Sexual Edge in the Tropics: Colonization, Recolonization, and Rewriting the Black Female Body

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For Alcide, the irresistible black womanizer of Raphaël Confair's *Le Nègre et l'Amiral* (1988), men foolishly believe that "[c]haque femme est un pays nouveau" ("each woman is a new country" 118). Such a conviction implies that every woman represents a new territory to conquer, an enticing challenge. This article examines that concept of sexual conquest to contrast the rewriting of the female body as a landscape in Confair's novel and the Reverend Isaac Teale's "Sable Venus: An Ode" (1764). Such an undertaking reveals nationalistic biases in these authors' representations of femininity and place. This study questions the celebration of the black woman's beauty as she embodies the Caribbean space: a space of desire, ripe for the taking. In the midst of geographical, literary, temporal, and linguistic differences, the juxtaposition of these texts illuminates a relationship of epistemic complicity between colonial and postcolonial literatures in the West Indies.

Teale created his poetic work in Jamaica in 1764 for his student, mentee, and friend Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican planter (Smith McCrea 8). Edwards published the poem in 1793 in *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*. At the height of slavery in eighteenth-century Jamaica, "Sable Venus: An Ode"'s glorification of an African woman may appear odd until one realizes that the conquest of her body celebrates

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. Pays in French also means region, land, nation, and place.
2 For a study of the metaphoric associations among woman, land, and nation in Haitian fiction, see Joan Dayaris "Fictions of Haiti."
3 In a note, Young explains that Edward Bate blush is the one to attribute the poem to Teale in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1830* (202).
4 See Chris Bongie on the notion of epistemic complicity as the intertextuality between colonial and postcolonial literary discourses that he designates with the word "postcolonial. Consult Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of PostColonial Literature* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998)
British colonial power and its coercive force. In contrast, Confiant, one of the Martinican leaders of the Créolité movement, praises the sexuality of the beautiful dark-skinned woman as the symbol of an African heritage often discarded in the tropics in *Le Nègre et l’Amiral*. In so doing, he denounces the effects of colonialism such as black self-loathing, or what Frantz Fanon calls lachrymation, the desire to whiten one’s skin (38). Indeed, colonization in the Caribbean generated a taxonomy of skin tones so that blackness in this discussion does not deal with a question of color dichotomy but rather, a range of shades or hues and their social and political implications. For instance, in the eighteenth century, a white Creole from Martinique, Moreau de Saint-Méry, declared the existence of one hundred twenty-eight gradations of blood resulting in dozens of skin colors organized in a restrictive social hierarchy in which the whiter the skin, the better (96).

As a consequence, the mulatto woman has come to function as a prominent object of desire for both white and black men, while also embodying an ambivalent cultural and political symbol of métagisse or mestizaje in Caribbean literature. In Cuban literature, the eponymous protagonist *Cecília Valdés* (1882), written by the white Creole Cirilo Villaverde, illustrates this same representation of femininity. The mulata Cecília, coveted by all men, embodies a problematic idea of the nation as she only privileges sexual relationships with a wealthy white Creole to improve her social status (Lazo). In French Caribbean studies, scholars trace the motif of the mulatto woman’s attractiveness over that of darker skinned women and her preference for white men in French Antillean literature written by white Creoles to the eighteenth century; black writers would later appropriate this feminine ideal (Antoine 133, 209; Buron 133-134). Last but not least, in 1929, amidst the fed of colonial exhibitions, French dictionaries recognized this desirable light-skinned beauty under the mercurial term “lhoudu,” derived from the French creole for darling (*Poulet Robert* 792). Therefore, Confiant’s vision of black femininity seems to subvert such colonial assumptions about Creole beauty. Yet contrasting Teade’s “Sable Venus: An Ode” to *Le Nègre et l’Amiral* establishes that the sexual possession of black female bodies comes to symbolize both a colonization and a reconcentration of space in the tropics as well as a power struggle with a sexual edge, that is to say, expressing itself through carnal acts of domination.

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3 The mulatto woman has also an important role in the French-speaking Caribbean. See Hoffman.

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**Venus des mornes “Venus of the Hills” Reconstruction of Black Masculinity**

When examining Confiant’s work, the celebration of black African or chocolate skinned enchantresses, not honey-colored ones, becomes evident. The narrative voice underscores the beauty of irresistible “negressé féeriques,” fairy-like black women, Philomène and *Celle-qui-n’a-pas-son-pareil*, the One without-equal (209). This sexual preference in the work of an author who has decried the inadequacies of negritude and its obsession with Africanism to the detriment of creoolsity therefore demands our attention. In 1989, Raphael Confiant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Jean Bernabé explained that as “Epigones of Césaire, [they] displayed a committed writing, committed to the anticolonialist struggle,” but as Negritude replaced “the illusion of Europe by the African illusion,” they instead embraced créolité to promote Creole culture (*Praise* 82-83). In so doing, they marked their works of fiction as postcolonial despite themselves, i.e., as political projects against colonialism and the metropole’s dominant power. The writers proclaimed their desire to protect Creole culture against Frenchification and the destruction of a local way of life. They also critiqued Césaire for his promotion of the law of departmentalization that allowed Martinique to change status in 1946 from a colony of France to an overseas department. This change of status plunged Martinique and Guadeloupe into a postcolonial world where neocolonialism prevailed and the change of status created unfortunate cultural and economic changes and increased dependence between France and its overseas departments (Daniel 242). The anticolonial discourse of the créolité writers therefore revolves around the ambiguous relationship between the French Antilles and the metropole. Most of Chamoiseau’s and Confiant’s novels not only deal with the consequence of the plantocracy system but also take place around the period of departmentalization to denounce the alienating consequences this change of status had on Creole culture and Martinicans (*Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo 177*).

*Le Nègre et l’Amiral*, Confiant’s first novel in French, illustrates the precepts of Créolité and its anticolonial stance. The novel is set in colonial Martinique (late 1930s-early 1940s) under Vichy rule. Exploring the sexual relationship
between Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pariel (The One-Without-Equal) and Rigobert brings forth the Creole black man's alienation and disconnection from nature and the freedom of the morne or hills, as well as a disconnection from his island. Significantly, the white Creole, also known as the bè,ò, owns this space. This woman emulates Confiante's concept of l'amour nègre, black love, which promotes spiritual and cathartic love-making with black women.

Escaping the Admiral Robert's Vichy colonial government millisch, the black protagonist Rigobert hides like a runaway slave in the hills of Morne-des-És ses. When Rigobert, an impenitent Francophobe who despises the countryside, gazes at Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pariel, he is bewitched by and in awe of her incomparable beauty. The narrator proclaims her charms without providing any information about her phenotype. Therefore, a reader from a doudou background, the French exotic tradition that promotes the light-skinned doudou beauty, may expect the color of this paradisiacal vision to be honey or caramel. Soon the narrator offers more information:

Le souffle coupé, il avait hâte d'entendre la voix de cette créature qui, en effet, n'avait pas sa pareille au monde. La noirceur fine de son buste et de ses bras aux lignes parfaites lui balisa un corps de Le désespoir. Le grain de poivre de ses cheveux enserrait sa tête comme un disque qui rehausserait la nacré éclatante de ses yeux. Une véritable nègresse! Une nègresse d'Afrique, aux fesses larges et matées, d'une taille supérieure aux sang-mêlé. Rigobert pour qui la couleur et la noirceur avaient toujours été même bête même poil, et qui tapisait sa case de photos de Marlene Dietrich et de Lauren Bacall, comprit ce qu'Amédée appelait une "nègresse féérique." (Le Nègre 209)

Breathless, he could not wait to hear the voice of this creature to whom indeed, nothing else compared. The refined blackness of her bust and perfectly-shaped arms gave her the body of a goddess. The peppercorns of her hair were like a tiara around her head, enhanced by the bright mother-of-pearl of her eyes. A true Negress! A Negress from Africa, taller than half-caste women, with broad and perky buttocks. Rigobert, for whom ugliness and blackness had always been the same and who wallpapered his shack with photographs of Marlene Dietrich and Lauren Bacall, understood what Amédée called a "fairy-like Negress." (Le Nègre 209)

To his amazement, a "negress" enthralls Rigobert. Her attractiveness destablizes his assumptions about beauty. Her striking dark skin brings to light and shapes her goddess-like body. The narrative voice depicts this "the fairy-like Negress" living in a holy region as a goddess of love who could be named the Vénus des montes or Venus of the Hills. The narrator also suggests that dark skin reminiscence of African ancestry has rarely been a part of the canon of Western beauty in Martinique. The description of Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pariel insists on the wooliness of her hair by drawing attention to the "peppercorns of her hair" and indicates a will to destabilize the French colonial motif of the doudou, the emblematic lighter-skinned object of desire, a recurrent figure in advertisement or touristic promotion aimed at a metropolitan clientele since colonial exhibitions (Cotz 109-110). In Martinique, the relationship with hair represents a problematic fascination with standards of Western beauty (Smeralda 10). Many Martinicans cherish long straight or wavy tresses, considering them more beautiful than wooly hair. Implicitly, Rigobert shares this propensity at first; the narrator clearly states that the black man, before his encounter with Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pariel, always associates blacknass with ugliness. Yet after meeting this African woman, the male protagonist depicit her as "une nègresse d'Afrique, aux fesses larges et matées, d'une taille supérieure aux sang-mêlé" ("a Negress from Africa, taller than half-caste women, with broad and perky buttocks" 209). Therefore, he lauds the "fairy-like Negress," the Vénus des montes, the ignored beauty, who appears far superior in his eyes to the mulatto woman.

In addition, the reference to the size of her buttocks implies that Confiante attempts to go against the grain of both a Martinican standpoint, by embracing dark skin, and a French point of view, by celebrating African beauty. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, the black woman's body, her sexuality, and her supposed abnormality fascinated French authors such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé or Zola, and the pseudo-scientific world of positivism and phrenology. The reference to the size of the Vénus des montes buttocks recalls the Hottentot Venus, Saarjje Baarstman, who captivated crowds and the scientific world.

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8 Stéphane Mallarmé's erotic poems such as "Image Grottesque (Les Lézards roses)" (1866) and its original version "Une nègresse, par le démon secouée" (first written in 1864 and published in 1867) exemplify the sexual mostrophy of the Negress. In these poems she is a lesbian pedophile. See Mallarmé (157, 270). Baudelaire's poems "La belle Docothee" (1869) and "A une malabariste" (1868) and Émile Zola's Thérèse Raquin (1867) also depict black female sexuality as a potential threat to white society.
and was exhibited in England and France until her death and dissection by George Cuvier. The glorification of Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pareil's beauty and body parts appears all the more problematic because of the Western tradition's tendency to see black women as prostitutes or vile objects of desire. The Venus of the Hill's characterization evokes the flimsiness of the separation between racialized ideas of the past and postcolonial modernist ideas in the novel's present.

If the sight of Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pareil brutally reminds Rigobert of the power of African beauty, their first sexual encounter is an epiphany. Their intercourse symbolizes his communion with a woman from the hills and the purity of the culture that she embodies. The couple's first intimate encounter takes place in a garden, in the countryside. According to the narrator, Rigobert and this woman found themselves more intertwined than the plants around them (211). The garden leads to sexual ecstasy and cultural awareness. Celle-qui-n'a-pas-son-pareil lives in the hills, like the maroons before her. She embodies the freedom to cultivate the land, to take full possession of it, far from the béhité greed.

Alors Rigobert apprit les gestes éperdus de la fusion charnelle que la fréquentation des prostituées de la Cour Puit-t-a-pain et la masturbation quotidienne devant des photos d'actrices européennes lui avaient interdite. Ce corps ferme et noir, ces seins plantureux qui se gonflaient sous le mignonage de ses mains affairées, cette coqueline chaude aux lèvres d'un rose violent dont la langue serrait bon le vêtement, cette sueur qui lui pénétrait dans le dos et le faisait frémir, c'était cela l'amour nègre que les Blancs-pays avaient su découvrir avant tout le monde et dont ils voulaient se garder le privilège. (non accent; Le Nègre 211)

Rigobert discovered the orgasmic movements of carnal fusion that his visits to the prostitutes of La Cour Puit-t-a-Pain and his daily masturbation in front of photographs of European actresses had prevented him from experiencing. The firmness of this black body, the heaviness of these breasts bulging under the attention of his frenetic hands, the steaming coqueline with its lips of violent pink and elotions' smelling of reviving vetcher, this sweat that penetrated his skin and made him quiver, all of this was the

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9 For studies on Staatje Barman and the fascination she generates, see Sharpley-Whiting; Willis and Williams, and Baker (313-319).
10 See Gilman's study on iconography of female sexuality.
11 French Creole for "vagina" often used in a derogative way for "pussy."

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Negro love which white Creoles had been smart enough to discover before anyone else and wanted to keep for themselves. (my emphasis; Le Nègre 211)

The possession of the body of a black woman facilitates the spiritual experiment of l'amour nègre. This black love calls into question the power struggle between dominating and being dominated. Indeed, as the narrative voice explains earlier, before the appearance of Celle qui n'a-pas-son-pareil, black women were never objects of Rigobert's sexual attraction. He preferred masturbating in front of posters of Western pin-ups, since for him the color black was synonymous with ugliness. Such an association indicates the devastations of colonization on the psyche that Frantz Fanon interrogates in Peau noir, masques blancs (1952).

The narrator uses the concept of l'amour nègre to reconstruct the mythology of the black woman while revisiting her initial rape by the white colonist. Contrary to male Caribbean writers such as Nicolas Guillen, who erase this sexual violence in their definition of mestizaje, Constan integrates the brutality of "the original rape" in the mythical history of the island. His strategy delves into colonialism's sexual edge — its veiled societal promotion of carnal acts as coercive tools of domination and subjection. Conscious of the value of the black woman, the béhité had managed to make her contemptible for the men of her race so that she could only satisfy her white master's desire. For the black man who cannot protect her, the ravished woman becomes the accomplice of the colonist while being simultaneously reduced to the status of her oppressor's sexual toy. This sharp-edged expression of sexuality inflicts both a physical and psychological violence on colonial subjects to bring them into submission. L'amour nègre exemplifies what Robert Young points to as the colonizer's "ambivalent axis of desire and repugnance [which] was enacted through a remarkable ideological dissimulation" in the former British West Indies (152). Consequently, this type of love raises questions about the power struggles involved in being dominated and being dominated. Having sex with a black woman and promoting her beauty has, therefore, both cultural and political implications, which remain conflicted. Colonial desire divides the black couple and establishes a deep and latent antagonism between each partner so that colonial power reigns. The original rape then gives way to the promotion of the mulata and the black female body as a site of abjection. The object destabilizes an individual's identity or idea of self when he or she confronts

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12 See poetry such as Nicolas Guillen's 1931 "Mujer nueva" (171, in which the black mother is pregnant with a new world without any clear mention of the father.)
it (Kristeva 12). On one hand, the raped black woman reminds the black man of his inability to protect her, which jeopardizes his idea of masculinity and of self. On the other hand, the black woman reminds the white man of his beast-like desire, a crime against nature; as if she belongs to the animal realm, she makes him guilty of bestiality when he sleeps with her. Nevertheless, forcefully taking the black woman also proves to the white colonist that he has squashed the black man’s masculinity and cultural agency.

Possessing the African woman through a consensual union, however, brings Rigobert closer to his Creole culture. Indeed, he realizes that despite his refusal to speak French, his mind was nevertheless colonized. He discovers his “true” Antillean self: the effects of colonialism dissipate while at the same time the white man’s sexual grip over the black woman is challenged. So for the black man, here heterosexual intercourse with the black female serves as a process of recolonization of self and space. As a matter of fact, the narrative closely connects *Celle-qui-n’a-pas-sa-pateil* to her natural surroundings. This African woman distinguishes herself because she speaks with “une voix empreinte d’une fluidité et d’une profondeur semblables à la chute d’une cascade” (“a voice impressed of a similar fluidity and depth to the fall of a cascade” 209). In addition, the narrative’s insistence on her phenotype and the purity of her blood associates her Africanity or blackness with nature, namely her lack of contact with anything French. Yet the narrative voice does not establish through her description the possibility of a link to an ancestral land and customs. She is not in Africa; she is, in fact, living in harmony with her new environment in a Creole garden. Indeed, her vegetable plot exemplifies an ecosystem satisfying the needs of man while respecting nature. Michel-Rolph Trouillot pinpoints this space as the *louis classiques* of the Creole society in creolized writings. This positive place stands as a space of resistance at the margin of the plantation where the slaves could work the land for their own needs; to feed themselves or earn money (Trouillot 25).

The couple’s first union in the Creole garden allows Rigobert to reconcile his Creole culture and his blackness. Through the typical garden, Confiant celebrates this woman’s Africanity to underscore the fact that she escapes Frenchification, contrary to the tainted mulatto class. In addition, through lovemaking, the *Venus des mornes* teaches Rigobert, a black man who despises pastoral living, the benefits of nature and working the land (211). Their relationship indicates the alienating effects of colonial city life that disconnect Rigobert from the island to the point that he is unable to produce his own food. The trope of the Creole garden promotes self-sufficiency and suggests nostalgia for an idealized period during which black people managed without any outside assistance. The critique of a contemporary Martinique still at the mercy of subsidies from France emerges here.

Yet, the objectification and essentialization of the black woman’s association to the land reproduce colonial biases that are seemingly inescapable. Contrastingly Confiant’s novel to Teale’s poem reinforces the female body as a phallic representation, the masculine object of desire that will permit a man in-the-making to become fully a man. Here, this construction of the feminine betray the effects of a problematic intersexuality between colonial literature and postcolonial literature in the formalization of epistemological concepts.

**The Sable Venus and the Taking of the Caribbean: Impostion of the Colonist Masculine Ego**

Teale’s poem “Sable Venus” supports Confiant’s accusation that the white man first discovered the wonders of l’amour nègre and decided to keep it for himself. This ode reproduces the tone of classical Greek or Latin models; the poetic language is metaphorical and excessively baroque. Intertextuality plays an important role, as suggested by the poem’s preface. The latter consists of a quotation from Virgil’s *Bucolics* II. Rosalie Smith McCrea explains that “the narrative from which Teale specifically draws from Virgil, recites the tale of Corydon... who burns with love for Alexis” revolves around the pain generated by homoerotic and unrequited love and desire (9). Yet, according to Edwards, who implies that slave women were free to dispose of their bodies as they wished, this poem depicts “the character of the sable and the saffron beauties of the West Indies” and portrays the follies of their paramours” (226). In colonial times, though, the terms “sable” and “saffron” were more polite than “black” or “African”; their customary usage points to the manipulation involved in the representation of black femininity and slavery. The more respectable use of “sable” and “saffron” reveals Blackness as a floating signifier whose meaning depends on the ideology of particular individuals. In fact, the fur of the sable, a carnivorous mammal of the weasel family, and saffron connote consumption in that they represent commodities like slaves, which wealthy Europeans could afford.

Teale extols the wonders of the Sable Venus at a time when prejudiced views of Africans prevailed in Great Britain. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774),
Edward Long, the so-called father of British racism, declared Africans to be "the vilest of the human kind to which they have little...pretension of resemblance" and African women as "libidinous and shameless as monkeys, or baboons," which would welcome "those animals frequently to their embrace" (Young 150). Long decried the dangers of miscegenation and hybridity while critiquing colonial sexual libertinage. The blame here falls upon black females or women of color, while in French colonies in the Americas the burden of libertinage is also put on the white Creoles themselves (Garraway 24).

Teale's panegyric, written in Jamaica in 1763-1764, is striking. On one hand, Marcus Wood views this poem as the offensive expression of "[t]he tendency to ironise, and even joke about, the processes of sexuality and suffering embodied within the experience of the middle passage" (1). On the other, Smith McCrea sees this ode as Teale's parodic exercise of style to help his student Bryan Edwards, a slave-owner in the making, appreciate the beauty of classical poetry (11). In any case, the subversiveness of this text remains. Beneath the laughter lies a more puzzling truth, as laughing comprises a mechanism that displaces abjection (Kristeva 15). Indeed, Young suggests that this poem embodies the ambivalent "hybridized sexual and economic discourse of the times" that betrays an intense attraction for an object of desire perceived as corrupted and corrupting (158). This idea raises the question: why did such a repugnant object seem so irresistible at the time? To begin to answer, it is important to note that this ode, divided into twenty-six stanzas, extols the noble/white female beauty and her sexuality while erasing the black male. If scholars examine representations of this black woman, they tend to overlook the erasing of her historic partner. However, male authors' discussions about femininity often serve to conceptualize masculinity in their masculine discourse.

From the start, in the second stanza, the poetic voice introduces his muse, "the sable queen of love," and then in the fourth stanza acknowledges her peculiarity when he declares: "Unusual is my theme" (228). At the end of the poem, the poetic voice challenges Bryan Edwards and reminds him the inappropriateness of this ode: "Thus have I sung; perhaps too gay / such subject for such time of the day; / And fitter far for youths; / Should then the song too wanton seem; / You know who chose the unlucky theme; / Dear Bryan, tell the truth" (233). There is a clear understanding here that the choice of the content of this parodic ode might be too risqué for the young Edwards who nevertheless picked such a poetic topic (Smith McCrea 11).

The Sable Venus, an inviting beauty—though symbolizing "the sober shade of night" (228)—fully deserves the white man's attention as she is as enticing as the white female, the emblem of Western canonical beauty. To prove how pleasing the black woman appears to European eyes, the poetic voice emphasizes her conformity to a white model of beauty, as suggested by the fifteenth stanza: "The loveliest limbs her form compose, / Such as her sister VENUS chose / In Florence, where she's seen; / Both just alike, except the white. / No difference, no-none at night, / The beauteous damask between" (231). This verse elaborates a reassuring family romance; blood ties link the Sable Venus to her white sister Venus. Teale employs references to classic antiquity, thereby re-creating a Western mythology for the black woman that renders her whiter and her origins pure. She is the perfect object of desire for the dominant male gaze and as such a blatant example of scopophilia, so much so that in the second edition of Edwards' book a lithograph accompanies this poetic work.

After looking at the lithograph, many scholars associate the Sable Venus with the Venus of Botticelli. According to Smith McCrea, however, "inter-textual" references in the engraving come from the Sea Triumph of Galatea in the manner of Raphael or Poussin (13). This point matters, as a sea triumph implies a lofty theme and the topos of the conquest; in addition this nymph's name, "Galatea," means milky-white. I suggest that in Teale's poem, the Sable Venus is a rewriting of both the Venus of Botticelli and Galatea, two white females created by white desire. That is, the Sable Venus expresses a new form of white desire—colonial desire. The literary use of Galatea destabilizes the mighty power of Venus; a nymph does not possess a goddess's powers. Acis and Galatea's love story exemplifies this distinction. If behind the Sable Venus lurks Galatea, then the erasing of the black woman's preferred companion materializes, too (Smith McCrea 14). Indeed, the cyclops Polyphemus, jealous of Galatea's love for Acis, destroyed the poor man. In Teale's poem, the building and innocent love between the white man and the black woman depends implicitly on the erasing of the black man. The Sable Venus left home and unconditionally forsake any relationship with a black man to be seduced by a white colonist. The intertextuality in the ode and the lithograph concerning love triangles necessarily points to the disappointment of the Sable Venus' spurned kinsmen. Thus the black man's conspicuous literary absence also signals his presence. The possible parodic aspects of the poem and the lithograph barely hint historical facts that espouse a triumphant white masculinity. The
glorious representation of a black woman is far from being a lofty subject for an eighteenth-century audience (Smith McCrea 11). Indeed, the masculine ego that creates her pseudo-classical mythology in both works merely celebrates its own male and colonial glory.

According to the poetic voice, the Sable Venus attracts and seduces “The prating FRANK, the SPANIARD proud,/ The double SCOT, HIBERNIAN loud and sullen ENGLISH…” (229). Like many nymphs, she generates male desire and she is therefore implicitly blamed for her ravishment. One might go so far as to say that she is “asking for it.” And she is indeed taken; the white man takes her to Jamaica. The association with European colonization in the Caribbean becomes evident. Teale recounts the Middle Passage and her travel from Africa to Jamaica, her new home where she is supposedly worshipped. His poetic tale erases the violence inherent in this trip; this woman seems to have willingly come to new shores. From the beginning he inscribes the black female body within a particular geography: a manipulative European space creates the triangular trade and pretends this economic endeavor is inconspicuous. Teale’s ode truly celebrates the triumph of British colonial power. The poem is an intriguing way of “heralding the arrival of a new shipment of chastel slaves who were vital to the economics of the plantation and from among whose numbers,” planters “such as the young Bryan Edwards … could sexually exploit” women (Smith McCrea 15). The poetic voice portrays a universe in which the horror of the trade is irrelevant because its audience refuses to see it. So this poem does not simply erase the horror of the trade, it celebrates the positive aspects of this economic endeavor. In the eighth stanza one reads about the Sable Venus: “From East to West, o’er either Ind/ Thy scepter sways; thy power we find/ By both the Tropics felt” (229). Those two verses in the ninth stanza are even more to the point: “When thou this large domain to view/ JAMAICA’s isle, thy conquest new” (229). The Sable Venus incarnates a powerful force taking possession of a new space, Jamaica, in the same way she conquers the hearts of white men. In fact, her might masks British colonial supremacy. If unaware that this section deals with a black woman, then the reader might believe that “thy” refers to Britain or Britannia, its female incarnation. The poem describes the Sable Venus not as a victim but rather as a conqueror, whose arrival on a new land is joyfully celebrated.

The black woman can accomplish what the colonist cannot because of her power, as she is part of nature. Early accounts of explorers or historians such as Bryan Edwards give a sense of an unwelcoming and dangerous Caribbean in general, and Jamaica in particular. The imagery of this feminine corporeality simultaneously conceals and reveals masculine biases. Teale erases the black woman’s Africanity and animality, which foster an identification with Nature that cannot flatter and reinforce the white ego. Only then, her Greco-Roman representation allows her to conquer Jamaica. This female body seems to function as a Derridian “supplement” that both replaces and supplants or adds to something else that it resembles here the Other’s masculinity.13 Hence, she compensates for and supplements the white man’s lack of power, as he cannot control the elements. She becomes then a great intermediary and thus a potent agent of colonization as she takes possession of the island for him. Yet, she is the white man’s creation; ultimately, through her, he conquers the elements, which at first resisted him. Appropriating the black female and transforming her allows the white man to demonstrate his might; however, the latter expresses itself in ambiguous and fleeting ways. In addition, the Sable Venus becomes westernized, yet most importantly she is creolized as she adapts to her new surroundings in the tropics, and finally, represents Jamaica. As such, the transformation of this woman represents the colonization of Jamaica – being exploited by British colonists who modernized, westernized, and unknowingly creolized the reluctant island. This colony remains a space where, historically, slaves resisted the colonist. The mighty power that this so-called goddess possess foretells that the white colonist created a type of power he cannot always maintain. For instance the Baptist War of 1831-32 and another violent slave rebellion in 1864 shook planters.

Yet, in Teale’s poem, the black woman incarnates the unrepentant expression of colonial power and colonial desire that does not hide itself. From a Foucaudian standpoint, whenever power becomes visible it also exhibits its weakness. Real power creates reality but no one can easily pinpoint its whereabouts. In the poem when “she smirks with kind consenting eyes,” this object of desire blatantly represents the poetic voice’s will and desire to possess an object worthy of attention. The promotion of the black woman’s value takes many forms, which have nothing to do with femininity but rather with a worried masculinity. Eventually the Sable Venus’s consent marks the might of white maleness, which then succeeds in dominating such a powerful woman.

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13 See Derrida’s “... That dangerous Supplement” (227-248).
Epistemic Complicity

Confiant's and Teale's Bowery discourse, indicating how pleasurable the black woman appears to the masculine eye, betrays a phallic scopophilia with political undertones. In Teale's poem, the sexual pleasure derived from looking at the object of desire masks the violence inherent in colonization and the sexual abuses it often entailed. According to Young, who underscores psychological violence, a colonial discourse developed in which black women would experience "their own desirability through their own victimization" while "learning to see themselves as sexually unattractive" (152). Through Rigobert's gaze, by contrast, the forgotten original rape and victimization of the black female resurface to denounce the effects of colonialism. Both authors eroticize this female body taken as a mere vessel to express masculine and masculinistic ideology in colonial and postcolonial literatures, respectively. Their construction of black female corporeality as a space ripe for the taking reminds us, as Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton note, that the body is the first and the most intimate of the colonies (406). This erotic construction brings forth colonization and colonialism's sexual edge, which reveals a representation of sexuality hiding its violence. While both authors create the triumph of the black female body in the Caribbean, their endeavors remind us of how problematic this space was and remains.

In Confiant's creole mythology, after the white man abuses her, the black man uses her, albeit for a so-called good cause: the rebuilding of his masculinity and cultural awareness. Her reification betrays the sexual edge of not only her initial colonization by the white man, but also her recolonization by the black man. Therefore, the crânite revalorization of black beauty echoes a sexualization of the black woman that dates from the early days of colonization. Confiant and Teale construct the black female body as a phallic representation, the object of desire that will reinforce one's masculinity. The imagery of this feminine corporeality functions as a Derridian supplement as the female body seems to both replace and supplant the Other's masculinity. As such, for the white colonist, the domination of black female corporeality represents the subjection of the black male's body: taking this woman away strips her usual companion from his maleness to promote white masculine supremacy. For the black man, the black female body represents the white colonial masculinity that he is trying to replace with his own. Therefore, the reduced female body emblematises a phallus, an expression of the ultimate

power that one lacks, the reduction of the feminine that Luce Irigaray has so decried. For her, the "[w]oman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (25). Yet, in Confiant's and Teale's masculine "sexual imaginary," looking at the Other's woman with lust has nothing to do with mere pleasure and "fantasies." It entails extending one's power and creating a particular reality; it is a clash or a war of cultures. Their glorification of the black woman subverts her authority for male domination. Here, the formalization of epistemological concepts around race or gender exposes the problematic complicity between colonial literature and postcolonial literature.

Contrary to Confiant, Teale does not underscore what makes his Venus African; there are no references to the wooliness of her hair, her blatant hyposexuality, or the size of her buttocks. The lithograph elaborates more explicitly a representation relating to her color, hair, and stockiness. These elements became more prevalent in the description of the "primitive Other" such as the Hottentot Venus in the nineteenth century. Comparing Teale's poem to Confiant's work, the topoi of the Sable Venus and the Vénus des marais establishes that the glorification of the black woman has a long history, both in French and British imaginations as well as colonial discourse, and has to do with power and masculinity. Thus the so-called promotion and revalorization of the black woman's beauty is an exercise fraught with danger for some male writers.

Our archaeology of the black female demonstrates that this woman symbolizes a compelling object of desire, a source of pleasure for the white colonist. In addition, she incarneres the place of investment for his licentious practices. It is this very place that the black male in turn must similarly invest in or conquer. Teale's poem equates possessing the black female body with conquering the tropics and destroying the Other's masculinity. White rewriting of the black female body therefore comes to symbolize colonization of the Caribbean and glorification of white masculine power. The latter always feels threatened. The Sable Venus may represent Jamaica and the Vénus des marais Martinique, but these feminine figures embody the fear and desire to possess the space of the Other (i.e., the Caribbean) necessary for the masculine ego to prove its own worth. In addition, for Confiant, re-rewriting the black female corporeality embodies a re-colonization of the Caribbean, a possibility to bring the black man back into the space from which he has been expelled. Yet, Confiant's promotion of the black female body simultaneously
opposes and feeds colonial discourse and a contemporary douxiste tradition of exoticism à la française, which extols light-skinned women. It remains that both constructions express a sexual edge objectifying black women in order to voice masculine and masculinist ideology in colonial and postcolonial literatures. The production of a counter discourse against a supposedly unified colonial ideology is not an easy task.

Today, the expression of the violence born out of the colonial period continues to intensify in the French West-Indies. While the glory of the colonies has waned, the ownership of land or the Caribbean space has become the motive for the real fight; this space has become a site of contestation and struggle. Such an understanding—that violence lurks in odd, attractive places (namely women's bodies) and is still pervasive and powerful—may allow for a different mapping of the future of the French Caribbean. Such an understanding may allow us to refocus our efforts to encourage less antagonism along gender lines and more resistance to the effects of departmentalization or neo-colonialism.

Works Cited


