

**Reading/Writing Women
in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane***

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I write for the still-fragmented parts in me, trying to bring them together. Whoever can read and use any of this, I write for them as well. . . . I write in full knowledge that the majority of the world's illiterates are women, that I live in a technologically advanced country where forty percent of the population can barely read and twenty percent are functionally illiterate. I believe that these facts are directly connected to the fragmentations I suffer in myself, that we are all in this together.

—Adrienne Rich

In the absence of the kinds of foundational texts that nations typically construct in order to account for their origins, Francophone Caribbean writing has responded to the implicit question of "How did we become a people?" by writing and rewriting—over and over again—the very terms of its cultural existence, by either re-emplotting the "official" French colonial version of its history or by re-mythifying its African "prehistory." As if to ask how many metanarrative options are available for a people born of the slave trade, of Middle Passage. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant writes about the psychic disintegration that has been the French West Indian legacy of slavery since the 18th century, but also about the stasis and schizophrenia that are the by-products of 20th century departmentalization. As Michael Dash puts it in his introduction to the English translation of Glissant's text, life in the Département d'Outre-Mer is dominated by the Social Security Building and the airport: the choice is between dependence or escape (xviii).

No reader familiar with Francophone Caribbean women's writing will fail to recognize these thematic preoccupations in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (1982), whose representation of voicelessness, alienation, confinement, deracination, rupture, exclusion, dispossession, madness and exile connects it intertextually with other West Indies-generated texts, both Anglophone and Francophone.¹ The protagonist Juletane initiates her journal by announcing her sense of ontological uncertainty as if it were a badge of collective

identification, an inescapable legacy, a doomed destiny: "En naissant, j'étais déjà victime des éléments, sans compter trois siècles d'histoire de notre peuple dont mes frères épaules devaient hériter . . ." (13) 'At birth, then, I was already a victim of the elements, not to mention three centuries of our people's history which my frail shoulders were to inherit . . .' (2).

The three points of the "triangle de traite"—Africa, the West Indies, and the Métropole—fixed points of reference and sites of longing, though privileged differently in the minds and psyches of Caribbean subjects, have left their imprint on all Francophone Caribbean writing, but especially on writing by women. For every Emma Bovary in a Caribbean text who imagines herself elsewhere, France has functioned as the social signifier par excellence, the locus of imitation and of educational, economic, cultural, and social opportunity; Africa has functioned as the mythic signifier, the return to authenticity, *Terre Ancestrale, Mère-Patrie*.

For Glissant, who bemoans the metropolitan fixation of West Indian society, it is imperative that the Francophone Caribbean subject envision a new hemispherically-oriented "*poétique de la relation*." Maryse Condé signals the need for a geographic and ideological change in orientation as well, but she has focused not on France, but on the other symbolic site, Africa. In a 1984 interview, she argues against constructing a Caribbean politics of identity around a search for lost origins. Condé decries the need to project onto Africa the capacity to restore psychic unity where once there was brutal physical rupture, the impulse to expect racial identification to transcend historical and cultural difference. Even in her recognition of the justifications used formerly to underwrite the project of Negritude, of the temptation to fetishize Mother-Africa as a way of retaining a primordial connection to a collective memory, she considers the dream of racial repatriation no longer viable, especially for women:

Etre femme et antillaise, c'est un destin difficile à déchiffrer. Pendant un temps, les Antillais ont cru que leur quête d'identité passait par l'Afrique . . . ; l'Afrique était pour eux la grande matrice de la race noire et tout enfant issu de cette matrice devait pour se connaître, fatalement, se rattacher à elle. En fin de compte, c'est un piège. (Jacquey 22)

To be a woman and Antillean is a destiny difficult to decipher. At one time, the Antilleans believed that their quest for identity went by way of Africa. Africa was for them the great womb of the black

race and every child who emerged from this womb had to, in order to know itself, fatally, reconnect with it. In the final analysis, it's a trap. (my translation)

Condé illustrates this problem in two of her novels, *Heremakhonon* (1976) and *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981), which chart a map of idealization, disillusionment, and demystification of Africa through the experiences of their West Indian daughters-in-quest. Véronique and Marie-Hélène, her highly self-conscious and assimilated protagonists, seek their identities in Africa and are unprepared for and profoundly disappointed by the discrepancy between fantasy and reality.

The great preponderance of Caribbean novels by women is written in the autobiographical or monological mode; *Juletane* has a split structure that ensures against it being purely monological, but it stops short of being accurately characterized as dialogical.² Indeed, the ironic pathos of the narrative resides in the fact that Mamadou, the intended reader of Juletane's journal, never sees it, whereas Hélène, who does, reads it too late. Too late, that is, to help Juletane. It is the conceit of the narrative to suggest that four years after Juletane and Mamadou's death, this narrative about the failure of love becomes a testimony to the triumph of writing and its correlative, the power of reading. It is precisely the power of reading that accounts for the presence of Hélène, the character who discovers the journal and whose life is changed in response. Not only does the reader outside-the-text read over his or her shoulder, as it were, s/he reads Hélène reading Juletane's text. This is a necessary device of the fictional-journal genre, for as much as textual reflexivity refers to the fictional-journal's context, it also supplies much of its content: "[I]t is a drama of both writing and reading" (Abbott 49). Here thematic specificity devolves from a drama of both reading and writing *women*.

Juletane's split structure posits four potential readers. One part of the narrative consists of the fragmented first-person journal kept by Juletane (the protagonist whose name is the title of the novel) between August 22 and September 8, 1961. The other part consists of the third-person account of Hélène, who finds the journal after the death of Juletane, and reads it. This captivated reader-in-the-text, Hélène, is a social worker who had been assigned to Juletane's case but was too distracted to attend to it at the time that Juletane (already profoundly, clinically depressed) was offered the possibility of returning to France. Hélène is the only other character able to understand Juletane's situation, by virtue of her own Caribbean background and

experience of having lived in the Métropole. Just as their narratives are contrapuntally related to each other, the two women are doubles; their lives and narratives move in parallel but diametrically opposite directions. As Juletane “moves from innocence to (a traumatic) experience that ultimately destroys her,” Hélène’s jaded and hard-hearted view of love and sexual politics is transformed by her reading (Ngate 559). She comes across the journal at midnight in the midst of packing for a move out of her present apartment and, except for those brief respites when she lights a cigarette, pours herself some Scotch, plays Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in response to Juletane’s own action in the text, or reflects on the story and its implications for her experience, she reads through until five o’clock in the morning. At that point, Hélène has come to the final entry in Juletane’s journal and has been cathartically affected by the tragic experience of her compatriot: “Hélène redressa avec tendresse les coins écornés du cahier, le referma et pour la première fois depuis près de vingt ans, elle pleura. Le journal de Juletane avait brisé le bloc de glace qui enrobait son cœur” (142) ‘Hélène tenderly smoothed the bent corners of the notebook, closed it, and, for the first time in almost twenty years, she wept. Juletane’s diary had broken the block of ice around her heart’ (79).

The journal is the transcription of a woman’s coming-to-writing and the various scenes of writing mirror stages of self-consciousness and psychic disintegration. Juletane’s textual activity begins as a way for her to record her thoughts. Then it evolves into a relationship, a means of clinging to something, a friend, a confidante, across the closed space that becomes synonymous with the sterility of her life: “Ma vie se déroule dans une chambre de cinq pas sur quatre et sous le manguier de la cour où je prend mes repas” (54) ‘My life unfolds in a room five paces by four and under the mango tree where I eat my meals’ (26). Although Juletane writes as a way to contextualize her inevitable misreading of Africa, perhaps the activity of keeping a journal in itself (since it separates her from an entire set of African women—as well as the nature of her testimony) only reinforces what Jonathan Ngate has called her “difficulty . . . in meeting the continent on its own terms” (553). Perhaps Juletane lacks what Vèvè Clark claims real readers develop by reading other texts that call attention to their own allusive activities, “diaspora literacy,” which Clark defines as the “ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean, from an informed and indigenous perspective.” (304). Perhaps Warner-Vieyra, a Guadeloupean who has lived much of her life in Senegal and had

already been living there for some twenty years at the time that her second novel, *Juletane*, was published in 1982, is offering a cautionary tale to those who would attempt to impose a causal logic on the events in Juletane's life. Some forms of transcultural exchange do not work in the enabling way we would like to think they do.³

In Warner-Vieyra's novel the orphaned and utterly insulated Juletane gets to Africa in the heady days before Independence by way of the Métropole, but there she meets her horrific destiny by accident. Raised by her grandmother following the death of her mother soon after childbirth, Juletane is sent to Paris to live with her godmother at the age of ten, when her father dies. Some years later, her godmother also dies. Alone, she is susceptible to the lure of love and the bonds of family that marriage with a handsome and articulate African law student promises. "Moi, je l'aimais avec toute la fougue et l'absolu d'un premier et unique amour. Il possédait à mes yeux toutes les vertus. N'ayant pas de parents, peu d'amis, Mamadou devint tout mon univers" (31) 'For my part, I loved him with all the ardour and intensity of a first and only love. In my eyes he was perfect. I had no relatives, few friends, so Mamadou became my whole world' (13). Because her orphaned status means that she is not only psychologically and physically bereft, but also that (in Glissant's terms) she lacks a history, her access to the "Other" in the figure of the African Mamadou constitutes both an opening up to a wider social and cultural world and a return to the motherland.

Ironically, what appears to be a lifeline leads eventually to total closure and enclosure as extreme melancholy deteriorates into madness. It is on the boat from France to her new home that Juletane discovers inadvertently that Mamadou already has a wife, Awa, and a five-year-old daughter who are awaiting his return. Devastated, confused, and paralyzed with fear, she once again feels the anguish of being an orphan:

L'arrivée sur cette terre africaine de mes pères, je l'avais de cent manières imaginée, voici qu'elle se transformait en un cauchemar. Je ne me demandais plus comment j'allais être accueillie par la famille de Mamadou: sûre d'être une intruse, déplacée, déclassée. L'autre femme était avec sa fille, entourée des parents qui l'avaient choisie et qui la protégeaient. Et moi, je serais là, ridiculement seule en face d'eux, moi l'étrangère. . . . (35)

This homecoming to Africa, the land of my forefathers, I had imagined it in a hundred different ways, and it had become a

nightmare. I no longer wondered how Mamadou's family would receive me: I knew I would be an intruder, out of place, lost. The other woman was with her daughter, surrounded by family who had chosen her and who protected her. And I, I was there, absurdly alone to face them, I was the stranger. . . . (15)

Upon their arrival, events unfold differently from the way Juletane anticipates they will, even as they corroborate her sense of marginality and insignificance in Africa. She is warmly received by Mamadou's family, who speak to her in a blend of Wolof and French which she has difficulty understanding. According to Juletane, that is the last time she hears French spoken from anyone other than her husband and the detested Ndèye (his second co-wife), and she never learns what she calls "la langue nationale." Indeed, she finds herself more and more immersed in her own world, in her own space, the subject of her own melancholy and desperation, an object of derision and misunderstanding.

She comes to be known as the "madwoman," a perceptual and behavioral category she effectively calls into question:

Ici, on m'appelle "la folle," cela n'a rien d'original. Que savent-ils de la folie? Et si les fous n'étaient pas fous! Si un certain comportement que les gens simples et vulgaires nomment folie, n'étaient que sagesse, reflet de l'hypersensibilité lucide d'une âme pure, droite, précipitée dans un vide affectif réel ou imaginaire? (13)

Here they call me "the mad woman," not very original. What do they know about madness? What if mad people weren't mad! What if certain types of behavior which simple, ordinary people call madness, were just wisdom, a reflection of a pure, upright soul plunged into a real or imaginary affective void? (2)

It is certainly not by virtue of her own assertions of lucidity that Juletane makes the reader question whether she is truly "mad." As Shoshana Felman contends in her study of writing and madness, "*To talk about madness is always, in fact, to deny it.* However one represents madness to oneself or others, to represent madness is always, consciously or unconsciously, to play out the *scene* of the denial of *one's own* madness" (252). Rather, Juletane reinforces the Foucauldian notion that in the binary terms of every discourse, the ultimately alienated, excluded, demarcated outsider is equated with madness.

But how is madness rendered in the text? What is the relationship, as Felman puts it, between "statement" and "performance," between "speaking about madness" and the "madness that speaks":

Literature and madness by no means reside in theme, in the content of a statement. In the play of forces underlying the relationship between philosophy and fiction, literature and madness, the crucial problem is that of the subject's *place*, of h[er] *position* with respect to the delusion. And the position of the subject is not defined by *what* [s]he says, nor by what [s]he talks *about*, but by the place—unknown to h[er]—*from which* [s]he speaks. (50)

Juletane compels the reader to ask, as does Maxine Hong Kingston in her autobiography, *Woman Warrior*, is a woman "mad" because she tells the same story over and over again—or because Western-mannered and unable to bear children in a traditional Muslim society that valorizes fertility, she does not conform and has no place? Is she mad because her precarious and fragile enough sense of personal identity has no defense against deforming and defamiliarizing modes of perception?

When Mamadou takes the beautiful, shallow, vain (and French-speaking African) third wife, Ndèye, who quickly becomes his favorite, Juletane reads the truth of her own degraded and deviant status in Ndèye's eyes:

Voilà que pour elle je suis folle et, ce qui est tout vexant pour moi, "toubabesse": elle m'assimilait, ni plus ni moins, aux femmes blanches des colons. Elle m'enlevait même mon identité nègre. Mes pères avaient durement payé mon droit à être noire, fertilisant les terres d'Amérique de leur sang versé et de leur sueur dans des révoltes désespérées pour que je naisse libre et fière d'être noire. . . . En France, je n'avais jamais été peignée quand on faisait allusion à ma couleur; je me rappelle avoir toujours accepté ma différence fièrement, d'autant plus que très souvent, j'avais entendu sur mon passage: "C'est une jolie négresse," ou "elle est mignonne, la petite noire." Je n'aurais jamais imaginé à ce moment-là, qu'en terre africaine quelqu'un m'aurait assimilée à une Blanche. (79)

And here I was, as far as she was concerned, crazy, and what was just as annoying to me, "European" or "toubabesse." She was quite simply identifying me with the white wives of the colonials.

She was even stripping me of my identity as a black woman. My forefathers had paid dearly for my right to be black, spilling their blood and giving their sweat in hopeless revolts to enrich the soil of the Americas so that I might be born free and proud to be black. In France, I had never been offended when people referred to my colour. I remember I always accepted proudly the fact that I was different, all the more so as very often I had heard people say as I passed: "She is a pretty black woman" or "The little black girl is adorable." Then I would never have imagined that on African soil I would have been called a white woman. (42-43)

Although she defined herself in negatively differentiating terms at the outset of the novel ("Je n'ai pas d'enfant. Je n'ai ni parents, ni amis. Et même plus de nom"), Juletane rejects Ndèye's attempts to complete the job of erasing her subjectivity totally. In this passage, Juletane cleaves to her self-representation as a *black* Caribbean woman, whose rich if painful cultural and racial legacy of transplantation, slavery and rebellion, she believes, has endowed her with a history worthy of respect, not contempt. Having experienced "difference" in France as something faintly positive, Juletane evokes the "triangle de traite" here as a legacy of entitlement—unaware that her Caribbean female body is the overdetermined site of contradictory projections, not only of racial oppression and exoticism by Europeans, but more problematically, of French acculturation by Africans. In the context of growing African nationalism, Ndèye's fascinating conflation of two signifiers of outsidership—whiteness and colonialism—with another—madness—identifies Juletane ineluctably as a member of the Caribbean diaspora, an exile from the African present.

Juletane's hatred of Ndèye reaches its extreme when Ndèye slaps her; from that point on, Juletane plots her revenge, and eventually throws boiling oil in Ndèye's face after dreaming that Ndèye had murdered her. Because Juletane moves between various states of consciousness and is not a reliable narrator, the reader comes to depend upon Hélène, the reader-in-the-text, to verify what has happened in the narrative. For example, when Awa's three children (to whom Juletane is actually quite attached) mysteriously die simultaneously of poisoning, the reader can only conjecture what might have happened. But it is Hélène who recalls hearing about the strange and horrific event and concludes for the reader that Juletane must have been responsible, whether she remembers or not. That

Juletane has difficulty making certain kinds of logical and temporal

connections is evident in her mystified and admiring reaction to the suicide of Awa, who is overcome by grief at the death of her children.

Yet despite her extended bouts of depression, delirium, and uncontrollable rage, Juletane is also capable of speculating on what we would call the theoretical possibilities offered by cultural relativism while at the same time demonstrating the tragic limitations imposed on her by her own sense of romantic individualism:

C'est vrai que nous aurions pu être une grande et belle famille. Pour cela, il aurait fallu que je sois également née dans un petit village de brousse, élevée dans une famille polygame, dans l'esprit du partage de mon maître avec d'autres femmes. Bien au contraire, je ne suis de nulle part et mon prince charmant, je l'avais rêvé unique et fidèle. Il devait être tout pour moi, moi tout pour lui, notre union aussi solide qu'une forteresse construite sur un rocher. . . . Puisse-je vivre longtemps, assez longtemps, pour voir la chute fatale de cette demeure où vécurent mes dernières illusions? (115)

It is true that we could have been one big, happy family. But for that to be, I would also have to come from a little village in the bush, have been brought up in a polygamous family, taught to share my master with other women. Whereas, in fact I belong nowhere and I had dreamed of a prince charming who would be faithful and mine alone. He was to be all mine and I all his and our union would be as solid as a fortress built on a rock. . . . Can I live long enough to see the fatal fall of this house where my last illusions dwelled? (63-64)

Juletane comes slowly to realize that each cultural encounter, however idealized, brings with it its own body of conventional expectations and points of cultural resistance. Because she expected "Mère Afrique"/"Prince Charmant" to fill what she perceived to be her subjective lack, she discounted the potential violence of that cultural encounter, never *imagining* that deterritorialization is an ongoing process of gain and loss, devaluation and revalorization in relation to both fixed and changing terms of reference. By the end, Juletane understands her "dernières illusions" to be the traces of symbolic investments now bankrupt of meaning, of use to her now only as fuel for her desire for vengeance. But the psycho-mythic connotations of "La chute fatale de cette demeure" 'the fatal fall of this house' suggest as well a desire for the sustaining power necessary to witness her own final decomposi-

tion. When Mamadou suddenly dies in an automobile accident, Juletane's motivation for writing and living disappears: "Je me sens vidée de toute énergie. Je n'ai plus personne à aimer, personne à haïr. Je peux mettre le point final à ce journal que Mamadou ne lira pas" (140) 'I feel drained. I have no one to love, no one to hate. I can put the final period to this diary which Mamadou will never read' (78). This last entry recapitulates the journal's opening, which invokes a world of transvaluation where "les fous ne sont pas fous, mais des sages aux regards de justice" (141) 'mad people are not mad, but wise and just' (78).

Juletane enacts what readers—at least since the advent of reader-response criticism—now understand theoretically, but have always known experientially, that reading and writing are only two names for what is virtually the same activity.⁴ In *Juletane*'s case, the act of writing on a blank page (conceived implicitly as confession and testimony) provides both therapeutic and cognitive benefits, and the process of reading herself retrospectively proffers a sense of mastery over a life that now exists as mere shards. Indeed, she maintains that the nature of that very narrative would be different now, had she thought of using writing as an instrument of mediation years ago:

Pendant des années, j'ai divaguée d'un état de prostration à la furie du désespoir sans confident. Je n'avais jamais imaginé que coucher ma peine sur une feuille blanche pouvait m'aider à l'analyser, la dominer et enfin, peut-être, la supporter ou définitivement la refuser. (60)

For years I had wavered between abject depression and raging despair with no one to turn to. It had never occurred to me that putting down my anguish on a blank page could help me to analyze it, to control it and finally, perhaps to bear it or reject it once and for all. (30)

To suggest, however, that all the results of *Juletane*'s efforts at self-inscription are salutary or that reading/writing necessarily exist in some deferred relation to experience would be naive. In a journal entry in which *Juletane* herself questions whether it is a good idea to resurrect a past "plus chargé de peines que de joies" (52) 'more filled with sorrows than with joys' (25), she projects, perhaps unconsciously (though accurately), a fear of what these psychic excavations might produce. When she asks rhetorically, "Réveiller tout cela, n'est-ce pas laquiner un fauve endormi?" (52) 'Stirring up all that, isn't it provok-

ing a sleeping tiger?' (26), the psychoanalytic implications of rousing the savage beast from its anesthetized/repressed state are clear: she is both the *fauve endormi* and the object of its wrath, the interpreting subject and the locus of interpretation. As the mutually constitutive effects of this process of self-reflexion and inscription become more and more apparent, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between them, especially as they are inextricably bound to the narrative impulse that enables Juletane to keep going, from misery to rage. At this point in the narrative, writing not only provides emotional sustenance and intensity; it elicits a deep erotic longing. She even derives aesthetic gratification from "la magie des mots" and from exercising continuing mastery in French. She reconstitutes herself in her own language, the language of her exclusion, the language of her most prized identity.

Near the end of her narrative, Juletane compares her own alienated situation and experience to that of a fellow patient in the psychiatric hospital to which she is finally confined. She extracts from the story of an African woman from a traditional village who had moved to Paris with her husband a narrative that helps to explain her own madness. Left alone all day while he is at work, unable to speak French, the woman had no one with whom she could communicate, and some months later fell ill. Unable to care for her, her husband sent her back to Africa for treatment. She awaits his return from France so they can go back and live in their village:

L'expérience de Nabou constitue un étrange parallèle avec ma vie dans ce pays. Nous avons connu toutes deux la solitude de "l'étrangère," qui n'a que des souvenirs à ruminer pendant de longs jours, qu'une voix à écouter, la sienne, jusqu'à l'obsession. . . . (140)

Nabou's experience in Paris strongly parallels my life in this country. We both knew the loneliness of being the "foreigner" who had nothing to do but turn over memories for days on end, who had only one voice to listen to, her own, until it became an obsession. . . . (78)

A passage like the one above challenges an essentialist reading of this text, one that would attribute a "cause" to Juletane's breakdown, whether it be the evils of colonialism, the egocentrism of African men, the over-valorization of motherhood in African society, or even the system of polygamy that ensures male privilege *tout court*. Alongside

the broad strokes and stress on structural constraints, the complexity of Warner-Vieyra's authorial perspective can be discerned in the care she takes to mediate against the temptation either to critique or to dictate her reader's identification with or empathy for the condition or position of a single female character. This is a narrative in which, conceptually at least, every female character is "the other woman."

How is one to read "women" if not through Warner-Vieyra's very insistence on the interplay of colonially produced cultural differences? That Juletane suffers almost unbearably her own isolation within the cloistered traditional female Muslim West African community does not necessarily constitute a critique of it, nor does it preclude other possibilities under other circumstances. And what about Awa, who waits five years for her husband only to have him return home with another wife? Much to Juletane's surprise, and despite Juletane's feelings of hostility and rivalry toward Awa, she is treated kindly and accepted by her. Moreover, it is clear that the reader's sympathies are to be shared with a mother who loses three children and in despair kills herself. Hélène, initially liberated but emotionally dead, is redeemed by the tragedy and loss of both Juletane's and Awa's stories. That Hélène alone survives in order to serve as the vehicle of transmission has critical as well as narratological consequences, some of which I have implied above. To read "women" in this narrative, it is necessary to read beyond Juletane's single doomed destiny, to consider as no less crucial to the feminist "message" of the text the disparate positions of Awa and Hélène, and to delineate that which separates them as well as that which connects them as women.

Those rhetorically powerful universalizing questions about reading theories and practices that have characterized Western feminist criticism on both sides of the Atlantic until recently appear hopelessly reductive from a contemporary Francophone African perspective: "What does it mean for a woman to express herself in writing? How does a woman write as a woman? What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?" To ask such questions in reference to *Juletane*, as if the material conditions of such a reading were an incidental aspect of the analysis, is to beg the most pressing of all questions.⁵ Moreover, as Christopher Miller has shown, it is scriptocentric to assume that the status of literacy compensates for the asymmetry of gender and necessarily empowers women materially; within a specific culture, it might also serve to marginalize them.⁶ Indeed, it is a grave irony that Juletane can define her identity in Africa only in writing, because overall literacy in Senegal—the unnamed scene of this deterritorialized

West Indian female narrative—is below 10%, and female literacy significantly lower. Precisely because literacy in Francophone African culture is synonymous with French-language literacy (with women having made only the most belated emergence into the Francophone literary tradition), Warner-Vieyra's message about the importance of reading and writing in the life of a woman (and here Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* reverberates) has to be read in its local, and necessarily intercultural context, if only to stress its global implications. For in most of the world, it is a rare representation that has women reading or writing at all.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the 1992 Colloquium on Twentieth Century French Studies. I thank Ronnie Scharfman for her critical insights and encouragement.

1. Two rich critical collections that treat women's writing in the Caribbean and provide extensive bibliographies are *Caribbean Women Writers* edited by Selwyn Cudjoe and *Out of the Kumbula* edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido.

2. Juletane's text is only technically speaking a journal. In effect, it is a (fictional) autobiography, since it has an intended reader (who is not addressed directly, but is referred to in the third person) and is as much a retrospective reading of her subjective history as it is a daily account of recent events. This is necessary because Juletane's readers (both within and outside the text) do not "know" her and thus lack a means for framing her story or for decoding its terms.

3. Françoise Lionnet argues that Caribbean heroines "suffer the fate of victims because in that tradition there is not yet a literary model that allows the female subject to genuinely conceive of herself as both a speaking and acting subject" (37-38). Lionnet uses "passive" and "dependent" to describe Juletane's personality structure and behavior, which I would call "reactive." She stresses the troubling or problematic aspects of such a representation of female agency, whereas I take a different view of Juletane's retreat. Although for all intents and purposes, she renders herself socially and physically powerless in Africa, she does seek access to her own inferiority and to an intersubjective world through a particular (if restricted) mode of activity. She is a speaking, acting, and writing subject and hence a literary model herself.

4. See the edited collections of Jane Tompkins and of Susan Suleiman and Inge Crossman, which focus on the role of the reader in the critical process. Taken as a whole, the essays trace the movement within literary theory from text-dominant to reader-dominant constructions of the reading process,

landing eventually at a dialectically-informed construction of the interaction between reader and text. Eventually, the politics of subjectivity displaces other concerns, and the focus sharpens and shifts toward the gender inscribed in the text as well as the gender of "the reader."

5. See Schweikart 51. These questions extend the line of questioning that was initiated by Peggy Kamuf in "Writing Like a Woman" and pursued by Jonathan Culler in "Reading as a Woman" and later Mary Jacobus in "Reading Woman (Reading)."

6. See Miller's final chapter, which begins with a discussion of "the relation of literate culture to patriarchy, the control of literary production, and the process of canon formation outside the boundaries of first-world canons" (247) and ends with an analysis of *Une si longue lettre*. Since Juletane's position as a reading/writing woman (and Hélène's as well) is inscribed doubly in her Caribbean origins and African displacement, Denise Shelton's remarks concerning "the situation of the Caribbean woman writer" who has not benefitted from "the emergence of numerous feminist presses in Europe and Canada" are pertinent here. Shelton cites the following reasons: "lack of institutional support, absence of a real reading public, high illiteracy rate among the majority of their countrymen; cultural biases of the minority (who more readily consume the literature of France and Europe), indifference of the foreign readership. All this is compounded by the malaise felt by the writer in the presence of the two languages of unequal status, French and Creole" (347).

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