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The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers

edited by Sandra Courtman

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Vol. 8 2007 ISSN 1471-2024

<http://www.caribbeanstudies.org>

Writing One's Identity: Letter-writing and the Agency of Identity Formation

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Abstract

Well into the 1990s, the Martinican woman writer has had to endure a history of silencing. Whilst prominent male writers such as Césaire, Fanon, Glissant, Chamoiseau and Confiant have dominated the literary scene of the island, women's writing has most often been silenced or simply gone unnoticed. However, a new generation of women writers is now producing literature that is concerned with this problem of silencing and explores new modes of expression.

In this paper, I propose to examine novels by Nicole Cage-Florentiny and Suzanne Dracius and the narrative techniques employed to convey their characters' identities. In particular, I will examine the importance of letters and the act of writing in the woman's attempt to create a new identity for herself. For the Martinican intellectual, the act of writing can become a form of liberation and a means to reunite with the self and others.¹ Whilst this can be seen through the insertion of letters in the narration of *L'espagnole*, which underscores the

¹ Elizabeth Wilson, "'Le Voyage Et L'espace Clos" -- Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Women's Experience in the Works of Francophone Caribbean Women Novelists," *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

protagonist's slow but definite liberation, the inability to write in L'autre qui danse leads only to failure and subsequent death.²

Although interpretations of the act of writing can vacillate between positive and negative ones, I will show that it does indeed entail a liberatory function. I will further examine the possibility of resistance in such acts of writing as well as the move from an object- to a subject- position in the process of creating an identity. Finally, I will show that the act of writing is essential to and in Martinican women writers' works as it entails not only the power to subvert but provides a significant portrayal and critique of contemporary society.

Well into the 1990s, the Martinican woman writer has had to endure a history of silencing. Whilst prominent male writers such as Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant have dominated the literary scene of the island, women's writing has most often been silenced or simply gone unnoticed.¹ One particular instance of this can be seen in Frantz Fanon's treatment of Mayotte Capécia's novel Je suis Martiniquaise in his seminal work Black Skin, White Masks. Fanon states that "One day a woman named Mayotte Capécia, obeying a motivation whose elements are difficult to detect, sat down to write 202 pages – her life – in which the most ridiculous ideas proliferated at random" and that "all circumlocution is impossible: *Je suis Martiniquaise* is cut-rate merchandise, a sermon in praise of corruption."²

Clarisse Zimra explains that according to Fanon, "the Caribbean coloured woman, brought up in a socio-cultural milieu whose highest moral and aesthetic values are white, inherits the atavistic obsession with what he termed '*lactification*': to whitewash the family's genetic pool by bearing a white man's child, thus condemning herself and her child to the lifelong torture of borrowed identity."³ But is Capécia, by telling this story, simply "borrowing" an identity? Or does she, through her writing, through the expression of the ambiguity faced by so many Martinican women, attempt to create a female identity in a male-dominated environment? And is Fanon simply criticizing Mayotte Capécia, the writer, or is he actually criticizing Mayotte Capécia, the woman?

² Nicole Cage-Florentiny, L'espagnole (Paris: Hatier International, 2002), Suzanne Dracius, L'autre qui danse (Paris: Seghers, 1989).

The debate about Fanon's treatment of Capécia is an ongoing one.⁴ Unfortunately, such disdainful attitudes towards women's writing can still be detected in Martinican society. Nicole Cage-Florentiny, one of the novelists whose work I will discuss, states that the sarcasm by male West Indian writers towards women's writing continues to exist. According to them, their female counterparts struggle not to fall into the trap of simply recounting their life-stories and to produce writing that represents a 'psychoanalytic' striptease. She explains that many West Indian writers still consider women writers as immature, as incapable of producing valuable social criticism or creating a collective (his)story; they are stuck in a singular frame of mind through which they tend to express personal problems rather than collective societal issues of importance (Jahn 6).⁵

However, a new generation of women writers is now producing literature that is concerned with this problem of silencing and explores new modes of expression. The act of writing in itself, as Trinh Minh-ha points out, is an attempt "to render noisy and audible all that had been silenced in phallogocentric discourse."⁶ Both Suzanne Dracius and Nicole Cage-Florentiny, the authors to whose work I now turn, create, through their writing, a specifically female vision and version of their societies and describe lives in which problems and oppression are not solely informed by race and class but furthermore by gender. Writing, here, "becomes an audacious act, one tantamount to an usurpation of the potential for literary creation, which had been previously the sole province of males."⁷ In both Dracius' L'autre qui danse (the other who dances) and Cage-Florentiny's L'espagnole, we encounter the doubled significance of the act of writing: writing as an act of identity formation, and writing as an act of subversion.

The act of writing generally, and for postcolonial women in particular, "becomes the protagonist's only way to exist truly in a world that neither recognizes nor values their existence."⁸ In the two novels at hand, the liberating act of writing for the author is directly extended to her protagonist through the use of an implied author. The implied author, or the author's "second self," as Wayne Booth calls it, "creates an implicit picture of an author who stands behind the scenes, whether as stage manager, as puppeteer, or as an indifferent God, silently paring his fingernails."⁹ It is through the use of this implied author that we are able to extract "meanings [and] also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all the characters."¹⁰ It is with this definition in mind that I extend the authors'

rhetoric as a form of liberation and apply it to their protagonists in order to obtain my interpretations of the novels and the act of writing in itself.

The assertion of one's identity becomes evident in Dracius' novel.¹¹ Matildana and Rehvana, the two protagonists of the novel, were once very close to each other. However, the sisters' relationship has been abruptly disturbed by Rehvana's sudden fanaticism. She joins a sect in order to re-create an authenticity as a mixed race Martinican raised in Paris. When she fails to find her place in Parisian society or her African sect, always either too dark- or light-skinned, she returns to her native island where she embraces, in her eyes, a traditional way of life. She stops communicating with her sister.

Matildana's only way of reaching her younger sibling is through the use of letters. Ignored by Rehvana and thus stripped of her subjectivity, she resorts to letter writing in order to reclaim this subjectivity and consequently uncovers Rehvana's lack thereof. This use of the epistolary form, as H. Adlai Murdoch explains, "puts into play a number of interesting and important possibilities that impact the key areas of gender, reflexivity, and representation, areas that hold particular implications for the analysis of a liminal, polysemic, feminized postcolonial subjectivity".¹²

Matildana writes her first letter in response to her sister's silence: "Puisque tu ne consens plus à me téléphoner, j'en suis réduite à t'écrire, bien que je brûle de te parler de vive voix" ("Since you no longer deign to call me, I am forced to write to you, although I so long to speak to you").¹³ Through her letters, Matildana produces a "feminist perspective that interprets reality for us, [...] and comment[s] on the events in Rehvana's life. Their reactions serve as a counterpoint to the narrativisation of the degrading and abusive reality that makes up the daily life of the protagonist."¹⁴ Matildana's letters serve as a representation of Rehvana and how she used to be, but whom the reader can no longer know as such. A Rehvana who used to be infinitely close to her older sister, who lovingly mocks her "tchips" and tantrums and a Rehvana who is dearly missed by her parents, although her father would not dare to admit to that.¹⁵

We also learn that Rehvana's relationship to her parents might partly be the cause for her rebellious behaviour. Matildana cites her father as having said that he would only welcome back his daughter once she became " 'une jeune fille comme il faut', aussi longtemps que tu

n'auras pas repris un comportement de 'fille de bonne famille', cessé de 'filer un mauvais coton', renoncé à ta 'bande de nègres' (sic)... et 'repris tes études' ” (“ ‘a good girl,’ until you’ve come back to the behaviour of a ‘girl from a good family,’ stopped ‘sowing your wild oats,’ left your ‘gang of niggers’ ... and ‘gone back to your studies’ ”; emphasis in original).¹⁶ We thus learn of the paternal pressure to which Rehvana is exposed at home.

Matildana’s letters, hence, serve as an indirect source of a psychoanalytic examination of Rehvana’s behaviour. Although the older sister never suggests that Rehvana’s behaviour has in the past been influenced by her upbringing, the reader can easily develop this conclusion by herself. Consequently, the letter suggests that whereas Rehvana has failed to examine herself and her life, her sister Matildana has done so and was able to embrace her ambivalent heritage, a process with which Rehvana struggles.

However, this matter is complicated by the fact that Rehvana and Matildana are sisters and grew up under identical circumstances. This, in turn, directs responsibility back to Rehvana alone, regardless of the environmental and cultural influences that affect her life, as she, unlike her sister, is incapable of the act of writing. The process of writing becomes here synonymous with the ability to critically examine one’s environment and embrace one’s place within it. Matildana’s particular depiction of her sister uncovers Rehvana’s relationship with her environment, her state of alienation in society and her position as postcolonial subject.

This process of psychoanalytic examination does not apply to Rehvana’s behaviour alone. The act of writing and the act of “attempting communication [is also] a process of self-understanding.”¹⁷ Matildana, in her writing, attempts to understand the motivations behind her younger sister’s actions and her willingness to submit to Jérémie, whom she describes as a “pithécanthrope” (“pithecanthropus”).¹⁸ She does not understand why Rehvana would choose him when she could have had Jérémie who is “dix fois plus intelligent que le crétin de la Pelée, et au moins aussi “fils d’Afrique” que lui” (“ten times more intelligent than that moron from the Pelée and at least as much a “son of Africa” as he is”).¹⁹ Matildana is willing to be self-critical and attempts to put herself in her sister’s shoes to better understand her actions. She expresses her incredulity at Rehvana’s behaviour. She vacillates between condemning her sister for her actions and pleading with her to come home.

However, it is this reprimanding behaviour that increasingly represses Rehvana's wish to communicate with her sister. After Matildana's second letter, which also remains unanswered, we learn that Rehvana:

a toujours eu horreur d'écrire – surtout à Matildana, qui froncerait encore avec condescendance son nez de “Cléopâtre-première en dictée” devant l'orthographe débridée, capricante de sa soeur –, mais elle ne sait, surtout, par où dévider l'écheveau de ces crises tempétueuses, ces réconciliations suivies de nouvelles crises; elle n'a même pas réussi à s'avouer qu'elle n'osait confesser à sa soeur l'échec de ce qu'elle appelait son “grand retour”. | Que saurait-elle lui dire, de son calvaire pierreux d'ouvrages vains et d'élans infertiles?

has always been terrified of writing – especially to Matildana, who would still screw up her “Cleopatra-first in dictation” nose condescendingly in front of her sister's unrestrained and capricious grammar –, but she just doesn't know how to handle the chaos of her tempestuous tantrums, her reconciliations followed by yet another tantrum; she couldn't even admit to herself that she didn't dare confess to her sister her failure of what she called her ‘grand return.’ | What could she tell her of her stony crucifixion of vain efforts and sterile outbursts?²⁰

However, these thoughts are not expressed by Rehvana herself, but through the use of free indirect discourse. It is therefore only through Matildana's letters, that we can learn of Rehvana's inability and unwillingness to admit to herself the “échec de son grand retour” (the failure of her grand return). We can assume that the outcome of Rehvana's journey – which ends in her and her baby-daughter's death – could have been different had she had the force to express herself, be it through letters, or, at the end of the novel, through the act of asking for help.

Carmen Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert point out that the power of writing is a resonant theme in the writing by Caribbean women, as well as their “relationship with the written word, with [their] very ability to write, with [their] discovery of the often awesome power of the text [...]. Thus writing itself becomes an audacious act.”²¹ Such audacity is here reserved for Matildana and, in a broader context of Martinican culture and society, had been reserved for male writers. Matildana, a liberated woman is “the other who dances,” and therefore “the other who writes,” whilst her sister, unwilling or unable to express herself, represents the Martinican woman before the discovery of the power of writing or the freedom of expression.

In the novel L'espagnole, the letters written by the protagonist Elena represent the few instances in which her voice is actively heard. But more than just portraying Elena's slow but deliberate liberation, her writing, in itself, entails an act of resistance. Selwyn R. Cudjoe states that "If [...], as Sartre says, 'writing is a way of wanting freedom' and 'wanting freedom' is essentially a political act in a colonial situation – an act of resistance – writing then becomes a political act fraught with all the urgency and necessity within the context of the Caribbean."²² Again, we see here the doubled significance of the act of writing – the author as subversive actor bestowing agency upon her silenced protagonist through the act of writing.

Elena recounts her life in two letters inserted into the narration of the novel. Again, it is only through these letters that the reader learns significant details of Elena's past and can witness a progression towards a liberated self. Her first letter is addressed to her priest on her native island Santo-Domingo in which she recounts her existence as prostitute or espagnole on Martinique. This letter can be interpreted as a confession as it is addressed to her priest. The fact that Elena confesses in writing rather than by actually speaking to a priest is important as the act of writing, as already mentioned, plays an essential role in the emancipation of women, in particular Caribbean women.

Betty Wilson explains that "The female protagonist[']s [...] only effective liberation [is] implicit in the act of writing, explicitly portrayed in several works as the means to achieve relief through a symbolic reunion with the self, with other women, and with the mother (land) from which [she] ha[s] been exiled."²³ Elena has in effect been exiled. She lives in Martinique, a place that is not very accommodating, where "*les étrangers ne sont pas bien vus (ici, les étrangers sont moins les Européens que les autres Caribéens)*" ("strangers aren't welcome (here, the other Caribbeans are strangers more so than the Europeans").²⁴ Her mother is dead and her relationship with her father is disturbed, which leaves her priest as the only parental connection to her homeland. So whilst she is "symbolically" trying to reunite with her native island through her letter-writing, she is simultaneously creating a, what Shelton calls, "counterdiscourse that actively criticizes the social reality that so oddly disorganizes the female sense of self."²⁵

The important element of this first letter is Elena's admission that she has sex for money. If Elena's letter-writing is interpreted strictly as an act of creating discourse rather than an act of

confession, she is actively resisting sexist domination and breaking with a past in which “black women have reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex [...] with silence, secrecy and partially self-chosen invisibility”.²⁶ Not only is Elena resisting, but she is attaining agency over her own state of being by creating, through writing, a voice. Foucault argues that “Le discours véhicule et produit du pouvoir; il le renforce [...]. De même, le silence et le secret abritent le pouvoir, ancrent ses interdits” (“Discourse conveys and produces power, it reinforces it. [...] Similarly, silence and secrecy shelter power, anchor its illegitimacy”).²⁷ So it is only by speaking up, by admitting to her true profession, that Elena can attempt resistance.

Elena writes her second letter after a slow and painful recovery – Ricardo found out that his mother is a prostitute and almost beat her to death. However, Elena believes that her final emergence into the world as a subject is due to her son’s aggression: “*Tu as cru me tuer, Ricardo. Mais pendant que les coups pleuvaient sur mon corps, en réalité, tu m’obligeais sans le savoir à accoucher de moi-même, à me mettre au monde*” (“You thought you killed me, Ricardo. But while the blows rained down on my body, you actually forced me to deliver myself, to bring myself to life”).²⁸

This symbolical re-birth marks the beginning of Elena’s new life. Simultaneously, in this letter, she juxtaposes her life to her mother’s, whom her husband – when he found out that she prostituted herself to provide for her family whilst he drank – beats and stabs to death. Elena thus depicts strata of societies – one Santo-Dominican, the other Martinican – in which the objectification of a woman’s body is one of the few means for her survival. The critique is subtle but it is nonetheless there. Elena, through her own writing not only tells the story of her own life, but that of many women from similar backgrounds, living in similar situations. Whilst her mother did not survive her ordeal, Elena realizes that life has more to offer than motherhood: “*Mais je ne suis pas qu’une mère et aujourd’hui je veux vivre, exister comme la femme que je refusais d’être. En croyant me tuer, tu m’as rendu à moi-même...*” (“But I’m not only a mother and today I want to live, exist like the woman who I’ve refused to be. By believing to kill me, you have returned me to myself”).²⁹ She is able to make the shift to a woman-centred existence and, through her writing, inscribes her new identity on her landscape.

Elena concludes her story by writing: “*Voilà, tu sais mon histoire*” (“There, you know my

history”).³⁰ This seemingly simple remark in truth pervades a great deal. The French *histoire* can be translated as both history and story. Elena, by conveying the story of her own life and that of her family, simultaneously describes the history of the Martinican and Santo-Dominican people: the poverty, political unrest, discrimination against different islanders and the oppression of women generally experienced on the islands, also influence her life personally. Wendy Goolcharan-Kumeta explains that: “[i]n most of the francophone female-authored texts, the personal life of the heroine often symbolizes the political life of her island.”³¹ She adds that many texts by French Caribbean women “are subtly subversive in that they explore the personal, private lives of the protagonist within their socio-political universe.”³²

Throughout the novel, it is not through her actions that Elena actively resists oppression and domination and attains her agency, but rather through her letters. Elena’s is an intimate resistance as she first attains her voice through writing and recounting her past life and relationships. By creating a discourse and giving a voice to herself, just like Matildana, she actively participates in her “subjectification.” bell hooks explains that “[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others.”³³

Elena’s story is thus not only the story of her own resistance. Through writing these two letters, Elena exposes her own history and the stories of many other islanders who suffer in similar circumstances. Her “counterdiscourse” reveals a societal critique that encompasses more than just her own life: “The conflated ‘herstory’” – in O’Callaghans terms – “is indeed a collective one.”³⁴ So rather than producing “ridiculous and random ideas,” as Fanon would have put it, or performing a “psychoanalytic” striptease, Cage-Florentiny, through her “second self” and through Elena, actually creates a valuable critique of her socio-political environment and proves herself to be a mature writer, indeed.

I hope to have shown in my discussion of these two novels that the act of writing, exemplified not only by the authors but also by their protagonists, is one that needs to be taken seriously. Criticism about women’s writing such as that by Fanon or the unnamed writer mentioned by Cage-Florentiny is not only outdated but also unfounded. Writing has –

for these women – become an act of identity-creation. But even more so, it is also an act of subversion in a society dominated by racism, sexism and class elitism. Shusheila Nasta points out that “The post-colonial woman writer is not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centred ideologies and languages, or in discovering new forms and language to express her experience, she has also to subvert and demythologise indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her.”³⁵

The Martinican woman writer has taken first steps towards her own identity formation; she manifests her agency in the act of writing. By bestowing the power of self-expression upon her protagonist, she further stresses the utter importance of the act of writing and consequently of the need for an independent identity formation. She, in the words of Murdoch, “undergirds and undermines stereotypes of gender and authorship, authority and subjectivity.”³⁶ Through their writings, Martinican women, no longer objects of the colonial and masculinized view of the world, confirm themselves as subjects, as agents of their own destiny and establish themselves as active portrayers and critics of contemporary society.

Notes

- ¹ For some examples see Aimé Césaire, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), Aimé Césaire, Discours sur le colonialisme; Suivi de discours sur la négritude (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2004), Frantz Fanon, Peau noire, masques blancs (Paris: Seuil, 1952), Frantz Fanon, Les damnés de la terre (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, Eloge de la Créolité (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
- ² Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986) 42.
- ³ Clarisse Zimra, "Patterns of Liberation in Contemporary Women Writers," L'esprit créateur XVII.2 (1977): 105.
- ⁴ For a revisionist reading see, for example, David Macey, Frantz Fanon: A Life (London: Granta Books, 2000).
- ⁵ Jennifer Jahn, Interview with Nicole Cage-Florentiny, rec 15 February 2007.
- ⁶ T. Minh-ha Trinh, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 37.
- ⁷ Carmen C. Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991) xiii.
- ⁸ Lorrie Sauble-Otto, "Writing to Exist: Humanity and Survival in Two *Fin De Siècle* Novels in French (Harpmann, Darrieussecq)," L'esprit créateur 45.1 (2005): 60.
- ⁹ Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) 151.
- ¹⁰ Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction 73.
- ¹¹ Suzanne Dracius, L'autre qui danse (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 2007), Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie, L'autre qui danse (Paris: Seghers, 1989).
- ¹² H. Adlai Murdoch, Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) 174.
- ¹³ All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. Suzanne Dracius-Pinalie, L'autre qui danse (Paris: Seghers, 1989) 105.
- ¹⁴ Françoise Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture, Reading Women Writing, vol. 1 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 98.
- ¹⁵ Dracius-Pinalie, L'autre qui danse 106.
- ¹⁶ Translation taken from Murdoch, Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel 177.
- ¹⁷ C.L. Innes, "Mothers or Sisters? Identity, Discourse and Audience in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Bâ," Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia, ed. Susheila Nasta (London: Women's Press, 1991) 145.
- ¹⁸ Dracius-Pinalie, L'autre qui danse 107.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 108.
- ²⁰ Translation of last sentence taken from Murdoch, Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel 180.
- ²¹ Esteves and Paravisini-Gebert, eds., Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam xiii.
- ²² Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Resistance and Caribbean Literature (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980) 68.
- ²³ Elizabeth Wilson, "'Le Voyage Et L'espace Clos' -- Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Women's Experience in the Works of Francophone Caribbean Women Novelists," Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature, eds. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990) 46.
- ²⁴ Nicole Cage-Florentiny, L'espagnole (Paris: Hatier International, 2002) 42.
- ²⁵ Marie-Denise Shelton, "Women Writers of the French-Speaking Caribbean: An Overview," Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference, ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe (Wellesley, Mass: Calaloux Publications, 1990) 352.
- ²⁶ Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, eds. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (London: Routledge, 1997) 171.
- ²⁷ Michel Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté du savoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 133.
- ²⁸ Cage-Florentiny, L'espagnole 126.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* 127
- ³⁰ *Ibid.* 131
- ³¹ Wendy Goolcharan-Kumeta, My Mother, My Country: Reconstructing the Female Self in Guadeloupean Women's Writing, Modern French Identities, ed. Peter Collier, vol. 21 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003) 23.
- ³² *Ibid.* 23
- ³³ bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist -- Thinking Black (Boston: South End Press, 1989) 12.

³⁴ Evelyn O'Callaghan, Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women, Warwick University Caribbean Studies, ed. Alistair Hennessy (London: Macmillan, 1993) 7.

³⁵ Susheila Nasta, ed., Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia (London: Women's Press, 1991) xv.

³⁶ Murdoch, Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel 175.

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