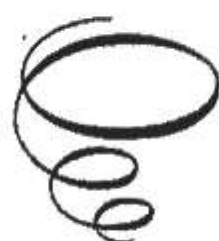


# Critical Perspectives on Conflict in Caribbean Societies of the Late 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

Edited by

Patricia Donatien and Rodolphe Solbiac

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



# BIRTHING CHAOS: TWO-FACED WOMEN, CULTURAL CONFLICT AND BETRAYAL IN *CRÉOLISTE* WRITINGS

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Traditionally, French Antillean novels by male authors such as Joseph Zobel's *La Rue case-nègres* (1950) glorify the *topos* of the *fanm poto mitan*.<sup>1</sup> This archetype of a devoted maternal figure strives for her progeny's or family's well-being and social advancement without the support of a male companion. This motherly model is not restricted to the French Antilles, existing in the Caribbean as a whole (Mohamed 61, Crawford 324). Literature from Martinique and Guadeloupe echoes, then, the Caribbean society's understanding of maternity as an enhancement of womanhood, particularly for single women finding respectability in a maternal role (Lesel 34, 90; Cottias 68; Crawford 327).<sup>2</sup> However, since the 1980s, Martinican and *créoliste* writers Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau have emphasized representations of Creole femininity that transform the traditional *fanm poto mitan* into a source of derision and contempt.<sup>3</sup> In their work, the *fanm cho*—loose woman and insatiable sexual partner—serves as a positive model of the feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> In French-based Creole, the *poto-mitan* represents the central pillar of the shanty and, by extension, the maternal figure becomes the pillar of the family. The single mother might be considered a stigmatized individual; on that stigmatization, see Myriam Cottias, 56. Yet, more often than not, Caribbean discourse glorifies the single mother's position when she dedicates herself to her children. The multiplicity of ways mothers have cared for people in the Caribbean cannot be neatly reduced to rigid categories. See Charmaine Crawford, 324.

<sup>2</sup> This characterization of the feminine comes from French Caribbean proverbs that are merciless to women but praise mothers. See Marie-Rose Lafleur.

<sup>3</sup> For these authors, *créolité* or *creoleness* is a cultural and political project aiming at promoting all things Creole and combating colonialism as well as French acculturation. This is what they claim in their 1989 manifesto "Eloge de la créolité."

Maryse Condé was the first scholar to condemn *créoliste* representations of sexuality and femininity, and many voices have since joined her critical stance.<sup>4</sup> Yet, few studies in French Caribbean Studies explore the cultural and political implications of both writers' imageries of sex and femininity.<sup>5</sup> This type of investigation unmasks the contradictions and flaws of a masculine project, which highlights a fragmented and conflictive Creole society under the guise of cultural promotion. Indeed, *créoliste* representations of contentious sexual imagery and gendered antagonism do not merely display Creole machismo<sup>6</sup>—they also betray the malicious effects of colonialism, namely how in the Caribbean “the imperatives of organized systems of oppression and exploitation” have ordered gendered constructions (Ramchand 312). Using Julia Kristeva's concept of the ambivalent two-faced mother (157), a supportive and castratory as well as abject figure, and applying the lens of Caribbean feminist epistemology to *créoliste* antagonistic ideas, sex and gender open new perspectives for analysis.<sup>7</sup> This approach sheds new light on Confiand's and Chamoiseau's views in their early novels of not only maternal and feminine imagery but also ideas on masculinity, *créolité* and cultural if not political consciousness in a French Caribbean context.

Questioning these authors' antagonistic constructions of womanhood demonstrates how their discourse manipulates a colonial taxonomy of black women from the Caribbean to promote the nationalistic claims of their identity project. Confiand's and Chamoiseau's linking of women's sexuality to the colour of their skin to transfigure the traditional maternal

<sup>4</sup> Consult Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Maryse Condé for more about this.

<sup>5</sup> Françoise Vergès's “Métissage, discours masculin et déni de la mère” (1994), Joséphine Valenza Arnold's “Comment peut-on être Martiniquais” (2006) and Bonnie Thomas's *Breadfruit of Chestnut: Gender Construction in French Caribbean* (2006) are notable exceptions.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Patrick Chamoiseau's *Bibliographie des derniers gestes* (2007) illustrates this idea, as the novel showcases the persistence in “Caribbean discourse of figuring the traumatic memory of slavery in terms of the wounded, or wounding female body.” See Maeve McCusker, 149.

<sup>7</sup> In psychoanalytical and feminist discourses, the term “castratory” is a neologism that often expresses what Julia Kristeva examines in “The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection” as the displaced fear of castration, namely the many psychical relocations of the fear of the vagina. Caribbean Feminist scholarship from the British Commonwealth continues to expose the ongoing, relentless contestations over who will exercise power and how power is deployed. See Eudine Barriteau, 10. See also collective works edited by Barriteau and Rhoda E. Reddock.

imagery and assert a cultural and political agenda is not without failings.<sup>8</sup> I will first examine the *créolistes* novels that most showcase the mother as an accomplice of colonialism and how the national trope of the mother as the motherland crumbles. For that purpose, I will explore more texts by Confiant. With both authors, though, the mother embodies a site of abjection, castration and conflict; that is to say, alienation, and *Frenchification* (acculturation to French culture). Symbolic womanhood does not give birth to the Creole nation but rather chaos and the impossibility of national and cultural awareness. This maternal imagery epitomizes the cultural betrayal threatening *créolité* while echoing the perversion of the more favoured tropes of the plantation/slave ship as the crucibles of *créolité* (Milne 53).<sup>9</sup> The mother stands as the accomplice of the symbolic father or master<sup>10</sup> and colonial system. She is a threat to black masculinity and the culture it hopes to uphold. Early *créoliste* novels demonstrate a conflictive two-faced femininity while manipulating a colonial motif that Frantz Fanon theorized in *Peau noire, masque blanc* and *Les damnés de la terre* as the colonized woman as a cultural traitor.<sup>11</sup> I will finally examine the *fanm cho* as an instrument of remasculinization that neither threatens nor strengthens the idea of the nation.

The nationalist undertone of Confiant's and Chamoiseau's discourse derives from an anthropological idea of the nation as a group of individuals sharing the same vision or an "imagined community," to use Anderson Benedict's terminology.<sup>12</sup> The *créolité* movement aspires to such a shared vision of the cultural and political and so translates cultural nationalism at its core. In a word, in this acceptance of the national idea the cultural is political. In this framework, their representations of sexuality and motherhood also translate their anticolonialist vision. I

<sup>8</sup> The taxonomy of women of colour linking and cataloguing their sexuality to their phenotype is a colonial concept that Moreau de Saint-Méry Médéric-Louis-Elie explores in *Description de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue* (1797). For a recent anthropological approach to the evolution of this taxonomy, see Stéphanie Mulot, 266–275. Mulot examines, among other things, the representations of the *kochoni* (bitch or slut).

<sup>9</sup> "Créoliste" and "créolité" refer to the literary and cultural movement that R. Confiant, P. Chamoiseau and J. Bernabé started in Martinique in the 1980s. They promoted their movement and their ideas in *Éloge de la créolité* (1989).

<sup>10</sup> The *béké*, the white Creole, and the white man from the *métropole* represent the symbolic Father in postcolonial discourse.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent study on Fanon's theorization of the black woman as a traitor see Chantal Kalisa, "Exclusion as Violence: Frantz Fanon, Black women and colonial Violence," 19–41.

<sup>12</sup> See Benedict Anderson (1991)



propose that the *fanm poto mitan* in *créoliste* writing signifies the maternal *imago* born out of slavery and inherited from the plantation system that psychoanalyst Jacques André defines, in *L'inceste focal dans la famille noire antillaise* (1988), as the *mère focale* in French Antillean contexts—the “Focal Mother.” Hence, in the *créoliste* work and a French Antillean context in general, matrifocality denotes the centrality of the maternal figure in an individual psyche and must not be confused with matriarchy (a society in which women, particularly mothers, have the central roles of political leadership, moral authority, and control of property) or matrilinearity (a system tracing descent through the mother).<sup>13</sup>

Due to the misdeeds of slavery, such as forced concubinage and the legal refusal to recognize slaves’ paternity, the Caribbean family unit differs from the traditional European or Western standard due to the significance of mono-parental families (Garraway 210, Cottias 58). Paying attention to the unique qualities of the Afro-Caribbean family on each island leads to a more accurate analysis. While French Caribbean women may occupy a central, privileged role, their society remains patriarchal. If the father is absent from the home, he may still be able to rule it from afar, or the symbolic Father, namely the White paternal *imago*, will rule instead (Gautier 164; Burton 1994, 207). Consequently, the father’s problematic “absence” and the mother’s pervasive mental presence reflect the contentious side of colonial and post-colonial society and demonstrate the internal mechanisms of the domination principle in the Caribbean. Eventually, in the *créoliste* texts examined here, most mothers are revealed to uphold a system inherited from a colonial structure in which black men have no real power. This notion indicates that in the French Caribbean, despite the end of slavery, the end of colonial status and the beginning of departmentalization in 1946,<sup>14</sup> the domination structure created by colonization remains. The ambivalent staging of the two-faced woman and gendered conflicts expresses the internal rifts of a Creole society thirsting for development and modernization.

<sup>13</sup> The understanding of matrifocality may also vary from island to island.

<sup>14</sup> In 1946 Martinique changed its colonial status and became a French overseas department.

## The *Fann Poto-mitan*—the “Two-faced Mother”

### a. Rewriting the *Fann Poto-mitan*— Abject Mothers and Cultural Betrayal

While *créoliste* fiction sometimes represents maternity in a positive fashion, the critique of contentious maternal figures prevails, especially in early novels. In a French Caribbean context, the bad mother signifies a terrible bond of emasculating dependence and symbolizes subordination from the island to the *métropole*. The theme of France as the suffocating and all-consuming motherland has become commonplace in French Caribbean anti-colonial discourse (Britton 74). I propose that the *fann poto mitan* in *créoliste* writings revisits this oppressive maternal figure as the incarnation of the *mère focale*, the “Focal Mother.” From childhood, this powerful psychic image controls Creole males and stands as an oppressive mental representation that establishes feminine power over masculine psyche in the unconscious (André 39, 373).<sup>15</sup> As the mother and her body often constitute a source of abjection (Kristeva 13), the symbolic presence of the *fann poto mitan* in the centre of society can only generate the antagonism of a masculine discourse that seeks to promote a threatened black masculinity. When confronting the abject, that defiling object, which might be the feminine body threatening to corrupt his ego, the man realizes his vulnerability (Kristeva 14). In a French Caribbean setting, the horror born out of the encounter with a corporeal space that the masculine individual cannot fathom illustrates how epistemology, namely acquiring knowledge and awareness of the world around us, becomes corporal. As a matter of fact, the “body is both a repository of our consciousness and unconscious and, simultaneously, the physical medium through which we experience the world and engage actively with it” (Mohamed 40). Hence, discourse, which constructs ideas of gender, should not be separated from the social practices that created it. In this theoretical framework, the corporal space appears as a site of investigation for societal conflicts.<sup>16</sup> This is what the exploration of maternal imagery illustrates. Indeed, constructions of motherhood take many challenging forms in *créoliste* writings.

<sup>15</sup> Concerning psychoanalytic research on the French Caribbean family, the “Focal Mother” and the castration of the father from African descent, see also Livia Lesel.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the findings of Caribbean feminist theorists around the construction of gender and power in a region marked by colonialism, enslavement and indentured system can be applied to the French Antilles and its literature. See Barriteau Eudine and Rhoda E. Reddock.

In Confiant's *Le Nègre et l'Amiral* (1988), the last wife of Alcide, the womanizer, symbolizes the feminine danger of assimilation to colonial power. As the headmistress of a school, Romaine dedicates herself body and soul to the oppressive Vichy regime.<sup>17</sup> The omniscient narrator, using Alcide as focalizer, remarks that this woman "fueled a blind faith in *Maréchal Pétain*" (89).<sup>18</sup> The narrative voice echoes Fanon's ideas concerning colonized women, as for him they might be the colonial "ally in the work of cultural destruction" (1997, 49). The colonial project feeds out of this common republican motto, justifying control of primary education by the church: "Let us win over the women and the rest will follow" (1997, 37). In the novel *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*, the narrator observes that "Romaine had, like him [Alcide], a dozen brothers and sisters that had stayed in sugar cane fields by the Galion Plantation, at La Trinité, and she concentrated on forgetting them by pretending to no longer understand Creole and straightening her hair with a hot iron" (88). Romaine loathes her black ancestry and plantation roots. These attributes pull her down the social ladder that she is struggling to climb and prevent the respect she thinks she deserves as a headmistress. Her refusal to speak Creole and her willingness to change her hair's texture signal her *Frenchification* and suggest her conflictive relationship to her creoleness and blackness.<sup>19</sup> Her disdain for her husband confirms her colourism—her favouring of light skin.

Spitefully, Romaine claims that her husband is darker skinned than she is, even though the narrator underscores that both protagonists are the same colour. This female character's refusal to accept her own colour signifies her self-denial and emphasizes her need to repress all that is black in order to achieve her goal—acceptance into Martinican bourgeois culture. Her colourist stigmatization pervades her maternal actions. She seizes her newborn son to "examine the color of his genitals and the texture of his hair" (88). Reassured, the new mother exclaims: "He didn't take after his father. His hair isn't woolly, just a little frizzy [. . .]. Thank the Lord! I've made a little brown [. . .]" (89). These comments leave no doubt about Romaine's opinions of dark-skinned Martinicans—a "little brown" is worth more than a "little black." The rejection of blackness also

<sup>17</sup> In his study of Chamoiseau's *Chemin-d'école*, Burton examines the topos of education as an efficient carrier of *Frenchification*. See Richard D. E. Burton (242–243).

<sup>18</sup> Whenever possible, I quote translated versions of the books examined; otherwise translations are mine.

<sup>19</sup> For a study of the sociocultural implications of hair straightening in the French Caribbean, see Juliette Sméralda.



signifies the maternal legacy of denying paternal authority and rebuffing the dark-skinned—the father.

Romaine's delight in front of her "little brown" child with only "slightly" frizzy hair betrays her obsession for the *peau sauvée*, "saved skin," namely light skin. She exhibits the maternal obsession with *lactification*, or the desire to whiten the race that for Fanon "every woman in Martinique" embodies (1967, 47). Thus, Romaine exemplifies the Fanonian *cliché* of the black woman as "the ultimate symbol of assimilation and the traitor to the black race" (Kalisa 31). Due to her behaviour, this protagonist incarnates the Focal Mother—the maternal imago representing "le porte-parole du Maître"—"the Master's mouthpiece" (André 243). Through the mother, the white man (the symbol of *métropole's* colonial power) continues to control colonized people's psyches. He represents the law and remains the mother's object of desire. In *Le Nègre et l'amiral*, the Maréchal Pétain figures the Master and Romaine's primary preoccupation. Consequently, according to the narrator, "Romaine raised her child in the cult of whiteness and the absurd idea that he wasn't a little black boy but someone special and different" (89). This caricature of the bourgeois Martinican mother only sees blackness as ugly. She damages her child Cicéron's psyche by deceiving him about his racial identity. For the narrator, as a successful prototype of alienation, Romaine symbolizes abjection because she destroys male Creole identity and, in so doing, Creole culture. Her son does not learn to speak Creole until the age of fifteen, which keeps him from integrating with the masculine counter culture that resists bourgeois commands—he is no womanizer like his father. In fact, an insane bag lady dressed as a Carmelite nun rapes the twenty-two-year-old virgin Cicéron. As the Focal Mother and Master's mouthpiece, Romaine emasculates her son in destroying his bond to Creole culture. Alcide has no say in his child's upbringing as his wife robs him of his fatherly role. He can only helplessly watch her debilitating influence on his child. In Confiant's novels, the abjection of black mothers and their betrayal takes many forms.

In *Mamzelle Libellule* (2000), when the homodiegetic narrator Adelise still lived in the countryside, her mother forced her into the torments of the sugarcane fields (29). For the young girl, the plantation appears as a terrible space because of the sexual misery that she discovers there and that her mother pretends to ignore. Yet this parent seems to be concerned with preserving the virginity of her daughter—she warns against Thérémène and his so-called licentious behaviour (31). For Adelise, these maternal warnings reek of hypocrisy. The narrator explains that "the man that represented a true danger, [her] mother turned a blind eye to him"



(32). The overseer, the agent of colonial authority and the white Creoles or *békés*, "a hulking mulatto from Vauclin," stands as a sexual menace (32). Born out of slavery, his comportment mirrors that of the majority of *békés* who seize black women and lead them astray. From then on, the overseer's sexual voracity demonstrates his willingness to exercise the same power as his *béké* employer. That mulatto man uses his position of power "to track down women he could take. Any woman would do, young or old, green or experienced" (32). The overseer's sexuality betrays his alienation because it evokes that of the white Creole master.

When the overseer meets Adélise for the first time, he caresses her breasts in front of her mother and addresses this maternal figure with these words: "you've got quite the little lady!" (32). His lewd behaviour does not offend this usually overprotective mother. On the contrary, this female protagonist swells with pride and replies: "You wouldn't know it, but she's already fourteen" (32). The maternal words underscore an implicit permission to possess Adélise's adolescent body. For the narrative voice, this so-called *fanm poto mitan* affirms herself as an accomplice of the oppressive system that condemns her daughter to be raped. Even when Raphaël Confiant depicts a positive maternal image, the black mother is still subtly criticized.

In *La panse du chacal* (2003), Devi, a Hindu woman, becomes the supportive partner of a black man, Anthénor. The narration exploits this female protagonist's conception of motherhood to reinforce the benefits of *créolité*. The narrative voice describes a positive feminine image promoting the black man's patrilineal filiation. This female protagonist silently withstands the humiliation of men from her mother's ethnic group and the contempt of jealous black women. She senses "that it was the price to pay for the Indian race to be finally accepted by the Creoles, so that it could become Creole" (347). Devi, the Indian newcomer,<sup>20</sup> is not of black ancestry—she cannot embody the Focal Mother as her own patriarchal culture defines her, and she has no history of slavery in the New World. She can identify her mixed-race son in these terms: "This son of India and Africa can only call one land his home: Martinique" (345). Théophile's description of her son is telling. The white teacher from *métropole* claims that

[. . .] the child that Devi carried would be Caribbean, a new kind of Caribbean being, born of the island soil and owing nothing more to the old world of his forebears [. . .] "What the mulatto, too attached to his planter father and European values, could not do, the mixed Indian-Negro

<sup>20</sup> Often, Indian indentured workers in Martinique came from Pondicherry.

could,"<sup>21</sup> he insisted, even though he would be denigrated by the name of *échappé-Couli*. (348)

Contrary to black mothers, Devi represents a positive maternal figure at the disposal of the black man. Her maternity expresses *créolité* and its underlying promotion of *créoliste* masculinity.

The criticism of the mulatto as an accomplice to *Frenchification* emanates from the teacher's words and underscores the conflictive aspects of *créolité* or Creole culture. Black mothers who allow the existence of mulatto children betray the Caribbean culture, birthing children that can only love their white father. Indian maternity and its subordination to Creole paternity allow the child to take root in this new land of the black father. Théophile's comments also imply the power in black paternal blood and deny the matrilineal validity of women of colour. This *échappé-couli* (of Indian and African heritage) does not possess white blood; he will not have the same relational problems with France as those experienced by mulattoes. Still, the characterization of Devi's son is problematic and leads the reader to question *créolité*. Historically, the Afro-Indian proved to be a source of discord in the Caribbean.<sup>22</sup> The "new" mixed-race individual is a well-known conflictual character in Trinidad—the *dougla* (Puri 24).<sup>23</sup>

### b. From the Forgotten Mother to the Forgetful Mother

Contrary to Confiant, Chamoiseau often seems to portray women more positively (Burton 129; Thomas 87). Still, his work, through the subtle critique of the Focal Mother and *fanm poto-mitan*, denounces the ambivalent power-system and French Creole culture created by colonization. This critique goes through the questioning of maternal figures in *Chronique des sept misères*. The characterization of forgotten and forgetful mothers sketches the outlines of a society where the desire for legitimacy and power distorts not only maternal but also gender relations. Initially, Man Elo, formerly known as Héloïse, incarnates the positive and heroic figure of the *Fanm poto mitan* from French Caribbean culture. As a shopkeeper and single mother fighting for the well-being of her child, from a Martinican standpoint she is an admirable mother. Yet,

<sup>21</sup> This reads "Indien-nègre" in the original.

<sup>22</sup> Maryse Condé's novel *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989) depicts the difficult integration of Indians and *échappé-coulis* in Guadeloupe.

<sup>23</sup> *Dougla* originally meant mixed or hybrid in Bohjpur and Hindi. Today it often means bastard in Trinidad.

the narration also insinuates that Man Elo cannot protect her son, "a child of trauma" resulting from rape—Pierre Philomène, also known as Pipi (McCusker 36). Pipi's identity crisis, his inability to root himself, his obsession with his origins, his past and the absence of his father will eventually kill him. His mother rejected Anatole-Anatole because that individual transformed himself into a demonic creature, a *dorlis* (an incubus), to rape her while she was asleep. Their first encounter was a conflict in which she rejected him and his love interest. He followed her from the cemetery to her house and tried to get invited inside. Horrified, she yelled at him: "What do you want mis'erable fiend? [. . .] Scram or I'm tossing holy water on you!" (20). From the start, she sees him as a demonic creature and rejects him.

Ignoring her refusal, he enters the house she had locked up and barricaded. Admiring the *dorlis*'s skills, the narrator explains that the incubus "went inside of her without waking her up and spent eight delicious hours on her sleeping body" (20). The ensuing sexual abuse marks the beginning of antagonism and fear, which feeds the mother's resentment and shame toward her aggressor. Symbolically, Héloïse's raped body also exemplifies a recurrent trope in Caribbean discourse, for the female corporal space often embodies the traumatic memory of the colonial past (McCusker 149). When Anatole-Anatole comes to visit her the night following the birth of their son, she refuses to acknowledge him as the father of her child and denies this man once more. Consequently, the "*dorlis* hurried away, his heart broken" (22); the narrator's sympathy for this man rejected by the mother of his son arises here. At the end of the novel, though, Héloïse overcomes her antagonism and fear to acknowledge her rapist's paternity of her child, calling him the "father of my son" (167). Making amends, she seeks the *dorlis* to save their son from the darkness and madness threatening him. Her change of heart comes too late—she learns that her rapist died a while ago during one of his illicit nocturnal visitations. The narration implies that her initial conflict with Anatole-Anatole fed his life-long spree as a rapist, and so her antagonism and refusal to let the father interact with his son was lethal. The narrative voice, though implicitly critiquing the cultural space that engendered such a conundrum and conflictual relationships between these protagonists, also seems to blame the mother.

As a matter of fact, the questioning of maternity appears at the beginning of *Chronique des sept misères*. The despair and anger of a father confronted with his wife's inability to give birth to a male heir is inescapable. Their house and the femininity around him emerge as both space and source of conflict, respectively. Félix Soleil's anguish signals



his spouse's abjection as Fanotte's maternity threatens his manhood and thus his ideas of masculine culture. The narrator adds that "Félix Soleil came to associate women with all of the misfortunes of his life, then of the whole world, and soon, of the universe" (12). Félix Soleil adheres to the French Antillean proverb "*fanm sé sèpen*" ("woman is a snake").<sup>24</sup> At the birth of his last daughter, Héloïse, his ninth female child, Félix Soleil cries out, vexed, before disappearing for six days: "Yin ki fanm, fanm ki an t'you mwen!" ("I'm up to my neck in nothing but women!") (9). Félix does not forgive his wife for this last child, which he sees as the ultimate betrayal. For him, daughters call his masculinity into question, so his antagonism toward them never wanes. To console him, his friends assure him that he has been cursed. They repeat to him "how impossible it was for a guy with all balls in working order to beget only girls [. . .]. Somebody slapped a hex on you" (12). Ironically, the commentary used to boost Félix Soleil's morale brings forth the emasculation of a father unable to "sire" a son.

The loss of masculinity results from his wife's supposed disobedience; for Félix, she refuses to give him a boy. She then appears as a traitor—she prevents him from being the man he wants to be. Félix's resentment and antagonism signify the fear of maternal power and procreation which is frequently associated with abjection. The narrator also underscores her as a failing maternal figure, as he explains that "the mother, Fanotte, a woman crushed and deadened by her husband's authority, was paying no attention to her daughters" (11). As a wife trying to please her hateful husband, she cannot dedicate herself to her children that she ignores. Over time, Fanotte, the at-fault party, makes herself inconspicuous. She blends into the décor and devolves into a forgotten mother figure. Through the years, pushed away by her husband and ignored by her daughters, Fanotte moves from the centre of the hut to the periphery where she disappears. She dies "so discreetly amid tatters of her straw mattress" (15) that no one notices her demise at first. This forgotten mother does not symbolize the glorious *poto-mitan*. In his shanty, the father reigns or tries to convince himself of his own control.

The critique of the maternal figure as a cultural traitor takes several forms in *Chronique des sept misères*. The single parent Clarine has already aborted a child due to her mother's exhortations, and the young girl's lover abandons her when he learns of her pregnancy. Implicitly, though, the narration highlights Clarine's problematic relationship to

<sup>24</sup> On gendered biases against women in French Antillean proverbs, consult Marie-Rose Lafleur.

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The critique of the maternal figure as a cultural traitor takes several forms in *Chronique des sept misères*. The single parent Clarine has already aborted a child due to her mother's exhortations, and the young girl's lover abandons her when he learns of her pregnancy. Implicitly, though, the narration highlights Clarine's problematic relationship to

<sup>24</sup> On gendered biases against women in French Antillean proverbs, consult Marie-Rose Lafleur.

motherhood. After her abortion she abandons the child she conceived with the recently deceased Albino Gogo to marry the mulatto Ti-Joge. Clarine hopes that marriage will return her to a state of purity and place her in good graces.<sup>25</sup> When she first meets this light-skinned man, she is smitten. When he asks her if she is mother of the baby she replies: "Sé ... pa ich mwen kilà non... Sé ich an adanm" ("It's ... not my chile...It's another lady's") (49). In Creole, the use of the double negative "pa...non" emphasizes her maternal denial and foretells her son's abandonment. The narrator explains that Clarine pretends not to be the mother of the illegitimate child she is holding because "she wanted, instinctively, to make herself new for this man" (49). Consequently, the day Ti-Joge told her that he would stop by her house, she frantically remembers her first lover's "disappearance" after learning about her pregnancy and his looming paternity. What would her new suitor think of raising a child who was not his? She does not give Ti-Joge the opportunity to answer this question.

Like a mad woman, she leaves her house with her baby to abandon him and ends up in the *Cathédrale Saint-Louis*. Her rejection of her child implies that of the deceased father and marks the preference for the mulatto, who resembles the white man and often symbolizes acculturation to French culture and assimilation. According to the narrator, the handsome mulatto "had French at his complete command" (49), a mastery which signifies his *Frenchification*. In *créoliste* ideology, Clarine's desire for respect and social promotion likens her to the Focal Mother. To become respectable and "new," Clarine must hide her sexuality and refuse the role of nurturing mother. She therefore becomes the forgetful mother. For her, respectability (being a married woman) matters more than motherhood, being a single mother. Clarine's choice has disastrous effects on her abandoned son, better known by the name Bidjoul. He is condemned to a life of wandering, which he ends by throwing himself in front of a car. Here, a subtle critique of marriage and the desire for respectability emerges.

For the character of Dalmeida in *Le Nègre et l'Amiral*, Creole language is the bastard product of a people and a culture (128), and its rejection symbolizes denial of the culture which created it. Hence, refusing the illegitimate child also represents the maternal rejection of a certain Creole culture. In opposition to the Indian Devi in *La panse du chacal*, Clarine betrays Creole culture and destroys it. Like Romaine in *Le Nègre et*

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques André, 74–88. In this chapter, the psychoanalyst explores the notion of the expected child as a reminder of sin, the expression of forbidden sexuality and the sexual concealment on which a young girl's education is built.



*l'Amiral*, who refuses to speak Creole and believes that her child is "a little brown," Clarine reveals herself as the "Master's mouthpiece"—precious ally in cultural destruction. Yet, in *créoliste* novels, if mothers are often depicted negatively, depictions of women who appear to be sexually liberated are more positive.

### *La fanm cho*

In *Chronique des sept-misères*, the character Marguerite is also a single mother, but she is remarkable for her buoyant sexuality. She therefore incarnates the *fanm cho*, the *créoliste* instrument of "re-masculinization."<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, she first mends Pipi's "dilapidated body" and delirious mind (128). When "reviving his interest in screwing" (133), she finally allows a pathetic Pipi to be reborn into manhood. The narrator characterizes her as a "beauty [who] had had a tumultuous love life" (134). The vigour and sexual appetite of this *chabine*, a *métisse* with gold coloured skin, corroborates the French West Indian prejudices against a woman of that colour.<sup>27</sup> In Creole, the unflattering expression *fanm cho* (the loose woman in heat) describes a single woman or mother whose sexuality is not in check. This individual fascinates because while she exudes femininity, her sexual behaviour resembles that of a man: in a sense she is phallic without expressing the idea of castration (André 94). Usually, in Caribbean society, the male individual reinforces his reputation and masculinity through his sexual exploits, while women must protect their respectability by removing all sexual desire. Marguerite embraces her wantonness. The narrative voice in *Chronique de sept misères* does not negatively judge the behaviour of this female character. On the contrary, in this masculine discourse, the expression of female libido often allows for the glorification of virile sexual prowess.

Among Marguerite's twenty lovers, five frequent her hut with diligence. However, to the great displeasure of these men, "Pipi and Marguerite hurled themselves into the sole happiness here below of those who spend their days out of luck," meaning fornicating (134). Marguerite devotes herself to Pipi and forgets about her other lovers. Attaching herself to one partner, Marguerite loses part of her *fanm cho* behaviour. The narrator states that the five frequenters are deprived of the only happiness

<sup>26</sup> On the literary representations of the *fanm cho* as a masculine tool to promote Creole virility, see Jacqueline Couti, 52–55.

<sup>27</sup> See Stéphanie Mulot, 266–275) who examines, among other things, the social representations of the *kochoni* (bitch, slut). She distinguishes between the *chabine* (the yellow gal) and the reputable woman. See also Jacques André, 94.

that destitute people can achieve liberally and gratuitously—sex. First, Marguerite's five lovers are persuaded that "the essential brevity of the commerce of love" foreshadows Pipi's eventual boredom with his new mistress (134). Marguerite's and Pipi's insatiable sexual appetites for each other disrupt the five lovers' "sexual routine" (134) and destabilize a particular Creole culture in which women are at the sexual disposal of all men.

The couple cannot stop spending "sportive nights making exuberant love," their coitus representing an intense moment of freedom and pleasure (134). Their passion is such that one evening in a mango tree, "on the strongest limb, they indulged until dawn in carnal acrobatics so perilous that the five spying paramours forgot their resentment for a few hours to become admiring and even supportive onlookers" (135). The narrative voice describes the intercourse as a sportive spectacle that generates amazement in its spectators and unites a group of divided men. Having sex with the *fann cho* allows Pipi to show off his sexual prowess and hence assert his masculinity. In so doing, he is preventing other men from doing so and going against a Creole masculine culture, which has nothing to do with French bourgeois ideas of morality.

In Confiant's *Le Nègre et l'amiral*, the topos of the *fann cho* goes further. The *bôbô* Philomène, that is to say, the neighbourhood prostitute, incarnates the ultimate loose woman and attracts the reader's attention. This "everyman's woman" and her profession acquire a sacred quality that generally goes unnoticed (272). Often, male writers describe the prostitute with fascination or sympathy. The hetaera or sex worker represents the obscenity of wild and threatening femininity (Kristeva 196). Confiant complicates the role of the prostitute with the concept of sacred prostitution—the expression of ultimate love, a motif that Charles Baudelaire held dear. For this poet, the "most prostituted being [. . .] is God, since he is the friend of every individual, since he is the endless communal reservoir of love" (635). Baudelaire derives such ideas from Joseph de Maistre, who was one of the authors the poet read the most (McGinnis 12). Studying the motif of sacred prostitution according to Maistre's principles of substitution and reversibility captures the scope of Philomène's character—the sacrificial and atoning figure.<sup>28</sup>

In *Vierge du grand retour*, the reader can better grasp the sense of the sanctification of Philomène's sacred prostitution, which reveals itself in

<sup>28</sup> See Reginald McGinnis, who writes that "sacred prostitution, as Maistre understood it, represents the archetypal figure of reversibility: the voluntarily substitution of the suffering victim in the place of another" (McGinnis 13). Also see Daniel Vouga, 63–65.

the section entitled "Genèse." This part recalls the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, which according to Elisabeth Badinter establishes woman as the subordinate of man (153). The authorial voice of *Confiant's* novel exclaims:

God created Philomène in his image, and she became a magical *Mamzelle*, still wrapped in a sheath the color of the sky. God blessed her and said, "Be forever barren, more barren than the male papaya tree, because your womb is not made to know the numerous pains of childbirth. You will open up to man, every man, rich or penniless, black or white, green or seasoned, and offer him pleasure so as to help him bear his plight." (14)

If the prostitute Philomène is made in the image of God, she symbolizes Baudelairian prostitution. The authoritarian voice that dictates Philomène's station in life gives her no choice in her sexual behaviour and expresses its oppressive masculine power. If she follows the precepts that are dictated, she can never disappoint men. As a sacred prostitute, Philomène must serve men "to help [them] bear [their] plight" (14). The male individual finds himself at the centre of this hetaera's preoccupations. Moreover, this "everyman's woman" is domesticated and controllable—the man has no reason to be afraid of her. Her blessing of infertility celebrates her inability to procreate—motherhood would take her away from the man she serves. The idea of self-sacrifice is tied to references that date to the beginning of time (McGinnis 10–13). To honour the goddess Ishtar, Babylonians consecrated to her service sterile women that were unable to find a place in society. This consecration let these female individuals participate in society by becoming spouses to the population and serving the community.<sup>29</sup>

From a feminist point of view, the characterization of Philomène as a sexual object devoted to the pleasure of her master is not "magical." For the narrative voice, God chose the hetaera to fulfil a precise task, to achieve what most women refuse to do—love black men unconditionally. As a divine instrument, her sexuality distinguishes itself. From a Caribbean feminist point of view, *Confiant's* vision of sacred prostitution represents the antithesis of the Focal Mother and so betrays the distrust that black men may feel toward the cultural traitor—the black woman. This idealized idea of prostitution, of black women unconditionally loving black men, recalls the power struggles between genders as bourgeois women such as Romaine are often viewed as impediments to the national

<sup>29</sup> To learn more about sacred prostitution and the role of prostitutes, see Jean Bottéro, 165–198.



and cultural consciousness. Confiant's representation of sacred prostitution may prevent discussions around the economics of sexual exploitation but not interrogations around the nefarious effect of colonialism and enslavement in the construction of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean.

Initially, questioning Confiant's and Chamoiseau's conflictive imagery of motherhood demonstrates the development of a two-faced femininity, both magnificent and abject, which reinforces or destabilizes the masculinity of the French Caribbean man. Their writing glorifies the *fanm cho* while debasing the *fanm poto mitan*. Eventually, though, examining the praise and uncompromising criticism of antagonistic feminine figures in a French Caribbean context reveals a masculine claim with a nationalist agenda, which in turn illustrates a complex gendered conflict. From this *créoliste* perspective, the existence of masculinity necessitates that the mother of colour be killed because she too often births chaos. In the above texts, Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau show that disposing of the *fanm poto mitan* (symbol of the *métropole*) breaks the bond of dependence that obstructs the construction of masculine identity. Moreover, from a Martinican point of view, the sexualization of women signals the promotion of a freedom that local society does not tolerate (André 64).

The promotion of the *fanm cho* reminds readers that in *créoliste* fiction the only acknowledged images of motherhood are those of perverted matrixes incarnated by the plantation and the slave ship, as they are the true and yet conflictive crucibles of *créolité* (Milne 53; Garraway 19). Like Philomène or Marguerite, women who seem to please the *créoliste* narrative voice in early novels distinguish themselves through their sexual activities or commerce. Contrary to the woman of colour Man Elo—who rejects the black father as a rapist and a demon—Devi shows herself to be the potential mother of a new Creole race that embraces blackness and whiteness to promote black fatherhood. Devi exudes no lingering stench of compromise like women of colour. In *La Panse du chacal*, the black father figure finally expels that of the symbolic, omnipresent Father. If the sexual representations examined convey cultural claims, the conflicted staging of abject mothering leads us to reflect upon the claims of *créolité* that Confiant and Chamoiseau extolled in *Éloge à la créolité* (1989). More than the motif of racial and cultural mixing or the praise of creoleness, the topoi of fragmentation, chaos, violent friction and conflict at the centre of societal structure stand out.

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