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Kalisa, Marie-Chantal, "Colonial Violence and Trauma in the Works of Michèle Lacrosil and Ken Bugul" (2000). *French Language and Literature Papers*. 58.

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Colonial Violence and Trauma in the Works of Michèle Lacrosil and Ken Bugul

Chantal Kalisa

Abstract

To what extent can we say that both Lacrosil and Bugul rewrite Fanon? Through the study of *Cajou* and *Ken*, respectively the Guadeloupean and the Senegalese female protagonists, this article proposes a way to derive a specifically female perspective on colonial violence. The essay focuses on the two novels, *Cajou* and *Le baobab fou*, and examines the effect of colonial epistemological violence and its specific impact on the black female's subjectivity. The protagonists Ken and Cajou revisit their initial trauma in a quest for knowledge of their historical heritage and engage in a dialogue with Frantz Fanon, representative of black male intellectuals. Cajou and Ken are young women living in Europe during the late 50s and 60s. Although they find themselves in Europe under different circumstances, the women's stay in Europe takes a tragic turn as the result of traumatic disillusionment and alienation, both physical and psychological.

Keywords: Fanon, African literature, Caribbean literature, Women writers, Colonialism, Violence, Lacrosil, Bugul, *Cajou*, *Le baobab fou*

An African woman in the post/colonial Métropole

Le baobab fou is a fictionalized account¹ of the life of the author, Ken Bugul, while she lived in Belgium as a student. Over and over again, Ken the protagonist fails to find herself in post-colonial Métropole. The novel recounts her progressive descent to madness due to colonial erasure of the colonized sense of history² and misleading images of the Métropole as a place to recover one's identity. Though throughout the novel, Ken is constantly moving from one location to another, from one group of friends to another and from one lover to another in order to find a place in which to belong, she nevertheless experiences both physical and physiological confinement. She finds herself in a vicious circle from which she does not seem able to get out. Like many colonized subjects, Ken idealizes, at least in the beginning, the Métropole as evidence in her desire to espouse the Western female body.

It is through the experience of the body that wants to put on a white mask that the black woman awakens to her racialized female body. The protagonist discovers her 'malediction corporelle,' in the fanonian³ sense but comes to realize that gender plays an important part in her experience of the West, a factor that considerably complicates her case. While the black man's experience in Europe has often been represented in literature and stories of those who went there, whether to fight in the wars, to work or to study, the black woman's experience is different because no one has recounted this experience from a female point of view. At the peak of her identity crisis, Ken asks, 'Pourquoi n'avoir pas prévu la réaction de la femme noire au colonialisme.'⁴ The question summarizes the black woman's frustration over the failure of decolonizing theories to incorporate the impact

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- 1 Literature provides a privileged insight into social and cultural changes resulting from the contact between different peoples — contacts that may have been caused by politics, economics, or even changes in climate.
 - 2 Francophone African and Caribbean novels and autobiographies, for example, reveal much about the nature of the encounter between the peoples of that continent and Francophone countries of Europe, namely France and Belgium, the former colonizers. But in most works, and nearly all criticism of literature in question, the focus is on racial difference and the psychological responses that difference generates.
 - 3 Frantz Fanon has analyzed this cultural encounter through the lens of race in his books and essays, especially in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952). But the racial perspective that marks much of this literature and the criticism it has produced masks a much less understood and little studied dimension of the encounter between Europe and Africa: the role of gender.
 - 4 Ken Bugul, *Le baobab fou*, Abidjan: Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1983, p. 113.

of colonialism on the black female psyche and the importance of narrating her own experience as unique for the colonized woman. If the only model she has is from a black male's perspective, how will she know what it is to be a 'Négresse' in the colonizer's land?

For Ken, to attain desired integration in the Métropole, she must 'whiten' herself or she must correspond to the western idea of 'African woman's beauty.' For instance, she alternates African and European clothing, depending on her desire to 'fit' in her exoticized and eroticized African clothes, or to 'belong' in her European attire. In *Le baobab fou*, there are two instances that define racialization and sexualization of black women's bodies. The first event is Ken's traumatic experience in a wig store during which she is forced to face her non-whiteness; that is she has no face for white women's 'sleek, brown, very long and very hairy wigs.'⁵ Outside the wig shop, Ken looks at the 'horrifying' face reflected in the mirror. In this macabre incident, Ken simultaneously discovers her otherness with its ensuing negative value. This is reminiscent of the famous fanonian scene in which a little white boy's reaction of fear and horror reminds the black man of the negative value attached to his 'blackness' and his subsequent non-admittance into the Western world.

Ken's second turning point in race and gender consciousness materializes itself in her romantic affair with Louis, a Belgian agronomy student. This romance, she explains: 'servait à m'expliquer, à m'intégrer, à montrer que j'étais comme eux: qu'il n'y avait aucune différence entre nous, que eux et moi, nous avons les mêmes ancêtres.'⁶ The inter-racial romance ends in an abortion that further alienates Ken from the white world. At the abortion clinic, the doctor asks her whether her sexual partner was white or black. Ken observes: 'Pour la première fois, je me rendais compte qu'une femme pouvait tomber enceinte d'un Noir ou d'un Blanc.'⁷ During the ordeal, she becomes suddenly aware of the overdetermined meanings given to the fact that Louis is white and she is black. The racist white doctor's attitude induces her to detest his white skin and that of her lover. The abortion, according to her, lulls her symbolically, for if the scene at the wig store taught her to hate her skin, the trip to the clinic taught her to hate the white skin. She learns the divisive racial discourse in the context of the Métropole. The symbolic death announces the end of innocence for Ken; that is the end of the Ken who had assimilated misleading images of the West.

Although she lives in Belgium in the 60s, an era characterized by Western civil rights and feminist movements, Ken rejects liberalism by stating that it still 'exposes her,' therefore amplifies her identity crisis. Ken displays her resistance to post-colonial violent racism by displaying contradictory behavior. For instance, she is led to exploit the times by prostituting herself, cashing in on her black womanhood. She is told that '*Tu est une noire et tu es belle. Il faut que tu exploites cela.*'⁸ A product of consumption, she consciously participates in promoting the stereotypical image of the erotic and exotic black woman. For instance, she organizes dinners and exotic games around African themes where she consciously enacts her race and gender. Ken is required to play what she calls 'le jeu de l'occident' in which she has to display an 'authentic' identity as a black woman. In 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,' Homi Bhabha explains that this enactment is limited to mimicry, 'a representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.' Ken's desire to emerge as 'authentic' occurs through mimicry which according to Bhabha 'repeats rather than represent'⁹ the required display of false and ironic authenticity.

This coming in and out of the white world becomes an exhausting exercise both physically and mentally. The end of the novel suggests that Ken has been seriously mentally alienated from Western society. Ken's experience of post-colonialism and 'becoming a black woman in the Métropole' are not the only problem. In fact, the novel indicates that Ken was already traumatized prior to her trip. Ironically, in playing the 'Western game,' Ken is looking for a way to 'straighten things out' with her ancestors the Gauls, that is to come to an answer about her relations with former colonizers. Finding these ancestors will help solve her identity problem by providing her with what her family failed to do. Her mother abandoned her and her blind father who never communicates with her cannot see her progressive alienation away from the village N'Doucoumane. When the West

5 Ibid., p. 48

6 Ibid., p. 54

7 Ibid., p. 59

8 Ibid., p. 120

9 Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.' *October* 28, Spring 1984, pp. 125-133, p. 129.

rejects her, her alienation is further complicated by the fact that she cannot truly go back. At the end of the novel, Ken, severely distraught, attempts to return to her native village in order to recover her history from the baobab tree, the novel's metaphorical representative of the heroine's roots and witness to her people's historical amnesia. However, Ken understands that while she was busy making a 'detour' in the Métropole, the baobab tree had died, taking along her chance for historical recovery.

The ambiguous and unsettling ending of *Le baobab fou* can be read as a failure on the part of Ken to get out of the 'Western game', into which she sometimes finds herself drawn and which she sometimes consciously enacts. Ken, indeed, continues to try to be admitted by the Westerners, despite the cycle of failed attempts to do so. From the evidence in the narrative, it is clear that gender¹⁰ is a major component in the complex situation that develops when an African woman goes to Europe. The narrative exposes the absence of women's experiences in theories of colonialism, decolonization and neocolonialism. Through Ken the prevalent images of the 'Négresse' emerge: she is a black woman, who shares stereotypic images with black men as seen in some of the early literature about the Métropole. In the West, the black female protagonist has a different kind of encounters than her male counterpart as a sexualized being. The work under study directly questions the exclusion of the experience of gender as a considerable factor in the alienation of the female protagonist. Ken's case suggests that theories about the encounter between Europe and Africa, based on the experience of black males cannot sufficiently describe the experience of displaced female protagonists. Ken presents a similar desire for the Western body as the protagonist in Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise*. In his reading of the novel, Frantz Fanon dismisses the expression of a specific black female's experience of colonial traumas as apolitical. The analysis of Ken's experience leads us to conclude that such dismissal is faulty because the novel contains a strong critique both of Western societies and of colonialism. The works also examine sexual politics in the larger context of the colonial world. Most black female characters have been portrayed as eager to whiten themselves and their offspring. This is especially true for the Caribbean as exemplified by Fanon's essays and the poetry of Negritude.

Black female colonial neurosis: Lacrosil's response to Fanon

Lacrosil is variously dismissed as a minor writer, a writer whose work is so personal that it is of little social importance and a writer who is so steeped in her own psychological complexes that her characters have little chance of rising above their deep suicidal introspection.¹¹

The so-called personal writings are often referred to as apolitical. Michèle Lacrosil attempts to defuse this contention by engaging in a discussion with fellow intellectuals/writers such as Frantz Fanon. The psychological complexity found in *Cajou* and her other novels is the attribute that makes the author comparable to Fanon, as she attempts to dissect the Caribbean mind. Like Fanon, Lacrosil preoccupies herself with the Caribbean female mind, as has Fanon, but she arrives at different conclusions.

Cajou is the story of the title character, alias Monica Kébaire, a highly educated self-hating product of a white mother and a deceased unknown black father. She works as a chemist in Paris. The novel is set up in four evenings during which the protagonist ponders whether or not she should accept her boss' offer of a promotion. The question of 'worthiness' provokes several other questions while fragmented memories from childhood

¹⁰ Gender is as important as race in influencing the nature of the contact between the colonizer and the colonized as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's most recent book has demonstrated in her discussion of artistic and literary representations of the black woman in nineteenth-century French sexualized primitive narratives that have shaped the images of the post-colonial black woman in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This analysis draws on Fanon's general paradigm of race consciousness, but also on the evolution of gender consciousness as exemplified by the experiences of two female protagonists in order to frame the phenomenon in a broader context that includes both race and gender. (T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Frederick Ivor Case, *The Crisis of Identity: Studies in the Guadeloupean and Martiniquan Novel* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1985), p. 30.

reappear. During these four evenings, seating or lying on a couch in her small apartment, alone or with her 'Aryan' boyfriend Germain, Cajou goes back to her past, specifically her childhood, in order to find out why she suffers from an acute form of inferiority complex.

The atmosphere of the novel is reminiscent of the psychiatric approach used by Fanon. Lacrosil specifically addresses the issue of whether colonial neurosis — a result of systematic repression of the colonized's desires — is curable. There are specific references to psychic life in the novel. While *Le baobab fou* follows a black woman's descent towards madness, *Cajou* describes a black woman's agonizing attempt to get out of this colonial neurosis. Because of the oppressive nature of colonial culture, the colonized are forced to repress any desires that might inform them about their own culture. Because of Cajou's display of self-hatred, her white mother takes her to a psychiatrist who recommends that they do not talk to the girl about her black paternal heritage. Cajou's mother and her psychiatrist become symbols of her deepening neurosis. Implicit is a possible sign that Lacrosil was referring to Fanon, a psychiatrist himself, by choosing a psychiatrist as the ultimate repressor/oppressor.

The structure and the language of *Cajou* constitute a strong reference to Fanon's influence. Some artifacts and clichéd scenarios are indicative of this psychiatric decor. Most of Cajou's reminiscing happens in her enclosed boarding room¹² in which we find the stereotypical 'divan,' and 'oreillers'. Germain, the boyfriend, functions as her psychiatrist who attempts to 'cure' her by listening to her 'la tête penchée, les coudes sur les genoux,' while making his own 'confession.' Cajou sits 'au fond du divan-lit' from where she can see 'un coin de sa joue'. Germain in this role, comes to undo the damage done by the first psychiatrist in asking Cajou to talk about her father because as Germain tells her, 'il y va de ta santé.'

It is in this 'safe' decor that Cajou revisits her childhood and adulthood. Contrary to Mayotte who rejoices in the presence of whiteness in her blood, thanks to her white maternal grandmother, Cajou considers her 'métissage' as a doom. This is the privileged moment where the heroine enters a world of neurosis for, as Fanon theorizes, 'le nègre esclave de son infériorité, le Blanc esclave de sa supériorité, se comportent tous les deux selon une ligne d'orientation névrotique.'¹³ The diagnosis of the psychiatrist is that Cajou suffers from 'complexe de frustration,' 'syndrome dépressif,' 'obsession dangereuse, de transfert'¹⁴ The psychiatrist recommends the mother to avoid talking about her father, the migration of her ancestors and 'questions raciales'.¹⁵ In addition, the psychiatrist recommends that she seek the company of young children like herself, and this had the following effect:

A dix ans, ce que je savais ou je me figurais au sujet des problèmes de l'hérédité des êtres, et le sentiment de ma propre laideur, étaient pour moi des obsessions. Un psychiâtre a recommandé la fréquentation des fillettes de mon âge. C'est ainsi que Stephanie Bajères est entrée dans ma vie; j'en ai construit sur elle ma conception de la beauté physique et mes rêves; elle n'a pas tardé à me devenir nécessaire. Je désirais la priver de toute autre amitié, l'étouffer et, parfois, la blesser ou l'enlaidir.¹⁶

Lacrosil's psychoanalytic influence is further illustrated in Cajou's repetition of the initial trauma as an adult. Cajou recreates several times the triangular relationship that started between her, the mother and the psychiatrist. Following Freud's Oedipus complex, the psychiatrist (as the father) enters the symbiotic relationship between the mother and the child as the disruptive third element of the new triangular relationship. In this context, it is highly suggestive that the white psychiatrist comes to take the place of the dead black father. The other triangular relationships involve Cajou, Stéphanie and a third schoolmate Jacqueline. Jacqueline enters

¹² The protagonist evolves around closed spaces. Cajou is either in the enclosed garden of her childhood games with Stéphanie, in the room in Paris or the enclosed space of the chemical laboratory where she works. In these spaces, Cajou undergoes psychological self-torture. The torture continues in the present because the objective of the narration is to revisit her past, exclusively in her mind.

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 48.

¹⁴ Michèle Lacrosil, *Cajou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4

the relationship when she invites Stéphanie at a party and fails to do the same for Cajou. This incident terminates the friendship between Stéphanie and Cajou.

As an adult, it is the triangular relationship between her, Marjolaine and Germain that incites the protagonist to search for answers. Marjolaine and Cajou end their relationship when Germain interferes, first as Marjolaine's love interest and then as Cajou's love. In addition to playing the role of the psychiatrist, Germain's way of speaking occasionally reminds Cajou of her mother.¹⁷ These roles, combined with the fact that he is her lover, make him the ultimate colonial oppressor. As noted by Isabelle Gros, critics often fail to analyze what she calls 'la maladie de Germain'.¹⁸ This blind spot is mostly due to the fact that Cajou believes that she deserves Germain's sadistic behavior because she is a descendant of the slaves. Germain repeatedly violates her by forcibly kissing her and raping her, while psychologically torturing her about the true nature of Cajou's relationship with Marjolaine among other things. Germain is as much threatened by a possible homosexual relationship¹⁹ between the two women as he wants to control all the facets of Cajou's life including her workplace where he manages to find a job. He is indeed 'le maître de la situation.' He literally comes between the two women by letting Cajou know that she will need his help in order to see Marjolaine again.

However, as noted by Maryse Condé, 'Le couple Germain/Cajou est l'illustration du couple victime/bourreau alors même que ce dernier n'assume qu'imparfaitement son rôle et serait prêt à l'abandonner'.²⁰ Indeed, Germain unsuccessfully confesses about his imperfections to Cajou in the attempt to convince her to marry him. Cajou is never swayed by Germain's effort to bring in the crowd — the white crowd. In fact, the opposite seems to occur. The more Germain insists that she overstates her problems, the more Cajou decides not to enter completely the white race by way of marriage. Cajou maintains that the white society will always reject her.

Perhaps the strongest subtext that links Fanon and Lacrosil is the implicit intertextuality between Cajou and Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise*. In his analysis of the text, Fanon bases the discussion on the heroine's concluding remarks: 'J'aurais voulu me marier, mais avec un blanc. Seulement une femme de couleur n'est jamais tout à fait respectable aux yeux d'un blanc. Même s'il l'aime, je le savais'.²¹

Fanon's contention is that the Black woman merely seeks to fulfill her desire for the white man. His criticism of the novel, though strong and significant in terms of interpersonal relationship between black men and black women, fails to see beyond the mere black woman's obsession to 'whiten herself'. But the novel offers much more than that. *Je suis martiniquaise* is first and foremost a coming-of-age story of a character who, like most Antillean blacks, grew up idealizing the white race. A product of a black father and a 'métisse,' Mayotte is very proud of her white grandmother. She learns the hard way what an older school mate had told her as a young girl that 'La vie est difficile pour une femme, tu ve'as, Mayotte, su'tout pou' une femme de couleur'.²² When she was little, Mayotte idealized a young priest because of his blond hair and blue eyes. As a child, she learns to equate beauty with whiteness and decides that she will love a white man; although she is with her white boyfriend, André, she describes him as no more handsome than the other men who have courted her, like Horace, a black Martiniquan who took her virginity. Mayotte cuts ties from Horace because 'Le souvenir de mon père me faisait un peu mépriser cet amour physique que mon corps réclamait. En outre, j'étais fière. Je ne voulais plus toucher à ces hommes de couleur qui ne peuvent s'empêcher de courir après toutes les femmes et je savais que les blancs n'épousent pas une femme noire'.²³

17 Ibidem, p. 204.

18 Isabelle Gros, 'Michèle Lacrosil: Liberation par l'écriture ou comment vomir le dégoût de soi.' *Elles écrivent des Antilles: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique*, ed. Suzanne Rinne and Joëlle Vitiello (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp. 121-132, p. 126.

19 The theme of homosexuality is present in *Le baobab fou* as well. In this novel, Ken is sexually involved with a young Italian who is going through an identity crisis of her own. In addition, Ken lives with François, a gay man who will become violently jealous when he suspects that his male lover might have slept with her. In *Cajou*, Germain confesses to homosexual relations. These relationships appear genuine (François) and appear to be a phase for Ken and Germain. The latter considers it to be a coming-of-age phase.

20 Maryse Condé, *La Parole des femmes. Essai sur les romancières des Antilles de langue française*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979), p. 32.

21 Mayotte Capécia, *Je suis martiniquaise* (Paris: Editions Corrèa, 1948), p. 220.

22 Ibid., p. 20.

23 Ibidem, p. 131.

That Mayotte rejects black men is due in part to her philandering, irresponsible father. But her aspiration to whiteness is also a result of the colonial legacy. The option to go to a white man produces disappointing results as she can never truly expect to stay with André. In addition, family and friends accuse her of betraying the black race. To her surprise, Mayotte finds herself alone in her belief that white is better, a fantasy she lives through the son she shares with André. While he criticizes Mayotte for her unwillingness to rid herself of the inferiority complex, Fanon neglects to see the complexity of interaction between blacks and whites created by the additional discourse on gender.

Lacrosil creates a character whose blackness is only skin-deep because as Patricia Barber-Williams remarks, Cajou is a 'coloured girl with a "white" state of mind.'²⁴ The author removes all things black from the heroine's environment. The black father is long deceased and her mother is forced to abide by the Law of the Father, that is the white Father, through the psychiatrist. Lacrosil provides us with a different scenario: What happens when, all of sudden, the black woman's wish not only to have the white man's child but also to marry the latter becomes a reality? Is it enough to cure a lifelong mental disease that has affected Cajou since childhood by accepting the white man's offer?

Cajou consciously questions her involvement with a white man and her unborn child. She ponders whether or not marrying Germain and having his child will solve problems. The only flight left for her is suicide, a wish she constantly invokes in the novel. This outcome is embedded in the nature of black colonial neurosis as defined by Fanon: It is a 'tentative de fuir son individualité, de néantiser son être-là.'²⁵ The normal course to flee one's social problems is to leave the Island. Cajou does not have this option since she is already in France. Therefore, the likelihood of suicide is strong. Desire for self-annulment is central to the novel. The protagonist considers suicide as a possible outcome of her introspection. As the novel progresses, the narrator begins to prefer death to repeating the past in the future because she will always be an 'outsider'.²⁶ Towards the end, Cajou's disease worsens. She starts to hear 'une phrase musicale,' that says 'DIA-SPO-RA' (199) which creates more and more confusion in the protagonist to arrive to a state of 'dispersion,' 'dissolution,' and 'destruction.'²⁷

Some critics have suggested that the image of Cajou drowning herself in the Seine symbolizes an attempt to drown the 'ugly' image of herself. It is therefore a victory since the heroine manages to repossess her body.²⁸ However, we do not know whether Cajou actually commits suicide or if her attempt to kill herself will amount to another future.

Le baobab fou's Ken sinks deeper and deeper into madness while Cajou presents the mind of a character already afflicted with colonial neurosis due to similar forms of repression. The analysis of Cajou offers a view of a woman who, despite being immersed in the white culture to the point of being sick, attempts to secure a satisfying identity for herself. While in the past, critical attention has been directed to the issues of race — and gender — specific social and psychological traumas in the context of post-colonial relations, the present study demonstrates that colonized female protagonists experience those types of traumas as well. Cajou and Ken constitute thought-provoking examples of Metropolitan encounters during a specific moment in the history of European-African and French Caribbean relations, namely the post-independence era. Recent literature such as Calixthe Beyala's fiction testifies to the intricate nature of contemporary African female encounters with the West. During the last two decades, French society has been undergoing considerable stress as a result of changing attitudes and policies that affect immigrants in France. The problem is too often framed in a series of stark dualities: black-white, Europe-Africa, rich-poor.

24 Patricia Barber-Williams, 'Images of the Self: Jean Rhys and Her French West Indian Counterpart.' *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 9-19, p. 11.

25 Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 48.

26 This word is written in English, probably to signify her otherness by using a foreign word. While many have praised Lacrosil's capacity to use the French language, she has been criticized for not using a proper Caribbean language such as Creole sayings.

27 Michèle Lacrosil, *Cajou* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 209.

28 Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, 'Feminism, Race and Difference in the works of Mayotte Capécia, Michèle Lacrosil, and Jacqueline Manicom.' *Callaloo* 15:1 (1992), pp. 56-62, p. 69.