

MAYOTTE'S OTHER IDEAL

KEJA VALENS

SALEM STATE COLLEGE

In its first four years in print, Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise* (Martinique, 1948) won praise (from its admittedly rather small readership) for its poignant descriptions of the life of a young Martinican woman discovering her island and negotiating the erotic and economic mire of early 20th century colonialism.¹ Then, in 1952, Frantz Fanon scathingly dismissed *Je suis Martiniquaise* as evidence of black women's desire for "lactification." According to Fanon, Capécia's novel epitomized postcolonial subjects who, adopting the mindset of the colonizer, strive to become whiter.² Fanon excoriated Mayotte because he saw her choice of the "other" for a partner as an attempt to be more "other" herself: "Mayotte aime un Blanc dont elle accepte tout. C'est le seigneur. Elle ne réclame rien, n'exige rien, sinon un peu de blancheur sans sa vie" (34). Furthermore women, in Fanon's reading, can literally take the body of the white man into their own to lighten not only themselves but "the race": "Nous sommes avertis, c'est vers la lactification que tend Mayotte. Car enfin il faut blanchir la race" (38). And women writers who describe this process have incorporated colonial ideology, making it part of their texts.

Over the last decade, scholars have returned to Capécia's work, recognizing the many other ways of reading it. Clarisse Zimra and Beatrice Stith Clark were among the first to point out that while the story ends with the protagonist bearing a child fathered by a white man, far from being the ideal mate she comes to search out, André is an unhappy compromise for the protagonist Mayotte. Rather than a model to follow or even an example of "what colonized black women want" they read *Je suis Martiniquaise* as a tragic tale with lessons about the dangers, perhaps even the impossibility, for colonized black women to find any kind of happiness, success, let alone self-realization, through relationships with white men.

Despite the return of critical attention pioneered by Zimra and Stith Clark, *Je suis Martiniquaise* remains under Fanon's shadow. Recent criticism focuses on reading or responding to his critique of the novel,³ and while *Peau noire, masques blancs* is widely available in its second edition, *Je suis Martiniquaise* never saw a second

¹ *Je suis Martiniquaise* was awarded the Grand prix littéraire des Antilles in 1949.

² Capécia serves as the prime example for Fanon's analysis of "la femme de couleur et l'homme blanc" ("the colored woman and the white man") in *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

³ See for example Hurley, Sparrow.

edition and remains out of print—and difficult to obtain—except in Stith Clark’s 1996 English translation. Part of the legacy of reading Capécia through Fanon is an almost exclusive focus on the second half of the novel. Stith Clark makes this focus titular, translating *Je suis Martiniquaise* as *I am a Martinican Woman* and thus adding an age specification that is not present in the original.⁴ The idyllic first half of *Je suis Martiniquaise* remains virtually unexamined. The few French critics who do mention it dismiss the first half of *Je suis Martiniquaise* as both overly romantic and “devoid of literary substance.” And Mercer Cook’s 1949 praise of the “poignant beauty” of the first part’s “intimate” descriptions of childhood in Martinique fell from grace along with other pre-Fanonian commendations of the novel (Cook: 370). It is my contention that the first half of *Je suis Martiniquaise* offers an opportunity to reconsider the first half of Fanon’s claim: that black women want white men. Before she depicts Mayotte fully acceding to the mindset of the colonizer, Capécia paints her idyllic childhood where black girls find what they want with themselves, one another, and the island itself.

In the novel’s opening paragraph, Mayotte describes her first object of desire: bananas. “Ma mère suspendait devant ma bouche un régime de bananes. Je cherchais alors à les attraper, car je les adorais. Je crois bien que c’est par gourmandise que j’ai appris à marcher” (7; “My mother dangled before my mouth a bunch of bananas. I tried to catch them, for I adored them. I think I learned to walk out of gluttony”). Mayotte constructs herself as a child who is motivated by sensual desire. And her first bodily craving is to ingest the fruit of the land. Of course, this infantile paradise risks repeating so many other utopic romanticizations of Caribbean girls and plants. But the obviously utopic quality of this and so many other images from the first half of the novel make it difficult to find the facile repetition of Caribbean Garden of Eden, and points towards a more self-conscious idealization.⁵ Furthermore, the self-sufficiency of girl and land is an ideal whose erasure is assured in its very imagery, for bananas represent not only a native plant of Martinique and a staple of Martinican cuisine but also one of Martinique’s major exports to Europe, the island’s status as a “banana republic.” And only a few paragraphs later Mayotte herself realizes that she will soon become an “abandoned child”, literally abandoned by her mother’s early death but also forced to give up freedom and accept discipline. In one sense, this is a necessary part of any growing up; any story that follows a character beyond childhood will tell

⁴ By virtue of pioneering work on Capécia, Stith Clark becomes a target of later developments, but the immensity of her contribution should never be underestimated. Similarly, any translation must, by virtue of being a translation, use words different from those in the original and any other choice besides “I am a Martinican Woman” would have added or subtracted other implications to the original. However, since Stith Clark’s necessary decisions tend to elide the very aspects of *Je suis Martiniquaise* that I wish to highlight, I will use my own translations throughout this essay.

⁵ Sibyl Jackson Carter argues that *Je suis Martiniquaise* is a direct parody of the writings of Lafcadio Hearn and other explorers and ethnographers who perpetuated precisely those stereotypical ideals of the Caribbean and its women.

of their struggle with or submission to some kind of discipline, some loss of freedom. And most *Bildungsromane* depict the pre-adolescent moment as some kind of ideal. But the details of Mayotte's ideal and its loss are revealing: Capécia does not just lament the limitations that adulthood and colonialism imposed on black girls, she mourns a particular set of lost possibilities.

In Mayotte's ideal we can find not what her youth "was really like" but rather what she wishes it had been, what she imagines could have been perfect. In her perfect childhood, Mayotte enjoys a particular freedom: the freedom to indulge her "passion pour le jeu, le sport, la bagarre" (8; "passion for games, sports, rough-housing"). It is a freedom from the control of bodily impulses and from binary gender roles. It is the freedom to play in a group of children that is not divided by gender or color: "une vingtaine de gamins des deux sexes et de toutes nuances" (10; "about twenty kids of both sexes and all nuances"). And perhaps more germane to my argument is what she loves to do with this group of children: to get caught in a storm. She writes, "Orages de mon pays, comme j'aimais vos violences et les grandes vagues de vos pluies et cette eau des hauteurs, toute chargée de vos foudres!" (10-11; "Storms of my country, how I loved your violence and the great waves of your rains and that water from the heights, all full of your fires!"). The apostrophe extends into a personification of Martinican storms that allows a love interest and a corporeal connection to emerge.

It is a commonplace of Caribbean literature and theory to conflate the women with the island or its various parts, but here Mayotte seems to see herself not as being the island or the storm, but as having or at least wanting to have them.⁶ In order to take the island as her lover, Mayotte simultaneously aligns herself with and distinguishes herself from a female embodied land. And then the particulars of what she loves in the storm—violence, fire—make it hard, even as it is personified to become a lover, to assign the storm any particular race or gender. This confusion between animate and inanimate, human and elemental objects of love and desire marks the first half of *Je suis Martiniquaise* and makes it difficult to qualify Mayotte's sexuality. What is certain is that what she most savors as a child is unbounded sensation, social and physical disorder, and contradiction—things that she finds naturally abundant on and in the island itself.

During this time she also has "comme les autres filles, un amoureux, un petit garçon noir, nommé Paul" (11; "like the other girls, an admirer, a little black boy named Paul"), but his designation as "un amoureux" leaves out any comment on her feelings for him⁷, and her contextualization of the relationship with Paul suggests that she accepts him because that is what is done, regardless of her personal feelings for the

⁶ For further discussion of Capécia's interactions with stereotypes about Caribbean women, see Lizabeth Paravasini-Gebert.

⁷ "Amoureux" refers to someone who is in love with the subject. Stith Clark's translation, "sweetheart," conveys the way that it generally connotes a love which is accepted by the subject, but misses the clear specification of the source of love coming from outside the subject.

boy. It is in comparison not only to her impassioned address to the storm but also to the gaze she directs at an older girl, Loulouze, that Mayotte's relationship with Paul seems so unremarkable. Mayotte's idyll certainly includes relationships between boys and girls but these already smack of the emptiness of other socially structured relationships in contrast to the richness of feeling that she has with the storm and with Loulouze.

The Cambeille river where she and her friends play is also where the "blanchisseuses" ("white-washers") wash their clothes and where "après leur travail, les plus jeunes se baignaient sans façon dans la rivière" (12; "after their work, the youngest bathed freely in the river"). One person in particular stands out among these women:

Loulouze était la plus belle et la plus gaie et, malgré notre différence d'âge, nous étions de vraies amies. Encore enfant, malgré ses dix-sept ans, elle aimait rire; lorsqu'elle avait étendu son linge sur les rochers, elle venait souvent nous rejoindre, en attendant qu'il séchât. Quand nous avions tendu une corde au-dessus de l'eau rapide, elle se suspendait par les bras et avançait en se balançant comme nous le faisons aussi, mais c'était différent. Les mouvements de Loulouze me causaient une sorte d'émotion. Parfois aussi, elle se baignait avec nous. Elle avait une peau dorée qui tenait de l'orange et de la banane, de longs cheveux noirs qu'elle roulait en tresses et qui n'étaient crépus qu'à la base, un nez assez épaté et des lèvres épaisses, mais le visage d'une forme telle qu'elle devait avoir des blancs assez proches dans son ascendance. Je regardais sa poitrine avec envie, moi qui étais toute plate. Quand elle était sérieuse, ses grands yeux noirs, qui devenaient bruns lorsqu'on la voyait de près, la faisaient paraître plutôt mélancolique, mais elle était rarement sérieuse et, à tout propos, elle découvrait des dents qui brillaient comme le soleil. (12-13)

"Loulouze was the most beautiful and most gay and, despite the difference in our ages, we were friends. Still a child, despite her seventeen years, she loved to laugh; after she had spread her washing on the rocks, she often came to join us while it dried. When we had strung a rope above the rapid water, she hung by her arms and crossed delicately, as we also did, but it was different. Loulouze's movements caused me a certain emotion. Sometimes also, she bathed with us. She had a golden skin with tones of orange and banana, long black hair that rolled into braids and that were only kinky at the base, a rather flat nose and thick lips, but a face of a shape that showed she must have rather close white ancestors. I looked at her chest with envy, I

who was completely flat. When she was serious, her big black eyes, that became brown when one saw them up close, made her look rather melancholy, but she was rarely serious and, at every chance, she showed teeth that shone like the sun.

Working and playing in the river, Loulouze merges with and emerges from this force of nature. As in the storm, Mayotte admires and desires in Loulouze a blending of innocence and risk and of similarity—here of age and gender—and difference.

The physical description of Loulouze seems to offer a special appreciation of those things that allude to her white ancestry: her “gold” skin, mostly straight hair, and most tellingly “a face whose shape reveals rather close white ancestry.” Perhaps even where it is directed toward a sameness of geography or gender, Mayotte’s pre-pubescent ideal is already guided by a desire to have and to be as white as possible. But Loulouze’s whiteness combines with her other qualities to connect her not so much to a French colonial ideal as to Maman Dîô, a river woman whose power of seduction is as irresistible as it is dangerous.

Known also as Manman d’leau, Mami Wata, and River Muma, Maman Dîô is a mythico-religious character prevalent throughout the Caribbean and West Africa. She beckons with her beautiful face and voice and the promise of material as well as sensual gain, but kills those who do not do her bidding or who mistakenly follow her beneath the surface. But Maman Dîô attracts devotees as well as victims. Unlike her victims, who thought they could possess her, Maman Dîô’s devotees balance their desire to have her with their desire to be her.⁸ They exchange devotion and service, often sexual, for the chance to be touched, in whatever way she deems fit, by Maman Dîô.⁹ In as much as Loulouze can be read as a Maman Dîô figure, Mayotte can be read as her devotee.

Maman Dîô’s dangerous beauty as well as her connection with money and mechanical progress stem in part from her mixed race: like Loulouze she has long smooth hair, light skin, and Aryan features. Often identified with East Indians or Europeans, her origins have been traced to the first encounters of Africans and Indo-Europeans in the 15th century when she became a syncretic artifact, recoding various European and East Indian icons—mirrors, hairbrushes, coins—into Afro-Caribbean mythology and religion. “Mami Wata devotees,” writes Henry Drewal, “‘study’ others-overseas visitors [...]. Their study of our ‘ways’—our lore, writings, possessions, or patterns of worship—is actually a resymbolization of them.” (160). It is not that by their association with Maman Dîô Loulouze’s traits are less white, but that whiteness itself becomes less exclusively the territory of the colonizer. Loulouze’s connection with

⁸ This distinction, which is the enforcer of heterosexuality, is of course taken from Freudian psychoanalysis, especially as Sedgwick, Butler, and Fuss have interpreted it.

⁹ In her forthcoming book, Sue Houchins explores Mami Wata as a figure of desire between women.

Maman Dîô positions those elements of her character that would seem to fall outside of a Caribbean tradition (her light skin, her later financial success and rejection of marriage, the sexual attraction she engenders in Mayotte) all the more firmly within it, while simultaneously acknowledging that even the “within” of Afro-Caribbean mythology is always already created out of some sort of syncretism.¹⁰

The play of self and other, same and different, is complicated. Although Fanon tries to separate out into easily distinguishable categories “la femme de couleur,” “l’homme de couleur,” “la Blanche,” and “le Blanc”, the categories are neither as coherent nor as fully distinct as he seems to imagine, and the alignment of others and selves even among those four is not clear. As Mayotte’s descriptions of boys and girls show, Martinique is far from homogeneous in terms of race, culture, or collaboration.¹¹ For Mayotte to love “le Martinicain” is not necessarily to love “the same”¹² and for her to love whiteness is not necessarily to love “the other.”

Capécia wrote *Je suis Martiniquaise* during the flowering of *negritude* but she seems to anticipate *antillanité* and *créolité* with their recognition of the heterogeneous nature of “Caribbeanness.” Capécia seems also to anticipate a critique of *antillanité*—made perhaps best by Walcott—that it depends on whiteness, on colonialism.¹³ In the first Part of *Je suis Martiniquaise*, Capécia creates a pre-adolescent pre-colonial ideal that both claims as always already Caribbean those very elements Fanon critiques her for taking from the outside, as well as being aware of its own constructedness.

90 Of course there is an innocence to the riverside encounters between Mayotte and Loulouze that belies an interpretation of Loulouze as Maman Dîô: they do not touch, only chat and look and move alongside one another. That the two share meetings at the river’s edge, literally over the river, and deep in the island’s woods also connects their relationship to Mayotte’s relationship with the elements and locates Mayotte and Loulouze’s connection in a kind of Martinican sylvan pastoral¹⁴ that will remain opposed to the urban romance with the French officer in Part Two. But that’s the point: the awakening of Mayotte’s desires occurs in a childhood idyll of girls and nature. And it is interrupted not by any waning of Mayotte’s desire for Loulouze, or even of what might be Loulouze’s desire for Mayotte, but rather by Loulouze’s entry into a kind of “traffic in women.” Loulouze is given a “gold” bracelet by a young man in return for which she gives him something of which she deems Mayotte too young to hear but which makes her father kick her out with the approval of the women of the

¹⁰ For more detailed considerations of Maman Dîô, see Drewal, Revert, and Haigh’s “Between.”

¹¹ The possibility that blacks could be aligned with slave owners is made apparent in the servile manner in which Mayotte’s father treats her; questions of all sorts of collaboration are particularly near the surface of *Je suis Martiniquaise* through its setting during the Vichy rule in France. For a detailed analysis of the war in *Je suis martiniquaise*, see Duffus.

¹² The gender rift in *Je suis Martiniquaise* which Sparrow and others analyze puts Martinican men and women not only at odds in general but particularly in different positions in relation to the colonial powers.

¹³ See for example *What the Twilight Says*.

¹⁴ Jeff Theis’s details of specificity of the sylvan pastoral in early modern British literature can be extended to the colonial context.

village and sends Loulouze to Fort de France. Loulouze has entered into the exchange of material goods for women's bodies, and discovered that in that in that exchange, as she explains to Mayotte, "La vie est difficile pou' une femme, tu ve'as Mayotte, su'tout pou' une femme de couleu'..." (20; "Life's hard fo' a woman, you gonna see Mayotte, 'specially fo' a culluhd woman").

Although overall as she comes of age Mayotte seems to abandon her childhood desires and to accept the reality Loulouze describes as one more part of the colonial heteronormativity to which she accedes, the progression is not neatly linear. In fact, at the same time as Mayotte desires nature she desires a black boy, at the same time as she desires Loulouze she has her first love for a white man (her Parish priest), and after she loses the first black boys, Loulouze, and the white man, she falls in love with the moon.

Je me promenais, toute seule au bord de la mer qui reflétait longuement la lune. J'étais amoureuse de la lune, je me remplissais le coeur de sa lumière qui me semblait à la fois plus pure et plus troublante que celle du soleil, je me sentais frissonner à son contact, je lui parlais, je lui offrais mon coeur vierge et lui disais: "Pa'le moi à ton tou', dis-moi que tu m'aimes..." (87)

"I walked, all alone along the edge of the sea reflecting the moon. I was in love with the moon, I filled my heart with her light which seems at once purer and more troubling than that of the sun, I felt myself shiver at her contact, I spoke to her, I offered her my virgin heart and said to her: 'talk back tuh me, tell me that yuh love me...' "

The moon here is not only a symbol of femininity, as it traditionally is, but also of independence—Mayotte walks alone in the moonlight—and of a particularly Martinican nature: She enjoys this moonlight on the shore, one of the defining geographic features of her island, where she is near the "mer" des Caraïbes with her feet in her island's ground. Even more so than the storm, the moon is personified: given the power of bodily touch, spoken to and asked to speak back. This is for Mayotte as full-blown a love affair as the one she has with Horace to whom she will soon give her virginity.

As with Loulouze, we find in the moon an unusual color configuration. Mayotte opposes the "purer" and "more disturbing" light of the moon to the light of the sun. The moon's light is one that shines in and with the dark, while sunlight is allied with "the light of day," a lack of color opposed to the complex combination of all colors that constitutes black. And yet, in the dark the "pure" light of the moon shines whiter and perhaps the contrast of pure white moonlight and dark night is what Mayotte finds "disturbing." If we are going to racialize this love affair, we run into a similar

conundrum as with Loulouze. Where Mayotte may desire a same in terms of national origin or gender, she equally seems to desire an other in terms of race (in the broadest sense—human versus non human race—and in the smallest sense—black versus mixed race, although Mayotte’s own status as “black” is complicated by her white maternal grandmother).

Perhaps as much as a black woman’s desire for white men, these other desires too, in Fanon’s judgment and in the colonial regime with which he is for a moment aligned, are a problem. She needs not to choose “the same” versus “the other” but rather to choose a certain same and a certain other. The conundrum Mayotte is caught in then is the one Cheryl Duffus and others describe, doubled: she is trapped in the colonial status that she embodies but also in the compulsory heterosexuality that undergirds and is promoted by both colonial and post-colonial projects. The insistence on heterosexuality as *the* norm that can and must not be violated—and its concomitant regulation of the boundaries of gender and family roles—belongs to a moral and political structure whose imposition forms part of French colonialism.¹⁵

Ironically, when he refers to “la conséquence de l’absence de l’Oedipe aux Antilles” (146; “the result of the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles”), Fanon is among the early writers to address the ways in which Caribbean family structure differs from European family structure and to consider how, as a result, European models of individual and national desires that derive from the nuclear family model may not fit well in the Caribbean. Indeed, drawing from African and Indigenous Caribbean traditions as well as from those traditions forged out of necessity during slavery, Caribbean domestic life organizes not around the heterosexual couple, but around extended families.¹⁶ Furthermore, the great incidence of non-nuclear child-rearing households in the Caribbean renders un compelling an Oedipal model that divides mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters into so many components of a heterosexual family romance.

But Fanon, instead of seeing the absence of the Oedipal model in the Caribbean as begging a thorough reconsideration of the configuration of family, gender, and sexuality, links it to an assertion of the absence of homosexuality in the Caribbean.¹⁷ And so in spite of his insight, Fanon and the post-colonial project that remains deeply

¹⁵ This is perhaps most obvious in the Code Noir, and more specifically in its insistence on the social prestige and moral superiority of marriage.

¹⁶ For detailed discussions of Caribbean family structures, see: Edith Clark; Michael Garfield Smith; Raymond Smith.

¹⁷ “Mentionnons rapidement qu’il ne nous a pas été donné de constater la présence manifeste de pédérastie en Martinique. [...] Rappelons toutefois l’existence de ce qu’on appelle là-bas ‘des hommes habillés en dames’ ou ‘Ma Commère’. Ils ont la plupart du temps une veste et une jupe. Mais nous restons persuadés qu’ils ont une vie sexuelle normale. Ils prennent le punch comme n’importe quel gaillard et ne sont pas insensibles aux charmes des femmes, -- marchandes de poissons, de légumes. Par contre en Europe nous avons trouvé quelques camarades qui sont devenues pédéastes, toujours passifs. Mais ce n’était point l’homosexualité névrotique, c’était pour eux un expédient comme pour d’autres celui de souteneur ” (146).

indebted to him, as Duffus writes, “relegates women to their traditional role in nationalism and community formation as maintainers of order through their reproductive capabilities” (1100). If she chooses Loulouze or a banana or a storm or the moon, Mayotte refuses her position as a vessel for the reproduction of something, “the boundaries established within” one or another socio-economic system where the family, reproduction, and the state are linked through the disavowed womb. If in the second half of *Je suis Martiniquaise* and in all of Fanon’s view of Mayotte the problem is that she asserted her choice, and it was the wrong choice, about what would go into that womb, the other option that Mayotte might be considering is not using that womb at all for traditional reproduction. Mayotte’s girlhood desires are neither neatly homo nor neatly hetero, just as they are neither clearly colonized nor decolonized. It is, however, particularly difficult to explain the desire of the black woman for the white *woman* as part of a trajectory of lactification due precisely to the question of what kind of reproduction, if any, might occur between two women.¹⁸

Mayotte in her early loves begs a series of complex questions: Does loving darkness have to entail complete rejection of all whiteness? Is any love of whiteness a love of colonizer? Is any love of colonizer necessarily part of a desire for “lactification”? How does a love of same gender, of same geographical origin, complicate other divisions of hetero and homo?

Je suis Martiniquaise does not answer these questions, but it does show them to be constitutive not only of the colonial progress in the city but also of the, consequently, idealized pastoral past: even in the idyll of the child on the moonlit shore clearly the values and the influence of the colonizer has arrived, and they can’t even remain an outside force threatening to destroy the idyll because the idyll in as much as it is necessarily retrospective is necessarily responding to and perhaps incorporating their values. Any resistance to colonialism is futile because it’s already here and because the pre-colonial ideal is predicated on its impending loss.

What interrupts Mayotte’s affair with the moon is not any failure of prosopopeia or any deficiency in the embodiment of the moon, but rather new events on other fronts. Mayotte is denied the opportunity to explore what she and the moon might share by the “terrible shock” of learning about her father’s affair with a girl her own age and then by a boat with a couple singing a well-known creole song about his departure for the Front that leads her back to her friends and to Horace, who will fall in love with her. It’s a perverse world out there, full of men preying on women, and colonialism

¹⁸ Haigh, in her analysis of Michel Lacrosil’s *Cajou*, has already suggested some of the shifts in Fanon’s model that follow when the Caribbean woman’s desire to be the white woman is accompanied by a desire to have her: “Not only does Lacrosil succeed in representing the lesbian desire unimaginable for Fanon but, in depicting Cajou’s refusal of compulsory heterosexuality and of compulsory motherhood, she succeeds also in suggesting that black female desire for whiteness cannot be reduced, as Fanon seems to imply, to a simple desire for literal miscegenation (35).

preying on both, the text seems to say, and Martinican girls can do nothing about it. You can only avoid it for so long, then it will sweep you up.

Indeed, at the end of Part One Mayotte moves to Fort de France and gets swept into the urban economy and a carnival that unmixes her up and readies her for the affair with the French officer that is already under way at the beginning of Part Two.

Despite her enchantment with the sands and forests of the Martinican countryside, Mayotte is tempted by the stories of urban “progress” told by her father and sister: “Moi aussi, je voulais voir cette ville don’t m’avait tant parlé Francette, ces gens élégants, ces magasins, ces belles femmes en costumes de bain sur la plage” (112; “I, too, wanted to see that city about which Francette had told me so much, those elegant people, those stores, those beautiful women in bathing suits on the beach”). Interestingly, although it is a colonial ideal that she has wants to see, it is the “belles femmes” rather than any kind of man who she imagines going to watch.

Fort de France is the center of colonial power in Martinique. In her first description of it, Mayotte compares Fort de France not to any place she has lived previously, but to Paris. And the first street she walks in Fort de France is la Liberté at the end of which, “sur la grande maison blanche dans laquelle s’était installé le Gouvernement de la Martinique, flottait le drapeau tricolore” (113; on the big white house where the Government of Martinique had set itself up, flew the tricolored flag). The rural Martinique of Mayotte’s childhood was no less a product of colonialism, but it was the kind of colonialism that has trickled down country roads and mixed in many culverts with the other native and imported traditions of the island. In Fort de France, Mayotte comes face to face with the source of colonial power in Martinique. Its promise of Liberty is there for Mayotte to seize, but its insidious “colonization of the mind” gets to her first.

In the main square stands a statue of the woman Mayotte will, in many ways, come to emulate in Part Two:

L’Impératrice Joséphine. Mon Coeur se mit à battre. Mon Père m’avait souvent parlé de la femme du grand Napoléon, elle était l’orgueil de notre île. Qu’une Martiniquaise ait pu devenir Impératrice de la France, de tout l’empire français, qu’elle ait pu devenir la femme du plus grand souverain du monde, nous remplissait tous de fierté. Nous la vénérions et moi, comme toutes les petites filles de chez nous, j’avais souvent rêvé à ce destin sans pareil. (113-114)

“The Empress Josphine. My heart began to race. My father had often spoken of the wife of the great Napoleon, she was the pride of our island. That a Martinican could have become Empress of France, of the entire French Empire, that she could have become the

wife of the greatest sovereign in the world, filled us all with pride. We worshiped her and I, like all the girls from home, I had often dreamed of her unparalleled destiny.”

Although Mayotte seems here to align herself neatly with The Empress Joséphine as a fellow Martinican, Joséphine, née Rose de Beauharnais, was, despite questions about possible black ancestry, from a prestigious French colonial family.¹⁹ And although she was indeed idealized by many Martinican girls, her instrumental role in the restoration of slavery on the island between 1814 and 1830 eventually got the statue’s head sliced off.²⁰ Mayotte’s encounter with this statue and the focus on her dream, absent any desire to have the marble woman, mark the novel’s shift. But before Empress Josephine’s model passes from being a dream Mayotte shares with all Martinican girls to one she actually tries to act out, a few more things have to happen. Her first night in Fort de France, Mayotte reconnects with Loulouze: “Je dormis cette nuit-là dans son lit. Elle avait une poitrine volumineuse à laquelle je pris plaisir à comparer mes petits seins” (118; “I slept that night in her bed. She had a voluminous chest to which I took great pleasure comparing my little breasts”). The absence of the Oedipal model even in Fort de France is here evident as are its possibilities. Loulouze has two children, but when Mayotte asks if she’s married: “Pour rien au monde je ne mai’ie’ai, déclara Loulouze. Pou’quoi est-ce que je me ma’ie’ais puisque j’ai des enfants?” (118; “Fuh nothin’ in the wuhld would Ah marry, Loulouze declared. Why would Ah marry now that Ah ha’ kids?”). Loulouze has born children as light if not lighter than herself, but by purposely remaining out of wedlock she leaves open the question of whom and what she’s born them for, and she reserves room for erotic developments with Mayotte or other non-white non-men.

It is, perhaps less ironically than one might think, in the place that seems to allow for all manner of sexual transgression, that Mayotte finally trades her passions for Loulouze, the storms, and the moon for social mobility through André. Maryse Condé finds in *Je suis Martiniquaise* a depiction of “the impossibility for [a West Indian girl in those days] to build up an aesthetics which would enable her to come to terms with the color of her skin” (131). The carnival chapter at the end of Part One might offer an even more biting indictment than Condé: it’s not that Mayotte is unable to build up that aesthetics, but that it is co-opted and destroyed. For after her re-encounter with Loulouze Mayotte seems to be in one of her strongest positions in the novel. She has begun to achieve financial independence on her own. Although she has left the natural elements of rural Martinique that she so loves, she has found in the city part of what she loved in the country: Loulouze and all that she represents.

¹⁹ Ernest John Knapton’s probably remains the best biography of the Empress Josephine.

²⁰ For a discussion of the symbolism of the statue of Empress Josephine and its beheading, see Natasha Barnes.

In the chapter following her night with Loulouze, Mayotte attends the long-awaited Carnival. This could be a place for the authentic expression of Martinican aesthetics: a “native” festival that not only celebrates local values but resists imported ones as it offers an opportunity to turn everything upside down. Mayotte describes her first impression of Carnival: “Loulouze m’avait beaucoup parlé du Carnaval, mais je n’avais jamais pu imaginer quelque chose d’aussi beau. Plongée, du jour au lendemain dans un monde qui n’était plus que farces et aventures, j’étais extraordinairement excitée” (125; “Loulouze had told me so much about Carnival, but I had never imagined something so beautiful. Plunged, from one day to the next, into a world that was all farce and adventure, I was extraordinarily excited”). If Mayotte has never before witnessed Carnival, its “native” status comes into some question. Carnival seems to belong not to Martinican tradition but to the imposition of colonial order in Martinique, and yet it is somehow accepted by Mayotte and all those around her as Martinican—perhaps in the same way that the “Gouvernement du Martinique” flies a French flag with no seeming irony. And as Bakhtin shows, the reversals of Carnival succeed not in controverting the status quo but in reinforcing it.

Even as Mayotte expresses excitement about the “farces et aventures” of Carnival, she seems to anticipate something much more conventional than the wild mixing of elements that she so loved in the storms of her childhood. Carnival will not offer farce for the sake of play or adventure for the sake of surprise, but rather farce and adventure for the sake of finding the order that undergirds them, the same colonial order that supports the dream of Joséphine. Mayotte explains: “Je rêvais au prince charmant que je découvrirais sous un costume de pierrot ou de clown” (125; “I was dreaming of the Prince Charming that I would find under a Pierrot or a clown costume”). In both scenarios, the young Martinican girl enters into an affair with a colonial agent—Napoleon was quite directly the head of the French empire, while “prince charming” is a standard formulation to designate the male hero in European fairytales. Mayotte has partaken of this dream ever since her first love for the white priest, but as long as she was in rural Martinique she had competing desires and she believed in *les guiablasses* and *les zombis* as much as in any European mythology (15, 106). In Fort de France, the colonial order begins to not just penetrate but to take over Mayotte’s dreams, and Carnival is the last hurdle that sends her full flung into the tragic pursuit of lactification.

It turns out, furthermore, to be common knowledge that the colonial order is not the dream of Joséphine realized, but only another mask over a much more sinister colonial reality: “Je ne savais pas encore que, plus souvent, c’est l’inverse qui se produit et que des hommes qui ne sont que des clowns se déguisent, pour nous abuser, en princes charmants” (125; “I did not yet know that, more often, the opposite occurs and men who are but clowns disguise themselves, to abuse us, as Prince Charmings”). This function of Carnival is common knowledge to women, but Mayotte stands here still on

the brink of childhood: “Je me croyais déjà femme, mais j’avais encore beaucoup d’illusions” (125; “I thought I was already a woman, but I still had many illusions”). Coming of age, Mayotte teeters between an imaginary childhood ideal and an illusory colonial dream, from which she will soon tumble into the pit of pain and disappointment that awaits her in womanhood and in the second half of the novel.

During Carnival, Mayotte gives up the play of gender traits and roles that she relished in her rural childhood for a straightforward set of reversals that rely on a stable set of binary opposites: “Beaucoup étaient, comme moi, en travesties. Je m’étais, en effet procuré un costume d’homme [...] Bientôt je m’aperçus qu’une femme masquée me suivait. Je me retournai de temps en temps et constatai avec plaisir qu’elle s’entêtait” (126; “Many were, like me, transvestites for the night. I had, in fact, gotten myself a man’s costume [...] Soon I noticed that a masked woman was following me. I looked back occasionally and found with pleasure that she was still there”). Mayotte’s expression of surprise when she discovers her pursuant to be a man is either disingenuous or else her final moment of ingenuity: “Quelle ne fut ma surprise d’entendre une voix d’homme sortir de sous la masque de velours” (127; “What was my surprise to hear a man’s voice from behind the velour mask”). She had explained her own manly costume as what girls wore, not an expression of gender bending but of gender conformity. And she went to Carnival hoping to find the “prince charmant auquel je rêvais” (“prince charming of whom I dreamed”) so that her own transvestism could only have been designed to encounter another, a sort of double negative that would resolve into a standard positive (127). Mayotte is “quelque peu déçue” (“a little disappointed”) not at the gender of her partner, but at his race and class: “c’était [la voix] d’un métis nommé Yvon, un de mes voisins” (127; “it was the voice of a colored man named Yvon, one of my neighbors”).

Mayotte’s acceptance of a colored man during Carnival does not mark her resistance to “the mindset of the colonizer” but rather one penultimate step on her path into the arms of a white soldier. Mayotte goes to sleep twice on the last page of the Part One, as if putting to final rest her girlhood self. After the dance with Yvon, “je rentrai chez moi et m’endormis aussitôt” (128; “I went home and fell asleep immediately”). She wakes to one last hope of a mixed up world, full of Martinican tradition.

Vers une heure, je fus réveillée par des voix qui s’élevaient de la rue. Retrouvant mon excitation de la veille, je courus à la fenêtre. D’abord je me demandais si je rêvais encore. La rue était pleine de petits diabolins tout noirs, qui criaient à qui mieux mieux. [...] Le lendemain du mardi gras est, en effet, chez nous le jour de la guiablesse. Ce jour-là, tout le monde s’habille de robes noires tenues à la taille par un foulard blanc, les têtes sont attachées dans des serviettes blanches, d’autres serviettes recouvrent les épaules et les lousps

ressortent sur des visages si uniformément enfarinés qu'il n'est plus possible de reconnaître les nègres des blancs" (128).

"Around one o'clock I was awoken by voices coming up from the street. Finding again my excitement from the night before, I ran to the window. At first, I wondered if I was still dreaming. The road was full of little black devils shouting about who is best. The day after Mardi Gras is, in fact, the day of the *guiabliesse* here. That day, everyone wears black dresses tied at the waist with a white scarf, heads wrapped in white scarves, other scarves covering shoulders, and glasses sit on faces so uniformly floured that it is no longer possible to distinguish blacks from whites."

But her participation in Carnival has set Mayotte straight, as it were. She describes the day after Carnival as something that happens "chez nous," forgetting her own unfamiliarity with Carnival and lumping together all Martinicans and all of Martinique as "nous" in the face of an other to which it seems to feel a need to explain itself. And she exchanges her childhood enjoyment of "toutes les nuances" where color difference matters not as part of a dividing line but instead as part of the spectrum that makes up a Martinique of whose racial complexity she is much too aware to draw simple lines like white versus black, for this binary division where blacks should be distinguished from whites, and there is a concomitant panic when that might prove impossible. For the "little black devils" are not here just playful creatures of Martinican mythology, they have become the stuff of Mayotte's nightmares. After just a few more lines describing the festival day, Mayotte goes to sleep for a last time in Part One, "rêvant toutefois que ces petits diables noirs qui m'avaient reveillée de leurs cris me couraient après et que je ne parvenais pas à m'en débarrasser" (128; "dreaming that those little black devils whose cries had awoken me were running after me and I could not rid myself of them"). Mayotte's transformation is complete when she not only sees the sprites of her childhood as "little black devils" that might chase her, but also wishes more than anything to be free of them.

The beginning of the next chapter is the beginning of Part Two. Mayotte wakes up, and we soon realize enough time has passed for her to be living with André in his house that "dominait la vaste rade de Fort-de-France" (9; "dominated the vast harbor of Fort de France"). The tragedy ensues: Mayotte becomes pregnant by André who abandons her, exemplifying Fanon's model of "la femme de couleur et le Blanc."

And so we have returned to Fanon whose shadow is so long because his analysis is so incisive on so many fronts, and because his example as much as his analysis shows how resistance to colonialism is so often also complicit with it. *Je suis Martiniquaise* could have offered Fanon, does offer us, not only the opportunity to see how Capécia

mourned Mayotte's fate but also a glimpse of her other ideals. For the encounter between Europe and Martinique caused not only great loss and pain, but also fantastic ideals. It has become difficult to see Capécia as doing anything other than mourning Mayotte's fate. But that mourning is not only because of colonialism's insidious power, it's also because even with colonialism in place, Mayotte was able to imagine another ideal, on to which she could not hold.

REFERENCES

- Barnes, Natasha (2006). *Cultural Conundrums: Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics*. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.
- Capécia, Mayotte (1948). *Je suis Martiniquaise*. Paris: Corrêa.
- Capécia, Mayotte (1997). *I am a Martinican Woman & The White Negress*. Transl. Beatrice Stith Clark. Pueblo: Passeggiata Press.
- Clark, Edith (1957). *My Mother Who Fathered Me*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- "Le Code Noir." *Les 60 Articles du Code Noir*. Liceo di Locarno: Biologia, Presentazione della Martinica. May, 2007. 15 August, 2008. http://www.liceolocarno.ch/Liceo_di_Locarno/materie/biologia/martinica/code_noir.html
- Condé, Maryse (1993). Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer. *Yale French Studies*, 83 (2), 121-135.
- Cook, Mercer (1949). Review. *The Journal of Negro History*, 34 (3), 369-371.
- Drewal, Henry John (1998). Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa. *TDR*, 32(2), 160-185.
- Duffus, Cheryl (2005). When One Drop Isn't Enough: War as a Crucible of Racial Identity in the Novels of Mayotte Capécia. *Callaloo*, 28(4), 1091-1102.
- Fanon, Frantz (1971). *Peau noire, masques blancs*. (First published in 1952). Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Fuss, Diana (1995). *Identification Papers*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Haigh, Sam (2000). *Mapping a Tradition: Francophone Women's Writing from Guadeloupe*. Modern Humanities Research Association Texts and Dissertations 48.
- Haigh, Sam (2000). Between Speech and Writing: 'La Nouvelle Littérature Antillaise'? In Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray (Eds.), *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations* (pp. 193-204). Houndmills/New York: Macmillan /St. Martin's.
- Hurley, E. Anthony (1997). Intersections of Female Identity of Writing the Woman in Two Novels by Mayotte Capécia and Marie-Magdeleine Carbet. *The French Review*, 70 (4), 575-586.

- Jackson Carter, Sibyl (2005). Maryotte or Not Mayotte? *CLA Journal*, 48 (4), 440-451.
- Knapton, Ernest John (1963). *Empress Josephine*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth (1992). Feminism, Race, and Difference in the Works of Mayotte Capécia, Michel Lacrosil, and Jacqueline Manicom. *Callaloo*, 15 (1), 66-74.
- Revert, Eugène (1977). *La magie antillaise*. Paris: Annuaire Internationale des Français d'Outre-Mer.
- Smith, Michael Garfield (1962). *West Indian Family Structure*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Smith, Raymond Thomas (1988). *Kinship and Class in the West Indies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sparrow, Jennifer (1998). Capécia, Condé, and the Antillean Woman's Identity Quest. *Macomère*, 1, 179-187.
- Stith Clark, Beatrice (1997). Foreward: An Update on the Author. In *I am a Martinican Woman* by Mayotte Capécia, transl. Beatrice Stith Clark, (pp. vii-xiv). Pueblo: Passeggiata Press.
- Stith Clark, Beatrice (1997). Introduction. In *I am a Martinican Woman* by Mayotte Capécia, transl. Beatrice Stith Clark, (pp. 1-25). Pueblo: Passeggiata Press.
- Valens, Keja (2003). Desire Between Women in and as Parodic Métissage: Maryse Condé's *Célanire cou-coupé*. *Journal of Commonwealth Studies*, 10 (1), 67-93.
- Walcott, Derek (1999). *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Zimra, Clarisse (1978). A Woman's Place: Cross-Sexual Perceptions in Race Relations (Mayotte Capécia). *Folio*, 11, 174-192.
- Zimra, Clarisse (1984). Negritude in the Feminine Mode: the case of Martinique and Guadeloupe. *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 12 (1), 53-77.