

The Politics of Race and Patriarchy in *Claire-Solange, âme africaine* by Suzanne Lacascade¹

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La Créole est d'une beauté plaisante, d'une grâce distinguée parmi ses politesse crues et banales, et d'une douceur excessive. Les blancs sont les biens-réçus des familles créoles et, après quelques jours de résidence, comptés comme les amis de la maison.

The Creole possesses a pleasant beauty, a distinguished grace among her raw and banal politenesses, and as of an excessive softness. Whites are well received by Creole families and, after some days in residence, counted among the friends of the house.

—Pétrus Durel, *La Femme dans les colonies françaises: Etudes sur les mœurs au point de vue mythologique et social* (1898)

Mme. Pol Hucquart, sous un sourire figé, luttait contre une défaillance. Résisterai-je jusqu'à la fin? Trop de chocolat pour mon goût.

Madame Pol Hucquart, with a fixed smile, fought against feeling faint. Will I resist up to the end? Too much chocolate for my taste.

—Suzanne Lacascade, *Claire-Solange, âme africaine* (1924)

Racial discrimination, colonialism, marginalization and imperial politics are the components of Martinican author Suzanne Lacascade's 1924 novel, *Claire-Solange, âme africaine*. This little-known work, of which only thirty copies were printed by the Eugène Figuière Parisian publishing house, is shrouded in mystery. Less information is available about the author or under what circumstances she conceptualized and completed her novel. Based on the paltry number of documents referring to her work, it may be surmised that this was the only novel Lacascade ever wrote. The author also probably contributed to various reviews and journals of the first days of the Négritude movement, working with other women from Martinique such as the Nardal sisters, Jane and Paulette, and Suzanne Césaire. Although the novel viewed through a postmodern lens seems rather melodramatic, Guadeloupian novelist Maryse Condé, the first scholar to study the work in depth, does remind us that it "is the first literary attempt by a woman of color from the Antilles that seeks out original qualities." Condé continues stating that "this novel was published in 1924, before the cries of Négritude and, [therefore] it must be considered as the fruit of [the author's] personal development [as a novelist]" (Condé 29).² The original qualities evident in Lacascade's novel to which Condé alludes are particularly bound up in the discourse of race, racial mixing and hierarchy, and colonialism as construed by blacks and whites. Lacascade also openly criticizes the power of men over women in early-twentieth century France. Racialized parameters are synthesized most significantly through the protagonist Claire-Solange's views and opinions on two environments: the first is France, whose language she speaks fluently but in which she feels foreign; and the second African, a mythical place to which she is drawn due to her African ancestry filtered through her island home of Martinique. Although Claire-Solange reiterates time and again her "passion" and dedication to the defense and glorification "de la Race Noire" [of the Black Race], she eventually realizes that she will always be detached from being truly African and will never travel to African shores (Lacascade 66). This detachment felt by her heroine alludes to Suzanne Lacascade's own feelings of *étrangeté*; a disjunction between woman-author-writing-in-French and her native country. Julia Kristeva defines this disjunction as a result of "not belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin,

the impossibility [of taking] root, a rummaging memory [haunted by] the present in abeyance. The space of the foreigner is a moving train, a plane, in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping" (Kristeva 7-8). The haunting foreignness and rootlessness of the novel manifest in the deep recesses of Claire-Solange's identity as she seeks to justify her mulatto skin as well as reject everything associated with the white race. She is the *anomalous* of Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* who is "an exceptional individual" and who no longer associates herself with "the pack. . . [she] represents a power of another order, potentially acting as a threat as well as [an] outsider" (Deleuze et al. 245-46). The anomalous woman author intimidates social stability defined by masculine prerogatives. She insists on going against tribe, tradition, and established norms. She is the nomad who destabilizes as she establishes her own place that is new and uncharted. She is a femme fatale who makes men lose their self-control. At the end of Lacascade's novel, the anomalous Claire-Solange succeeds in cutting herself off from all racial ties—black or white—to exist in a no—(wo)man's land of racial ambiguity.

The protagonist's racial allegiances are problematic from the beginning. We are told in the first pages of the book that her mother, Aurore, a young *mulâtresse* "de nos vieilles colonies" [of our old colonies³] embarks with her family to Paris for the 1889 Exposition. She falls in love and marries Etienne, a young Frenchman who "gives up his past, breaks with his future, cutting blood ties, [and] . . . becomes an expatriate for the love of a fragile creole" "reniant son passé, brisant son avenir, rompant les liens du sang, si tenaces chez les gens du Nord . . . s'expatriait, pour l'amour d'une fragile créole!" (Lacascade 13-14). Returning in 1893 to Europe from Martinique (where Etienne is a high ranking diplomat in the colonial mission of the French West Indies), he brings with him their infant daughter, Claire-Solange; their baby boy; and Aurore. Even though they take flight to the southern, more mild Midi region of France to escape the "frissons" of cold which affect the warm blooded islanders during their stay in northern France, disaster strikes. First the baby and then Aurore fall ill and die. Claire-Solange returns to Martinique with her father.

As a woman author ahead of her time who produced a phenomenal novel for the 1920s, Lacascade pays close attention to the minute details that draw barriers between racial groups, nationalities, and

gender of early twentieth century Parisian life. Instead of portraying her character as a “typical” mulatta woman of her time (i.e. playing into the popular stereotypes of the day), Claire-Solange Duflôt Hucquart wields her African heritage to confront the white and masculine world, drawing strength from her difference with resounding determination. The protagonist flaunts her skin color to construct a visible presence and an active voice in the foreign environment into which she is introduced. She divides her world in terms of color and then acts accordingly, even if it means going against prescribed norms of practice in the white, bourgeois Parisian world of 1914.

Lacascade probably relied on personal experience to create her work. She definitely attempts to draw out the racial prejudices of the day as well as the misconceptions the *colons* had about the *colonisés*. Her commentary on these misconceptions leads us to conclude that she did not see any possibility of mutual racial harmony or hope of equality in a color-blind world. Through her work Lacascade makes it clear that the early twentieth-century, for people of color living in France, was highly problematic. The author clearly describes how the French people viewed the black race (inclusive of its various shades) as inferior, colonized, and in need of being saved culturally, intellectually, and linguistically. It is for these reasons that her novel is a valuable resource, shedding light on the intricacies of the politics of race in early twentieth-century Paris as well as in the colonies.

Lacascade's *Claire-Solange* breaks with the typical writing style of the *assimilé*. These authors from the colonized Francophone diaspora, raised and formed within the French education system, strove to write like Frenchmen, modeling their prose in the popular European literary styles of the time. Conversely, Lacascade exposes French readers to the dialogue, the unaltered voice, of *real* people of color from the Islands. She constructs her novel in the local French créole of the heroine's milieu, exposing the uninitiated reader to a speech that is a mélange of African dialects and French West Indian idioms. The French, white reader of the time is forced to contemplate otherness as s/he is exposed to Claire-Solange's world. As the impending doom of WWI draws nearer, this whole new world is transported on the same boat with the heroine to France. Claire-Solange and “all the Duflôts and their allies,” créole aunts and uncles and her grandmother (on her mother's side) as well as with her white father,

Etienne Hucquart, arrive in Paris at the mansion of the widow Madame Pol Hucquart's (Etienne's dead brother's wife) (Lacascade 19).

As one of the first feminists of color, Lacascade constructs a politically charged text (calling for a dialogue on race) while offering a staunch message on women's subjugated roles in society. The author comments openly and critically on the restriction of (both white and black) women's intellect by the societal structures forged by men in France and the Antilles. Despite its melodramatic flair, *Claire-Solange* is certainly an advanced treatise for its era, both for white and black women living in France. Lacascade's novel is filled with creole sentences and sayings translated by Claire-Solange who attempts to enlighten her white family about the charms and actualities of the Martinican heritage from which she comes. Dispelling stereotypes, the heroine defines her speech with phrases such as "comme nous disons" 'as we say', marking territory along ethnic lines between the Creoles of the house and her aunt's stuffy, bourgeois, white society.

Claire-Solange's powerful voice interjects not only into white, bourgeois circles, but also into the tight male cliques of masculine salon society normally off-limits to women. When the protagonist breaks into these forbidden spaces, Lacascade peppers Claire-Solange's speeches with creole maxims, songs and poems as well as very vivid visual descriptions of the Islands, all the while offering sociocultural and political commentary on the human condition of those of color who live (and were historically enslaved) in the colonies. Lacascade's novel opens up the world of the Creole as never before. Adding to the revelations of creole culture that her heroine imparts, at the end of the novel Lacascade includes three "bel-airs des Antilles" (*Mardi-Gras*, *Le Clair soleil*, and *Dis-moi Doudou*), complete with piano scores to further instruct her audience. The inclusion of these short musical scores makes Lacascade's novel effective in three different registers: the linguistic, the visual, and the aural. We not only read of the life of the Creole, we *experience* it.

Claire-Solange is above all a novel about seeking place in the margins of society and about the disconnected isolation felt by one woman caught in the in-between space of race and identity. The young heroine is neither black nor white nor French nor African. She is defined by her difference in both racialized worlds. For whites whom she encounters, she is exotic, for black Africans, she

is viewed as French, white, and as an *assimilée* of the Martinican elite, imbued with the Parisian, bourgeois haute-culture of the time. Even Claire-Solange's name evokes conflict and racial ambiguity. "Claire," meaning "light" in French, further complicates the protagonist's identity. She is unsure whether to seek out and embrace her whiteness—her lightness—or reject it. From the moment she sets foot on French soil, she fights to secure herself in a definitive category, defining for her white cousin, the dandy Jacques Danzel, the nuances of racial type in the colonial world and the dissent between "*bequés* and *mulâtres*, *capres* and *quarterons*" (Lacascade 35):⁵

Claire-Solange interjects: Creole, born in the colonies, example: creole beef, creole horse, you'd read in the dictionary. Mulatto comes from mule, which means: incapable of creating a family. Whites like to give us this name and we accept it laughing, I do, at least, as proof of their self-importance. (Lacascade 35-36)

Claire-Solange prend la parole:—Créole: né aux colonies, exemple: boeuf créole, cheval créole, liriez-vous dans un dictionnaire. Mulâtre vient de mulet, veut dire: incapable de créer une famille. Les blancs aiment à nous donner ce nom et nous l'acceptons en riant,—moi du moins,—comme une preuve de leur suffisance.

Not only does her articulation of the categorization of race and its colonial lexicon force the reader to remark on the bestiality of the colonial enterprise, she also demonstrates her outspoken nature as a woman with a mind, intellect, and political savvy ready to comment on the sociocultural inadequacies of her time. The young heroine leaves her audience, her cousin, Jacques Danzel, his godmother Mme. Pol Hucquart, and her father Etienne Hucquart, speechless. They are more incredulous when she follows her laundry list of definitions with a direct statement claiming her affinity to the black race ("moi je suis nègre") as well as to Jews, whom she also views as "une . . . race opprimée" [a . . . race that is oppressed] (Lacascade 36). Mme. Pol Hucquart is surprised at Claire-Solange's affection for both races from which she considers the young heroine as being disassociated not only by color but also by nature and class. Her aunt asks her point blank, "Why do you call yourself black?" to which Claire-Solange responds:

Why? Look at my frizzy hair, I wouldn't know how to smooth it out in long curls laid against my cheeks like the Jews of Aden, I could never pull it back in a bun [in the style of] 1830. . . . Take a good look at me . . . In order to deny [my] African origin, I would have to live under a veil, not letting either my eyes or my nose show. Come on Aunt, smile. Accept that a woman of color adds a little spice to the family. (Lacascade 36-37)

Pourquoi? Voyez mes cheveux crépus, je ne saurais les lisser en cadennettes contre mes joues, comme les Juifs d'Aden, je ne pourrais les relever en chignon 1830 . . . Mes cheveux de nègre, il faut les séparer en bandeaux, les tordre tant bien que mal sur la nuque . . . Régardez-moi bien . . . Pour renier l'origine africaine, il me faudrait vivre sous un voile, ne laissant passer ni mes yeux, ni mon nez. Allons, tante, un sourire. Acceptez telle quelle une femme de couleur qui donnera de la variété à la famille.

Again, Lacascade makes reference to the exotic nature of the French colonial enterprise as it is construed through the seduction of race. Playing on the idea of the veil (which particularly calls attention to the French fascination with veiled North African Arab women, ideas of the harem, and sexual licentiousness) and Africa as a continent, veiled in darkness and in need of enlightenment by French culture and intellect, Claire-Solange challenges the popular imperial politics of the early twentieth century. Curiously, where she allies herself with Jews as one of the oppressed, in the succeeding paragraph she defines the sociocultural incongruence between Jews and blacks by drawing on their hair texture as a deciding factor for what is considered "white" and "black." Lacascade's confused views on racial categories can hardly be condemned here, since she is relying most probably on the ethnographic/demographic strategies of the French colonial missions in Africa, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The plethora of information sent back from the colonies in the form of ethnographic and natural histories shaped the minds of the French population. This information provided evidence, as was believed at the time, of the inferiority of those of color and led to the labeling of these same peoples as exotic, much to the delight of the mystified French public. Frédéric Cuvier and Geoffroy St.-Hillaire's *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* and Cuvier's *Discours sur les révolutions du globe*, published in 1824 and 1864,

respectively, paved the way for a century of racial categorization that was based, according to these scientific studies, on fact (Sharpley-Whiting 22). Even after Claire-Solange's speech on racial categories, the heroine's aunt, still unable to understand her niece's division of the races (Lacascade poignantly makes us aware that the French *just don't get it*), responds "Leave aside your fighting instincts; in France the question of color counts for so little" 'depuis un siècle pour la cause de couleur' (Lacascade 37). Clearly difference for her aunt is based on *malcomprehension* rather than any prejudice. Lacascade embodies in Aunt Hucquart the typical French reaction to the problem of race: categorize and then assimilate all difference, because once a *colonisé* is incorporated into the French Empire, s/he is considered French. Mme Hucquart's reaction to her niece's views reflect the author's awareness of the bitter lessons of assimilationist politics endured by people in the colonies; a body of policies and mandates originally legislated through the republican tenants of the French Revolution.⁸ The colonized were assimilated into the French realm and expected to embrace their adopted Frenchness, or *Francisation*, as the process was known, with open arms. Those foreigners living in France were also expected to kowtow to French republican ideology which promoted the solid centralization of the French state. National decrees such as the 1888 Decree sought to "grant immigrants the same type of civil status as French nationals," but with the understanding that these immigrants would adopt "new Christian name[s]" in order to adhere to the "logic of republican law [that struggled] to eliminate all traces of origins" (Noiriel 74). Today, as it was during Lacascade's time, at the heart of France's nation-state model is the need to promote unity, gather all citizens under one republican umbrella, and assimilate and eradicate all markers of difference within the population. This model is based on the belief that through the *machine à francisation*, as minister Adophe Landry expressed in 1914, France would be protected from "the formation of nonindigenous cores that might alter our race" (Noiriel 84-85).

Within the quagmire of the white/black racial divide and assimilationist politics, Lacascade throws her volatile young heroine into the fray of a paternal/colonial-slave/master dialectic. Claire-Solange rejects the white race she sees as the enslaver of those of color, yet sets her father (who is white) apart from the oppressors. For the

young woman, the stoic patriarch of the colonial regime in Martinique, Monseigneur Hucquart, sacrificed a brilliant career in France to be with his beloved Aurore and work as a notable functionary in the French Colonial Bureau. He is not implicated historically as a *colon* and is above the malicious behavior of whites in the colonies. For his daughter, Hucquart *is and isn't* white. The heroine even reverses him for having fought "for a century, for the cause of color" "depuis un siècle pour la cause de couleur" (Lacascade 37). Metaphorically, patriarchy operates on two levels. On the one hand, Claire-Solange rejects France, the fatherland of the assimilated creole and promoter of the *mission civilisatrice*, an imperial policy said to be necessary to educate and assimilate the *indigène*. Yet, on the other, she embraces this same fatherland because it is her father's homeland. According to Claire-Solange her father is patient, indulgent, and, even though he works for the system, cannot be considered as one who profited from it.

With the outbreak of World War I, Claire-Solange realizes that she loves Jacques (who is drafted to the Front). Her father's self-sacrifice for a special mission to an undisclosed military outpost and her decision to volunteer as a nurse in a Parisian hospital contribute to her change of heart with respect to France. This foreign country becomes a metaphor for a beloved, complaisant, father-symbol worthy of her love. In the end, France embodies an archetypal accepted father as the young woman changes her hostile views toward the father[']s land in favor of love for her adopted *patrie*. This fatherland image melds in symbioses with the *personnage* of her own biological father: "Why father did I have to wait until catastrophe in order to understand!" "Pourquoi faut-il, Papa, que j'aie attendu le malheur pour comprendre!" she declares in a letter to Etienne Hucquart while working in a hospital where she tends wounded from the Front (Lacascade 180). Later in the letter she admits that it wasn't until she had heard "the alarm bell among the peasants, praying with the people in Sainte-Geneviève, navigating around Paris...that she came to know the true France" "le tocsin d'alarme parmi les paysans, en priant Sainte-Geneviève avec les civils, en circulant à travers Paris . . . qu'elle a connu la vraie France" (Lacascade 180-181). War generates her compassion for a country that, before, was synonymous for abjection and oppression. Her sermons of love sent to Jacques at the Front go unanswered; yet this

lack of acknowledgment causes her to embrace even more an “ardeur de sacrifice” as she resigns herself to never leave France, but to stay and claim her beloved hero when he returns (Lacascade 181).

The protagonist’s about-face and ideological changes are shocking and take the reader by surprise. How could this militant woman of color, who espouses the tenants of a new, black consciousness and feminism, succumb to the tutelage of white patriarchy? Frantz Fanon would suggest almost 30 years later in *Black Skin, White Masks* that giving up one’s blackness is a result of the imperfections of love, as well as its perversions (Fanon 42). Fanon’s critique of Martinican Mayotte Capécia’s 1948 novel *Je suis martiniquaise* in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* may apply to Lacascade’s novel. Fanon criticized Capécia for devaluing black men in her aspirations for whiteness. Upon a first reading, it does seem that Lacascade falls into the same trap as Capécia of succumbing to what Fanon defines as black women’s “need” to become white (thus, according to his hypothesis, obtaining financial gain as well as increased social standing) through liaisons with white men. He states that Capécia’s penchant for white men is based on the fact that for her it is “customary in Martinique to dream of a form of salvation, that consists of magically turning white” (Fanon 44). Fanon condemned Capécia for “valorizing whiteness in her aspirations to privilege” (Sharpley-Whiting 37).

By contrast, Lacascade’s novel dissolves any similar criticism, offering a heroine who is sure of herself and able to make her own way in the world without the aid of men, white or black. Claire-Solange, unlike Capécia, never views herself as inferior with respect to the white part of her family or French society, nor does she believe she is underprivileged. On the contrary, as Emilienne the protagonist’s Martinican aunt remarks to her: “it’s your double heredity that makes you so valiant” ‘c’est ta double hérédité qui te rend si vaillante’ (Lacascade 189). Claire-Solange’s love for Jacques is based not on attraction because of his white skin (which in fact she views as beige and ugly), but rather pure love. At no point does she experience feelings of inadequacy because of her race, nor does Claire-Solange hypothesize that her life would have been less difficult if she had been white, as Mayotte Capécia states in her 1948 novel: “If my [grandmother] had married white, perhaps I would have been totally white. ? And life would have been less difficult for me” (Capécia

cia 59). Nor does Claire-Solange feel that marrying a white man will give her status or “make her more white” as Mayotte contends when she admits “I wanted to marry, but with a white man” (Capécia 202). We can only speculate on the impact Lacascade’s novel would have had on Fanon’s hypothesis concerning sexuality, women, and race. If anything, the reason Claire-Solange’s love for Jacques Danzel is heightened at the end of the war and the novel is because of his infirm, broken body. She feels it’s her duty *as a woman* and as a nurse to love him. As feminists and scholars of race, we cringe at the heroine’s need to give into the persona fashioned for her by the white patriarchal/colonial system as nurturer and care giver to her white man. We might surmise that Lacascade’s heroine falls into “a symbolic order,” as francophone literary scholar and critic Françoise Lionnet would suggest. This symbolic order, Lionnet contends, often influences the outcome of heroines’ destinies in francophone novels written by women of the Antilles (Lionnet 132). Yet unlike the protagonists of later novels, such as Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s *Juletane* (1982) and Michèle Lacroisil’s *Cajou* (1961), two women who die as a result of investing too much in men (black and white, respectively) and false promises, Claire-Solange survives intact mentally and physically at the end of Lacascade’s novel. Out of her own volition, the heroine makes a series of choices to which she adheres.

Within the postmodern framing of francophone literature, where often race is a principal issue, we may conclude that Suzanne Lacascade’s work fails to be the manifesto championing freedom and equality for the colonized that it started out to be. In the end, Claire-Solange abandons her staunch views about the necessity of breaking the chains of racial oppression in order to embrace the love she feels for a white man. However, I argue that we must consider the novel as reflecting the views of its era. If understood solely as a commentary on the way things were and how they stood with regard to gender divisions and racial stereotypes, Lacascade’s work is a valid reflection on the patriarchy and dominant male codes that ruled both black and white women’s lives in early twentieth-century France. In the end it is obvious that, like her heroine, Lacascade considered change along gender and racial lines to be elusive, something for future generations to undertake. She set out to provide a commentary on the social prerogatives of race and gender in France during the

World War I era, giving credence to the fact that, as Lionnet suggests, “women writers are often especially aware of their task as producers of images that both participate in the dominant representations of their culture and simultaneously undermine and subvert those images by offering a re-vision of familiar scripts” (Lionnet 132).

Claire-Solange opens a window to how things were in pre- and post- World War I France, not how they should be. The heroine comments on events as an elite Creole woman perhaps might have at the time, admitting that she had become transformed by Europe (Lacascade 202). This colonizing, imperial country has molded her like a father molds a daughter. *Claire-Solange* becomes French, adopting the French assimilé view of her colonial past. Lacascade reveals the painful truth about the colonial situation: the colonisé could not escape the influence of the *francisation* and power of the imperial machine. *Claire-Solange*’s francisation, the change in the way she views France and her home island, is construed through a metaphorical interplay of theme and language. Metaphors abound when describing the dialectic colony/France and are defined in terms of nature. The young woman gives into the identity that is fashioned for her by Parisian bourgeois society, realizing that her sacrifice is everything and that “her happiness, when the Fatherland is in need, is not admirable for a hero” ‘son bonheur, lorsque la Patrie est dans le besoin, ne convient pas à un héros.’ (Lacascade 202). Instead of effacing lines between colonized and colonizer, clear distinctions between the two spaces become more distinct. Martinique becomes something where nothing is ordered, where everything “is reproduced spontaneously,” while the opposite is true of “ordered” and “civilized” France, where “a gardener . . . does not let nature have its freedom to remain spontaneous, spirited, luxurious” ‘un jardinier . . . n’accorde pas à la nature la liberté de rester spontanée fouguesuse, luxuriante.’ (Lacascade 202). *Claire-Solange* eventually views the war in a positive light because it has for her forged a “sacred union” [between] “blacks and mulattos in tasks and in committees” ‘union sacrée [entre] blancs et mulâtres dans les œuvres et les comités’ as all seek to crush their common enemy (Lacascade 179). Just as a promoter of assimilationist politics would hope, *Claire-Solange*, in her desperate situation of waiting without word from Jacques, treating other men whom she declares resemble

her lover as they lie dying in their hospital beds, begins to “contemplate this symbol of European life” ‘comtemple ce symbole de la view d’Europe’ which, from her privileged milieu, she sees now as not much different than what she had known in the Antilles. It is the universal and “true family home” ‘[un] vrai foyer de famille’ that creates “intimacy,” she concludes (Lacascade 179). Within this intimacy, race and ethnic strife are forgotten. Claire-Solange sets everything aside (as she totally assimilates into her bourgeois life) for Jacques and the ideal of the nuclear family: “she loves exclusively, ferociously, tragically, like an African woman, and she will accept the imprisoned existence of Europe, this bourgeois life whose beige cloth she knows has a bloody lining” ‘elle aime, exclusivement, farouchement, tragiquement, comme une Africaine, et elle acceptera l’existence emprisonnée d’Europe, cette vie de bourgeois dont elle connaît le tissu beige, à l’envers sanglant’ (Lacascade 205).

Love of family and *patrie* become the centering forces that dictate the heroine’s actions for the rest of the novel. Claire-Solange’s militant *métissage* takes a backseat to her assimilation into the French elite bourgeoisie class of Paris. Lacascade regards the world of the métis through an exterior diegesis wherein, as Françoise Vergès explains in *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*, “the emergence of a new identity” takes place. This new identity insists on “the productive quality of discourse” and does not seek to radically change the status quo (Vergès 12). At the end of the novel, Lacascade’s heroine chooses not to discount her white heritage, albeit born of pain, suffering and slavery. Through the voice of Claire-Solange, the author deconstructs colonialism and its markers upon her subjectivity through a “process of anamnesis,” which assumes that “the past has the value of representing what is lacking” by proposing a new discourse wherein a “heterological position of the subject [is favored]” (Vergès 16-17). This heterologically positioned subject situates him/herself within “a social and cultural matrix of race, gender, class, and sexual difference” (Vergès 17). Within the matrix, the Creole woman scrutinizes “suspicion toward the ideals brought by Europe and the Enlightenment [and at the same time, recognizes an affiliation with] these ideals” (Vergès 17). If we place Claire-Solange within this matrix—this new identity which she views as constructed, not from a denial

of the past, but rather as an embrace of the facts of the present, which do not discount the privilege of her class—her change in attitude at the end of the novel becomes more comprehensible. The heroine (as did Lacascade) sets herself within the convergence of racial ambiguity, a place, the author seems to acknowledge that only the *métis* can understand. Claire-Solange speaks with the knowledge that she must, as Vergès states in her study, “work within her own history, away from the ideological discourse of European feminism about patriarchy and power relations . . . [she must] resist the *altericide* (destruction of otherness) led by the French state” in order to carve out her own specific identity in the world (Vergès 20).⁹

Lacascade embraces her *métis* identity which she views as a unique and special in the world. Maryse Condé remarks that Claire-Solange fashions her identity out of what she is and the love she is able to give because of who she is: “According to [Lacascade] . . . Claire-Solange captures for her benefit the warmth, the generosity and the abundance of her [island]. She also carries within herself an Earthly Paradise that only asks to blossom” (Condé 30). Although the heroine regrets that she must remain and live with her husband in France, she admits that she draws strength from the knowledge that she possesses the power of the sun and passion (Lacascade 220). Lacascade sincerely believes, as she foregrounds the thoughts of her heroine, in the “greatness of Africa and the African man,” yet she also accepts “the white world [and coopts] possession of the very elements that are inherent in racist mythology” (Condé 31). Lacascade definitely wishes to efface the stereotypes attached to women of the Antilles whom, Condé suggests, are viewed by whites in popular lore as “servants, charged with taking care of the white man’s child, [as] enslaved field hands turning the soil under the sun, [and as] forever humiliated concubines.” In place of these archetypes, the author seeks to build a new identity that will promote another type of “woman of the Tropiques” (Condé 30). This strong and independent woman of the Tropics is not like Mayotte Capécia, who considers being white the summit of a perfect ideal she wants to obtain. In contrast, Claire-Solange’s view of whiteness throughout Lacascade’s novel is synonymous with death and foreboding; a death “more deathly than a mortar-shell” ‘plus meurtrière que les obus’ (Lacascade 193). Whiteness for the heroine is the equivalent of a void—an

abyss—into which she does not want to fall. By the end of the novel, readers are well aware of the heroine's metaphorical suffocation and, on a certain level, do identify with her plight. Claire-Solange is able to "pull back the curtain of snow" 'écarte le rideau de neige' in order to let her African "smile of hope" come through, but she pays a price (Lacascade 193). The author grounds a new heterological subject within the identity of Claire-Solange and overturns privileged whiteness, offering another version of a woman of color's story in a white man's world. Yet, in the end, as the author duly notes in the tone of the closing pages of the novel her protagonist is unable to avoid the reality of the sociocultural and racial constructs of the time.

Lacascade's novel does not offer a prescription for racial liberation. Claire-Solange does not conquer the purviews of masculine domination or succeed in vocalizing a strong argument against colonial assimilationist theory. The work remains purely a commentary on the *way things were* for one Creole woman of the elite class of Martinique during the early part of the twentieth century; an era stratified by war, colonialism, racism, and French bourgeois idealism about race. At the end of the novel Claire-Solange, for her love for Jacques (who is maimed for life and embittered by the war and human carnage he witnessed on the battlefield), remains to take care of him in this beige in-between world set at the crux of white and black, where *étrangeté* will forever define the young heroine's identity as, indeed, it must have the author's.

Notes

1. A version of this article appears in *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls: Seeking Subjecthood Through Madness in Francophone Women's Writing of Africa and the Caribbean* by Valérie Orlando (Lexington, 2003). Permission from Lexington Press to reprint this version of the article is gratefully acknowledged.

2. All English translations of Lacascade's work are mine. To my knowledge, and after careful research and correspondence with Maryse Condé, she is the only literary scholar to have read and studied Lacascade's work in depth. In 1999, Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting refers to Lacascade's novel in her study *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Nar-*

ratives in French. The novel is practically impossible to find because there were only thirty copies printed. Two libraries contain the edition in their collections—Yale Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

3. “Old Colonies” refers to the first French colonial settlements in the West Indies dating back to the late-seventeenth-century. These included Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti.

4. The four racial groups that make up Martinican society.

5. France has anchored its identity, its being in the world, in the modern age—that of the *Lumière*s of the late-eighteenth century. Great philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau promoted the philosophical idea of “ontological security” based on racial and ethnic origins and hierarchies. A century later, France led the way in constructing its imperial identity by drawing on anthropological-sociological structures as proposed by great French ethnologists of the nineteenth century, such as renowned zoologist and author of *Discours sur les révolutions du globe*, Georges Cuvier (Sara Bartmaan’s dissector). French statesmen’s penchant interest in mixing science and politics throughout the late eighteenth, nineteenth and most of the twentieth century solidified policies on race through study of the colonized world. The French civilizing mission in Africa, the Americas and Asia—from the *vieilles colonies* in Guadeloupe and Martinique to Algeria and the Maghreb (colonized in the nineteenth century)—provided a testing ground for anthropological hypotheses of the day held in high esteem in Europe. Upholding doctrines such as the “First Order of Nature,” as Donna Haraway suggests, became “a colonial affair” where African men, women and children found themselves under a “system of unequal exchange” held at bay by an “extractive colonialism” that categorized every aspect of the colonial world (Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions*, [NY: Routledge 1989], 119). North African colonization, propelled the French, scientific world toward leaps and bounds of discovery, following on the heels of military conquests that inevitably sparked the public’s interest in further study of the exotic flora and fauna of the newly founded colonies. The enthusiasm of Napoleon III for the scientific ventures of the colonial missions accumulated eventually into the founding of the Société Zoologique d’Acclimation in the spring of 1855. Frantz Fanon later wrote in his work *Les Damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*) that, “Le langage du colon, quand il s’agit du colonisé, est un langage zoologique” [The language of the colonizer is a zoological language.] The link between science and colonialism took on its most heinous attributes towards the end of the nineteenth century when “human zoos” became the rage in Paris. After the successful “dog exhibition” in 1874, human exhibitions boasting African specimens became

widely popular. Humans behind bars, put on display, became a common occurrence across Europe. In Berlin in 1879, six Zulu warriors were displayed, and from 1877 to 1893, several “tribes” were exhibited in the Jardin d’Acclimatation in Paris. Such fascination, however, does not end with the nineteenth century. As recent as 1994, a zoo near Nantes, France, wanted to create a “village ivoirien” [Ivory Coast Village] but were discouraged by a wave of antiracist organizations (“Zoo humains,” *Le Monde*, Jan. 17, 2000). Anthropological classifications based on race dissimilated any potential chaos within the French psyche over racial-ethnic questions and created a sense of security for the white colonials of late-nineteenth-century France.

6. Author’s emphasis.

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