PROVOCATIONS

A TRANSONATIONAL READER IN THE HISTORY OF FEMINIST THOUGHT

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THE MYTHOLOGY OF
THE DOUDOU

Sexualizing Black Female Bodies, Constructing Culture in the
French Caribbean

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Since the eighteenth century, Caribbean white Creoles and travelers to Martinique and
Guadeloupe have extolled the beauty of the mulatto woman, transfiguring her into a
Venus-like symbol.1 So much so that this figure has come to be known nowadays in
French studies and mainstream culture as the doudou. In the 1890s, for an American
audience and then in the 1920s for a French readership, the works of international trav-
eler and journalist Lafcadio Hearn showcase this exotic and racialized discourse around
French Caribbean women. Yet, it is only in the interwar period that writers from these
islands living in Paris—namely, Suzanne Lacascade, and Paulette and Jane Nardal—
noticeably denounce such a colonial as well as masculine eroticization and exoticization
of the black female body. Consequently, this introduction contrasts Hearn’s writing to
that of Lacascade and the Nardal sisters, to suggest that for these French Caribbean writ-
ers during the interwar period, awareness of the gendered self went hand-in-hand with
awareness of the racial self. At that time in Paris, negrophilia and primitivism were
thriving; the often demeaning craze for anything black or African was inescapable. Thus,
these writers had to confront European representations of their blackness, Creoleness,
and femininity, that is to say of their Caribbean culture. These exoticizing works illus-
trate—as Brent Hayes Edwards argues, reclaiming Etienne Balibar—that “racism always
‘presupposes’ sexism” (132). To understand what these women were up against, this essay
first examines the polysemic inherent in the term doudou, then discusses Hearn’s racial-
ized and exotic discourse, before exploring the responses of Lacascade and the Nardal
sisters.
Today in French Caribbean studies, as in mainstream culture, the Creole term *doudou* designates the mesmerizing mulatto woman as the ideal or potential lover who offers her favors to the white man. The *da*, the asexual dark-skinned maternal figure who takes care of white Creole children frequently stands as the stark counterpart to the enchantress of color. In French Caribbean–based Creole, *doudou* means “darling.” This term originated from the French word *doux* (soft or sweet) repeated twice (Hearn, Two Years 349). Anyone can be called *doudou*. This Creole word entered standard French dictionaries such as *Le petit Robert* in 1929, before the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris. The gallicized *doudou* has come to signify a beautiful, loved French Caribbean woman, most likely light skinned or mixed race. Studying these representations of the black female body in the French Caribbean as a metaphor for both colonized islands and islanders reveals the manifestation of the male gaze in a French colonial context. That is, the white male defines the black female.

This masculine vision exemplifies what Robert Young terms “colonial desire”—a peculiarly sexual expression of patriarchy and colonialism (152). Thus, the paradigmatic stereotypes of the courtesan or *doudou*, and the dark-skinned maternal figure of the mammy or *da* feed a sexual and colonial mythology. These images extolling either sexual or maternal traits embody the same racialized and masculine ideology that promotes white culture. Biased and dangerous ideologies lurk behind these stereotypes; the pervasive aspects of exotic imagery have long-lasting implications for contemporary Martinican culture.

The French meaning of *doudou*—in contrast to the more expansive meaning in Creole—does more than encourage a perception of the female body in Caribbean literature as a mere object of desire or metonymic promotion of the beauty of the island. This female body often symbolizes the French Caribbean as a so-called place of leisure and pleasure that also hides dire social problems. We all think we know what femininity entails, but do we understand the political and cultural undertones specific to this particular construct of femininity? Examining the polysemy—that is, the multiple implications—of the term *doudou* demonstrates the extent to which a community creates myths and imagery of femininity or accepts external representation of its women as its own.

Nowadays the *doudou* has become a cultural icon that symbolizes the beauty of her island or region; her graces frequently promote her homeland in a touristic way, as shown in numerous postcards (see opposite page). In his article “*La doudou et la da*” (“The Lover and the Mammy”), R.D. Burton attempts to trace the history of this female figure. For that purpose, he draws on the work of the researcher Régis Antoine to explain that this exotic model of femininity originates from the eighteenth century and took shape in the song “*Adieu foulard, adieu madras*” in 1759–70 (Burton 133–34). Yet, in his study of the song, Antoine does not use the term *doudou* but rather talks about “a certain
image of the French West Indian woman separated from her friend, a French sailor" (Antoine 209).  

In fact, Antoine is discussing the free mulatto woman, the belle afranchie of the Ancien Régime—the aristocratic, social, and political system established in France from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth century. Caribbean white Creoles and travelers to the island extolled the beauty of this Venus-like figure, whose beauty and sensuality were irresistible. In the late nineteenth century, international traveler and journalist Lafcadio Hearn became a mouthpiece of this exotic and racialized discourse in his work on Martinique.  

In his texts, light-skinned women of African heritage, reduced to sexual objects, embody an exotic model of femininity that mainstream French culture would define in the 1920s as the doudou. In Hearn's vision, little distinguishes the figures of the da and the doudou, as their sexual and maternal traits are closely intertwined. Eventually, the black female body appears to be a mirror reflecting Hearn's own biases while flattering the white masculine ego.

**COLONIAL DESIRE AT PLAY IN THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN**

In 1887, Harper's Weekly sent Hearn to the Caribbean as a correspondent for two years, most of which he spent in Martinique. In 1890 he then published two books based on the experience: a "Martinican" novel, Youma: The Story of a West Indian Slave, and an account of his trip, Two Years in the French West Indies, filled with illustrations, many of them depicting Martinican women. In Youma, Hearn narrates a supposedly true incident that took place in Martinique before the abolition of slavery in 1848: a female domestic slave chose to perish with her masters during a slave riot. Studying Hearn's construction of French Caribbean femininity first brings to the fore his attempts to contrast...
light-skinned women’s sex appeal with dark-skinned women’s maternal traits. Yet he
cannot help underscoring their attractiveness due to miscegenation and therefore their
mixed “racial” heritage as well as their dedication to the white man.

In Two Years in the French West Indies, Hearn devotes an illustrated chapter, “La fille de
couleur,” to the exotic beauty of Martinican women of color, which fascinates him. In the
first edition of his book, a postcard of a mixed-raced woman titled “A Martinique Métisse”
serves as the frontispiece, thus framing the ideology of the whole text. In this short chap-
ter there are seven images of women, derived from a thriving trade in postcards and
photographs in Martinique and Guadeloupe. In “La fille de couleur,” Hearn praises the
graces of mulatto women and quotes white Creole writers from Martinique and white
travelers without questioning his informants’ accuracy or motives, as the endnotes of
Two Years in the French West Indies attest. His descriptions may at first appear positive, as
he seems to celebrate the wonders of métissage—miscegenation or racial mixing. Yet
Hearn’s writings illustrate white masculine discourse and racial biases. For instance,
discussing the mystical charms of the belle affranchie, Hearn explains that these “women,
whose tints of skin rivaled the color of ripe fruits, and whose gracefulness—peculiar,
exotic and irresistible—made them formidable rivals to the daughters of the dominant
race, were no doubt physically superior to the modern filles de couleur” (324). More than
once Hearn associates mulatto women with fruits, particularly when he talks about their
skin color. These women become a mere object of consumption and desire that needs to
be taken. Moreover, he sees the “modern fille de couleur” as a sexual object, “as the half
breed girl destined from her birth to a career like that of the belle affranchie of the old
regime” (328). This light-skinned woman appears not only as a beautiful fruit ready for
consumption but as the epitome of the courtesan-prostitute. Sex is her trade. Yet Hearn
also considers the courtesan’s dedication to the white man as learned behavior inherited
from slavery (330). Thus, he acknowledges that her desire to please her lover, the
master, the white Creole or European traveler, derives from the social structure of the
plantation system. His vision of gender relationship within the plantocracy remains
problematic.

In the introduction to Youma, Hearn argues that the “da was, in general, a Creole
Negress—more often, at all events, of the darker than of the lighter hue,—more com-
monly a capresse [of chocolate or bronze complexion] rather than a mestize [honey or
gold]” (t). As a matter of fact, like the archetype of the mammy within U.S. slavery, the
da, also a maternal, domestic slave, was characterized by her dark skin. Hearn adds
that: “In her particular case, the prejudice of color did not exist. The da was a slave; but
no freedwoman, however beautiful and cultivated, could enjoy social privileges equal to
those of certain das” (my emphasis). The da was respected and loved as a mother. “She
was at once a foster-mother and a nurse” (t). According to Hearn this maternal figure,
enslaved and devoid of any sexuality or individual identity, often fared best in a plantation
system. Of course, he also praises her moral values: “She represented the highest de-
velopment of natural goodness possible in a race mentally undeveloped, kept half savage by
subservience... her special type was a product of slavery: the one creation of slavery perhaps not unworthy of regret” (5). His nostalgic discourse implies that this mode of enslavement could have positive aspects for slaves and betrays that Hearn has embraced the cultural ideal of white Creoles and Americans. His comments in the introduction to the novel frame his fictional discourse and display potential racial biases feeding his American readership.

In addition, comparing Hearn’s depiction of the da in the introduction to Youma with the depiction in “La fille de couleur” in Two Years in the French West Indies sheds a particular light on his ambivalent representation of femininity. He cannot help associating the da with the enticing belle affranchie or the courtesan (314). In “La fille de couleur,” his conflicting representations of the maternal figure as a sexualized “Byzantine Virgin” demonstrate how Hearn’s sexual and exotic biases contaminate his construction of this maternal figure (314). In Youma, the narration first underscores the da’s dark color and as such her ethno-class, to construct her as an archetypal maternal figure. Yet the narrator comments in detail upon Youma’s physical attributes and concentrates on her phenotype or racial traits and her beauty before extolling her virtue. The narrator notices that “her tint was of a clear deep red—there was in her features a soft vague beauty,—a something that suggested the indefinable face of the Sphinx” (14). This depiction of an unlovable Oriental virgin figure recalls the sexualized “Byzantine Virgin” in “La fille de couleur.” Despite the maternal role to which Hearn relegates the da in his introduction, the novel’s narration alternates between an emphasis on Youma’s sexual attributes and her altruistic motherly role. Eventually, the story concentrates on this da’s selflessness toward her mistress’s family.

Youma has a heightened sense of duty and risks her life more than once to protect the small Mayotte, the white Creole child under her care. She also refuses to run away to marry Gabriel; she loves him against her mistress’s will so she cannot elope with him. The narrator underscores her strong moral sense, her sense of duty and her Catholic beliefs. Her explicit refusal to embrace her sexuality with a black man promotes the ideal of life of the white community. The end of the novel offers a striking example of Youma’s solicitude toward whiteness. On the eve of the abolition of slavery in Martinique in 1848, a mob of angry slaves and freedmen, including her suitor, sets on fire the house where Youma’s “adoptive family” or masters take refuge. She declines the assistance of rioters trying to help her escape the burning building because they refuse to save the little Mayotte. Being a da for Youma is a calling. So she dies with her white Creole family. She chooses to stay with the little Mayotte instead of loving a black man and starting her own family. Her sacrificial stance emphasizes the maternal characteristics of the da and transforms her into the mouthpiece of a political ideology glorifying the white Creole way of life, including the subservience of people of color on which it depends. The novel Youma constructs a racialized family romance narrative that ultimately excludes blackness. Black women can nurture white Creole families but women of color held up as examples cannot have families of their own.
HEARN'S AUDIENCES AND THE LASTING LEGACY
OF COLONIAL DESIRE

When Hearn published his two texts in the 1890s, his audience was the American bourgeoisie, which acquired wealth after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. After quenching the American thirst for tropical exoticism in the 1890s, Hearn's vision remained mostly unchallenged and fed France's yearning for all things black in the 1920s. Indeed, Marc Logé translated Youma and the chapter "Martinique Sketches" from Two Years into French in 1923 and 1924, respectively. Logé did so during the zenith of primitivism and negrophilia surrounding colonial exhibitions in France. In the 1930s, Hearn's texts and his vision of femininity influenced anticolonial Martinican writers, such as Aimé Césaire (Arnold 71). Later in the 1980s, the créolises Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau among others would also appreciate his work. All those thinkers praise Hearn for preserving Martinian folklore to the point that his vision often feeds their own promotion of Creole culture and blackness. Rather than rejecting his exotizing vision, they embraced his representations as authentic images. These male Martinian writers, who discovered a version of their culture through the eyes of an outsider writing above all for an American audience and feeding its racial biases, did not challenge his vision. On the contrary, they started to use black female bodies to mirror their own ideologies and vision of the world. Yet since the 1920s, female voices from Martinique and Guadeloupe had warned against the perpetuation of this exotic and erotic imagery, in vain, it seems. For these French Caribbean female writers, reducing female islanders to the doudou, an object of desire symbolizing the Caribbean and its inhabitants, feminized Caribbean men as well.

TRANSATLANTIC WOMEN'S VOICES: THE DOUDOU WRITES BACK

In Paris from 1919 to 1935, the explosion of modernist ideas, which fed negrophilia and primitivism, impacted the development of black consciousness and French proto-feminism of color. Suzanne Lacascade, Suzanne Roussier-Césaire, and Paulette and Jane Nardal denounced the detrimental exotization of the French Caribbean islands and their inhabitants, as well as of the black world as a whole. These women fought the type of sexual exoticism that Lafcadio Hearn among others embraced and are often viewed as precursors of negritude (Sharpley-Whiting 14). Critics often question their feminism and political activism, as these French Caribbean writers' claims were not as radical or politicized as those of their European counterparts. In her work to undermine the motif of the doudou, Suzanne Lacascade, of Guadeloupe, challenges the notion of political assimilation and the place of the French Caribbean colonies in the French empire, not the role of women as such. The sisters Paulette and Jane Nardal in turn, carefully spell out why black Creoles should avoid perpetuating French exotic and erotic imagery. So doing, these female thinkers do not present a feminist agenda per se but rather a cultural and political one based on denouncing racial biases. Yet their work illustrates the claim that "racism always presupposes 'sexism'" (132). Through their ambivalent critique of exoticism à la française,
also called *doudouisme*, these women living in Paris expose the threat to black culture in general and to French Caribbean culture in particular. They also make a transatlantic commentary on the condition of black women in a French colonial space.

Suzanne Lacascade’s *Claire-Solange: Ame-africaine* (1924) represents the first attempt at female literary promotion of black consciousness through racial essentialism (Sharply-Whiting 16). Lacascade deconstructs the objectifying *topo* of the enchanting and docile mixed-race woman. The resentful and biting character Claire-Solange promotes the worth of the colonies that an ungrateful France does not recognize. This young mulatto woman stands as a complex protagonist, one who claims her black African and Creole ancestry over her French and white one. Her portrait initially brings forth her feisty spirit, her cultural and political agenda, and her rejection of all things French, not her sensuality. To some extent, Claire-Solange speaks back to exoticism and French imperialism. Yet, she remains the product of a wealthy mulatto middle class that wants to be recognized by France as useful citizens and as equals. At the end of the novel, she marries a white man, her cousin.

Jane and Paulette Nardal denounced the representation in colonial discourse of the colonies and their inhabitants as exotic in their salon in Clamart and in journals such as *La Dépêche africaine* (1928–30) and the bilingual *Revue du monde noir* (1931–32). For these Martinican women, this imagery threatened their identity and integrity while preventing black people from being valued. In their thinking, Caribbean men are complicit in the colonial discourse and their own emasculation. Yet, they did not challenge “the implicit superiority of French culture and civilization” (Sweeney 119). In her article “Partirs exotiques” (*La Dépêche africaine*, 1928), Jane, the younger of the two sisters, explores how Europe sees Caribbean people as a source of entertainment and the black woman as a beautiful animal, as symbolized by the dancer Josephine Baker. She explains: “Should it come to be known or perceived that you are ‘exotic,’ you will arouse a lively interest, preposterous questions, the dream and regrets of those who have never traveled: ‘Oh! The golden Islands! the marvelous lands! With their happy people, naive people, carefree natives! In vain, you strive to destroy so many legends, they hardly believe you” (qtd. in Sharply-Whiting 108). In addition, Jane critiques the dark imagery sold by the best-selling author Paul Moran (a representative of exoticism in colonial French literature) and exposes the dangers of exotic and erotic reification of black female bodies by the colonial discourse or *doudouisme*. This Martinican woman explores the social and emotional consequences upon black women living in a Paris that fetishizes them in its thirst for the exotic.

Paulette Nardal also decries the exoticism that was all the rage in interwar Paris. In 1932, in “L’éveil de la conscience noire” (“Awakening of Race Consciousness”) she explains: “The coloured women living alone in the metropolis, until the Colonial Exhibition, have certainly been less favored than coloured men who are content with a certain easy success. Long before the latter, they have felt the need of a racial solidarity” (Nardal 29). She understood “the emergence of race consciousness as a specifically feminine ordeal” (Boittin 153). She also perceived the European interest in the other as a manifestation of colonialism, and often sexual in content. At the time, Jane and Paulette Nardal would not
have been able to label this expression of colonialism as "colonial desire." Yet this is exactly what they fight against in their articles, through attacking white and black men's objectification of black women.

Lacascade offers a challenging rewriting of the mulatto woman that emphasizes not only her political and cultural values but also the validity of Caribbean culture and eventually of French civilization. The Nardal sisters on the other hand emphasize the danger of sexual eroticism and the sexualization of black women by both white and black men. Ultimately, the Nardal sisters noticed the danger in the representation of an exotic, feminized, and sexualized Caribbean. Their work demonstrates that the immeasurable love that the doudou is assumed to feel for Frenchmen/white men and ultimately for France, flattering and reassuring as it may be for American and French audiences, conveys an idea of the French nation that erases local Creole realities. This image of women of color that scholars nowadays in French studies often call the doudou hides a complex transatlantic discourse deforming the French Caribbean and its culture. In fact, this construction of femininity reflects political, cultural, and national ideologies that frequently vilify the blackness or darkness that these women are supposed to represent. And yet, this is the same vision of womanhood that contemporary Martinican male thinkers such as the Creolists Raphael Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau often seem to praise. This shows the obstacles that feminism has had to overcome in the French Caribbean particularly when dealing with feminine images inherited from a colonial discourse that both black women and men have integrated as theirs.

NOTES

1. The expression *mulatto woman* (*mulâtre* in French) when used in the French Caribbean is a complex concept, recalling a hierarchy of color and class inherited from the plantation system: often, the whiter, the better. The terms *mulâtre/mulâtrese* are widely used in Martinique to describe in a positive fashion members of the elite or middle class and light-skinned individuals or in a derogatory way “sellouts” and mercenaries betraying their blackness.

2. Unless otherwise noted, translations from French to English are mine.

3. Lafcadio Hearn (27 June 1850—26 September 1904) was known also by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo. He is famous for his writings about Japan, less so for his work on New Orleans and Martinique.

WORKS CITED


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would Lafcadio Hearn's description of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women of color be positive to twentieth-century cultural and political figures from Martinique?

2. From a feminist point of view, why is Hearn's construction problematic? Does one need to be a feminist to understand its shortcomings?

3. After reading Hearn's description of Martinican women, how do you perceive them? What are the cultural and political implications of this author's depiction of black Caribbean femininity?

4. Why is it important to know Hearn's audience? Why is it important that he first wrote for an American audience at the end of the 1880s?

5. Do the postcards present a single version of Martinican women or do they have multiple implications? What features of each postcard lead you to a specific interpretation of Martinican women?

LAFCAIO HEARN, FROM LA FILLE DE COULEUR

[...] The da (nurse) or "porteuse-de-baptême" who bears the baby to church holds it at the baptismal font, and afterwards carries it from house to house in order that all the friends of the family may kiss it, is thus attired; but nowadays, unless she be a professional (for there are professional das, hired only for such occasions), she usually borrows the jewellery. If tall, young, graceful, with a rich gold tone of skin, the effect of her costume is dazzling as that of a Byzantine Virgin. I saw one young da who, thus garbed, scarcely seemed of the earth and earthly;—there was an Oriental something in her appearance.

difficult to describe,—something that made you think of the Queen of Sheba going to visit Solomon. She had brought a merchant’s baby, just christened, to receive the caresses of the family at whose house I was visiting; and when it came to my turn to kiss it, I confess I could not notice the child: I saw only the beautiful dark face, coiffed with orange and purple, bending over it, in an illumination of antique gold. . . . What a da! . . . She represented really the type of that belle affranchie of other days, against whose fascination special sumptuary laws were made: romantically she imgaged for me the supernatural godmothers and Cinderellas of the creole fairy-tales. For these become transformed in the West Indian folklore,—adapted to the environment, and to local idealism: Cinderella, for example, is changed to a beautiful métisse, wearing a quadruple collier-choux, zépiquiers tremblants, and all the ornaments of a da. ¹ [ . . . ]

¹ “Vouél Cendrillon avèk yon bel robe velou grande lakké . . . Ça te la bai ou mal zit . . . la tini bel manous dans zéreilli, quéte-tou-chou, buouche, bracelet, tremblant . . . toutt rôcè bel bagage comme ça.” . . . [Conte Cendrillon—d’après Turiault]
What successes she achieved in this regard may be imagined from the serious statement of creole historians that if human nature had been left untrammeled to follow its better impulses, slavery would have ceased to exist a century before the actual period of emancipation. By 1738, when the white population had reached its maximum (15,000), and colonial luxury had arrived at its greatest height, the question of voluntary enfranchisement was becoming very grave. So omnipotent the charm of half-breed beauty that masters were becoming the slaves of their slaves. It was not only the creole negress who had appeared to play a part in this strange drama which was the triumph of nature over interest and judgment; her daughters, far more beautiful, had grown up to aid her, and to form a special class. These women, whose tints of skin rivalled the colors of ripe fruit, and whose gracefulness—peculiar, exotic, and irresistible—made them formidable rivals to the daughters of the dominant race, were no doubt physically superior to the modern filles-de-couleur. They were results of a natural selection which could have taken place in no community otherwise constituted;—the offspring of the union between the finer types of both races. But that which only slavery could have rendered possible began to endanger the integrity of slavery itself: the institutions upon which the whole social structure rested were being steadily sapped by the influence of half-breed girls. Some new, severe, extreme policy was evidently necessary to avert the already visible peril. Special laws were passed by the Home-Government to check enfranchisement, to limit its reasons or motives; and the power of the slave woman was so well comprehended by the Métropole [. . .]

Physically, the typical fille-de-couleur may certainly be classed, as white creole writers have not hesitated to class her, with the “most beautiful women of the human race.” She has inherited not only the finer bodily characteristics of either parent race, but something else belonging originally to neither, and created by special climatic and physical conditions,—a grace, a suppleness of form, a delicacy of extremities (so that all the lines described by the bending of limbs or fingers are parts of clean curves), a satiny smoothness and fruit-tint of skin,—solely West Indian. . . . Morally, of course, it is much more difficult to describe her; and whatever may safely be said refers rather to the fille-de-couleur of the past than of the present half-century. The race is now in a period of transition: public education and political changes are modifying the type, and it is impossible to guess the ultimate consequence, because it is impossible to safely predict what new influences may yet be brought to affect its social development. Before the present era of colonial decadence, the character of the fille-de-couleur was not what it is now. Even when totally uneducated, she had a peculiar charm,—that charm of childishness which has power to win sympathy from the rudest natures. One could not but feel attracted towards this natf being, docile as an infant, and as easily pleased or as easily pained,—

2. I am assured it has now fallen to a figure not exceeding 5,000.
artless in her goodnoses as in her faults, to all outward appearance:—willing to give her youth, her beauty, her caresses to some one in exchange for the promise to love her, perhaps also to care for a mother, or a younger brother. Her astonishing capacity for being delighted with trifles, her pretty vanities and pretty follies, her sudden veerings of mood from laughter to tears,—like the sudden rainbursts and sunbursts of her own passionate climate; these touched, drew, won, and tyrannized. Yet such easily created joys and pains did not really indicate any deep reserve of feeling; rather a superficial sensi
tiveness only,—like the zhebe-mamise, or zhebe-mamnizelle, whose leaves close at the touch of a hair. Such human manifestations, nevertheless, are apt to attract more in proportion as they are more visible,—in proportion as the soul-current, being less profound, flows more audibly. But no hasty observation could have revealed the whole character of the fille-de- couleur to the stranger, equally charmed and surprised.

LAFCADIO HEARN, FROM YOUMA: THE STORY OF A WEST-INDIAN SLAVE

The da, during old colonial days, often held high rank in rich Martinique households. The da was usually a Creole negro,—more often, at all events, of the darker than of the lighter hue,—more commonly a capresse than a mesteve; but in her particular case the prejudice of color did not exist. The da was a slave; but no freedwoman, however beautiful or cultivated, could enjoy social privileges equal to those of certain das. The da was respected and loved as a mother: she was at once a foster-mother and nurse. For the Creole child had two mothers [...]

She had sacrificed so much of her own maternal pleasures for the sake of others' children. She was unselfish and devoted to a degree which compelled gratitude even from nature's iron,—she represented the highest development of natural goodness possible in a race mentally undeveloped, kept half savage by subservience, but physically refined in a remarkable manner by climate, environment, and all those mysterious influences which form the characteristics of Creole peoples.

[...] Youma's tint was a clear deep red,—there was in her features a soft vague beauty,—a something that suggested the indefinable face of the Sphinx, especially in profile;—her hair, though curly as a black fleece, was long and not uncomely; she was graceful furthermore, and very tall. At fifteen she had seemed a woman; at eighteen she was taller by head and shoulders than her young mistress; and Mademoiselle Aimée, though not below the average stature, had to lift up her eyes, when they walked out together, to look into Youma's face. The young bonne was universally admired; she was one of those figures that a Martiniquais would point out with pride to a stranger as a type of the beauty of the mixed race. Even in slave days, the Creole did not refuse himself the
pleasure of admiring in human skin those tones none fear to praise in bronze or gold: he frankly confessed them exquisite:—aesthetically, his "color prejudice" had no existence. There were few young whites, nevertheless, who would have presumed to tell their admiration to Youma: there was something in the eyes and the serious manner of the young slave that protected her quite as much as the moral power of the family in which she had been brought up.

Madame Peyronnette was proud of her servant, and took pleasure in seeing her attired as handsomely as possible in the brilliant and graceful costume then worn by the women of color. In regard to dress, Youma had no reason to envy any of the freed class: she had all that a capresse could wish to wear, according to local ideas of color contrast [. . .]