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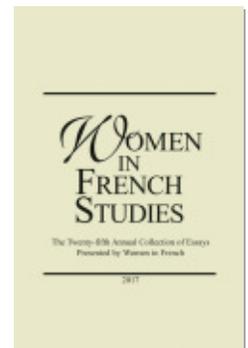
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“CE PAYS EST UN VOLCAN”: SAINT-PIERRE AND THE LANGUAGE OF LOSS IN WHITE CREOLE WOMEN’S NARRATIVES

Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel

The 1902 volcanic eruption of Mount Pelée that left Martinique’s most prosperous city, Saint-Pierre, in ruins, has been a recurring symbol in Martinican literature. At the turn of the twentieth century, white creole authors in particular, often represented the destruction of Saint-Pierre as unmitigated loss. For many of these writers, the eruption of Mount Pelée was an apocalyptic event, not only because of the resulting death and destruction, but also because the smoldering ruins of the city came to symbolize the erosion of the political and economic power of the island’s white creole population. This representation is evident in such texts as *Un Roman gai* by Marie Berté, writing under the pseudonym Emmbé, *Cœurs martiniquais* by Clémence Cassius de Linval, writing as Jean Max, and *Saint-Pierre-Martinique annales des Antilles françaises; journal et album de la Martinique; naissance, vie et mort de la cité créole; livre d’or de la charité* by Charles Lambolez, published under the pseudonym Cœur Créole.

For each of these authors, writing Saint-Pierre was an act of memorializing and preserving an image of the city as an insular space of whiteness, sheltered from the monumental changes brought about by such landmark events as the 1848 abolition of slavery in much of the French Caribbean. Lambolez’s 1905 text, for example, includes an overview of the French colonial enterprise in Martinique, as well as several letters and reports written by white inhabitants of Saint-Pierre on the eve of the eruption. This act of preservation is described by the book’s editors in the preface as “l’œuvre d’un pionnier de la colonisation française, non celle d’un simple touriste en excursion aux pays d’outre-mer” (v). The preface also addresses the island’s white creoles directly: “Quant aux créoles, ils trouveront ici les tombeaux de leur race, leurs catacombes. C’est en ce livre de famille, livre d’immortelle mémoire, d’incomparable martyre et d’honneur Martiniquais, qu’ils viendront tous s’entretenir de malheurs inoubliables, pleurer sur des ruines que les siècles futurs ne relèveront jamais” (v). The specific image of his text as a “livre de famille” for white creoles, calls to mind the French administrative document the *livret de famille*, a register that documents genealogical information including births and deaths in a family. His reference to “[l’]honneur Martiniquais” in his address to white creoles suggests, therefore, a whitewashed reinvention of Martinican history and identity. Lambolez’s objective, in painting a portrait of Saint-Pierre, is not to imagine a new city rising, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of the old. Instead, it is an act of

mourning both the loss of lives and the disappearance of a future of continued *béké* dominance in the racial, social and economic hierarchy of Martinique.

In “French Republicanism under Challenge: White Minority (*Béké*) Power in Martinique and Guadeloupe,” Fred Constant provides historical context on the landmark events that have challenged the hegemonic power of Martinique’s economic elite over time. Constant identifies five such historical processes, including the 1848 abolition of slavery, the application of republican laws from 1870, departmentalization in 1946, and subsequent changes to the political configuration of Martinique’s relationship with France and the European Union in the decades to come (Constant 168). In each of these moments, as Constant shows, *békés* adopted a variety of lobbying strategies that allowed them to remain a powerful economic and political force. However, their *perception* of their position in Martinican society has historically been one of victimhood and disenfranchisement in the face of these monumental changes. *Béké* opposition to departmentalization, for example, was fueled by the fear that the new political status would “achieve what the abolition of slavery had failed to carry out a century earlier: the transfer of power to the black majority” (171). In the white creole political imaginary, loss and annihilation are always an imminent threat. This fear is also a haunting presence in literature by white Martinican writers, as evidenced by Lambomez’s text and by the works of the *béké* authors to be analyzed subsequently.

Lambomez’s genealogy of an imagined white creole community in his “livre de famille” is therefore intimately bound up with the history of Saint-Pierre. The city’s destruction and loss in 1902 comes to stand in for the perceived loss of *béké* economic and political power with the abolition of slavery in 1848. That this vision of history deliberately collapses time, making the former event a symbol of the latter, attests to the deliberate act of reinventing the past as part of this process of preserving Saint-Pierre as an imagined space of whiteness. Benedict Anderson’s articulation of an imagined community therefore provides a useful theoretical framework for analyzing *béké* authors’ literary contributions to this proto-nationalist discourse. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined community (6), a notion of shared identity that is articulated through symbols of belonging such as national anthems and newspapers. He further cites Ernest Renan’s assertion that “l’essence d’une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien de choses” (quoted 6), to highlight the collective amnesia and memorializing by which the nation is constructed. In addition to shedding light on the processes by which nationalist sentiment becomes political reality, Anderson’s specific examination of communities of white settlers in the Americas also identifies fear of a shift in the racial balance of power as the motivation for white creole nationalism (50).

Situating the representation of Saint-Pierre in writings by *béké* authors within this broader history therefore affords us a rare glimpse into the hermetically sealed world of whiteness in Martinique. Further, placing the texts of white creole women at the center of this analysis allows us to examine the gendered nature of these questions of power, loss and the creation of an imagined community as refracted through relationships between women across

color lines. Novels by *békée* writers provide an important lens through which to view the seismic shifts of the twentieth century from the perspective of white women who saw themselves as straddling the line between power and vulnerability in the island's racial and social hierarchy. Indeed, the themes of power and loss are at the heart of several novels published by white creole women, with the eruption of Mount Pelée and the destruction of Saint-Pierre as the backdrop to their exploration of these themes.

Two texts in particular stand out for their sustained engagement with the destruction of Saint-Pierre, and their representations of white creole women's seemingly tenuous grasp on power in this volatile landscape: *Cœurs martiniquais* by Clémence Cassius de Linval and *Le Sang du volcan* by Marie-Reine de Jaham. *Cœurs martiniquais* was first published in Paris in 1919 with a later reprint in 1961. The novel tells the story of the Daubray and Fougeras families, well-to-do white creoles living in Saint-Pierre. Ginette Daubray is taken in by the family of her childhood friend Anne-Marie Fougeras after her parents are killed in a violent hurricane, a temporary moment of devastation that foreshadows the seemingly more permanent destruction to come. The subsequent marriage between Anne-Marie and Rodolphe Daubray, Ginette's uncle, solidifies the long-standing relationship between the two families, a closeness that will be intensified in their last moments together in the shadow of an active volcano. In contrast to the pared down storyline and emphasis on description in *Cœurs martiniquais*, *Le Sang du volcan* emphasizes drama and intrigue. Published in Paris in 1997, the novel employs the same formula of two wealthy families, but instead of a congenial relationship, the de Solis and Tara families are locked in a multigenerational feud that plays out in both the sugar economy and the domain of politics. In addition to featuring female protagonists, both novels explore the experiences of two groups of women, *békées* and their *das*, as they grapple with their places in the colonial hierarchy of Saint-Pierre. The *da* in Antillean literature bears a close resemblance to the mammy figure in the literary tradition of the U.S. South. She plays multiple roles including household servant, caretaker and surrogate mother, and emerges in both novels as a foil to the *békée* protagonists.

In my close reading of *Cœurs martiniquais* and *Le Sang du volcan*, I argue that de Linval and de Jaham represent relationships of power and interdependence between *békées* and *das* in Saint-Pierre as symbols of what they view as the erosion of *béké* power. As black and white women contemplate their mortality in the face of an active volcano, their apparent equality before death becomes a way for de Linval and de Jaham to mourn not only the white victims claimed by the eruption of Mount Pelée but also the loss of Saint-Pierre as the bastion of white creole political and economic power in Martinique. The image of volcanic ash raining down on *békées* and *das* alike in the Little Paris of the Antilles, a natural catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions, stands in for the abolition of slavery as that unspoken catastrophe that haunts both novels. An examination of the entire spectrum of complex racial identities in the Antilles that go beyond a black/white binary, is beyond the scope of this work. Rather, this analysis focuses on the representations of white creole women and black

women in roles of servitude that emerge in de Linval's and de Jaham's texts. In this reading of Saint-Pierre recreated through the language of loss, I focus on two manifestations of the *békée/da* relationship: the shifting lines of power between white women as mistresses and daughters, and black women as servants and surrogate mothers; and the conflation of black and white creole women on the eve of the volcanic eruption. These representations of the evolving relationships among Martinican women, symbolize the white narrators' perceptions of the destabilization of a colonial racial order and hierarchy, and the advent of a new post-Saint-Pierre and post-slavery era. De Linval and de Jaham, though writing in different time periods, can both be situated within the long tradition of white creole authors straddling the line between their elite socio-economic status and the fear of losing that position in Martinican society.

Ultimately, what is at stake in white women's representations of Saint-Pierre, is a desire to enact a containment that the texts themselves reveal to be impossible. Recreating Saint-Pierre, as both authors' paratexts will show, is an act of mourning that seeks to preserve a snapshot of an imagined white city in Martinique. Yet, just as this act of preservation and laying to rest is continuously interrupted by revenants from the violent past of colonial conquest, so too is the harmonious image of Saint-Pierre as a space of whiteness interrupted by the city's non-white inhabitants who refuse to be contained within colonial categories. In this context, Martinican women navigate unstable color lines and evolving relationships of power, on an island that is haunted by the ghosts of dispossessed Caribs and the specter of revolting slaves. The tragedy of Saint-Pierre, both novels suggest, is less the loss of lives and property and more the destruction of a colonial hierarchy that imagines neatly-defined lines between white and black inhabitants on the island. The island's non-white population that refuses to be contained, both in the past and in the spaces delineated by the colonial order, exposes the fiction of colonial fantasies of a clear-cut racial hierarchy. Reading these two novels together, then, does more than provide a glimpse into the insular *béké* community. It also highlights the ways in which *békée* writers construct white womanhood both against and alongside black womanhood, a construction that reveals the instability of colonial racial categories.

Voicing Authority in *Békée*-Authored Narratives

Although there is a dearth of scholarship and biographical data available on de Linval and de Jaham, the little that we do know allows us to examine the overlaps and differences in their self-positioning vis-à-vis Martinique in general and Saint-Pierre in particular. Clémence Cassius de Linval was born in Saint-Pierre around 1880 (Corzani 88), where she lived with her family until she had to flee the city on the eve of Mount Pelée's eruption. She lost most of her family to the eruption, including Sœur Xavier, born Marie Cassius de Linval, who was the director of the Saint-Anne orphanage. De Linval was not the only writer in her family. Her niece, Paule Cassius de Linval, is most known for her text *Mon pays à travers les légendes: Contes martiniquais*, published in 1960. De Jaham was born sixty years after de Linval, on February 7, 1940, to a *béké* family descended from the line of Joséphine de Beauharnais. She grew up in Saint-Pierre and moved to the United States with her husband. In 1993, she created the cultural association Patrimoine Créole in Paris,

and in 2002 she founded the Cercle Méditerranée Caraïbe in Nice. She is the author of ten novels that are largely set in the Antilles and that target a popular French audience eager to consume an exoticized image of overseas France. Her first and best-known novel *La Grande Béké*,¹ later adapted for television, tells the story of a white creole matriarch and the machinations of family members eager to inherit her substantial fortune. In 1996, de Jaham was named a Chevalier des arts et des lettres.

The works of both authors have largely been dismissed by critics. For example, although de Linval's novel has been criticized as espousing a selective vision of Saint-Pierre, and rightly so, this shortcoming is sometimes couched as intrinsically linked to her gender. Thus, Alain Yacou describes her work and those of other *békée* writers as "ces réécritures sélectives (et féminines...) de l'Histoire" (90), and attributes her novel's elision of the impending elections that influenced the decision not to evacuate Saint-Pierre on the eve of the eruption, to the "désintérêt d'une femme pour des telles questions traditionnellement réservées aux hommes" (88-89). Likewise, in his characterization of de Jaham's work, Chris Bongie describes her as "the Jackie Collins of Franco-Caribbean historical fiction, a decidedly second-rate but prolific Martiniquan novelist of the *béké* caste" (292). Despite this dismissal, Bongie nevertheless raises useful questions about the aesthetic and political criteria by which texts for a more popular audience may be deemed valuable for literary analysis. Certainly, de Linval's and de Jaham's writings are deeply problematic. Yet they remain useful as a window into what David Macey describes as "the ideological self-perception of the *béké*" (45). Although both women perpetuate the tradition of nostalgic fiction aimed at preserving a pre-abolition racial hierarchy, their works also engage with the gendered dimensions of colonial conquest and highlight the impossibility of maintaining these colonial fictions.

In addition to considering the biographies of both writers, it is important to paint a portrait of the historical Saint-Pierre in order to lay the groundwork for examining how white creole women have reimagined the city through literature. Known in the nineteenth century as the Little Paris of the Antilles, Saint-Pierre was a bustling and prosperous port city, the gateway to Martinique for many visitors. Lafcadio Hearn, for example, on first arriving in Martinique through Saint-Pierre, described the city as "the quaintest, queerest, and the prettiest withal, among West Indian cities: all stone-built and stone-flagged" (Hearn 35-36). After France lost its most prosperous Antillean city, Cap-François, during the Haitian Revolution, Martinique's cultural capital became a "vitrine de la France aux Amériques" (Corzani 76). If Saint-Pierre reveled in its image as a modern city boasting electricity, telephone lines and a tramway, the specter of revolution nevertheless haunted its white creole population. It is therefore significant that Hearn goes on to describe the inhabitants as "a population fantastic, astonishing, a population of the Arabian Nights. It is many-colored; but the general dominant tint is yellow, like that of the town itself yellow in the interblending of all the hues characterizing *mulatresse*, *capresse*, *griffe*, *quarteronne*, *metissee*, *chabine*, a general effect of rich brownish yellow. You are among a people of half-breeds, the finest mixed race of the West Indies" (38). Hearn's description is exceedingly problematic because among other things, it

paints a portrait of exoticized hybridity that both fetishizes and feminizes the city through the list of colonial racial groupings that are all rendered in the feminine French form. This feminization, as we will see subsequently, enters into a long tradition of gendering Martinique as female and as occupying a subservient and often sexualized position. What is most striking about Hearn's characterization, however, is that Saint-Pierre is anything but white. His observations therefore throw de Linval's and de Jaham's representations of a white-washed city in sharp relief.

As novels that engage with a historical event, the paratexts of *Cœurs martiniquais* and *Le Sang du volcan* frame the texts' claims to accuracy and authenticity by situating the authors as insiders able to tell the story of Saint-Pierre. De Linval's paratextual interventions suggest that the goal of *Cœurs martiniquais* is to counter the narrative of Saint-Pierre's destruction as an act of divine retribution meted out to a city with a less-than-virtuous reputation. Her counter-narrative instead presents Saint-Pierre as a martyr, the innocent victim of a cataclysmic event beyond its control. Her preface is worth examining in its entirety here for the ways in which it frames this project of loss and recuperation through writing, and the different gendered roles involved in this project.

On a beaucoup dit de Saint-Pierre. On a vanté ses mœurs légères, ses carnivals tapageurs, d'autres se sont plu à découvrir, aux yeux étonnés des profanes, ses voluptés singulières, l'attrait de ses charmes mystérieux ; qu'il me soit permis à moi aussi, de pénétrer au sein de ma cité et à travers les scories qui la souillent, de toucher à ce qui fut son cœur. Cœur de martyr et cœur de mère ; cœur épris d'ardent idéal et de tendresse chaste et pure, j'ai entendu ses battements, et viens les redire à son peuple, pour que la cité qui se lève soit en tout digne de son amour ! Fort-de-France, ce 17 février 1918. JEAN MAX (3).²

In this love letter to Saint-Pierre, de Linval mourns the loss of the city by recreating it. There is much in her language that points to the project of restoring a Saint-Pierre that was, rather than imagining the emergence of a new and transformed city. Notably, her description of the city as sullied by scoria, a kind of dark brown or black volcanic rock, evokes the image of both the volcanic ash that rained down on Saint-Pierre, and the presence of free black inhabitants in a city that de Linval imagines to be a space of whiteness. This latter reading, as we will see, is borne out in the novel by the narrator's descriptions of the terrifying signs of volcanic activity that leave all of Saint-Pierre's inhabitants, black and white, covered in ash and therefore indistinguishable from one another. It is indeed striking that de Linval's Saint-Pierre is populated entirely by white creoles, with the occasional *da* or manservant as the only black inhabitants of what was in reality a majority black city. Cutting through the scoria to touch the true heart of the city, as de Linval describes it in her preface, is ultimately a project of erasing blackness in order to claim Saint-Pierre as a space of whiteness.

De Linval's nostalgic rendering of a city that never existed, recalls Saint-John Perse's grandmother's act of mourning an imagined Saint-Pierre, in an anecdote recounted by the French author Paul Morand: "Saint Léger Léger [sic] qui est originaire de l'île voisine de la Guadeloupe, fief de sa famille, me

racontait que sa grand' mère [sic], créole de vieille souche, parlait volontiers de cette catastrophe de la Martinique, 'où il était mort sept mille personnes'. On lui objectait qu'il y avait eu quarante mille victimes: 'Ah! répondait-elle, si vous comptez les gens de couleur'" (41). Despite, or rather because of their desire to erase all traces of black presence in Saint-Pierre, both Perse's grandmother and de Linval must ultimately reckon with black death and therefore black lives. In the hypothetical "si" of Perse's grandmother's exclamation is the inadvertent recognition that counting people of color and by extension recognizing their humanity in this moment of catastrophe, amplifies the extent of loss.

Cœurs martiniquais' preface also reveals the gendered nature of this project of mourning the loss of a white Saint-Pierre. Notably, de Linval as Jean Max inhabits a masculine persona, perhaps to lend credence to the veracity of the novel's representation of Saint-Pierre at a time when women's testimonies were devalued. Yet the novel itself remains very much woman-centered with its focus on the female protagonists Ginette Daubray and Anne-Marie Fougeras. De Linval's idealized Saint-Pierre is represented largely through its virtuous white women: nuns, teachers, mothers and philanthropists, as well as its loyal black women: the *das* who labor contentedly as surrogate mothers, cooks and caretakers. Despite the paratext's claims to male authorship and authority, the choice to dedicate *Cœurs martiniquais* to Jean Max's mother, "modèle de ces cœurs qu'il a essayé de dépeindre" (1), highlights de Linval's desire to preserve white women's legacy through the narrative.

Le Sang du volcan too is motivated by the need to preserve a particular version of the history of white presence in general, and the legacy of white creole women in particular, an undertaking that Benjamin Ngong has described as "une quête du 'paradis perdu'" (184). Indeed, it is striking that both novels contain nearly identical references to Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc as the founder of the first French colony in Saint-Pierre. In situating d'Esnambuc as a founding father of sorts, both texts seek to establish a genealogy of whiteness in Martinique, akin to Charles Lambolez's "livre de famille." De Jaham's paratextual interventions, while different from de Linval's, outline the same project of mourning and recuperation. In *Le Sang du volcan* there is no preface presented as an aside between author and reader in the non-fictional world before the fictional characters come into play. Instead, de Jaham weaves together fact and fiction in the opening pages through a short summary of her previous novel *L'Or des îles*. She situates *Le Sang du volcan* as the second volume in a series that would later become a trilogy, described as "une plongée dans l'Histoire" (de Jaham 11). In this way, de Jaham suggests that History with a capital "H" will unfold in the pages of this multi-part epic narrative that is the result of both fictional interpretation and exhaustive historical documentation. The novel supports this framing of the narrative by parading a host of historical figures including Moreau de Saint-Méry, Joséphine de Beauharnais, Napoléon Bonaparte, Pory Papy, Victor Schœlcher, Paul Gauguin and Victor Hugo who, in a rather extraordinary scene, hosts a séance in his living room, during which the ghost of Boukman, one of the early leaders of the Haitian Revolution, inhabits one of his dinner guests.

Like *Cœurs martiniquais*, *Le Sang du volcan* places *békées* and their *das* at the center of the story, emphasizing the experiences of historical white creole women like Joséphine de Beauharnais and fictional ones like Charlotte de Solis. However, in contrast to de Linval, who situates herself as an insider, an inhabitant of Saint-Pierre who only escaped the city on the eve of the eruption, de Jaham's emphasis on the historical nature of her novel places her at a temporal remove from the events. De Jaham is both an insider, a member of the insular *béké* community and a descendant of Joséphine, and an outsider, a contemporary novelist reimagining the lives of Saint-Pierre's women. Thus, both writers, despite their different historical positioning vis-à-vis the destruction of Saint-Pierre, belong to the tradition of *béké* authors constructing an imagined community in their texts. Ultimately in both novels, the destruction of Saint-Pierre functions as an allegory for the loosening of *békés'* hegemonic grip on political power with the abolition of slavery. Both authors undertake this project of mourning loss and claiming an imagined past through their representations of Martinican women's relationships across color lines.

Mothering and Servitude in Colonial Martinique

It is significant that both authors' reinvention of the colonial past occurs through their refiguring of an idealized and harmonious relationship between *békée* protagonists and their *das*. In *La Famille coloniale: La Martinique et la mère patrie, 1789-1992*, Richard Burton identifies *béké* writers' recourse to the tropes of the *doudou* and the *da* as an attempt to immobilize history, to preserve a snapshot of the island's pre-abolition racial hierarchy. As Burton argues, this colonial impulse is particularly gendered:

... l'image de la Doudou, aujourd'hui comme en plein milieu de l'époque esclavagiste, est, bien sûr, de voiler et de justifier l'exploitation d'une Martinique ou d'une Guadeloupe féminines et souriantes par un pouvoir métropolitain phallique. Mais, ainsi qu'il arrive si souvent aux Antilles, un mythe d'origine métropolitaine a été progressivement intériorisé par la population locale, d'abord par l'ethnoclasse *béké*. . . . Pour les poètes et les romanciers *békés* écrivant au lendemain de 1848, le mythe de la Doudou non seulement légitimait le pouvoir sexuel exercé sur les femmes de couleur par les hommes blancs—ce n'est pas nous qui les désirons mais elles qui nous désirent, affirmait les innombrables contes à doudou de l'époque postesclavagiste—mais, plus largement, entérinait le pouvoir économique et social que l'élite *béké* exerçait sur une population de couleur systématiquement féminisée (134).

Burton argues further that the *doudou* and the *da* do similar work of feminizing Martinique as a hypersexualized object and an asexual maternal figure respectively. His temporalizing of *béké* writers' deployment of these tropes is important because it allows us to better understand how these authors collapse time such that the 1902 volcanic eruption comes to stand in for the 1848 abolition of slavery. Burton identifies the abolition of slavery as that turning point that spurred the need for *béké* writers to seek to preserve the racial status

quo of the slaveholding period in literature. Preserving this imagined Martinique as a feminine figure therefore becomes a way to attempt to legitimize conquest through a gendered colonial fantasy. De Linval and de Jaham are certainly complicit in maintaining this white creole fiction that Burton summarizes in the formula “La Martinique est femme devant la France, les Martiniquais de couleur sont femmes devant l’élite béké” (136). Yet, their texts’ engagement with female protagonists and women’s relationships across color lines, also complicates the supposedly clear-cut demarcation that Burton establishes between a feminized black Martinique and masculine white creole power.

The representation of creole women as both powerful and vulnerable in the racial and gendered hierarchy of colonial Martinique is inextricably intertwined with the conflation of mothering and servitude for black women in both novels. The *békée/da* relationship emerges in each text as one of power and interdependence, a relationship between white women as both daughters and mistresses, and black women as both surrogate mothers and servants. In *Cœurs martiniquais*, this complex, multifaceted relationship is most clearly visible in the contrasting representations of two maternal figures in the life of the protagonist Ginette Daubray: her mother Lucy and her grandmother’s servant, Da Ti-Clé. Introduced only a few pages apart, Lucy and Ti-Clé make their first appearances in the novel on the occasion of young Ginette’s first school play. Although both women are dressed their best to honor Ginette, the differences in their clothing attest to the separation between these figures’ roles. The narrator describes Lucy as “charmante, la jeune femme, avec sa capeline en paille d’Italie, sa robe vaporeuse en mousseline des Indes, semée de petits bouquets pompadours” (de Linval 12). This representation of Lucy as effortlessly charming and elegant is markedly different from the more extensive description of Ti-Clé’s contrived ensemble:

Sa chemise de batiste brodée aux épaulettes laissait dépasser, à l’encolure, le feston rouge du gilet de fine flanelle lui servant de dessous. Un gros bouton, formé d’une cornaline encerclée d’or, la fermait par devant, au dessus d’un large écusson où s’étalait, en toutes lettres son nom de Clémentine. Deux énormes agrafes assorties au bouton ornaient, au haut du coude, les manches festonnées de cette chemise assez décolletée, d’où émergeait la poitrine et les bras ridés de la vieille. Une large jupe de satin violet broché de fleurs exotiques, élégamment ‘piquée’ à la taille, suivant l’expression créole, ainsi qu’un foulard de soie jaune artistement croisé sur la chemise, complétaient ce costume vraiment original (13).

In contrast to the short description of Lucy’s simple elegance, this representation of Ti-Clé relies on a *champ lexical d’exagération*. Adjectives such as “gros,” “large” and “énorme,” as well as the final description of the ensemble as a “costume,” suggest that Ti-Clé’s clothing are a farcical imitation of Lucy’s more elegant dress. The contrast between the two women’s appearances illustrates the conflation of motherhood and servitude. Da Ti-Clé, as surrogate mother, is represented as an unsuccessful mimicry of Lucy, a substitute maternal figure distinguishable from the authentic mother by the

exaggerated nature of her love and loyalty. Later in the novel, Ti-Clé is described as speaking to her mistress's son, Ginette's uncle Rodolphe, "avec cette familiarité quasi maternelle qu'elle conservait envers l'enfant qu'elle avait porté, jadis, dans ses bras" (55). This image shows that the *da's* mothering often spans several generations, from her mistress Mme Daubray, to her mistress's son Rodolphe and finally his niece Ginette. Yet, the description of her relationship to the child that she raised as "quasi maternelle," emphasizes her role as a stand-in for a more authentic maternal figure. Her hyphenated identity as Ti-Clé (Little Clé), the diminutive form of her name Clémentine, reinforces this image of the *da* as less than mother.

The *da's* role of surrogate mother positions her as, to borrow Homi Bhabha's formulation, "a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite" (126). The narrator attempts to contain the performance of motherhood in the enclosed space of the *da's* room. Ti-Clé's room as a space of intimacy between surrogate mother and daughter, is contingent on the temporary absence of the real mother. The room is a space in which color lines become blurred and Ginette can shed her identity as the daughter of a well-to-do white family in order to inhabit the persona of a *da* by wearing the servant's clothing and jewelry. This performance, the narrator recounts, was always cut short by Lucy's appearance in the room. In these moments, Ginette would hide from her mother, with Ti Clé's complicity, and spring out of her hiding place only when she was ready to leave the room of her grandmother's *da* and return home with Lucy. In this jovial account of childhood games of dress up and hide-and-seek lies an important illustration of the relationship of interdependence between *békées* and *das* in *Cœurs martiniquais*. The *da* can play a maternal role for a time, but always with the promise that the family order will be restored at the end of the day when Ginette leaves with Lucy, and Ti-Clé returns to her position as the elder Mme Daubray's household servant. Consequently, when Lucy dies early in the novel, Ti-Clé's room as maternal space can no longer serve that function of temporary escape because there is no other, more permanent mother-space to which Ginette can return. The *da's* room, formerly a "lieu de prédilection" (de Linval 31) and a "paradis" (32) for Ginette, is now a space that leaves her indifferent (33) to the possibilities of exchange between women across color lines.

The private, enclosed spaces within which these moments of exchange occur, attempt to contain the potentially transgressive nature of these relationships. For example, at Ginette's school play, her parents watch the performance along with the audience seated in front of the stage, whereas Ti-Clé, unable to contain her nerves, finds a place backstage where she can watch Ginette more closely. Like her room, this semi-private space backstage symbolizes both Ti-Clé's proximity to Ginette, and her erasure from the role of motherhood as she watches the play from a hidden space at a remove from both the general audience and the performers on stage. In this moment, she is both servant behind the scenes, and surrogate mother desiring to be close to her child. This oscillating between mothering and servitude highlights the potentially permeable nature of the boundaries between *békées* and *das*.

While *Cœurs martiniquais* shows the slippage between mothering and servitude, *Le Sang du volcan* underlines the *békée/da* relationship as simultaneously tenderly intimate and violent. Even in moments when the color and power lines between these two groups of women are clear, the intertwining of intimacy and violence in the text signals the forthcoming disruption of the racial order. In the early pages of the novel, the narrator introduces a teenage Joséphine de Beauharnais as she reflects on her place in Martinican society as the daughter of a “colon sans fortune” (23). She asks, “Pourquoi fallait-il que les femmes restent à la maison tandis que leur flandrins de maris passaient le temps à boire, à jouer et à se battre en duel quand ils ne poursuivaient pas des mulâtresses? Pourquoi certains êtres étaient-ils toujours des victimes? Les esclaves par exemple...” (23). Joséphine’s reflections are telling of the *béké* characters’ views on womanhood in Martinique. “Les femmes” is a category reserved for white creole women, distinguished from “des mulâtresses” who are complicit in the oppression of *békées* by their philandering husbands. What is most striking in this moment, however, is perhaps less what Joséphine says and more what she is unable to articulate. Her questioning of women’s social place leads her to rethink social hierarchies in general, culminating in an acknowledgement of slavery as a system that victimizes. Yet the possibility of Martinique as anything other than a slave society remains unspoken, suspended within the ellipses that symbolize the unspeakable nature of abolition. Joséphine’s inability to find the language that would account for this reality suggests that for white creole women, struggling against the boundaries of the colonial social hierarchy was simultaneously advantageous in offering greater socio-economic freedom, and dangerous in destabilizing the racial order on which these economic advantages depended.

When Joséphine ultimately summons the courage to question her *da*, Zézette, on the matter: “Et tu trouves normal d’être esclave?” (24), she opens the possibility of dialogue similar to the moments of potential exchange between surrogate mother and daughter in de Linval’s novel. However, here too the narrator stops short of imagining any significant blurring of color lines where *békée* and *da* can engage in an open conversation about slavery. Rather, Zézette’s response is a “regard étrange, le regard sournois et peureux d’un chien *bo cayé* pris à voler dans la cuisine” (24). The dehumanization of the *da* in this description of her look as that of a sly household dog, immediately closes off any avenues for meaningful exchange between black and white women that goes beyond colonial racial stereotypes, and suggests that the abolition of slavery haunts the text as that unspeakable event that disrupts potential solidarities between white and black women.

Throughout *Le Sang du volcan*, *békées* and *das* alternate between power and vulnerability within this relationship of intimate violence. For example, when Joséphine’s erstwhile admirer, Patrick de Solis, mysteriously and inexplicably loses his eyesight, his wife, Charlotte, mourns his loss of control over their plantation. The exchange between Charlotte and her *da*, Léone, is telling of the blurred lines that characterize the relationships of power among Martinican women:

Da Léone était occupée à broyer le *champignon-qui-endort* avec son pilon de pierre lorsque Charlotte pénétra dans l'office. N'y tenant plus, elle fondit en larmes.

-Ah ! madam' [...] ! j'peux pas supporter d'le voir souffrir comme ça !

Charlotte s'avança farouche.

-Tais-toi, idiote ! Il est à côté ! Tu veux qu'il t'entende ? Jamais, jamais il ne doit nous voir pleurer ! Promets-le-moi !

-J'peux pas ! glapit la nounou éperdue. Aïe ! Aïe !

La cuiller en bois de Charlotte lui frappait rudement le postérieur.

-Arrêtez, madam' ! [...]

Sans rien dire, da Léone l'entoura de ses bras et la berça contre son énorme poitrine ;

-Je suis...si bête...si faible ! hoqueta Charlotte (de Jaham 91).

In this scene, both women alternately occupy positions of strength and weakness. Da Léone is the maternal figure that comforts Charlotte. She is also the servant who interrupts her housework to provide this comfort, and the victim of her mistress's violence. Charlotte, on the other hand, wields power over Léone by striking her, and at the same time represents herself as fragile and powerless in the face of her husband's loss of control over their plantation. As the women switch back and forth between these roles with sometimes breakneck speed in de Jaham's text, they reveal the instability of Martinique's colonial racial order on the eve of Mount Pelée's eruption.

Toutt Nègues Vini Békés

These fluctuating relations of power between white and black Martinican women against the backdrop of Mount Pelée, symbolize *béké* perceptions of their tenuous control over the political sphere at the turn of the century. In both *Cœurs martiniquais* and *Le Sang du volcan*, the city of Saint-Pierre symbolizes white conquest of Martinique. Its destruction, by extension, represents the reversal of this conquest and the loss of *béké* power. De Linval's narrator, for example, describes Ginette's excursion up Mount Pelée with a close-knit group of family and friends, in terms that reinforce this idea of conquest: "Ils y arrivèrent non sans peine, mais heureux d'avoir atteint le point culminant du sommet. Un panorama de rêve s'offrait à leurs regards émerveillés. L'île presque entière était là, avec ses sites si divers, ses campagnes et ses clochers" (de Linval 65). This description of their arrival at the summit as an arduous journey for the group, frames their success as the subjugation of the mountain. From their vantage point, the narrator describes an island that offers itself up to their sweeping gaze, a gaze that claims ownership of the space. Picnicking around a mountain lake, Gaston, a member of the group, finds a bottle in the water that contains "les noms de quelques familles bien connus qui, venues là sans doute en excursion, y avaient laissé ce souvenir" (65). The act of inscribing their names for posterity, as these white creole families did in the past, and as Gaston does also on this occasion, suggests the desire to record their presence on the space itself. The image of names and lineages floating in vessels on the water,

stands in stark contrast to the anonymity of black captives in ships' holds during the Middle Passage.

Similarly, in de Jaham's novel, the conquest of Mount Pelée stands in for the colonization of Martinique. The de Solis plantation in Saint-Pierre, symbolically named La Volcane, represents *béké* power. The possibility of an eruption too, represents the potential loss of this power, a possibility that haunts the plantation's owners Charlotte and Patrick de Solis: "Et si le volcan venait un jour frapper pour de bon? Des générations de Solis avaient considéré la question avant d'y apporter une seule et même réponse : notre place est ici, jamais les Solis ne quitteront la Volcane. Au fil du temps, le volcan était devenu le symbole d'un éternel défi" (de Jaham 63). Both novels depict a struggle for power between *békés* and the volcano as symbol of that unstoppable force capable of disrupting the colonial conquest of Martinique.

In this tense atmosphere of perceived threats to *béké* power on the island, Martinican women are represented in both novels as clairvoyant figures whose knowledge of the island's past allows them to decode the baffling activity of a volcano assumed to be dormant. In *Le Sang du volcan*, Charlotte's granddaughter, Akwaba de Solis, locates the origins of Saint-Pierre's destruction at the Tombeau des Caraïbes, a site in the neighboring commune of Prêcheur that is today marked with a commemorative rock and plaque. She recounts the legend of Caribs who committed collective suicide as a last resort to escape capture and enslavement at the hands of French colonizers. Prior to their deaths, they uttered the curse: "la Montagne de Feu nous vengera!" (de Jaham 320).

The same story of the Caribs also appears in de Linval's *Cœurs martiniquais*. In de Linval's text, as Ginette and her stepmother Anne-Marie take leisurely Sunday walks at the Tombeau des Caraïbes, Da Ti-Clé narrates the ultimate act of refusal by Caribs "traqués par les Européens venus à la conquête de l'île" (de Linval 100). The use of the verb "traquer" emphasizes both the violence and dehumanization of colonization. As Ti-Clé, Ginette and Anne-Marie contemplate the Tombeau des Caraïbes, the women interpret this history in markedly different ways. For Ti-Clé, who makes the sign of the cross each time she encounters the site, it is a sacred space at which she can commemorate the island's past: "[Elle] évoquait devant l'abîme ces images légendaires du passé" (101). For the two white creole women, Ginette and Anne-Marie, the death of the Caribs represents a missed opportunity for France's civilizing mission: "Ceux-ci, insensibles à la civilisation dont ils ignoraient les bienfaits, n'avaient pas hésité à sacrifier à l'esclavage qu'ils appréhendaient, leur sauvagement liberté" (101). The racial anxieties that underwrite both novels, are present also in the mythologizing of the Caribs' actions, at least as they are represented here. The Caribs refuse to stay contained within the past, resurfacing in nineteenth-century Saint-Pierre in the form of this myth. The myth too enacts a similar refusal of containment by reappearing in two novels written over half a century apart.

With the exception of Da Ti-Clé's appearances, the story of the Caribs is one of only two moments in which *Cœurs martiniquais* represents non-white inhabitants of Saint-Pierre. The second example describes black sugarcane

cutters as “de[s] robustes travailleurs [qui] envahissaient les vastes champs. Armés de coutelas, la poitrine luisant au soleil ils abattaient vigoureusement les cannes à sucre” (112). Here too, the narrator’s word choice is significant because it evokes the menacing image of “robust” cutlass-wielding black workers “invading” the cane fields. The dual meaning of “abattre” as either cutting down or slaughtering, heightens the menacing nature of this image. In each of these examples, non-white inhabitants of Saint-Pierre act in ways that threaten the colonial order. The Caribs’ refusal, in the past, of colonial conquest masquerading as a civilizing mission, and the threatening image of cane cutters in the present, show the cracks in *Cœurs martiniquais*’ portrayal of Saint-Pierre as a space of whiteness. These representations of non-white Martinicans ultimately reveal the narrators’ fears of the disruption of the *béké* colonial project in Martinique, and the erosion of their power.

As Martinicans grapple with their mortality on the eve of a cataclysmic event, the lines between black and white characters in both novels are increasingly blurred and ultimately erased. In *Cœurs martiniquais*, De Linval’s narrator describes scenes of terror and panic in the days leading up to the destruction of the city. The people of Saint-Pierre take refuge in public buildings while others flee the city as ash rains down: “La cendre leur donnait un teint des vêtements uniformes. Les gamins s’en amusaient sur leur passage: –Jôdi, tout nègues vini békés (aujourd’hui les noirs sont devenus des blancs)” (de Linval 110). Whereas representations of Martinican women throughout the novel thus far have suggested a blurring of racial and power lines, in this moment when the volcano erupts, those lines are erased entirely. It is significant that this erasure does not occur by rendering all inhabitants uniformly grey from volcanic ash. Rather, in the gleeful song of the black children, it is specifically the black population of Saint-Pierre that becomes white, suggesting a form of equality based on black Martinicans’ acquisition of characteristics and socio-political status previously reserved for white creoles.

In *Le Sang du volcan*, the blurring and ultimate erasure of color lines, as viewed from the perspective of white creole characters, is particularly gendered. While black and white women operate in clearly delineated spaces at the beginning of the novel, their social roles overlap progressively as the island moves towards the abolition of slavery, until they ultimately become indistinguishable from each other. For example, when Charlotte de Solis learns that her son Thomas and her daughter Emma have habitually dipped into La Volcan’s coffers to finance their gambling and lavish lifestyles respectively, she takes away their control of the plantation’s finances. The narrator’s description of Thomas’ apology is telling of the *békée* character’s haunting fear of occupying the same social place as a non-white woman: “Bien, man-man, balbutia le gros homme, tirant de sa poche un trousseau de clefs. Je suis désolé. Dis-moi ce qu’il faut faire. Il prononçait man-man à la façon des gens de couleur. Un éclair féroce jaillit de sous la visière violette” (de Jaham 156). Charlotte’s visceral response to her son’s pronunciation of “man-man” signals her refusal of a creolized maternal identity. She rejects the moniker whose

pronunciation leaves the listener unable to distinguish *békée* mothers from mothers of color.

However, as the novel progresses, Charlotte finds it increasingly difficult to maintain such a separation. For example, her granddaughter Alexandra and her husband Miguel are killed in the wave of mysterious poisonings sweeping the island and heralding the end of slavery. On the day of their funeral, a messenger announces that a slave revolt has broken out in Grande-Anse, causing the black workers at La Volcane to distance themselves from their *békée* mistress lest they be seen to be on the wrong side of the revolt. The ever-loyal Da Léone is the only person who remains at Charlotte's side and accompanies her mistress to the funeral service: "Serrées l'une contre l'autre, les deux vieilles femmes conduisirent les cercueils jusqu'à l'église" (168). This description is striking. In this moment of shared grief and loss, against the backdrop of increasing slave revolts and agitation for freedom, *békée* and *da* become indistinguishable from one another. Power and color lines seem to disappear, leaving two old women to cling to each other and bury their dead. As the slave revolts intensify, Charlotte ultimately accepts her loss of control over La Volcane and her merged identity with that of Da Léone. As former slaves take barrels of rum away from the plantation during an insurrection at La Volcane, Charlotte watches helplessly from the window with Léone. She notes with resignation: "Nous sommes toutes deux pareilles.... Deux vieilles rosses inutiles. Tout est fini" (173). At the time Charlotte utters these words, the abolition of slavery is a near certainty, much more so than in the early pages of the novel when it remained an unspeakable thought for Joséphine and her *da*. In her terse "Tout est fini," Charlotte declares the end of the colonial status quo for the island in general, and for Martinican women in particular.

Ultimately, the abolition of slavery did not destroy the colonial order in Martinique as completely as the eruption of Mount Pelée destroyed Saint-Pierre. The eloquent denunciations of the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism written by generations of black intellectuals in the intervening years between the publications of de Linval's and de Jaham's novels, attest to the recalcitrant roots of racial and economic inequality in Martinique. From the perspective of *békée* authors, however, the dawn of the twentieth century brought irrevocable losses, significantly weakening their domination of the political sphere. De Linval's and de Jaham's representations of interracial relationships among women in Martinique, testify to the unstable, volatile nature of colonial fictions that seem to be always on the brink of destruction, and situate Martinican women as key players in the abolition of slavery and the volcanic eruption, two historic events that shook the island, and whose legacies resonate across time.

Notes

¹ In her novels, de Jaham does not use the feminine form of the noun *béké*. I do so in this essay, in keeping with the conventions of the French language.

² De Linval signs her preface using her pseudonym Jean Max.

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