, she somehow endeavours to deconstruct this image on an ideological level. In this way the reader is asked to question the *gestures* that signify madness in the observed as mirrored by the observer.

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Published in 1980 and 1982 respectively, *Le Quimboiseur l'avait dit...* and *Juletane* represent a significant development in the representation of women in Caribbean literature. As I have shown, in these novels liberation is not so much a physical or politically motivated step but more of a move towards knowledge of the self. I think *Juletane* as a novel represents even more of a progression in that the state of enlightenment attained by the heroine is shared among other women in a move which many feminist critics would see as being positive in terms of how women are represented in literature. When the power to enslave lies in the denial of knowledge, it can only be through the circulation of knowledge that women can reinvent themselves and their textual sisters. If the aim is to 'reconstruct new imaginative spaces' then images of women sharing knowledge must be of primary importance in the building of these new spaces. Warner-Vieyra's short stories achieve a different goal in that they represent a questioning of the unstable position of women in the twin realms of language and the symbolic order. Although there is little or no sense of redemption here (in terms of a positive outcome for women characters), the ambiguous portrayal of the *gestures* that signify madness seem to account for a refusal to acknowledge the dominant belief in specifically *feminine* hysteria. In other words, madness is not just located in the contextualised actions of the subject, but also in the sometimes absent and de-contextualised reactions of the onlooker. While Warner-Vieyra in effect demonstrates a conflicting attitude in terms of an implied ideological goal and an overt constitutional reality, it would be counter-productive to deem this an inconsistency. Rather this clash can be viewed as an instance of ambiguity in which opposition and context are the key players.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ambiguous Transitions

New representations of the Caribbean woman and female sexuality in the work of Gisèle Pineau

*Mourir et puis me relever cent fois,
avec eux, parmi eux,
mes pauvres personnages d'encre et de papier,
mes créatures de l'ombre et du néant.*²³⁰

In previous chapters, via the central discussion of representations of ambiguity in the texts chosen, we have encountered various representations of women from Mayotte Capécia's early portrayal of the *métisse* as aspiring to whiteness, to Suzanne Dracius's figure of the disguised *becoming-woman*, to Myriam Warner-Vieyra's characterisation of madness in exiled women. There is no doubt that parallel to the chronologically chosen texts discussed throughout this thesis, there has emerged a developing portrait of the Caribbean woman that reaches its equilibrium in the novels and short stories I have chosen to look at in this final chapter. As this new image of the Caribbean woman is emerging and not yet fully formed, it retains an ambiguous quality that comes from its ties to the old stereotypes of the past. It is important therefore to examine some of these stereotypes, and the effect they have on the representation of woman and woman-centred sexuality in contemporary West Indian culture. It will also be helpful in the first instance, to examine the systems of sexual politics which are in place in the Caribbean, and their impact on the subject for discussion in this chapter.

In his essay on the erotics of colonialism, A. James Arnold discusses the

²³⁰ Gisèle Pineau, 'Les mots dans la forêt' in *Lire en fête: histoires de lecture* (Publication de la ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, 2001), p. 121.

gendered nature of colonised societies where ‘the colonised is invariably conceptualised as the feminine, which can only be submissive, pleasure giving, accommodating, and ultimately screwed’ (p. 25).²³¹ Using Edward Said’s explanation of the feminisation of colonised societies, Arnold suggests that there are only two models of masculinity open to the feminised (because colonised) West Indian male.²³² These are the ‘super-male’ (the absent hero of *négritude*, the *marron*), and the passive homosexual (the masked *makoume*²³³ of carnival). The position of ‘real’ man is already occupied by the white coloniser. However, neither of these two rather ambiguous positions can provide any real stability for the West Indian male. The possibility of homoerotic desire is dismissed outright by Fanon, who maintained in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, that while there exists a type of cross-dressing (*ma commère*, or ‘hommes habillés en dames’), there exists no evidence of a cult of homosexuality in Martinique: ‘il ne nous a pas été donné de constater la présence manifeste de pédérastie en Martinique’ (p. 146). While the *nègre marron* represents the ideal figure of resistance, he remains an elusive and imaginary figure, rather than a historical one.²³⁴ Hence the need for a more plausible role-model, which would come in the form of the *conteur*, the male storyteller. According to Chamoiseau and Confiant, this traditional figure of the *habitation* was discreet and unthreatening, the antithesis of the *Nègre marron*.²³⁵ The *conteur* was the descendant of the African *maître de la parole* of which there are two types, the *griots* (historians and transmitters of local culture), and the *amuseur public* (entertainer and raconteur). The *griot* worked for the king, the *amuseur public* for the people. In the words of Confiant:

On comprend donc aisément que la traite esclavagiste et l’esclavage lui-même aient supprimé, ou plus exactement rendu inutile, la fonction du griot. Le roi n’était-il pas enchaîné, à fond de cale, aux côtés du forgeron, du

²³¹ ‘The gendering of créolité’, in *Penser la créolité*, p. 21-35.

²³² In *Orientalism*, Said suggests plausibly that Western Imperialists conceptualise the cultures they have colonised as feminine (i.e. submissive, passive, obedient) in order to justify their subjugation of these cultures.

²³³ Trans. ‘queer’ [*sic*] in contemporary popular culture, otherwise cross-dresser or transvestite.

²³⁴ Maroons of course were absent from developing Creole culture and so could never in reality be transmitters of that culture.

²³⁵ Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature 1635-1975*, (Paris: Hatier, 1991), p. 7.

guerrier, du charpentier ou de l'esclave? [...] Le conteur créole est donc l'héritier de l'amuseur public africain et non du griot. C'est pourquoi, dans ses récits, on ne trouvera nulle mention de noms de personnes ou de lieux évoquant de manière précise l'Afrique perdue. C'est pourquoi aussi il n'a le droit de conter qu'à la nuit tombée.²³⁶

And so the *conteur* was forced to tell his stories at night, while the White master was elsewhere. As ancestor of the contemporary Creole writer and symbol of the amalgamation of Amerindian, African and European culture, the West Indian *conteur* had the potential to become a powerful role model for the *Créolistes*. Through his storytelling he endeavoured to keep safe his people's history and by relating it to them secure their future integrity. But again, it is the *Béké* master who holds the position of dominance, and the *conteur* is metaphorically castrated.

But why the insistence on a male role model of Creole culture? As James Arnold remarks, the *Créolistes* make no mention in their work of all the grandmothers and elderly aunts praised by writers such as Gisèle Pineau for firing their imaginations with their *contes* and inspiring them to write. The figure of the grandmother in novels such as Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle* or Gisèle Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia*, and the figure of the *Da* in works written by *Béké* women, both provide ample scope for female models of strength and resistance.²³⁷ In her contribution to *Penser la créolité*, Gisèle Pineau comments: 'Aussi loin que je remonte, et sûrement grâce aux récits de ma grand-mère Man Ya, j'ai toujours eu envie de raconter des histoires, comme elle, et puis d'inventer, de créer des personnages pris dans les tourments de l'existence, de dire les petites misères et les grands sentiments, de mêler l'imaginaire au réel, de mettre face à face les évidences et la magie'.²³⁸ The gendered nature of West Indian literary discourse, from *négritude* to *créolité*, has denied the importance of such female ancestors, whom Pineau refers to as the 'arrière-arrière-petites-filles-d'esclaves' and consequently excluded women

²³⁶ Raphaël Confiant, *Les maîtres de la parole créole* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

²³⁷ As we saw in chapter 1, the *Da* represents the archetypal obedient, submissive, and faithful domestic servant, but she was also a conduit for the transmission of oral culture.

²³⁸ 'Écrire en tant que Noire' in *Penser la créolité*, p. 290.

creators from the literary history of the Islands.²³⁹ So far, this history has been written by men and has excluded the experiences of women, and so it must be deemed masculinist. Male writers have described both colonial oppression and the survival of their cultural heritage. They have described history by re-grouping the binary opposites of resistance and oppression. However, these are not the ultimate terms in which women's history will be written. According to Maryse Condé, 'l'oppression qu'elles [les écrivaines] doivent dénoncer est l'oppression masculine, le dénuement qu'elles doivent dépeindre est celui de leur cœur, étant donné le machisme et l'irresponsabilité des hommes de leur région.'²⁴⁰ The history of the West Indian woman is submerged under layers of oppression, from the global oppression of masculine dominance, to the more localised oppression of colonial dominance, to the contemporary system of re-colonising female bodies through literary representations of Black women as either objectified whore, or desexualised mother. This double-bind leaves women in the uncomfortable position of having no positive model of femininity through which to channel their sexuality.

In the West Indies (as in all other societies where Black women were enslaved), rape became the specific act of sexual violence forced on Black women.²⁴¹ It was systematically used as a threat and as a form of punishment against women and girls throughout (and after) the period of slavery. White men used the myth of the Black prostitute (the 'oversexed' Black woman) as an ideological justification for this act. Since the late eighteenth century, when (male) scientists first began to study the physiological differences between the races, due to her physical make-up (in particular the sexual or sexualised parts of the body) which varied somewhat from that of the Caucasian female, the Hottentot female was labelled sexually promiscuous. As she came to represent female sexuality (which had previously been represented by the White prostitute) in general, and Black womanhood in particular, all Black women were, as a result, labelled 'oversexed', or sexually promiscuous.²⁴² White men's

²³⁹ *Femmes des Antilles: Traces et voix* ed. by Gisèle Pineau and Marie Abraham (Paris: Stock, 1998), p. 13.

²⁴⁰ 'Femme, terre natale' in *Parallèles: Anthologie de la nouvelle féminine de langue française*, p. 253.

²⁴¹ I am assuming that while rape of Black women was the norm, rape of Black men must have been rare given the model of *heterosexual* desire which permeated the colonial plantation system.

²⁴² See Sander Gilman, 'White bodies Black bodies: Toward an iconography of female sexuality in

practice of raping Black women denied Black men their creative and procreative rights as males, and the dominant position which they would have otherwise maintained over Black women. In other words the rape of Black women was a *tool* used by White men to maintain Black men in a position of inferiority, and metaphorically to castrate them. In this way, an oppositional dichotomy was set up in which domination based on difference rendered the 'castrated' Black male subordinate to the 'virile' white master.

According to eurocentric masculinist thought, mothers cannot be sexual beings, and so in order to make room for the figure of the Black mother, this system of thought (which had already labelled all Black women sexually promiscuous) therefore had to come up with a new stereotype of Black womanhood.²⁴³ Thus, the overweight, asexual, African-featured, Black 'other-mother' was developed, and personified in the *da* of West Indian culture and the Black 'Mammy' as depicted in American literature from the deep south (also referred to in chapter one). Being asexual the *da* was an unsuitable partner for the White male, and was therefore free to become a surrogate mother for his children.²⁴⁴ Again the oppositional dichotomy of Mother/Whore was put into place and the controlling images of *da Mère* and *kokeuse/femme-libre* were applied to West Indian women.²⁴⁵ We therefore have two stereotypes of female sexuality emerging in literary discourse from the late nineteenth century onwards, that of the desexualised mother, and that of the sexually liberated (read: oversexed) daughter. The desexualised mother paradigm also includes the figure of the passive sexual partner, the woman '[qui se fait] monter dessus'.²⁴⁶ We will see how these stereotypes have helped West Indian males to boost their sexual 'egos' (neither figure can pose a threat to male sexuality; the mother figure is desexualised, while the daughter figure is oversexed and therefore pathological), in other words to become more masculine, while at the same time devaluing female sexuality and ultimately

nineteenth century Art, Medicine and Literature', in "Race", *Writing and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²⁴³ The Christian dogma of the Virgin Mary had ruled out the possibility of an active sexuality in the mother figure.

²⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that the West Indian *da* never married or had any children of her own. The children she took care of were only 'acquired', the fruit of another woman's sexuality.

²⁴⁵ This is the feminine form of *kokeur*, coming from *koké* meaning to copulate, or on a colloquial level to 'screw'.

²⁴⁶ As seen for instance in Gisèle Pineau's *La Grande Drive des esprits* (Paris: Le serpent à plumes, 1993), p. 112.

woman-centred discourse.

In works of fiction written by authors such as Raphaël Confiant from Martinique and René Depestre from Haïti, portraits of women systematically reduce them to their biological functions and sexual parts.²⁴⁷ Women characters are put in either the role of mother or whore, and there is no middle ground. The former is revered for qualities such as self-denial and submission, while the latter is perceived as a naked body, faceless, her beauty based only on her breasts and buttocks. Maryse Condé comments on the ambiguity inherent in this double-bind: 'De texte en texte, de Joseph Zobel à Patrick Chamoiseau, se répercute un univoque panégyrique. Les qualités qui sont reconnues à la femme sont le courage, l'abnégation dans la misère. Envers et contre tout, la femme assume sa fonction de reproductrice et d'éducatrice. Sans presque s'en douter, les écrivains mâles amènent au jour le malaise secret de leur société devant des images féminines qui semblent contradictoires'.²⁴⁸

In Raphaël Confiant's novel *Eau de café*, the character Eau de café (a woman), comments on how the 'inherent' ugliness of Black women is compensated for by the beauty her potential lovers see in her exterior genitalia (her *coucoune*/vagina and her *fesses*). In chapter four the narrator describes the 'femme[s]-de-tout-le-monde' (a prostitute), as having 'une stéatopygie délirante'. The quasi-scientific tone of Confiant's phrase implies an ideological link with early ethnographers and sexologists. In the work of Havelock Ellis there is a listing of secondary sexual characteristics which comprise an ideal of beauty ranging from the European to the Black.²⁴⁹ One of the more important secondary characteristics was the buttocks (which in the nineteenth century were a displacement for the genitalia):

The large thighs of women, and the corresponding development of the nates, must be regarded as an illustration of the greater accumulation of fat already alluded to, which is a pronounced feminine characteristic. We here encounter

²⁴⁷ See for instance Confiant's *Eau de café* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), and René Depestre's *Alleluiah! pour une femme-jardin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), both of which represent women as either whore or mother.

²⁴⁸ 'Femme, terre natale', p. 258.

²⁴⁹ Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary and Tertiary Sexual Characters* (London: Heinemann, 1934).

a peculiarity in the distribution of fat which is so constant that it may be, and sometimes is, termed a real secondary-sex character. (p. 154)

According to Sander Gilman, 'when the Victorians saw the Black female, they saw her in terms of her buttocks, and saw represented by the buttocks all the anomalies of her genitalia. [...] The presence of exaggerated buttocks points to the other, hidden, sexual signs, both physical and temperamental, of the Black female'.²⁵⁰ By focusing just on women's sex organs (to the detriment of other aspects of her character), male writers are effectively re-colonising the bodies of women. In another passage Confiant tells of a male spirit ('un incubé') who, in a fit of rage finds the only woman who is not protected from him and 'lui laboura le corps pendant trois heures' (p. 86). Beverley Ormerod has commented on how women rarely feature as principal characters in Confiant's fiction, and exist only to provide a *female presence* within the narrative. Referring to the two female protagonists in *Eau de café* she proposes that: 'neither is truly human: the supernatural waif Antilia is surrounded by the trappings of magical realism, while Eau de café herself, with her divination, charms and spells, is another manifestation of the witch [...] the seductive monster of patriarchal tradition, the "dark double" of idealized, passive femininity'.²⁵¹ In Confiant's novel, the female body is pared down to simple biological parts; the thighs, breasts and buttocks. However, not only is the *coucounes* hailed as the source of feminine beauty and sexual pleasure, it is also praised for its diversity: 'les coucounes bombées et crépues des négresses-bleues, les plus sublimes qu'on pût imaginer', 'les coucounes hardies des chabines aux poils jaunes comme la mangue-zéphyrine', 'la fente mordorée et pudique des mûlatresses', 'la toison chatoyante des câpresses', 'les poils [coupants] des Indiennes' (p. 85). Despite the humorous intent of this discussion of the various shapes and qualities of women's sexual organs, the reader's attention cannot help but be drawn to the similarity between such discourse and that of White anthropologists regarding the systemisation of racial categories during colonial times.

Confiant, however, does not just focus on sexual myths pertaining to women,

²⁵⁰ "Race", *Writing and Difference*, p. 239.

²⁵¹ Beverley Ormerod, 'The Representation of Women in French Caribbean Literature' in *An Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique*, ed. by Sam Haigh, pp. 101-117, p. 113.

he also brings back to life the myth of the sexually depraved, hugely-endowed Black man. Since early colonial times, White Europeans have consistently defined the Black Other in terms of sexual potency, believing that Blacks had powerful libidos due to the enlarged state of their sexual organs.²⁵² In Freudian terms, the white man, who seeks ‘an infinite virility’, considers the Black man a ‘penis symbol’, and transfers his sexual fantasies onto him.²⁵³ In the novel *Eau de Café*, Raphaël Confiant’s descriptions of the size, length, and breadth of Julien Themistocle’s penis, makes of him not just a penis symbol but a penis; not only is he reduced to his sexual parts, he also becomes them.²⁵⁴ Confiant’s reduction of Black men and women to their sexual parts is possibly an ironic spin on the old colonial myths, a ruse to re-engage and repossess the attractively terrifying images of the oversexed African savage. However, while we should not confuse what is fiction with what is real, it seems reasonable to assume that fiction can be *based* on reality, and that writers sometimes use their human experience as material for their work. Here, Confiant’s imaginative descriptions of the sexual characteristics of the West Indian are outside the realm of human possibility and experience, and one could argue that by proposing such caricatures he has spat in the face of progress. It is a widely held belief (and also a widely refuted idea) that contemporary writers of emergent literatures are endowed with the privilege of documenting their cultural reality (for the benefit of both local and international audiences), and therefore have a duty to enhance that reality by creating positive roles for both sexes and particular genetic types (Black, *métisse* etc.).²⁵⁵ This is perhaps why Confiant’s reduction of Black sexuality to a physical model or object is seen as being harmful to the global cause of Black Caribbean identity. With regard to the portrayal of women in his novels, Ormerod comments that: ‘They remain a psychologically unexplored other, generally reinforcing a tourist-board image of the exotic Caribbean female’ (p. 113). While his work is not up for discussion here, it is interesting to note that Confiant has a large

²⁵² See William B. Cohen, *Français et Africains: Les Noirs dans le regard des Blancs 1530-1880* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 339.

²⁵³ See Michael Vannoy Adams, *The Multicultural Imagination: “Race”, Colour and the Imaginary* (Routledge 1995).

²⁵⁴ Here ‘penis symbol’ refers to the real penis, and not to the phallus (or symbolic penis), which is generally a symbol of male power, something Black men have been denied as a result of colonisation.

²⁵⁵ I agree with Maryse Condé, however, who believes that such an idea is ‘la négation même de la fiction’ (‘Femme, terre natale’ p. 253).

readership both in the islands and in metropolitan France, and that people take an interest in, and enjoy his work. I would see Confiant, therefore, as a writer who possesses the ability to change and transform, rather than perpetuate, the rather stagnant stereotypes referred to above.

The Guadeloupean author Gisèle Pineau, on the other hand, has deconstructed these reductive paradigms of femininity by subtly re-modelling the already established stereotypes of West Indian womanhood. In this chapter I will be referring to her novels *La Grande Drive des esprits*, *L'Espérance-macadam* and *L'Exil selon Julia*, and to her short story, 'Piéça dévorée et pourrie'.²⁵⁶ Commenting on the female characters of her short stories and novels, Pineau remarks that '[elles] ne sont pas des modèles de vertu, d'abnégation et de soumission. Certaines rebellent, attendent l'homme ou vivent seules avec des souvenirs d'amours cachées. Différentes les unes des autres, elles sont toujours en première ligne, prenant la vie de front, portant leur charge comme si elles savaient que l'homme avait plus de mal qu'elles à sauver son corps et son âme des blessures de l'histoire'.²⁵⁷ This theme of fighting for survival is a recurring one in French Antillean literature, especially literature written by women. Notable examples include *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, by Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba, sorcière*, novels in which the main characters are women, all of whom have a strong sense of their identity as Caribbean women. Pineau's heroines all fit into this model. Myrtha (*La Grande Drive des esprits*), Rosette (*L'Espérance-macadam*), Man Ya (*L'Exil selon Julia*), and Lucie ('Piéça dévorée et pourrie') each deal with life in a stoic manner, accepting the good with the bad, and rarely yielding to despair or hopelessness.

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La Grande Drive des esprits, recounts the lives of two generations of Guadeloupean women: Myrtha (daughter of Man Boniface), and Célestina (daughter of Myrtha and Léonce). Despite the description of Myrtha as having 'u ne figure étroite et longue couleur de café clair. Une paire d'yeux où brûlaient des soleils. Un corps gracile qui offrait aux regards des mornes et des plateaux modelés dans une terre inconnue sous

²⁵⁶ Gisèle Pineau, *L'Espérance-macadam* (Paris: Stock, 1995), *L'Exil selon Julia* (Paris: Stock, 1996), 'Piéça dévorée et pourrie', in *Noir des îles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), pp. 161-203.

²⁵⁷ *Penser la créolité*, 'Écrire en tant que Noire', p.293.

ces cieux' (pp. 9-10), Ninette (Léonce's mother) saw her as 'rien d'autre qu'une de ces petites négresses ordinaires qu'on trouve par creilles dans les campagnes de Guadeloupe' (p. 20). But realising how passionate her son feels about this woman, Ninette goes to see Myrtha's parents to speak on behalf of Léonce. However, Myrtha's mother and her partner, Père Mérines (who 'méprisait les nègres d'ici-là, vantant ses ancêtres africains, à lui, qui n'avaient connu ni chaînes, ni verges, ni pals', p. 21), refuse to consent to the marriage, and decide to keep Myrtha under close supervision from then on. And so Léonce is deprived of the sight of his loved one until the day she escapes from under the watchful eye of her mother, and out of curiosity, comes to visit him. On hearing her voice Léonce 'tomba raide', but has the presence of mind to ask her to marry him, Myrtha is impressed by his poetic proposal and accepts: 'Messieurs et dames, à cet instant-là même, la belle comprit que l'homme en question était poète ma foi, un brin sentimental, de cette catégorie de nègres sachant tourner les phrases et pratiquant la langue française avec savoir' (p. 35). And so shortly after the death of Myrtha's mother, the two marry and move into their wooden 'case neuve' that Léonce lovingly constructed. The story unfolds with the lives of Myrtha and Léonce, the birth of their children, visits from the spirit world in the form of Léonce's grandmother Man Octavie, the downfall of Léonce, the death of Myrtha, the death of their daughter Célestina, and of course the part of the narrator (a photographer, and a woman) in the scheme of things.

On reading *La Grande Drive des esprits*, we realise that Gisèle Pineau has created a web of characters in which there is no real centre. In other words, there is no 'hero', or 'heroine', as such. Each character has his or her own 'space' in the text, which is directly related to the story they have to tell. This enables the reader to experience several different representations of women in one setting. Célestina, the daughter of Léonce and Myrtha, is physically beautiful, with 'un visage exceptionnel' (p. 150), but she has an imperfection, a stutter which renders her beauty less attractive to potential husbands. The narrator remarks that the first time she came to the studio to be photographed, 'son bégaiement me déchira le cœur et les oreilles. C'était un appel à chaque syllabe sauvée. Un espoir déçu à chaque mot éventré. [...] C'était insupportable d'assister à ce combat qu'elle livrait, piégée dans cette calamité par on ne sait quel hasard imbécile' (pp. 150-51). This *calamité* was lack of fatherly attention

from Léonce. After the war (in which he could not take part because of his club foot) Léonce lost all interest in his children, and took no notice of them for over ten years. Célestina remembers:

[...] comment elle s'était mise à bégayer, à jamais, quand son père cessa de lui parler, de la porter sur ses épaules et puis petit à petit, de la voir comme si elle était devenue tout à fait transparente. Des fois la fille figurait qu'elle n'était plus rien. Est-ce qu'elle était encore faite de chair? Elle devrait être tombée dans une autre dimension. Un genre de néant. Une nuit elle voulut se jeter au bas du morne. Mais songeant à Man Ninette qui lui avait prédit les feux d'amour, elle regagna la case où dormaient ses parents. (pp. 140-41)

Thus, at the age of twenty-one, she is doomed to celibacy, her beauty beckoning potential lovers, but her stuttering speech repulsing them. Célestina knows that her beauty is of no real importance when 'elle était plus seule qu'une femme borgne ou bossue!' (p. 140), but she is convinced that one day, the perfect lover will sweep her off her feet, and so she grudgingly keeps up appearances. Her only respite is in the photography studio, where she can sit and be photographed, silent and obedient to the needs of the camera: 'Pendant la séance de pose, elle ne dit pas un mot, se contentant de sourire, cligner les yeux, répondre par signes. Docile, elle suivit mes instructions avec application' (p.150). Being the object of the photographer's interest allows Célestina to fulfil the image she has of herself as perfectly and 'wholesomely' beautiful. This realisation of her other self (the self 'des jours gracieux où elle parlait comme vous et moi', p. 140) in the form of a photograph, represents a constant and solid image for Célestina, a kind of icon of eligibility in which she is the permanently silenced subject: 'Célestina venait fréquemment poser dans mon studio. C'était sa consolation, un genre d'emplâtre déposée sur sa peine. Elle aimait regarder son visage muet, impeccable, qui taisait le bégaiement' (pp. 154-55). The critic Joëlle Vitiello draws a parallel with Moses, who also had a stutter: 'En même temps, tel Moïse bègue lui aussi dans l'ancien testament, transmetteur de révélations divines, intermédiaire, Célestina

rapporte à la photographe tout un monde invisible'.²⁵⁸ Moses was 'slow of speech, and of a slow tongue' according to the old testament, but he acted as a medium for the word of God, and used a rod that God had given him to make signs instead of speaking. Célestina uses her time in the photography studio to impart to the narrator her knowledge of rural folklore and the stories of her own ancestors. Obsessed with the occult she sees a mystical trace in all things. According to the narrator, Célestina 'désignait des esprits, des méchants, des zombis, des sorciers, des houngans d'Haïti, des magies et des messes à vieux nègres' (p. 182). Her stories and fables are credited with opening up 'des chemins insolites' (p. 183) for the narrator. It is in this sense that Célestina is a mediator or *medium*, for the spirit world. We find out at the end of the novel that Célestina dies in a fire (the literal 'feux d'amour' predicted by her grandmother), having finally met the man of her dreams.

Léonce is also a mediator and diviner of spirits. Born with a caul and a club foot, he represents simultaneously the celestial and the chthonic, or indeed the dichotomous traits of virtue and baseness that exist together in man. In the African and West Indian traditions those born with a caul have access to the spirit world, and we are reminded of Toni Morrison's character in *Song of Solomon* who asks: 'Did he come with a caul? You should have dried it and made him some tea from it to drink. If you don't he'll see ghosts'.²⁵⁹ Léonce is fed the dried and powdered caul by his mother and his gift lies dormant for many years. On the day Myrtha announces that she is expecting their first child, Léonce's gift is returned to him: 'Le don revint... peut-être à cause de la graine qui germait dans le ventre de Myrtha. Peut-être parce que l'esprit de Léonce était sens dessus dessous. [...] Un petit sommeil l'avait pris au pied du caïmitier. À peine endormi, il se réveilla. Tout différent. Comme s'il sortait de son corps, pour naître une seconde fois' (p.82). Léonce's grandmother Man Octavie appears to him in a garden that resembles the original garden of paradise, and predicts his future. From that day on Léonce is a different man: 'Léonce était transfiguré. On aurait dit qu'une lumière marchait après lui, pour éclairer ses pas' (p. 90). Thus Léonce

²⁵⁸ Jolle Vitiello, 'Le corps de l'île dans les écrits de Gisèle Pineau, in *Elles écrivent des Antilles*, pp. 243-263, (p. 248), see Exodus 4:10.

²⁵⁹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 10.

is *transfigured* in the manner of Christ,²⁶⁰ and the celestial sign of the caul overshadows the more earthly characteristic of the club foot. We know through the myths of Œdipus, Jason and Achilles, that the foot is a symbol of the soul, and any imperfection in the foot implies a weakness in the soul. According to Paul Diel: 'Le mythe compare ainsi la démarche de l'homme à sa conduite psychique... (le pied vulnérable d'Achille symbolisait la vulnérabilité de son âme: son penchant à la colère, cause de sa perte); le pied déchaussé de Jason, à la poursuite de la toison d'Or, en faisant aussi un boiteux... Or l'homme psychiquement boiteux est le nerveux. Œdipe est le symbole de l'homme chancelant entre nervosité et banalisation, [il figure] l'ambivalence entre la vanité blessée et la vanité triomphante'.²⁶¹ Léonce's club foot reveals an aspect of his character that is base and vain. During the war, he tries to compensate for his infirmity by cultivating his garden, and raising it to the exalted state of the garden of paradise revealed to him by Man Octavie. While his work yields vegetables and fruit with which Léonce feeds his family, it also disables him further, in that he injures his club foot while tending to his plants. As a result of this injury Léonce is rendered an old man, both physically and spiritually. His gift gone and his garden in disrepair Léonce enters a period of his life that is governed by the *terrestrial* attributes that are implied metonymically by the lame foot.

This is the period referred to above, during which Léonce ceases to see, speak to or take notice of his children. The loss of the power transferred on him by the caul, coupled with the *mark* of the club foot, force Léonce into retreat. This self-imposed exile, in effect a withdrawal of the law-of-the-Father, has the effect of *marking* Célestina, in her speech. This mark (her stutter) links her to the spirit world, and symbolically reveals the prophetic qualities that she possesses. Léonce ceased to *see* his daughter Célestina, but not to *hear* her. For Célestina, however, it is better to be 'seen and not heard', to be silent than to use a voice which is imperfect. Despite this weakness in Léonce, he is characterised as a good, hardworking and monogamous man. He represents in Pineau's work (and indeed in the tradition of representation of male characters in West Indian literature) a new departure in terms of the portrayal of

²⁶⁰ See Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2-3.

²⁶¹ Paul Diel, *Le Symbolisme dans la mythologie grecque* (Paris, 1966) quoted in *Dictionnaire des symboles* ed. by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (Paris: Laffont, 1982).

the Black male character. In literature, film and song from the twentieth century, we find a representation of the Black male that equates him, in the words of bell hooks, with 'brute phallogentrism, woman-hating, a pugilistic "rapist" sexuality, and flagrant disregard for individual rights'.²⁶² As hooks suggests, it is imperative that the Black community has positive male role models on which to build its identity. In her representation of Léonce, whose ascent, ruin and rebirth symbolise the cyclical pattern of all human life, as a man who is in touch with the spirit world, and with the natural world around him, Gisèle Pineau has created a positive model of masculinity that transcends the paradigms of chauvinism and objectified sexuality we have seen to date.

Ninette, Célestina's grandmother, is portrayed at the start of the novel as the stereotypical West Indian mother figure who sacrifices her own needs in order to satisfy her husband, and who puts up with his infidelities even when his mistresses come to seek revenge by 'japper et blasphémer devant sa case' (p. 12). For Sosthène marrying Étienne (Ninette) was a challenge because, instead of falling for him instantly, as most other young women had done, she remained cold: 'Habituellement, les demoiselles changeaient de route à l'instant même, le suivaient, se couchaient *et caetera* [...] On ne sut ni le pourquoi ni le comment, mais Étienne resta de marbre' (p. 67). Sosthène uses all his charm ('fleurs en voilâ', 'langue française') to 'deflower' Étienne, but to no avail. At one point he worries that she might not possess 'cette bombance docile, odorante, moite et chaude' (p. 67) common to every woman with whom he, *maître kokeur*, had sexual relations before his marriage to Ninette.²⁶³ But he puts this thought out of his mind and finds himself marrying her, only to discover on his wedding night that '[...] elle demeura éteinte comme une bougie mouillée' (p. 67). And so, having learned his lesson that 'les bondas mâtés et les démarches fières cachent parfois des antres sans soleil' (p.68), Léonce goes back to his old ways of sleeping with any pretty woman he meets in the Guadeloupean countryside, and leaves Étienne at home in tears.²⁶⁴ For Ninette, sex is a means to an end and not an act of pleasure. By maintaining sexual relations with Sosthène, she believes she is respecting her conjugal duty: 'Toutes les nuits une semence riche courait dans le corps de Ninette,

²⁶² bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 102.

²⁶³ Term used by Confiant to describe a very promiscuous male, a possible translation would be 'master screwer'.

²⁶⁴ *Bonda* in Creole translates as *cul*.

qui, docile, s'ouvrait à la demande sans jamais repousser l'ardeur de son époux' (p. 11), while endeavouring to put a stop to his philandering: '[...] Ninette pauvre esclave, malgré l'âge et sans désir aucun, passait ses nuits à branler le coco et les graines de Sosthène, elle cherchait à rassasier, en quelque sorte, se disant qu'un ventre plein ne jalouse pas le déjeuner du voisin' (p. 63).²⁶⁵ Ninette respects her marriage vows for twenty-five years until, at the age of sixty, Sosthène becomes impotent: 'Grand-mère à présent, la femme avait pris sa semence quasi quotidienne, sans broncher, pendant vingt-cinq ans, vingt-cinq années de soumission dans la couche conjugale! Deux fois dix plus cinq années à mimer l'empressement et les fièvres (alors qu'elle était de marbre!) en priant la sainte Vierge pour que son entrain forcé amène l'époux aventureux sur la droite ligne de la fidélité' (p. 99). Shortly afterwards Ninette becomes a 'patronne des malades', and decides to devote her life to God. She gives up all sexual relations with Sosthène, making him promise 'de ne plus lui monter dessus' (p. 112), a promise he vows to keep.

In their study entitled *Femme martiniquaise: mythe et réalité*, Germaine Louilot and Danielle Crusol-Baillard divide the life of the Martinican woman into four sections; (1) *temps de jeunesse*, (2) *temps de maternité*, (3) *temps de maturité*, and (4) *temps de vieillesse*.²⁶⁶ The third stage, *temps de maturité*, is described as the 'temps de réussite si c'est possible sociale et financière, mais aussi d'abandon de toute vie sexuelle, *mwen pren chapelet mwen*' (p. 124).²⁶⁷ This is the case with Ninette, who, at the young age of forty-eight, decides to become celibate, but she takes this a step further and markets herself as a professional healer. For Ninette, abandoning sex is a direct rebellion against something which had been forced upon her (in the sense that, in order to be a 'good' wife, in the eyes of the church and society, she was obliged to satisfy the sexual needs of her spouse) throughout her life with Sosthène. In her role as healer of the sick, she becomes other-mother to those people she takes care of. She is also grandmother to Myrtha's four children. In this way Ninette crosses the boundary dividing stages three and four as outlined by Louilot and Crusol-Baillard. She is an 'old' wife, but a 'young' healer, a 'new' grandmother but an 'old' mother. Sosthène's

²⁶⁵Translated as *le sexe*, and *les testicules* respectively.

²⁶⁶ Germaine Louilot and Danielle Crusol-Baillard, *Femme Martiniquaise: Mythes et Réalités* (Martinique: Étude du Centre de Planification et d'Éducation familiale de Dillon, 1984).

²⁶⁷Trans. J'ai abandonné toute vie sexuelle pour me consacrer aux prières.

impotence empowers her, while it destroys him ('l'homme avait toutes les manières d'un bougre banni du genre humain' p. 110), Ninette experiences a spiritual rejuvenation, while Sosthène sinks into a state of melancholy.

The character of Myrtha is, as I mentioned earlier, reminiscent of characters such as Télumée (*Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*), or Tituba (*Moi, Tituba sorcière...*), who survived the many trials life put in their way, but came through each experience renewed or 're-born'. Myrtha, however, is unlike Télumée and Tituba in that she is a mother.²⁶⁸ Again we see the model of woman as mother-earth, a life-giving and fruit-bearing being. Myrtha gives birth to five children, four of whom live to be adults. After the death of her second child, she goes into a physical and spiritual decline: 'Cela faisait déjà trois mois qu'elle ne quittait plus sa couche et recrachait les potages que préparait Ninette. Ils semblaient s'être éteints dans sa gorge' (p. 107), but is miraculously re-born when Ninette distances herself from the young family, and bestows on Myrtha the position of mother and wife within the household. Myrtha also engenders the spiritual renewal of Léonce, who having spent years in a permanent state of apathy, is suddenly brought back to life after her death: 'Orphelin et veuf la même année, Léonce retomba bigidam dans la grand faitout de la vie de tout le monde. Ce genre de catastrophe terrasse à jamais ou bien réveille dans une calotte. Il oublia net la douleur que lui procurait son impossible éden' (p. 173). This too shows an interesting 'twist' in Pineau's writing. Léonce lost interest in life when he was not conscripted to fight in the war, on the grounds that he had a club-foot. His pride and vanity were affected by this rejection. More importantly, his masculinity was called into question. Léonce's club foot feminised him by rendering him an invalid (dependent) and also by drawing attention to the so-called *infantile sexual drives* that the foot symbolises. As a boy reaches maturity, his interest in feet (which are associated with the pre-œdipal phase in sexual development) is said to diminish and other attachments are made.²⁶⁹ In the case of Léonce, whose obsession with the foot is life-long, the pre-œdipal phase can never be overcome. His rejection by the army (essentially a rejection by the symbolic father) plunges him into an abyss of self-doubt, from which only the cathartic

²⁶⁸Neither of these two characters actually gives birth, but Télumée 'mothers' another woman's child, while Tituba aborts her foetus.

²⁶⁹See *Dictionnaire des symboles*, pp. 749-751.

event of death can pull him. In this way, Myrtha effectively 'liberated' Léonce from his œdipus complex, and allowed him to be re-born. Hence the image of death as catharsis or re-birth, which we have also seen in chapter one. Here, his image of re-birth casts both female and male figures in a positive light.

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In the short story 'Pieça dévorée et pourrie', woman is again portrayed as a survivor, and Pineau uses the image of the drum (a similar image to that used by Simone Schwarz-Bart in *Pluie et vent...*) to show this: 'Malgré sa vie bancale, la fille avait quand même pu sauvegarder son cœur, tendu comme la peau d'un tambour, toujours paré à donner un nouveau son, surprenant de roulements déchaînés' (p. 165). The idea of the heart giving out a new sound each time it is broken carries through the notion of death and re-birth already seen in Pineau's work. In Jungian terms, the drum or heart would act as a 'symbol of transformation', which can be used to express the necessity for a change of attitude.²⁷⁰ Such symbols, which are present in myths and dreams, could be instrumental in transcending oppositions (such as white/black, male/female) by replacing old attitudes with new ones. By using such symbols in her storytelling, Gisèle Pineau is giving the reading public a chance to deconstruct the stereotypes of women which we have been examining up to now. This is a short story which deals with the struggle between good and evil, the conscious and the sub-conscious, myth and reality, and life and death. Pineau uses dream sequences to create a subterranean atmosphere in which reality and make-believe are intertwined. The first dream is that in which Marie-Michèle (Victor's ex-wife) recounts the Villon verses to Lucie.²⁷¹ Having found a bloody knife wrapped up in one of Marie-Michèle's blouses, Lucie starts to have vivid flashbacks, and imagines that Victor in fact murdered his wife, and that it was not she who ran away. Thus in her dream she sees Marie-Michèle 'dans un dédale d'escaliers infernaux qui la menèrent à un grand parc planté d'arbres quatre fois centenaires' (p.186). The stairway is a symbol of knowledge of the occult and also of the unconscious, and therefore, in this instance situates Marie-Michèle as the gateway to Lucie's sub-conscious.²⁷² The four-hundred-year-old trees signify the period of

²⁷⁰See Vannoy Adams, p. 177.

²⁷¹From the 'Ballade des pendus' by François Villon.

²⁷²See *Dictionnaire des symboles* pp. 413-414.

colonisation and slavery. This is echoed in a later passage where there is a reference to Lucie descending ‘un escalier d’au moins quatre cents marches’ (p. 187). As Elinor Miller states with reference to Glissant’s novel *Le Quatrième siècle*: ‘The four centuries are not so much years as cataclysms: crossing the ocean, slavery, escape as maroons, and finally survival in today’s depleted land’.²⁷³

The telepathic link between Lucie and Marie-Michèle is predicted in their mutual reluctance to socialise together before Marie-Michèle’s departure: ‘Entre elles deux, passaient des fils qui les avaient toujours empêchées de s’aborder. Seuls leurs regards s’étaient croisés’ (p. 170). Lucie also refers to the fact that she has *taken the place* of Marie-Michèle: ‘Maintenant qu’elle avait pris la place de Marie-Michèle’ (p. 170). Earlier on in the story, the narrator comments that ‘Au fur et à mesure que Victor racontait ses déboires à Lucie, il sentait son corps gagné par un grand soulagement’ (p. 164). In this way Lucie is represented primarily as a mediator, but also as a double, twin or shadow. Her flashbacks have a temporal quality that suggests either a visionary experience or a spiritual revelation. The dream is situated in a kind of purgatory, which reminds Lucie of ‘les premiers temps maudits de la création du pays’ (p. 186). Marie-Michèle describes the place as being devoid of sunlight and suspended in time: ‘temps d’esclavage’. Thus Lucie’s dream brings together the beginning of colonisation (‘les premiers temps maudits de la création du pays’), the long period of submission to colonial power (‘[d’]arbres quatre fois centenaires’), and the recent reality of slavery (‘seulement un temps suspendu. Temps d’esclavage’).

In this story Pineau also uses animal imagery to characterise her protagonists. Marie-Michèle is associated with the chicken, which in many traditions takes the form of a *psychopompe* and is symbolic of the spiritual world.²⁷⁴ Lucie’s last memory of Marie-Michèle depicts vividly the killing of a chicken:

Elle s’occupait des poules, leur donnaient maïs et Purina, en tuait quelquefois [...] Lucie se rappelait l’avoir vue assise près d’un sceau d’eau bouillante. Du sang constellait son corsage blanc. Un couteau qui avait servi gisait à ses pieds sur un journal ouvert. Elle tenait une poule par les

²⁷³ Quoted in Debra L. Anderson, *Decolonizing the Text*, p. 40.

²⁷⁴ See *Dictionnaire des Symboles*, p. 784.

pattes et la plongeait dans le sceau, tête la première. (p. 171)

In many respects Marie-Michèle's killing of the chicken is reminiscent of a *ritual* killing, whereby the animal is killed for sacrifice. Used in rituals of initiation and divination, the chicken assumes the role of *psychopompe*, and is killed in sacrifice to create a link with the dead.²⁷⁵ The chicken is associated with the female, the *femmes-chamans*, and is opposed to the cock (also a *psychopompe*), a masculine symbol and an emblem of Christ. In any case Marie-Michèle is associated with death in this story, as we see for instance in the following description: 'N'avait pas porté d'enfant. Semblait rancir dans l'étroitesse de son corps sec' (p. 171). In so far as Marie-Michèle represents Lucie's sub-conscious or indeed her *dark side*, the dream of purgatory signifies a fear of death and also the atavistic fear of enslavement. As Marie-Michèle is associated with the chicken, so too is the old woman, Josy, a seamstress who fabricated Marie-Michèle's white lace blouses, and was paid by her in kind, with half a chicken. Josy is portrayed as a witch and malefactor: 'les yeux de la femme, oracle de Lucifer, volatile de malheur, maquerelle en quête de sel, ne couvaient pas la moindre bienveillance' (p. 190). She is associated with witchcraft, the smell of which mixes alkaline and bitter herbs, and also possesses the physical characteristics of a witch. According to Jung, the witch represents for women a scapegoat through which they channel their dark and antisocial drives. In this way, we see again that Josy represents a *corporeal* manifestation of Lucie's dark fears. More importantly, however, she is the antithesis of Lucie—generatrix and nurturing mother—in that, along with Marie-Michèle, she represents the past in its literal and metaphorical forms.

Similarly, Victor is associated with the pig, and is indeed obsessed with the notion of *breeding* pigs. Victor, along with Léonce from *La Grande Drive des esprits*, is one of the most positively drawn male characters that Pineau has presented to date. He is hard-working, loyal and an animal-lover. The opposite of the *kokeur* figure, he is monogamous and treats women with respect. It is unusual therefore to see that he is associated with the pig (which in all its symbolic forms adverts to negative qualities) and by extension porcine traits such as greed, *piggery* and ignorance. The traditional

²⁷⁵ See *Dictionnaire des symboles*, p. 281-283.

figure of the swineherd possesses qualities such as resolution and hardiness, and has much in common with the shepherd. In his manner of gathering Lucie and her 'lot d'enfants' under his roof and caring for them, Victor is emblematic of the shepherd. In opposition to Lucie's previous partners who are labelled *chien* or *scélérat*, Victor is described as being 'une aubaine dans son genre' (p. 166). The symbolic characterisation of the pig in the image of the sow feeding her young, is the only positive representation of that animal, and makes of the pig a symbol of abundance and prosperity. Thus, in this story, Victor's attachment to his pigs can be read as indicative of a need to nurture, prosper and provide for his *herd*. In this way Victor resembles the Christ figure.

'Piéça dévorée et pourrie' is a difficult and complex story to analyse, but it reveals much about the importance Pineau attaches to the underlying associations between human and animal, good and evil, life and death. The end of the story shows an act of forgiveness on the part of Victor which places him in an extremely positive light, and essentially gives a redemptive image of man. Similarly, the character of Lucie (who, although redeemed in the eyes of Victor, remains ambiguous) makes a promise to 'tenir les démons qui lui mangeaient le cœur' (p. 202). Thus the negative paradigms of unforgiving masculinity and irresolute femininity are somewhat alleviated by the image of the couple striving to let go of the past, and build a future together.

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L'Espérance-macadam is set in Savane, a kind of Ghetto, far from the capital Pointe-à-Pitre and the middle class suburbs. It tells the story of three women, Éliette who is an elder in the community, Rosette, her neighbour, and the young Angela, Rosette's daughter. The story tells how each woman has been marked by life in Savane and the disappointments that are a part of their daily lives. Éliette is morally damaged by the fact that she is childless, Rosette, because her husband sexually abused their daughter, and Angela because her father destroyed her innocence. As the story unwinds we realise that their lives are even more entwined than they thought. As is quite common in the Caribbean, where men will have children with several different women, Éliette's father Ti-Siklon was also father to Rosan, Angela's father. Towards the end of the novel, as Éliette comes to understand the significance of '[le] cyclone de 1928, tellement mauvais qu'il lui avait fait perdre la parole pendant trois ans pleins'

(p.124), the reader sees that her experience is mirrored with Angela's, and that the cycle of incest started by Ti-Siklon is perpetuated in his son.

In this text women are the primary characters, but their experiences are often created via men (be it father, husband or lover) who inevitably turn out to be a disappointment. Men in this novel, with the exception of two particular characters, are portrayed as misogynistic brutes, irresponsible and ignorant of women's needs. For the women of Savane they represent 'des animaux et [...] il fallait veiller leurs gestes pour pas qu'ils engrossent leurs propres filles' (p. 164). Rosette advises Angela to keep away from men: 'Ne jamais poser les yeux sur un mâle, le traverser de son regard, ne pas sourire, ne pas remuer les reins de telle façon' (p. 78). Portrayals such as this of Black men are common in West Indian literature and popular culture, while generalisations regarding their promiscuity and inability to remain faithful to one woman abound in the public imagination. Added to this is the notion that West Indian males are fathers in name only, they are expected to contribute financially to the running of the house, but take almost no part in domestic affairs, or indeed in the disciplining of their children. This kind of situation is widely accepted, and indeed expected from men who, from an early age, have been pampered by their mothers and older sisters. In their study on the position of women in Martinican society mentioned above, Germaine Luliot and Danielle Crusol-Baillard suggest that 'La mère martiniquaise a conscience de "mal élever" son fils dans l'idée d'une supériorité de sexe avec des droits exorbitants. Mais c'est son "petit mâle", sa fierté, son orgueil et elle pense parfois s'il a une promotion sociale, sa revanche à la fois sur la société et sur la condition de femme' (p.18). This situation turns into a vicious circle when these 'timâles', or 'star-boys' as they are called in the English-speaking islands, grow up and find that no other woman can replace or reproduce the attentions given to them by their mother. In fact the Martinican male is eternally dissatisfied as 'la femme autre que leur mère ne sera jamais qu'un ersatz' (p. 124). However, there is a certain discomfort attached to such generalisations. They give rise to equally hopeless stereotyping of women, for example the martyred matriarch as discussed previously, but more importantly, they do nothing to relieve the tensions among the sexes, or even question changing gender roles. It has been suggested by some theorists that Black men feel undermined by their inability to fulfil the White ideal of masculinity that exists in

Capitalist societies, and that this is why they exaggerate certain aspects of this ideal (for instance the will to dominate).²⁷⁶ But again, inherent in this solution is the presumption that Black-centered culture cannot develop ideals of masculinity proper to its own agenda. In her critical text *Black Looks* mentioned above, bell hooks questions both this notion of Black men wanting to comply with White ideals of masculinity, and the rather disturbing way in which the White media (in the United States and in France) have turned to Black culture for articulations of misogyny. According to hooks it is imperative that intellectuals begin to re-shape and re-think the role models they are confronted with. In the context of the Caribbean it is essential for contemporary writers to acknowledge and use the progress that feminist theory has made in terms of the demystification of both male and female stereotypes.

In *L'Espérance-macadam* Gisèle Pineau again proposes representations of Black masculinity which branch out from the more current negative model of the morally weak, lazy male. In chapter four Éliette describes her first husband Renélien as a man who 's'était montré brave, travailleur et passionné tout au long de ces années partagées' (p. 155). However, the reader is aware that it is only as a result of his devotion to Éliette that he behaves as a 'good' man should, and Renélien remains a fragmented character. Describing his relationship with his first wife, the narrator refers to a domestic scene in which Renélien in a fit of anger abandons the French language in favour of Créole, thus reverting back to his 'façons de vieux Nègre sans éducation ni sentiments' (p. 147). Here again 'good' behaviour (i.e. speaking French) is associated with Whiteness, while behaving badly (using Créole) is associated with Blackness. The other quite positive representation of the West Indian male is that of Joab, a father figure and herbalist who took Éliette and her mother Séraphine into his home in the aftermath of the cyclone of 1928. Séraphine describes him as 'un homme doux-sirop-miel' (p. 134), while her employer, madame Estélica 'répétait sans cesse qu'à ses yeux seuls elle voyait que ce modèle de Nègre rare était un bon bougre' (p. 134). But there is the suggestion that Joab is not a 'real' man. Much like Léonce from *La Grande Drive des esprits*, Joab is feminised: 'les autres disaient qu'il était du genre femelle: petite voix, Je crois en Dieu, et grands sentiments' (p.134). Séraphine also suggests

²⁷⁶This goes back to the idea that the position of 'real' man is already taken up by the white 'master'.

that they were never lovers: 'On vivait comme frère et sœur, [...] Joab fouillait et plantait rien d'autre que la terre de son paradis' (p. 136). It is possible that 'genre femelle' is a veiled reference to homosexuality, which is rarely referred to in French Caribbean literature. On the other hand it was Joab who was instrumental in helping Éliette speak again: 'grâce à lui à onze ans t'as retrouvé la parole' (p. 136). This is an indication that he is, at least on a symbolic level, in the realm of the masculine. This idea that men have some kind of power or authority regarding the transfer of language is a recurring theme in Pineau's work. We saw in *La Grande Drive des esprits* how Célestina developed a stutter when her father stopped taking notice of her. Similarly, in this novel Éliette stops speaking when her father starts to sexually abuse her. Her mother Séraphine also reacts in this way when approached by a man: 'Y avait quelque chose qui se dressait en moi dès qu'un mâle m'accostait. Mon cœur blackboulait cette race-là dans son entier et toutes ses dimensions. Mon corps s'échauffait et des paroles confondues se gourmaient dans ma tête pis qu'au cœur de Babel' (p. 133). These examples hint that language resides in an essentially male domain, and that there exists a singularly masculine power, which enables men to take language away from women, but also return it to them. Pineau's use of the Babel image is thus significant here, where the origin of confusion in the realm of language is reflected in sexual dynamics. On a symbolic level men and women do not speak the same language, which is one reason why there is tension between the sexes.

As I indicated earlier, women do not remain unaffected by the stereotypes of Black masculinity which have been so firmly put in place. These negative images of men usually imply images of women as downtrodden and beaten, crushed under the burden of a sadistic, childish man. In *L'Espérance-macadam* there is the prevailing idea that men and women are engaged in a battle of wills, where men fight and women either cave in and succumb to their bullying or react against it. The character Rosette is put in the role of observer and it is she who draws up the clearest picture of one view of Black femininity. She remarks that there are three categories of woman:

Il y avait la bougresse-vagabonde, *manawa* sans culotte sous sa robe, genre de chair dépitée jurant et buvant avec les hommes qui la montaient vite ment pressés, derrière une case pour un dix francs. Il y avait la femme-chiffe: elle

marchait de travers, le corps démonté par un seul énergomène, bourreau de triste engeance qui soulageait son aigritude dans les coups de reins, les coups de pied, se glorifiant d'être un homme véridique. Celle-là trébuchait pas devant les calottes de son destin, restant en bas éborgnée-défigurée, les yeux secs devant le vent de la fatalité. Et puis on rencontrait une-deux femmes sauvées, qui s'étaient relevées, avec des bosses et des cicatrices qu'elles montraient fières, pareilles à des médailles d'une dernière guerre. Elles marchaient seuls dans la vie, gouvernaient leur ménage sans mâle, et éduquaient la marmaille d'une manière raide. (pp. 163-64)

In this passage alone the author has accounted for the most frequently used representations of West Indian femininity in their crudest form, the drunken whore, the enslaved wife and the damaged but spirited matriarch. The last category of woman is described in terms of war imagery, thus suggesting that these women are warriors, sternly governing a household in which no man resides. The *femme sauvée* is the symbolic male in that she replaces the male, and also subverts him. Rosette and Éliette both strive to construct a safe place for the adolescent Angela. This is achieved not through strife and force, but through communication and strategy. At the end of the novel when the cyclone has died down and Anoncia (Éliette's aunt) reveals the truth of her past to Éliette, she vocalises her regret in the words: 'J'aurais dû ouvrir ma maison davantage et donner de mon cœur. Fais pas comme moi, Liette' (p. 300). Thus Éliette promises to become a mother to Angela, and rebuild Joab's projected paradise 'au macadam des espérances'. The last paragraph in the novel contains the words *reconstruire* and *mettre debout*, which create a positive image of generation and growth. These words are spoken by Éliette who has become a 'veille manman neuve' and represents a change of attitude, or symbol of transformation (as referred to above), that has the power to deconstruct or destabilise the old, in order to establish the new.

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L'Exil selon Julia is the story of Man Ya, a 'négresse noire' who is brought to France to live with her son, Maréchal, and his family, because her husband, Asdrubal, has been mistreating her for many years now and it is time, Maréchal feels, for Man Ya to leave him. Far from the language and way of life she was accustomed to, Man Ya tries to

relate to her grandchildren some of her knowledge of the life (both past and present) of the West Indian. The narrator comes to understand and appreciate her elder, and discovers that she too is in exile from a country she does not know but has often travelled to in an imaginary way.

Man Ya, or Julia, the grandmother of the narrator, experiences her trip to mainland France as an acute exile. For her, being outside Guadeloupe is more traumatic than being the victim of violence in her own home. This exile/homesickness manifests itself in Man Ya in the form of different psychosomatic maladies (insomnia, melancholia), and physical ailments (arthritis, bronchitis) which no doctor can cure. Although she is aware of her illness in the physical sense, Man Ya neglects to consider that her physical discomforts could be related to her emotional state: 'Elle vit toutes ses souffrances sans jamais penser que ses ruminations ne sont peut-être, qu'inventions, suppositions, lots de questions irrésolus, maladie de l'exil' (p. 181). Instead she is convinced that her sickness is the result of sorcery: 'Elle a déjà fait son propre diagnostic, y croit mordicus: le mal dont elle souffre est le résultat de pratiques sorcières destinées à la tourmenter jusqu'à ce qu'elle retourne auprès de son époux' (pp. 175-76).

However, Man Ya recreates and revisits her beloved country through a series of imaginary voyages which she shares with the narrator and her siblings: 'Elle voit l'état du monde, ses guerres, la ruine, la faim, la mort violente. Elle revit sa traversée et s'embarque pour d'autres traversées, ultimes. Les longueurs de mer entre le pays perdu et le nouveau monde. Les longueurs de peine...' (p. 182). These voyages are not just imaginary trips to Guadeloupe, but journeys through the intemporal that take her and her listeners to the lost continent of Africa and the time before slavery. Man Ya also takes herself, the children and the reader back to when she was a girl living in Routhiers. Instead of going to school she had to stay at home and take the place of her mother who was working in the canefields. Later she would go from her mother's house to Asdrubal's house, again to cook, clean, plant and harvest. Julia remained illiterate, but according to her mother, literacy is not something which is essential to happiness: 'Ta manman a pas eu besoin de l'écriture pour vivre dans l'honnêteté et même trouver un de ces Nègres braves qui s'usent pas à la boisson' (p. 131). Nor did being literate prevent Asdrubal, 'un homme instruit', from being violent and aggressive

towards his wife. This was what impeded Man Ya from learning to read and write during the early years of her marriage to Asdrubal: 'Elle en gardait une défiance instinctive à l'encontre des écrits. Un bord de sa mémoire refusait de recéler cette comédie de signes. Monsieur Asdrubal était un homme instruit mais ça ne l'empêchait pas d'être un féroce' (p.136). In fact Man Ya was taught that 'une négresse noire doit montrer la blancheur de son âme at agir dans le bien...', in other words her spiritual state (white/pure) must compensate for her physical state (black/impure). It is only after six years of being patiently instructed by her grandchildren that Julia eventually learns to write and sign her name.

In the chapter entitled 'Délivrance' the narrator gives a succinct description of her grandmother's relationship with 'le Bourreau' : 'Il aime le café de Man Ya [...] Il aime porter les chemises qu'elle lave, amidonne et repasse [...] La seule chose qu'il lui reproche, c'est d'être là en fait, dans les parages. C'est de croiser son regard, d'entendre son souffle. Savoir qu'elle respire dans le même air que lui' (p. 42). In fact what Asdrubal envies in Man Ya is her free spirit, her ability to put her mind at rest by keeping her hands busy. His own mind can never be so, as it is haunted by the ghosts of the battlefields, the astonished faces of the young men he killed. Asdrubal treats Man Ya like a slave, and married her strictly for this purpose: 'On raconte qu'il a cherché la plus laide des négresses noires pour faire offense et bailler de la honte à son papa. Il m'a jamais aimé ou si mal, d'une bien laide façon. J'étais comme un affront, un outrage... son esclave' (p. 132). Asdrubal is described as light-skinned and smooth-haired, like a *Blanc-pays*, and in his work as overseer on a plantation he behaves like a White master. By marrying a woman much darker than himself he is seeking to *negrify* the world while at the same time glorifying his own near-whiteness.

Man Ya refers to her 'enslavement', on several occasions, notably when she prays for him, 'le triste sire qui a rétabli l'esclavage, juste pour elle' (p. 43), when she describes his way of addressing her, 'Il m'a jamais parlé comme à une personne. Toujours comme à son esclave' (p.148), and again when she looks back on her life 'ce demi-siècle qu'elle a déjà passé sur la terre dans l'espérance et la soumission' (p. 180). These references linking Asdrubal to slavery and domination are in contrast to what one would normally expect from a person who is otherwise described as being an honoured soldier and patriotic citizen, a speaker of French. According to Daisy (Man

Ya's daughter), a man who speaks French in preference to Créole is 'un chef d'œuvre immaculé, un prophète en cravate sanctifiée, un espoir de grand marier' (p.292). However, the self-possessed *nègre évolué* often holds what he considers to be his social inferior in contempt, because he or she represents what that person is trying to flee:

Et tous les gens instruits qui viennent à la maison, gradés à deux galons, savants à certificat de fin d'études, inféodés au seul Français de France, regardent Man Ya sans la voir, avec un brin de compassion. À leurs yeux elle représente un état ancien, l'époque reculée d'avant où l'on ne connaissaient pas la ville, ses tournures de phrases, ses souliers vernis à hauts talons, ses beaux habits, toutes ses lumières, ses fards. Elle est une pauvre vieille femme de la campagne, illettrée, talons cornés, jambes écaillées, gros ventre. Ils ne peuvent pas admettre qu'ils viennent de là aussi et mesurent, en se mirant les uns les autres, le chemin parcouru par le Nègre. Man Ya illustre à elle seule toutes ces pensées d'esclavage qui leur viennent parfois et qu'ils étouffent et refoulent comme le créole dans leur bouche. Ils sont infiniment redevables à la France. (pp. 114-15)

This is the case with Asdrubal. Despite his education he is unable to reconcile himself with his recent past, or indeed his historical past and he envies Man Ya her stoicism and simplicity, all the while treating her with contempt because she embodies the symbolic sum of his roots and cultural identity (in other words his *créolité*). The fact that Man Ya wonders whether Asdrubal regrets his marriage to her on account of her physical appearance, the fact that her looks are not to his taste, suggests that she was aware of the unease she instilled in him, and of the reasons for it: 'Peut-être qu'il regrettrait de m'avoir épousée. Peut-être quand il me regardait avec mes cheveux grénés, mon nez large, il pensait qu'il m'aurait tuée tellement j'étais pas à son goût. Nègresse noire à gros pieds. C'est peut-être pour ça qu'il me foutait à grands coups' (p.148). If Man Ya stands by Asdrubal it is because she believes it was God's will that they became man and wife, and so it is her duty to be near him. It is striking that when released from her husband's brutality Julia wants nothing other than to return to it

because 'c'est Bondieu qui m'a déposée entre les mains de ce Bourreau-là. Un jour Il me dira pourquoi' (p. 133).

But this kind of submission is almost expected of women of a certain background in West Indian society. According to Germaine Louilot and Danielle Crusol-Baillard, '[le Martiniquais] vit sa femme comme le prolongement de sa mère, comme la reproduction du comportement de cette dernière: abnégation, soumission, complaisance' (p. 56). And so Asdrubal is merely fulfilling his role as a West Indian male, but because of his light colour and straight hair, he adopts an almost 'white' attitude to his peers, a leftover streak of the French coloniser: 'Asdrubal, quand il était dans sa jeunesse jetant sa gourme, à cause de ses yeux délavés et ses cheveux crantés, toutes les donzelles se couchaient pour lui. Quand il venait sur son cheval de gèreur, avec son casque colonial blanc, sa chicote à la main... au loin, on aurait dit un Blanc-pays' (p. 132). But Man Ya's own identity is so clear-cut, so firmly established in her way of living, that Asdrubal, despite his strength and authority, seems feeble in comparison to her. It was this profound self-knowledge, coupled with a secure faith in destiny, which helped Man Ya through the ordeal of her exile in France. This exile represents for Julia a true sense of loss. Firstly her language is no longer valid, and her colour no longer the norm: 'Tous ces Blancs-là comprennent pas mon parler. Et cette façon qu'ils ont à me regarder comme si j'étais une créature sortie de la côte de Lucifer' (p. 73). Secondly, her new environment has nothing in common with what she knows of nature, and so her knowledge of plants and their powers of healing cannot be put into practice: 'Soigner ses douleurs dans une France où il manque de tout, c'est hérésie. Au Pays Man Ya ne visitait jamais le médecin. Son jardin lui donnait des plantes à profusion' (p. 177). This infertile environment is the antithesis of Man Ya's Guadeloupe, but also embodies the desolation and ambivalence which affects all the inhabitants of the apartment block.

The pain of Man Ya's exile is rendered even more poignant with the knowledge that the children who are brought up in these dwellings will never acquire the ancestral heritage that is theirs, that they will never know their own land:

Quand elle retombe dans sa mélancolie, la cité lui apparaît comme une contrée déshéritée du savoir principal. Elle y voit croître toute l'ignorance du

genre humain. Est-ce qu'un jour cette marmaille saura authentifier les feuilles de l'arbre à pain, celles du corrosolier? Il y a tant d'espèces à dénombrer sur la terre, au ciel et dans la mer. Les enfants qui poussent là, dans la geôle de ses maisons en dur, perdent assurément le chemin du bon sens, à rôder qu'ils sont, si loin des essences de la vie, se dit-elle. (p. 179)

Man Ya is in possession of the history of her ancestors, but she fears that through lack of use her knowledge will evaporate (in this inhospitable climate) and fail to take its proper place in the minds of the next generation: 'Et elle craint pour toute la science abandonnée qui, à présent, dort en elle comme une eau sans vertu. Sa connaissance des plantes, bénéfiques ou toxiques, lui semble parfois se dissiper dans une mémoire desséchée et défaite par le vent des hivers' (p. 179). This is why she seeks to instil in her grandchildren a certain knowledge of their cultural heritage, an explanation for their difference, and the name of a place where they belong.

The words 'Retourne dans ton pays!' resonate in the ears of the narrator (the young Gisèle), but where is there to go, she asks, where is my country? This is the question which generations of West Indians have asked, this is the beginning of the painful process of self-discovery which ends with the realisation that neither Africa (the ancestral home) nor France (the 'Mother' country) can be called 'home', and that some kind of identity must be gleaned from the Islands ('le pays pas natal'). Man Ya brings her grandchildren on this voyage, telling them stories of Guadeloupe, lessening the pain of name-calling (*Nègresse, Bamboula, Charbon*), reassuring them that there is a place where 'les Noirs sont chez eux'. She speaks to them in Créole and (much to the astonishment of their mother) the children are eager to learn: 'Fait étrange, ses enfants veulent ressembler à ceux d'ici. Ils s'efforcent à parler créole... Ils sont d'ici sans en être vraiment mais ils s'essaient, chaque jour, passionnément, avec la volonté de ces gens de la ville qui font un retour à la terre' (pp. 292-93). Learning to speak Créole plays a large part in the 'naturalisation' process, passing from Négropolitaine to Guadeloupéenne.

The narrator in particular becomes emotionally attached to her grandmother, and makes of her (when the latter is gone) a kind of imaginary or spiritual confidante. We see this in the letters the narrator writes to Man Ya, which contain accounts of

everyday events, and adolescent secrets. It is obvious that the narrator feels isolated from her peers, and does not trust them ('je ne me suis pas déshabillée devant eux', p. 205), and so she takes refuge in her contact with Man Ya. The letters take on the form of a diary when the narrator admits that they will never be sent, 'Finalement, je me rends compte que je ne t'envoie plus du tout de courrier. Je suis une copieuse. J'imité Anne Franck et j'écris à un cahier' (p. 215). In this diary Man Ya represents the main character, confessor or therapist. This becomes very clear when the narrator acknowledges to Man Ya (her diary) that one of her teachers is bullying her. She cannot bring herself to tell her family of the horror of being made to crouch under the French teacher's desk for each class, of being in the 'dog-house' and seeing nothing but Mme Baron's hairy legs, her fat thighs, and smelling 'son odeur de femme sale lorsqu'elle écarte ses jambes pour lire un poème de Verlaine' (p.211). Again Black 'otherness' is reduced to animal symbolism. Like a dog the narrator goes under the teacher's desk 'à quatre pattes', and the young narrator is defined solely by the colour of her skin, 'Elle n'aime pas voir ma figure de négresse, ma peau noire' (p. 209). However, with remarkable insight she sees a parallel between her own situation and that of Anne Franck, the fact that they were both ostracised for nothing other than their difference. The narrator sees her skin colour as something which is arbitrary to her spiritual self, she speaks of 'wearing' her black skin as a Jewess would wear the star of David. She speaks of shedding her skin in order to be free: 'j'ai envie d'accrocher ma peau à un vieux clou rouillé, derrière la porte. Gagner les airs. Suivre les grands airs qui balayent le Pays' (p. 210).

Revealing her preoccupations to Man Ya enables the narrator eventually to tell her sister about her situation at school, and her nightmares come to an end. However, reality and the world of the imaginary have become intertwined and the narrator's truthfulness is called into question: 'Tu passes ton temps à inventer des histoires, à écrire des romans inutiles et tu caches la réalité au lieu de la mettre au grand jour. C'est vrai tout ça, t'es sûre que c'est vrai?' (p. 217). In fact, near the end of the text, when the family are embarking on their trip to Guadeloupe, the narrator herself questions this boundary between real and imaginary:

Comment démêler les rêves de la réalité? L'invention du véritable? Le réel du

conte? Mettre de l'ordre dans la cervelle. Mesurer, séparer, trier les paroles, s'entourer de raison et logique. Craindre que ces îles modelées au lointain ne soient que construction de carton-pâte, décor de cinémascope, mornes peints à la gouache pour colorer l'exil. Craindre et imaginer que tout n'ait été inventé par Man Ya. Se figurer que l'esclavage, Schoelcher, les Nègres marrons n'aient été que des acteurs mis en scène par Man Ya, juste pour nous donner une fierté, une histoire, une existence, un pays à aimer. (p. 234)

The reality of this history, so recently learned from Man Ya, is questioned by the narrator, and again we see a parallel with those people of Jewish origin who are prey, both to the tenacious nature of history, and to those who seek to destroy their history by denying the existence of the holocaust.

But Gisèle arrives in Guadeloupe, and learns that it is indeed a real place. She sees Man Ya in her own surroundings and realises that their efforts to teach her were futile, because that kind of knowledge was useless to her, and inferior to the knowledge of the land which she already possessed: 'Et les petites lettres si faciles qu'elle ne savait écrire, l'alphabet infernal, lui demandèrent pardon pour l'avoir tant de fois criée grande couillonne, imbécile, illettrée' (p. 305).

*

We can see from the three novels and the short story discussed above that not only has Gisèle Pineau provided the reader with representations of women from diverse backgrounds and age-groups, but she has also in many ways digressed from the more accepted models of femininity favoured by other contemporary West Indian writers. By inventing characters like Éliette (*L'Espérance-macadam*) who is non-maternal and yet 'adopts' Angela at the end of the story, and becomes a 'vieille manman neuve', and Célestina (*La Grande Drive des esprits*) who because of the combination of her beauty and her speech defect both attracts and repels men, Pineau seems to be deconstructing the existing canons of maternity and feminine beauty present in the Islands. While she maintains some of the traits present in established stereotypes of Black women (for instance the *femme sauvée* who manages her children and her life without a man), she also adds another layer of free-flowing images which destabilise the stereotype, and instead creates a new paradigm of femininity. Similarly,

her more positive representations of Black men, by showing the West Indian male as capable of monogamy, loyalty and friendship, reinforce these new images of womanhood. This is an important development in the evolution of women's writing in the West Indies and it is significant that this author has chosen to challenge her male contemporaries by using the progress made by her female ancestors (both in the realm of literature and feminist thought) and not the 'scaffolding' already provided by her male predecessors.

CONCLUSION

*At last, islands not written about but writing themselves!*²⁷⁷

In critical analyses of the arts, what one tends to focus on is how an image or idea is represented. In many ways, how we interpret this image or idea depends greatly on how it is represented in its visual or textual form. In a way, the spectator or reader *believes* in the visual or textual representation they are faced with. In literature, where the written word is the driving force behind the representation of images, (the portrayal of people, places, feelings, climates, political ideologies, smells, landscapes), the author of these words has a certain input into how we, the readers, interpret what is described. It is therefore safe to say that an author's description of a subject maintains a direct link with the reader's impression of that subject. However, when an author allows ambiguities to enter his or her text (either consciously or unconsciously) the reader's task of interpretation becomes more difficult. In essence, there is no right or wrong interpretation of a text or a passage within a text.²⁷⁸ However, just as the author is influenced in his or her writing by personal beliefs and life experiences, so too is the reader propelled in his or her interpretation by personal history and cultural beliefs. As Empson suggests: 'One cannot conceive observation except in terms of comparison, or comparison except based on recognition; immediate knowledge and past experience presuppose one another'.²⁷⁹ It is therefore with trepidation that the critic approaches his or her focus of study. A linear and neatly sewn-up critique of a text is an interesting impossibility, given that the ambiguities within the text will always prevent the imposition of rigid analytical conventions. This is not to say that analysis is impossible. On the contrary, although theoretical explanations of a text may be limited by certain boundaries, they are useful in that they describe in words what sensibility or unconscious thought are unable to reconcile.

²⁷⁷ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, p. 78.

²⁷⁸ One can argue that language is subjective and that therefore the interpretation of words must remain subjective.

²⁷⁹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. 290.

The theme of ambiguity developed in this thesis has served as a grid through which a myriad of impressions has flooded. In chapter one, mangrove and plantation were shown to be loci of ambiguity, and evocative of a sense of constraint and confinement. This is an image that is consistent with the notion of island as prison, and yet Condé's text, in particular, does not evoke this idea. Here, the mangrove is a site of expansion, of outpouring, an *in-between* (neither land nor sea) that permits the occurrence of infiltration. In chapter two I discussed how the figure of the *métisse*, as she is portrayed in two novels and one short story, can be read as an icon of racial ambiguity, an *in-between* of another kind. The *métisse* exists as the sum of two halves, marked in her body by both White and Black genes and driven by both African and European cultures. Franciane Galou's short story is different in that it shows the inconsistencies inherent in any theory of race or colour, and points to the *physicality* of blackness or whiteness. Chapter three centred on the work of Suzanne Dracius whose novel and short stories I discussed in terms of the themes of the body, otherness and technology. In these texts we see a blurring of boundaries (between body and machine, body and mind, sister and other) which renders the interpretation of characters ambiguous. This is an intentional ruse used by the author which helps the reader question and reinterpret the lived-reality of West Indian women. In *L'Autre qui danse*, the damaged and displaced Rehvana dies as a result of her search for selfhood and stability, while her sister Matildana flourishes in her *métissage*. These two women represent textually the conflicting emotions a writer such as Dracius experiences when faced with the inheritance of racial and cultural *métissage*. On the one hand this duality is felt as a source of creativity, diversity and accessibility, while on the other it is tainted with notions of impurity and strangeness. In chapter four I discussed the novels and two short stories of Myriam Warner-Vieyra in relation to the theme of psychological ambiguity. My reading of these texts revealed the author's ambiguous attitude to what is termed 'madness' in society. In each of the texts discussed we see a representation of an act of madness that is described using stereotypical *images* of madness. On an ideological level, however, it is evident that these characters are not mad women, but merely victims of circumstance. Warner-Vieyra's use of a set of prescribed gestures that *signal* madness, prompt a questioning of what these gestures mean in reality. In chapter five I used the work of Gisèle Pineau to show the transition

that has taken place within the canon of Caribbean literature written by women, from damaging or negative stereotypes of West Indian women to a more fluid and liberating image of femininity. Pineau has by no means imposed a new feminine order, nor has she invented new paradigms of femininity. However, her subtle mixture of stereotypical feminine traits and innovative models of womanhood, coupled with some unexpectedly positive representations of masculinity make her work eminently challenging. What is striking in Pineau's work is the general presence of received traits of femininity which we have shown throughout this thesis to be ultimately damaging to women. I have suggested, however, that these traits are, in most cases, contrasted with a more positive characteristic which ultimately reveals a fault in the stereotype. This juxtaposition of received traits (stereotypes) with positive, or liberating, images of womanhood, shows a certain split in the author's mind. It is this split which implies an ambivalent attitude on the part of the author, to the laying down of solely positive models of femininity within her work.

Thus writing, or the act of writing (by women), is central to this thesis. Inherent in the role of writer, however, is the dual relation of lived experience and recounted experience. In the case of the West Indian woman of colour the lived reality of being bi-racial (or multi-racial) and female, coupled with the historical truth of slavery and colonization, implies a layered structure of ambiguities. It is my contention that this ambiguity is out of necessity filtered into the written word, and that as a result of this there exists a legacy of infinite ambiguities within these works which would be impossible to analyse. Text is itself ambiguous and indeterminate. To tease out even some of these ideas is, as we have seen, a richly rewarding exercise.

This thesis has focused on a relatively small corner of the West Indian literary canon, and it should be noted, therefore, that there is the potential for a lot more research in this area. Even the simple exclusion in this study of poetry, theatre and the writing of male authors provides much scope for critical input.²⁸⁰ Given that the surge of literary output by women authors from the West Indies has only come about in the last sixty years, it is certain that critical studies of this work are few and far between. With the exception of Maryse Condé, whose writing is the focus of significant

²⁸⁰ Although I have made passing reference to the more prominent authors, I have not provided a detailed analysis of any of the works written by men from these islands.

attention both in France and the United States, these women writers are little known. Studies such as those referred to above by Sam Haigh and Françoise Lionnet are therefore invaluable in their contribution to knowledge in this field. I have yet to read a critical analysis of Suzanne Dracius's stories and yet Dracius remains an important and well known literary figure in Martinique. Her writing is greatly influenced by her experience of culture in her country, and is reflective of that culture. It is my project to render her recent collection of short stories in English, in order to bring them to an even wider audience.²⁸¹ Translation, (by adding another layer of interpretation), stretches the net of ambiguities wider still.

I hope that my critical interventions in this thesis have in some way helped to bring to the surface the intuitive impulses one experiences when reading these texts, and that my descriptions and explanations have not interfered with, but embellished, the overall perception of the writings. My aim is not to categorise, but to thoughtfully interpret the sinuous lines these Caribbean women have written.

²⁸¹ The short story 'La Virago' was translated by Doris Y. Kadish and Jean-Pierre Piriou and is published in *Callallo* 19 (1996), 143-147.

APPENDIX 1

Note by Suzanne Dracius

January 2003

It is an opportunity indeed to be given the chance to interview an author whose work one has been analysing and scrutinising for a number of years. The answers to all the unsolved riddles of the literary corpus are suddenly within reach. Having teased out the various themes and ideas present in the material, the critic lays claim to the knowledge s/he possesses and equates it with the author's own system of knowing. The representations within the corpus are equated with truth and the author-as-self is redundant. What the critic has observed is worked through the process of interpretation, and adjective and verb become *logos*. When one knows and is familiar with an author's work there is an intellectual bond that forms which is outside and dissociated from the potential or imaginary bond that one holds with the author. In other words there is an active bond with the literary corpus and an inactive but implicit bond with the author. An encounter between the author and the critic, therefore, has the potential to be either constructive or destructive. If this encounter releases an energy that the critic perceives as being equal to that which is inherent in the written word of the author, then the critic-text-author relation can flourish. If, on the other hand, the encounter is experienced negatively, the consequences may be disastrous.

In my encounter with Suzanne Dracius there was little of the anticipatory anxiety associated with the scenario referred to above. The difficulty here was rather how to go about putting together a formal set of questions and answers that would accurately reflect the many discussions we had had over the years. Suzanne Dracius knows my work as much as I know hers. Our ideas have crossed at times and what I have been able to reveal theoretically in other works of fiction, she has creatively

represented in her own. In knowing her I have observed first-hand the filtering process that occurs as the author grinds lived temporality into the fictional world of intemporal fluidity. This is a process that takes what we know as the infinite (in terms of time and history) and moulds, corners and locks it into a time-ended sphere of words. For the woman writer from the West Indies this process of writing pushes through many boundaries, including that of the corporeally known memory of White male dominance. Thus for Dracius, writing is a process which brings the lived experience into fictional form and renders it myth. Her stories all contain remnants, fragments of Martinican *contes* or Greek myths and her characters are usually archetypal. She attests to the 'flesh and blood' quality of her heroines. This points to the pleasant irony we often see in her work. How *real* is a character in a work of fiction? In drawing up the character the author has already brought his or her own prejudices and opinions into play, and reality is disrupted. And yet the 'realistic' aspect of her characters is something Dracius insists on. For her, the flesh, blood and body of a character equal the *persona* of that character. As mind and body are one in life, so should they be in text. Thus the importance in her stories of the *image* of the body as displaying the spiritual state of the protagonist. As I discussed in chapter three, Dracius's heroines are all marked in their bodies by the experiences they endure as Caribbean women. From the self-denigrating Rehvana, to the specularised Léona, Dracius's female protagonists all reveal in their bodies what is hidden in their psyches.

During a visit to Martinique in November 2002, I presented Suzanne Dracius with some questions I had noted down and asked her to respond to them in her own time. We agreed that she would send me her reply by e-mail. The following text is the contents of an e-mail I received from the author on 31st January 2003 in which she replied to my questions.

*

Mon 'retour au pays natal', 'vingt ans après', avait tout de littéraire. Il m'a aidée à résoudre mon problème d'identité, à assumer mon métissage, non seulement racial mais culturel: descendante de l'esclave nègre, du colon blanc, (le béké), mais aussi des Indiens à plumes et sans plumes (les Caraïbes et les coolies), avec de surcroît une arrière-grand-mère chinoise, j'essaie de me sentir, à l'instar de mon personnage Matildana dans *L'Autre qui danse*, 'bien plantée dans la confusion de mes sangs'. Mes

textes sont, en fait, une métaphore filée du métissage.

Métissage et marronage sont les deux mamelles de mon En-France. Semi-négresse gréco-latine (professeur de Lettres Classiques), dans cet espace natal à la fois vital, indispensable à mon bonheur et asphyxiant qu'est pour moi la Martinique, tout est concentré. J'y subis divers types d'oppressions, de pressions et de frustrations en tant qu'individu et en tant que femme (dans le microcosme machiste martiniquais, la mère est sacralisée, mais la femme est 'dérespectée', voire diabolisée). Fécondant ma relation personnelle avec l'histoire de mon pays, j'ai brandi le flambeau de la femme martiniquaise rebelle, assumée et battante en écrivant le fabulodrame *Lumina Sophie dite Surprise* et les nouvelles du recueil intitulé *Rue monte au ciel*.²⁸²

Mais ces douleurs sont fécondes, stimulantes et vivifiantes. J'adore me battre, et je déteste la veulerie. Sans militer directement, je milite littérairement pour la cause de la femme. Dans *L'autre qui danse*, Rehvana incarne le corps victime, le corps de la femme battue, un tantinet masochiste, spécimen si répandu en Martinique. Cette jeune femme qui se prend les pieds dans ses racines veut suivre la tradition de la Martiniquaise d'antan soumise à la phallocratie; elle incarne la difficulté à vivre harmonieusement une vie de femme et de mère avec un homme qu'elle aime. C'est peut-être pourquoi le géniteur d'Aganila, l'enfant de Rehvana, est l'angélique Jérémie, 'l'archange', tandis qu'Éric, à qui Rehvana se voue corps et âme, la bat, la trompe et l'avilit. Or le corps est chose très importante, par ici. En atteste la langue créole elle-même, qui répugne à utiliser des pronoms personnels réfléchis, et où l'on ne dit pas 'Je me baigne', mais 'Je baigne *mon corps*', pas 'Tu te laisses aller', mais 'Tu laisses aller ton corps'. Je refuse de répondre pour les autres. Même si je suis un porte-flambeau, je ne suis pas un porte-parole. Pour moi, le tissu corporel (le texte, la trame, au sens étymologique) est indissociable des idées, comme esprit et matière corporelle sont intriqués.

J'écris hic et nunc. Je vis ici et maintenant. Je me plais à saisir l'acuité du conflit entre tradition (tantôt oppressante, tantôt sécurisante) et modernité (tour à tour libératrice et polluante, frénétique et spleenétique), entre mœurs archaisantes et niveau

²⁸² This collection of short stories, which includes a longer version of the short story 'La montagne de feu' discussed in chapter three, is due to be published in 2003. *Lumina Sophie dite Surprise* is an unpublished play by Dracius which was written in 2000 and performed for the first time in the *préfecture* of Fort-de-France in October 2000.

de vie le plus élevé de la Caraïbe. Notre Martinique magnifique est un lieu d'un baroque effréné où se déploie la vanité des vanités, où se côtoient la mesquinerie des 'milans' colportés et une extraordinaire ouverture au monde. Dans ce domaine comme les autres, la Martinique est métisse. J'apprécie, par exemple, le retour sain aux danses traditionnelles, naguère méprisées et même interdites, considérées comme d'indécentes gesticulations de 'vieux nègres', des trémoussements obscènes d'esclaves. Mais j'observe que mon peuple a du mal à se débarrasser de la malédiction des fils de Cham et des séquelles du *Code Noir*, aujourd'hui encore, et jusqu'au cœur des familles. Je ne peux me contenter de le déplorer; je lutte contre, par la fiction littéraire. Et je m'applique à secouer certains jous et certains tabous.

Mes héroïnes sont de vraies femmes, des femmes de chair et de sang. De Rehvana à Lumina, en passant par les neuf nouvelles de *Rue Monte au Ciel*, ma Muse ou mon 'daimôn' m'ont inspiré des prénoms en -a, marque du féminin de la langue latine et de bien des langues romanes. Simple hasard? Coïncidence? Chacune de mes héroïnes constitue un archétype, une représentation partielle (partiale aussi, j'en suis consciente!) de la Femme antillaise, tiraillée entre sa double volonté d'émancipation (en tant que femme et en tant que métisse) et son désir impérieux d'évoluer en harmonie avec son entourage et son environnement socioculturel.

Dans 'Sa destinée rue Monte au Ciel', comme chez Aristote, Léona n'est qu'un 'outil parlant'. 'La petite da' n'est plus esclave, mais c'est tout comme, souffre-douleur de la patronne et objet sexuel pour le patron. Cependant elle marronne, dans sa tête d'abord, puis en réalité. Faisant mentir le proverbe créole qui prétend que 'les yeux des blancs brûlent les yeux des nègres', elle soutient insolemment, héroïquement, le regard de la béké. Quant à l'enfant fruit du viol, il incarne notre métissage, né d'une abomination mais adoré. (Par ici, on raffole des 'beaux petits types', c'est-à-dire des enfants métissés). La femme antillaise a besoin de se libérer et de transcender son identité encore davantage que l'homme antillais! Je ne suis pas certaine qu'il en soit de même en Guadeloupe, mais, pour ce qui est de mon pays, je suis convaincue que la femme y a pour tâche primordiale, non seulement d'affirmer et d'affermir son statut en tant que membre de la société antillaise, mais aussi de faire accepter sa volonté d'émergence dans le microcosme machiste martiniquais, 'bien debout', comme Mathildana, 'dans la confusion de ses sangs'.

APPENDIX 2

Suzanne Dracius

L'ÂME SŒUR

PARCE QUE C'ÉTAIT LUI

Il était de ces garçons qui croient que les filles en minijupe se fichent de tout et aiment la vie. Depuis un bon moment déjà Mathildana l'observait à la dérobée ; il allait et venait lentement sur les dalles de l'aéroport, comme le conseille le panneau « *Caution WET FLOOR* », mais sûrement pas à cause de lui. L'œil vague, un livre à la main, il aurait pu marcher ainsi, avec un doux air d'éternité, au milieu du XIXe siècle. C'est pour cette raison qu'elle l'aima, pour cette raison raisonnable, cette mine romantiquement sérieuse où l'étudiante en Lettres sentit comme un parfum sécurisant ou comme un baume, peut-être parce que, il y a quelques mois à peine, sa sœur est morte, petite déesse ! de faim et d'immortalité.

C'est parce qu'il y croyait dur comme fer, à cette affaire de minijupe, en ayant l'œil sur ses jambes, qu'il trouva belles, et parce qu'elle, elle avait en tête cette histoire d'éternité qu'ils se sont retrouvés, tous deux, cinq heures après, toujours étant et parlant au même endroit, pelotonnés sur la même banquette, tous les deux l'un près de l'autre, indifférents aux rumeurs et aux bruits de grève, ou clandestinement contents des retards annoncés, de demi-heure en demi-heure, par un haut-parleur gêné qu'ils auraient pu croire complice, s'ils eussent eu l'intime conviction de leur parfaite innocence.

Chaque nouvelle annonce d'un embarquement différé provoquait chez les voyageurs des haut-le-cors exaspérés, des soupirs non contenus, des récriminations... Seuls TERENCE et Mathildana s'en faisaient une joie nouvelle. Chacun, en son for intérieur, accueillait comme une chance exquise ce délicieux contretemps. Sans se l'avouer, sans le confier à l'autre, chacun savourait secrètement l'obligation de rester là, dans ce salon « Icare » d'Orly, la permission octroyée, pour quelques dizaines de minutes, puis soudain encore menacée, quand s'élevait à nouveau la voix, mais de nouveau accordée, pour quelques instants encore, d'être assis là, côte à côte, comme soumis au bon vouloir d'une divinité invisible dont la seule émanation, audible et parcimonieuse, aurait commandé leur destin.

Après, serait-il à côté d'elle ? Ne seraient-ils pas séparés ? Ils ne s'étaient pas trouvés ensemble à l'enregistrement. Se pourrait-il que le hasard les place à nouveau l'un près de l'autre, une fois montés dans l'avion ? Sinon, toutes ces heures loin de l'autre... Huit terribles heures l'un sans l'autre...

Elle rentrait en Martinique, ce jeune homme y allait aussi, mais en vacances, pour un mois, chez sa mère, aux Anses d'Arlets. Le haut-parleur, régulièrement, calmait la fureur des autres, trompait l'impatience grandissante des passagers énervés, mais ne dissipait pas leur trouble. Eux demeuraient à la même place, obéissants, sereins et bénissant les ordres, avec, aux lèvres, le même sourire, les mêmes yeux, exactement, infiniment indulgents pour l'agitation des autres. Ils se tenaient là, dociles et volontairement passifs, immobiles, tels des enfants sages, brusquement très gamins tous deux, comme pour fêter une enfance,¹ se chuchotant des souvenirs, des anecdotes de leur vie, pour elle, des « milans » foyalais, deux-trois potins de Fort-de-France, pour lui, des épisodes d'en France. La banlieue, quelques forfanteries de sauvageon attendri, singulièrement apprivoisé par la minijupe de cette fille.

Tous se montraient plus ou moins ulcérés par l'attente de plus en plus longue. De vingt minutes en vingt minutes, de demi-heure en demi-heure, la claire voix suave se faisait rauque, répétant que l'on différerait l'embarquement pour d'obscures raisons

¹ The phrase 'pour fêter une enfance' is undoubtedly a reference to a sub-section entitled 'Pour fêter une enfance' of the collection of poetry *Éloges* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), which was written by the Guadeloupean poet Saint-John Perse. The fourth poem in this section ends with the lines: 'mais pour longtemps encore j'ai mémoire des faces insonores, couleur de papaye et d'ennui, qui s'arrêtaient derrière nos chaises comme des astres morts' (p.35).

techniques, provoquant une totale panique. Tous maugréaient. Certains se mirent même à pester, à parler bombes, attentats, colis piégés, voire bagages qu'on fait exploser, incommensurables pertes de temps, donc pertes d'argent !... Ça circulait en tous sens, criant au vol, se préoccupant d'assurances, réclamant des remboursements, des dédommagements, portant plainte... Mais eux ne se plaignaient pas. Ces deux-là n'avaient pas à se plaindre. Car au milieu des protestations glapissantes, hors du chœur des vociférants, Mathildana et TERENCE goûtaient le temps partagé.

LE SOUFFLE DES ANCETRES

« Type sang-mêlé, sexe féminin, née à Fort-de-France (Martinique), d'après les pièces d'identité découvertes sur les lieux. Trouvée à 93120 La Courneuve, appartement 3517 B, au domicile de la dénommée LEDOUX Thanassia, 23 ans, sans profession, née à Capesterre de Marie-Galante (Guadeloupe), actuellement en déplacement à l'étranger selon le témoignage du gardien... introduit par effraction à la requête des voisins, incommodés par l'odeur... Trouvée en compagnie d'un enfant de sexe féminin, de type mulâtre, signes particuliers : œil gauche vert, œil droit bleu et brun... d'âge indéterminé... en apparence trop chétif pour correspondre à l'enfant inscrit sur le passeport et le Livret de Famille trouvés sur les lieux... En attendant le rapport définitif du médecin légiste... parle de dénutrition... inconnue du voisinage... chercher à prévenir la famille... Fichée aux personnes disparues... » disait, vague et laconique, le rapport de police communiqué à la presse pour la rubrique faits divers.

On a retrouvé Rehvana, la belle enfant prodigue des îles enchantées de la Caraïbe tant vantées par les prospectus, morte de faim dans une barre d'immeubles de la banlieue nord de Paris, seule au milieu des « Quatre Mille ». À ses côtés, blotti et roide, le cadavre de sa petite fille, Aganila, l'enfant emportée par la même inexplicable dénutrition, la même atroce et hermétique déréliction, en France, au cœur du vingtième siècle, au seuil du vingt et unième siècle.

En un gothique paradoxe, bien digne du baroque antillais, la Martiniquaise qui souffrait de crises d'identité chroniques a péri son passeport en main, immédiatement identifiable, tous ses papiers d'identité (Carte Nationale d'Identité, Livret de Famille etc.) égaillés sur la moquette, autour de son sac renversé, toutes poches retournées, déchirées, et de son portefeuille éventré, comme si elle avait cherché désespérément quelque chose, - quelque argent, sans doute, un dernier billet oublié, dissimulé dans une doublure ? - avant de perdre connaissance. La plupart des pages du passeport

avaient été déchiquetées. Il semble que Rehvana, à force de chercher ses racines, se soit pris les pieds dedans, jusqu'à la chute, celle don on ne se relève pas.

Totalement vidée de son être par la fin étrange de sa sœur, chancelante au bord de la folie, insidieusement pénétrée par le phantasme de Rehvana, par les chimères du remords et de la culpabilité, mais accoutumée à se battre et bientôt décidée à vaincre, Mathildana a essayé de redresser sa vie à elle, tené de dompter coûte que coûte les démons de son existence, pieusement recueilli l'héritage de tant de souffrance sororale.

Rien ne fut facile, pour Mathildana. Pour ele, plus rien n'était clair. Tout ce à quoi elle avait cru s'était dissipé dans les limbes. Dsparu avec Rehvana. Elle qui était accoutumée à regarder le danger en face, elle qui avait mené sa vie avec une énergie sereine voyait désormais toute chose à travers le voile de deuil qu'avait étendu sur le monde, telle une forme de filtre cruel, la destinée de Rehvana.

Cependant, il lui fallut très vite surmonter sa propre douleur, masquer sa propre hébétude et la farder de dynamisme pour soutenir ses parents, complètement abasourdis et demi-morts, eux aussi, après l'horrible nouvelle. Qu'ils ne perdent pas une fille après l'autre...

Une fois de plus, Rehvana avait laissé à l'aînée le soin de « réparer », le souci d'« arranger les choses » en occultant ses états d'âme, comme la Grande avait l'habitude, au temps où elles étaient petites, de passer derrière la cadette pour ranger ses affaires ou dissimuler ses bêtises.

Les forces que Mathildana dut alors puiser en elle pour ranimer sa mère hagarde, son père prostré, l'aiderent à se soutenir elle-même, lui interdisant de sombrer. De là lui vint un flux de vie qu courut à nouveau en elle, lui parcourut tout le corps et lui pommada l'esprit, dilua les ombres de son âme. Toutefois ce flot, quoique vital et salutaire, ne parvint jamais à charrier toutes les scories de souffrance que laissèrent en elle les questions liées au destin de Rehvana.

Elle voulut déchiffrer le cri, si proche et obscur à la fois, - si plein de ses accents à elle et pourtant étranger à elle -, si créole, si perdu, si pur, que Rehvana lança au monde avant de le quitter. Or Mathildana se souvint, au sortir d'une songerie amère, qu'elles avaient un peu la même voix, comme souvent il arrive aux sœurs. Mais leur cri n'était pas le même. Là où elle n'était que ferveur, assurance, ouverture au

monde, elle, Mathildana, la « Grande Sœur », Rehvana s'était perdue, chaque jour davantage, dans une quête abolie. La petite sœur se noyait dans un océan de mythes, errait, ballottée, chimérique, à mi-chemin entre les deux Mondes, à la recherche d'un troisième Monde, jamais totalement dans aucun.

Au demeurant Mathildana ne cessait de s'interroger. Refusant avec véhémence tout délire culpabilisant, elle voulait âprement *comprendre*. Même si la vie lui redonnait vigueur et joies, même si, en leur tournoiement, ses jours l'enveloppaient de douceur, l'anesthésiant de bonheurs petits ou grands, d'un soleil à un autre soleil, lui offrant paix, amour, que sais-je ? Mathildana n'aurait de cesse d'avoir *compris*. C'était là, oui, que résidait l'opaque héritage sororal : vivre, et vivre d'avoir compris pourquoi Rehvana n'avait pu, finalement, que mourir.

Elle se demanderait longtemps si sa petite sœur était morte d'avoir été un peu trop noire, chez les Blancs, ou au contraire toujours trop claire chez les Blacks. Ni Négresse debout, pleine et forte d'une *indéniable* noirceur, ni Blanche avec un grand B ayant le loisir, à l'occasion, quand ça lui chante, de se raccrocher aux fables, aux panoplies ou aux délires héraldiques de ces « races » dites « supérieures ». Ni l'un ni l'autre, mais sang-mêlé, métisse, quarteronne, « fille de couleur », comme ils disent, mulâtresse, ou *calazaza* ? Sans titre, sans nom, en fait, à force de répondre à tant d'appellations non contrôlées, hélas !

Subnègre, se dit Mathildana avec un triste sourire, inventant, pour fuir le réel stupidement cru de cette théorie d'étiquettes plus grotesques les unes que les autres, un vocable à elle. Un néologisme posthume dont elle fit don à sa sœur, insolemment, tendrement, - un terme de toute éternité pour la petite en allée.

Oint de poussière séculaire, épaissi de sueur et de sang, un mot : *subnègre*, pour être soi, même si on n'est rien tout à fait, ni noir, ni blanc ; pour n'être pas tout à fait rien (rien n'étant jamais tout noir ou tout blanc).

Un camaïeu délicat de ciels parme et de grisés les accueillit en Martinique à leur descente de l'avion, dans une tiédeur de carême qu'ils sentirent à peine sur leur peau, telle une caresse en harmonie avec la douceur épandue, en eux et tout autour d'eux, depuis qu'ils s'étaient rencontrés.

Mathildana et T rence voulurent aussit t g ter une Martinique   eux, une *autre* Martinique, en correspondance avec eux, neuve comme leur amour naissant, forte comme eux du sentiment de sa diff rence.

Mais Mathildana le mena aux lieux de sa prime enfance, celle d'avant les neiges sc ennes, d'avant l'En France. Main dans la main, ils hant rent le petit d dale assoupi des Terres Sainville,  mes unies en qu te d' me perdue et peu   peu apais es, longues silhouettes habitées de songes et de souvenirs et planant,   la recherche d'autres fant mes.

Huit heures de vol entre Paris et Fort-de-France avaient suffi   T rence pour p n trer dans l'univers de Rehvana, pour tout apprendre de Rehvana, du moins ce qui  tait dicible et que lui avait confess  Mathildana,   voix tr s basse, la t te appuy e sur son si ge, en regardant droit devant elle, d'une traite, sans discontinuer, sans tourner les yeux vers lui, ses interminables mains parfois crisp es sur ses genoux. Elle a continu    parler m me quand tout le monde,   bord, s'est peu   peu endormi. Ils rest rent les seuls  veill s, lui  coulant, elle racontant dans un murmure, comme dans un confessionnal.

Et maintenant, il se r v lait si  pris de cette jeune fille   lui offerte au hasard d'un a roport et   la faveur d'une gr ve qu'il faisait siens ses souvenirs. Pantelant, il se d couvrait pris dans son vertige.

Mais T rence n' tait pas homme   se fourvoyer en vaines poursuites de zombis. S eur ou pas s eur, Rehvana  tait morte et enterr e. C' tait bien triste, bien dramatique, il se voulait en empathie avec la belle Mathildana, il n'aimait pas que ses longues jambes r v l es par sa minijupe, il pouvait respecter son deuil et m me partager sa douleur, mais la vie  tait l , vibrante.

Le soir tombant, comme il sentait confus ment qu'une autre ombre  tait   chasser et qu'il  tait de ces  mes fortes qui ne redoute pas les  mes mortes, T rence s'empressa de donner   leur envol une aire de joie et de vie, joua les touristes avides de Mer Cara be   vingt-cinq ou vingt-sept degr s et de piment chaud comme le bonda de Man Jacques dans des accras bien croquants. Il arracha Mathildana aux  mes flottantes des Terres Sainville o  avait v cu Rehvana avec sa fille, l'entra na dans un tourbillon de tours de l' le en 4x4, de bains de soleil aux Salines et de courses folles sur la Savane des P trifications,   la recherche d'un improbable oiseau-chat qui miaulait

mystérieusement au fâitage touffu d'un pied-bois, retrouvant son créole natal au chaud contact des mangroves à ses pieds nus.

« Mangles gris ou mangles rouges ? » interrogea-t-il en riant, le nez au vent, son grand corps musclé chaloupant sur un vague air de ragga.

Nu-pieds il la fit marcher sur les roches escarpées d'un Bain des Diablasses inconnu, dressé face au Sénégal, aux confins des rivages du sud, lui faisant presque oublier le pierreux calvaire sororal. Eux se sentirent bien dans leurs peaux, dans leur métissage épanouis. Le regard tourné vers Gorée, juvéniles ils se recueillirent.

Combien de temps s'attardèrent-ils, s'arrêtèrent-ils pour souffler, soupirant, en toute volupté, épaule contre épaule, jouissant d'une saine communion, seuls dans ce désert de rocaïlle ? Nul zombi ne vint les troubler.

Puis ils reprirent, main dans la main, leur ascension. Mais cela devenait trop physique. Mathildana n'en pouvait plus. Elle glissait, ruisselante de sueur. Épuisée, la jeune foyalaise se laissa tomber à terre. Violenter pareillement son corps n'était guère dans ses habitudes. Dans son existence citadine, elle ne pratiquait pas de tels sports. En un élan protecteur, tel un grand frère attendri, Térance massa doucement les fins pieds endoloris aux délicates courbes égyptiennes.

Pourtant il ne put empêcher qu'un crépuscule ne les découvre, comme des voleurs, frappant d'une main furtive à la porte de Man Cidalise, Mathildana, toute tremblante, chuchotant fiévreusement « To To To ! » à la manière antillaise, et lui, Térance, soudain enfiévré lui aussi, complice d'il ne savait bien quoi, sous les bégaiements de la vieille Da.

- Eh ben ! Eh ben ! Mettez-vous !... s'était écriée Cidalise tout en penchant son vieux corps pour scruter les ombres, derrière eux.

- Mathildana, je te vois bien... Alors, vous m'avez pas amené ma jolie petite capistrelle ?... s'inquiétait-elle plaintivement, feignant de regarder l'ombre au-delà de Mathildana, pour ainsi dire *à travers elle*, afin de voir si, par hasard, Rehvana et Aganila n'y seraient pas dissimulées.

Térance et Mathildana demeuraient debout, éperdus, dans le chambranle de la porte.

- Eh ben, mettez-vous, mettez-vous ! répétait le vieux corps perclus en tordant frénétiquement sa main racornie tremblotant vers l'intérieur de sa case.

- Qu'est-ce que je vais vous donner ? Un ti feu ? J'ai pas fait le jus... Je sais déjà que ma petite capistrelle adore la prune de Cythère, seulement, avec mon rhumatisme, à présent, ma main sait pas grager encore... Un titac schrub ?... Ah, mais non ! Sacrée pistache ! J'oublie que j'ai une bonne tite liqueur de jujube, là en quelque part... Je l'ai serrée depuis un siècle de temps, je sais même plus en quel côté !... C'est pas drôle : le jujube te donne l'oubli !... ajoute Cidalise qui rit de ses deux-trois dents jaunes.

Sa main s'agrippe périlleusement au montant d'une dodine ; l'autre, crochue, cherche à tâtons la télécommande du téléviseur.

- J'ai déjà entendu la politique assez cet après-midi ! J'ai besoin de causer avec toi... Alors, quelles nouvelles ?

Cidalise babille et s'affaire autour du couple silencieux.

- Woy ! En quel côté je l'ai mis ?... Ma tête part à droite et à gauche... Je sais pas quoi faire de mon corps, depuis le jour où mon bel ti bâton de vieillesse m'a quittée là, comme ça... Eh ben, donne-moi les nouvelles !

On ne parla pas de Rehvana, du moins pas de sa fin. On ne *pouvait* pas en parler.

Man Cidalise fit semblant de se languir de sa visite, comme si elle devait revenir, un jour ou l'autre, sous un autre soleil, peigner ses cheveux crissants, lui enjoindre de tirer un conte, après avoir posé son corps endolori, roué de coups, dans la millénaire berceuse de balata.

« Balata bel bois... » chantonna Man Cidalise avec pénétration.

Ainsi a-t-elle sacralisé, au gré de sa fantaisie, son unique meuble créole, seul rescapé des temps anciens. Elle n'en démordra plus jamais, depuis qu'il a bercé les songes de « Pauvre Rehvana chère ! » Au temps saucé dans le miel où la jolie mulâtresse lui faisait visite dans sa case, l'aïeule lui céda, empressée, sa précieuse « balata bel bois », carrant son corps, pour sa part, dans le sofa de faux cuir déjà malodorant de moisi acheté par son fils « à la zone », « à tempérament », « avec crédit cent pour cent », précise fièrement Man Cidalise : « Mon garçon a pas besoin d'aval ; mussieu est fonctionnaire, oui ! »

- Mais regarde ça ! Le machin est déjà tout *cramoisi* ! Ils ne fabriquent plus rien de bon ces jours-ci.

Mathildana trouve délicieux de retrouver ce babillage imagé, ces créolismes touchants, cette manière de confondre *moisi* et *cramoisi* qui bercèrent sa première enfance en Martinique, avant l'exil, avant l'En France, avant que la petite sœur ne sombre... Avant que Rehvana ne se retrouve, mal dans sa peau basanée, sur les pavés de Paris.

Man Cidalise devisa presque gaiement, fit allusion à Rehvana tout comme si le seul chagrin qu'elle eût à souffrir par sa faute était une absence prolongée, une sorte de grave manquement dont Rehvana serait coupable à son égard. La vieille dame mettait Rehvana sur le même plan que ses grands fils qui ne venaient jamais la voir, ou du moins pas assez souvent, la laissant finir sa vie seule.

- Moi qui n'a eu que des ti mâles noirs comme hier au soir !... J'avais ma belle tite mulâtresse aux longs cheveux sur mes vieux jours, comme présent, comme manne du Ciel, parce que je l'ai bien mérité ! Comme tu me vois là, eh ben je suis née malheureuse... J'aime voir mon ti bâton de vieillesse, eh ben bon Dieu !... Tout bonnement.

La vieille femme parle d'elle au présent, elle rêve Rehvana au présent, mais Mathildana sait bien que Man Cidalise lit assidûment le quotidien « France-Antilles » qu'on lui porte dès potron-minet, parcourant en priorité la rubrique nécrologique, qu'elle écoute les avis d'obsèques sur Radio Martinique « dès sept heures moins vingt, chaque matin que bon Dieu fait, avant même de boire son café », qu'elle passe le plus clair de son temps devant sa télévision, et qu'elle ne peut rien ignorer du sort de Rehvana. Seulement, un accord tacite les oblige à se taire toutes deux.

Ou peut-être l'ancêtre avait-elle réellement perdu la tête, trouvé dans le jujube l'oubli ? À l'instar des Lotophages, sur les rivages desquels échoua l'Ulysse d'Homère au hasard de son odyssée, avait-elle le secret pouvoir de distiller la liqueur qui guérit de la nostalgie ? Le mythique lotus de l'oubli... (Jujube et lotus sont frères : tous deux, en grec, ne portent-ils pas le même nom, *zizyphé* ?)

Une force invincible et obscure a attiré Mathildana vers les hauteurs du Vert-Pré, au gré d'une longue promenade, puis à la croisée de Chère Épice, l'a tirée plus profond encore, passé Morne Galba et La Charles, jusqu'à ce fond reculé où vécut sa petite sœur (si l'on peut appeler cela vivre), non loin de l'endroit où vit toujours, solitaire et vaillante en plein mitan des champs de bananes, la grande dame du quartier

Café.

Cette même puissance implacable l'y ramena mainte et mainte fois, régulièrement, comme en un rite. Térance ne chercha jamais à l'en dissuader. Il l'accompagna, cependant. Obscurément il comprenait que quelque chose se tramait là, dans cette sordide case décrépite, que quelque chose d'essentiel passait dans le vieux regard attendri de taies lactescentes. Quelque ancestral mystère s'y jouait.

Il l'y suivit chaque fois, silencieusement, patiemment, respectueusement, avec une ferveur religieuse mâtinée de résignation et de terreur superstitieuse, en amoureux acolyte servant d'un culte étranger, enfant de chœur au cœur torturé, souffrant le martyre, jusqu'au jour où Mathildana ne jugea plus nécessaire d'y retourner.

L'exorcisme était consommé.

Au temps où Man Cidalise se nommait mamzelle Cidalise, à l'âge où mourut Rehvana, elle vivait dans cette même case, sur l'habitation où sa grand-mère, venue tout droit de l'Afrique dans le dernier vaisseau négrier, était esclave et lui parlait. Des lointaines rives de Guinée, l'ancêtre revenait leur parler.

PARCE QUE C'ÉTAIT MOI

Le mois d'août s'était vite enfui. TERENCE, le « Nèzagonal », comme l'appelait Mathildana parce qu'il était né là-bas, sur l'Autre Bord, devait reprendre bientôt l'avion pour Paris, où l'attendait son travail à la RATP, à Créteil-Soleil sans soleil, dit-il dans un grand éclat de rire. Mathildana avait promis de l'accompagner au Lamentin. Il avait tellement de bagages, avec tous ces coulirous, ces balaous, ces langoustes, ces avocats, ces mangues Julie, ce schrub, et surtout tout ce rhum qu'il rapportait à sa mère. Sans oublier le fameux flacon de jujube que Man Cidalise avait fini par retrouver sous son lit, serré dans ses « hardes de cabane », qu'elle tenait à conserver, « au cas où », « si couri vini », malgré le matelas « anatomique spécial personnes âgées » offert par son fils aîné, le fonctionnaire aux douze crédits et des poussières.

« Comme si on ne trouvait pas tout ce bazar là-bas, à Belleville ! se moquait Mathildana. Des mangues, y en a plein le treizième, à Chinatown... Et des avocats aussi...

- Des vieux avocats d'Israël microscopiques à goût d'eau ? ! Pas ceux de la propriété, non traités, garanti local ! répliquait fièrement TERENCE.

- Encore heureux que ce ne soit pas la saison des crabes ! Tu serais fichu d'en rapporter, pour qu'ils s'échappent pendant le voyage et courent partout dans l'avion.

- C'est pas Pâques, s'était contenté de répondre TERENCE, laconique.

L'aéroport... À nouveau un aéroport, comme celui où ils s'étaient connus, il y avait à peine un mois, cet aéroport d'Orly où chaque heure était un partage, mais pour eux seuls, et pour tous les autres un supplice.

Mais d'ici là, encore deux jours, encore deux nuits, encore leurs deux vies côte à côte... Oui, qui sait, pour la vie, peut-être ? Il l'inviterait à Paris... « Tu pourrais

venir à la Noël... C'est pas très beau : un vieil immeuble du XVIII^e, l'arrondissement, pas le siècle ! Le propriétaire coupe l'eau de temps en temps, enragé que les gens ne paient pas, et pis il veut nous chasser pour faire de la spéculation immobilière, mais, tu verras, je me suis fait un studio sympa. »

Térence riait, un peu gêné, quand il lui avait dit cela. Elle, évidemment, rien à voir. Belle villa, route de Didier, et toute espèce de diplômes imprononçables. Des machiins incompréhensibles. Une kyrielle d'études de grands-grecs. (Rien qu'à en écouter les noms, il avait la tête à l'envers.) Térence lui offrait sa vie, mais comment la prendrait-elle, sa vie, sa vie à lui, hors Martinique hors plages, hors zouks, sa petite existence de domien enfant de bumidomienne ? Il avait peur, brusquement, que passer l'eau dans l'autre sens ne mette un terme à leur histoire.

Mathildana appréciait qu'il ne mente pas, qu'il ne se soit pas senti obligé de frimer, avec elle. Cela prouvait qu'il ne la rangeait pas dans le lot de ces filles dites vénales qui choisissent les garçons en fonction de leur marque de voiture, avant toute chose, puis de leur couleur de peau.

- To-to-to ! J'ai dit bonjour ! Alors, fils, sa ou fè ? Ki nov ? Ba mwen nouvel-la, ti mal !

De grand matin, tandis qu'il finissait de sangler ses cartons, emballer soigneusement son rhum, ses avocats et ses mangues, Térence eut une visite-surprise. Son père daignait passer le voir.

- Eh ben, on est sur le départ ?... Tu n'as pas oublié la liqueur de jujube que Man Cidalise a envoyée pour toi, hein ?

- Tu la connais, Man Cidalise ?

- Par ici, tout le monde se connaît. Quant à pour moi, je *connais* toutes les femmes du pays Martinique !... Tu peux me croire.

- ...

- Alors, bonhomme ! Qui nouvelle,² garçon, ça va ? Je te vois bien, élégant comme un chic chien ! Laisse-moi te dire... Il paraît que tu as une bonne amie...

² From 'Ki nouvel?' in Creole.

Le père triture sa clef de Mercedes, embarrassé, se passe la main sur le visage.

- Comme ça, tu veux te fiancer sans prendre l'avis de ton papa ? On m'a dit que tu fréquentais la petite Mathildana ?... Tu ne dois pas aimer cette fille-là.

- Mais si, je l'aime ! N'importe comment, ça ne te regarde pas.

Le père s'éponge le visage.

- C'est pas ce qu'je veux dire. Il faut pas aimer cette fille.

- Enfin qu'est-ce qui te prend, papa ? Tu ne t'es jamais occupé de moi ! Tu as laissé manman partir pour France sans le sou, accoucher presque dans la rue, trimer comme une pauvre malheureuse à faire la fille de salle à l'hôpital, à vider les bassins et nettoyer la merde des gens pour nous élever, on ne t'a jamais vu à la maison,

Cette liqueur-là, c'est pour ton usage personnel... Allez, fils, bonne arrivée !

- On t'a vu beaucoup au Vert-Pré, quartier Café... C'était bien toi ? On m'a dit ça.

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