

ENCUENTROS



*Chestnut Women:
French Caribbean Women
Writers and Singers*

Lecture by

Brenda F. Berrian

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CHESTNUT WOMEN: FRENCH CARIBBEAN WOMEN WRITERS AND SINGERS

Brenda F. Berrian

A generation ago, the writer Maryse Condé of Guadeloupe wrote about the condition of women as follows: "Feminine discourse is neither optimistic nor victorious. It is loaded with anguish, frustration and revolt.... Throughout the world, woman's voice is rarely triumphant. The feminine condition is everywhere characterized by exploitation and despondency." (Condé 1979, 113)

In French Caribbean countries today, these statements are still partly true. The inferior status of women in French Caribbean society has been attributed to various causes, including religious dogmas and *vodou*, European colonialism, patriarchy, and the Napoleonic Code of 1804, which deprived women of rights and fixed them in inferior sexual roles. The stereotype of the smiling, sexually available black or mulatto *doudou* (love or darling) goes back to the eighteenth century. According to the critic Clarisse Zimra, the term *doudou* has come to mean nothing more than a "pet animal whose affections do not run deep and who can, therefore, be discarded..." (Zimra 1990, 146).

Along with the *doudou* is another image, that of the Haitian rural woman. As explained by Ira P. Lowenthal, "female sexuality is here revealed to be a woman's most important *economic* resource, comparable in terms of its value to a relatively large tract of land" (Lowenthal 1984, 22). The underlying notion was that female bodies were a source of income. If they objected to being sexually exploited, they were treated as castoffs or madwomen.

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To displace these stereotypes of the French Caribbean woman, writers like Maryse Condé, Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Simone Schwarz-Bart of Guadeloupe, and Edwidge Danticat of Haiti, have crafted women characters who seize their own destiny. These writers have broken the cult of silence that enshrouds sexual relationships within the societies of their birth islands. As novelists, they accomplish their aim by writing in a style that allows metaphoric interpretations.

In their search for self-expression and empowerment, the women novelists

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struggle to cast off the legacy of oppression. Yet their novels usually end with the women protagonists withdrawing or fleeing to escape the men who exploited or harmed them. For example, the heroine of *Juletane* (Warner-Vieyra, 1982) goes mad and wills herself to die when her Muslim husband marries a third wife. Juletane leaves behind a diary, to be read by another woman of Guadeloupe before her marriage to a Muslim man. Juletane hopes to enlighten the woman about cross-cultural differences, so she may avoid a similar fate.

Condé shifts the heroines of her first two novels, *Héremakhonon* (1982) and *Une Saison à Rihata* (1981), to African countries. Once far from their island of birth, they are free to act out sexual fantasies that would not be tolerated in their own society. For example, Véronique of *Héremakhonon* becomes involved in a torrid affair with a despised African politician. Later she discovers that he only covets her because she is exotic, a foreigner. Disillusioned, Véronique escapes to France, the colonial motherland. Likewise, Marie-Hélène of *Une Saison à Rihata*, sequestered in an identified African country on the brink of a coup d'état, is in love with one brother, but married to another. Her claim to fame is her alienation and the duplication of her island by giving birth to several children. The self-destructive behavior of these protagonists epitomizes women alienated from their homeland, whose feeble attempts to liberate themselves end in sacrifice and powerlessness.

An exception is the heroine of Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972). Télumée's first husband abuses her psychologically and abandons

her, but her second husband helps to build her self-esteem, until his untimely death. Télumée works as a maid, cane worker, and peanut vendor, learning how to survive as an independent woman. Eventually Télumée surmounts her sadness, by becoming a healer, a foster mother and at one with her island. Standing triumphant in her garden, she finally appears in her own identity: a proud peasant woman who dearly loves her country. In the end, her first husband returns to declare that he still loves her, and Télumée regrets that she cannot forgive his betrayal.

Historically and politically, the French Caribbean woman has been treated as sexually subordinate to the male. To illustrate this, the novelist Edwidge Danticat of Haiti introduces three generations of Caco women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). The Cacos, a rural working class family, struggle "to maintain continuity from one generation to the next, and to reshape through education the fate of the younger generation to the next, represented by the narrator and protagonist, Sophie" (Chancey, 1997, 121). The three generations of women have distinctly different lives. Ifé, Sophie's grandmother, clings to the old ways and the secrecy of the African past. Martine, Sophie's mother, escapes her home village in Haiti to the seeming safety and anonymity of the USA. Sophie is raised by her maternal aunt, Tante Atie, until her teens, when she is summoned to join her mother, Martine, in Brooklyn. Desperate for autonomy, Sophie quickly learns English to navigate her new and lonely landscape. For Sophie, the only means to salvation is an education connected to a life of exile. However, Martine

has not overcome the traumas of her past, particularly that of being a rape victim. In the psychotic delusion that she is somehow “protecting” her daughter, Martine subjects Sophie to abuse. Sophie, in retaliation, becomes self-destructive, and eventually a pregnant Martine commits suicide.

Although a painful story, Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a step toward changing the perception of the French Caribbean woman. With strength of character and high motivation, combined with creativity, Danticat uses the languages of French, Creole and English to explain how Sophie’s exposure to life and an education in the States offers an alternative vision. Sophie marries an African-American musician, gives birth to a daughter, and determines to break the cycle of abuse and silence. Her daughter, the fourth generation, will have the opportunity to fulfill her ambitions.

Breath, Eyes, Memory exposes the extent to which Haitian women have been subjugated. It takes four generations of Caco women to become free from the mores of the Napoleonic Code, initially enforced in Haiti in 1804, which relegated a woman to the status of a child. Myriam Chancy has written that “[i]n Caribbean fiction, dissatisfaction with oppressed gender roles finds its expression in the motif of flight as a result of social confinement.” Indeed, Martine, Sophie, and Tante Atie choose exile, fleeing to the United States or to another Haitian village.

Although Danticat also presents education as a vehicle for empowerment, women’s suffering permeates the pages of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. It has been noted that French Caribbean society assigns contradictory roles to men and women. The

Caribbean myth is that the female child is taught self-sufficiency, and matures into a strong woman who is able to handle anything. Yet girls are also taught that it is desirable to have a dominant male partner. The messages are contraadictory. “The woman is told she is ‘her own woman,’ but once she enters marriage or a live-in relationship, she must take on the childbearing, childraising, and house-keeping duties that place her in a subordinate position to the man and primarily confine her to domesticity.” (Berrian, 2000, 78)

The male child, on the other hand, is not raised with the same survival skills as the female. He tends to be spoiled and to rely upon his mother or other women of the household. Later his heavy dependence on female relatives is carried over into a relationship with an adult woman partner. Yet, the French Caribbean male internalizes the ideology of male dominance, and thus he subconsciously resents his dependence on a woman. This resentment can turn into hostility toward his wife and may lead him to establish relationships with other women. The wife, in turn, lacks self-confidence and may feel that she is somehow responsible for her mate’s irresponsible behavior.

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The novels of Condé, Warner-Vieyra, Schwarz-Bart and Danticat illustrate the extent to which French Caribbean women are subjugated. In contrast to this, the Caribbean singers Joëlle Ursull and Jocelyne Béroard sometimes begin a *zouk*¹ song with a tinge of sadness, but end on an optimistic note. For example, Ursull, a Guadeloupean singer and songwriter, composed a song about a love triangle for

her third solo album, *Comme dans un film*. “Joujou” (Plaything) deals with the betrayal of friendship because of competition over a man. When one woman’s best friend steals her boyfriend, a code of honor is broken. It is understood that a woman should not be involved with her best friend’s lover, and thus the act destroys their long friendship

The song begins: “There is no greater disgrace than the betrayal of friendship... Friendship is a gift... I had given it to you on a silver plate.” To be rejected is painful, but to be betrayed by your closest friend is devastating. The concern here is that a temporary romantic relationship with a man could be more valued than a long-term friendship between women: that a friend is disposable, but a male partner is indispensable. Nonetheless, “Joujou” closes with a defiant message: *Mé jòdi gadé byen / Sé on nouvèl fanm ki la douvan vou / An pa on joujou* (Today I am fine / A new woman stands in front of you / Not a plaything).²

In another example, the sexually available *doudou* is replaced by a self-assured woman in Ursull’s song “Amazòne” from *Black French* (1990). Ursull proudly compares herself and other women to the famous warlike women of Greek mythology and warrior women of Benin, West Africa. According to the myth, Amazon women were famous for their prowess and leadership skills. Ursull reassesses French Caribbean history and remembers how women toiled to build up their civilization. To reciprocate, Ursull acknowledges a debt to her female ancestors and advises:

*Bati lavi-w anè zafè-w
Mè pa bat lavi-w anè on moun*

*Amazòne an travay-ou
Amazòne an lari ya*

Base your life on something that is
yours,
Do not base your life on a person.
Be like an Amazon in what you do.
Be an Amazon in the street.³

Jocelyne Béroard, a singer from Martinique, pays attention to strong emotions in her lyrics and delivery. While always searching for new sounds and more innovative ways of singing, Béroard writes lyrics of appealing simplicity. A turning point in her career occurred in 1980, when she sang in the chorus on Kassav’s second album, *Lagué moïn*. Four years later, she joined Kassav’s all-male *zouk* band, helping to inspire a new generation of women singers and songwriters. Aware of her wide audience, Béroard carefully cultivated a dignified and gracious public image. Her song, *Pa bizwen palé* (No Need to Talk, 1985) was an early affirmation of the image of a sweet French Caribbean woman. For over two months, the song was on the Top 50 chart. The opening words are:

*Fénmen lapòt la-a
Oswé ya man pé ké ladjé-w
Oublyé déwo la pani pèsonn’
Limen bouji-ya
É vini la pou ou kouté
Tou sa tchè mwen lé di-w
Dépi jou a ou gadé mwen
Pa bizwen palé*

Close the door. Tonight I won’t let
you go.
Forget about the outside;
nobody exists but us.

Dim the light and listen to what my
heart has to tell you.
No need to talk.⁴

Although the opening echoes two songs by the African American Teddy Pendergrass⁵ (especially “Close the Door,” 1979), Béroard’s soft words, *Fénmen lapòt-la-a* are not an order. Instead, Béroard wishes to shut out external distractions so that she and her lover may talk freely about their feelings and the direction of their relationship. The man (sung by Patrick Saint-Éloi) is suspicious, and fears she wants to leave him:

*Sa ki rivé-w la
Mwen po ko jan vwè-w kon sa
Dépi yonn dé jou
Ou ka palé dè lanmou
Si sé paskè
Ni an moun ka fè-w vibré
Palé ba mwen franchman
An po ko jan vwè-w kon sa*

What’s the matter with you?
You’ve never been like this before.
For several days now
You’ve been talking about love.
Is it because someone else makes
your heart tremble?
Tell me frankly.
I never saw you like this before.

To soothe him, the woman reaffirms her strong love, with the chorus encouraging him to remain and listen.

In both “Pa bizwen palé” and Pendergrass’ songs, a power game is played out. However, Pendergrass wants a submissive woman; he teaches her to close the door, light a candle, and take a bath in order to prepare for seduction. While young

American audiences are attracted to the sensuousness of the music and the lyrics, many adults find the lyrics too explicit.

In contrast, Béroard’s message is: “As partners, let us share this experience and talk about our relationship.” Saint-Éloi, the immature lover, is not comfortable with this request. For him, sex is tantamount to romantic love, and he knows he gives her physical satisfaction. If she wants to talk about their relationship, the only plausible reason is that she must have another lover. On the other hand, the mature lover (sung by Jean-Philippe Marthély) realizes he must satisfy his woman intellectually and physically. He sings:

*Pa bizwen palé
Pa bizwen alé pli lwen
Kon lanmou sé la
Pa bizwen palé
Annou fenmèn zyé
É rété adan menm tenmpo-a*

No need to talk.
No need to go anywhere else.
When love is here,
there’s no need to talk.
Let’s close our eyes,
and stay with the same rhythm.

If the couple stays with the same rhythm, then their relationship can grow with sharing of mutual concerns. Thus, the candlelight and closed door in Béroard’s song symbolize the innermost region of the woman’s mind. The closed room with the lit candle is a place to reconfigure one’s strength and prepare for the outside world. The closed room is Béroard’s privileged, protective space to make a crucial single or joint decision.

In addition, it is a temporary space before reentering the public arena.

Another interesting point about “Pa bizwen palé” is that the second male singer actually advises the first man to listen to the woman. In using a male intermediary to voice her opinions, Béroard defers to the patriarchy. This technique makes the song safe, because it conforms to cultural expectations. Béroard thus uses the collective voice to tell her story. Not only is her voice heard, but also those of Saint-Éloi, Marthély, and the chorus, indicating that men and women must be able to converse to solve their problems. Thus, Béroard emphasizes a communal voice, not an individual one. No voice has more priority or authority than the other; the four voices enrich the final message: Listen to what I (the woman) have to say, before you (the man) engage in a conversation of mutual satisfaction with me.

The woman’s attempt to be independent in “Pa bizwen palé” is a departure from the status quo. Béroard’s intent is to show the woman’s uneasiness with the inequity that slowly creeps into a relationship. The woman wants to avoid guessing what her man actually thinks about her. She has a powerful need for open communication and wants her questions to be answered truthfully. The closing of the door, according to Béroard, provides an intimate space for the woman to tell her man that she is the one who talks. Yet, instead of the woman singer voicing these concerns, the second male singer does. Consequently, the song demonstrates the woman’s dependence on the approval of others and the acceptance of societal norms that favor male wisdom. Béroard, a realist, understands her Car-

ibbean public and knows how far to go with the lyrics.

For Béroard, there must be clouds if one cherishes the rainbow of hope. Her quest for this metaphorical rainbow and sunshine within the confines of a relationship continues with the song, “Siwo.” This Creole term is used by men to describe a kind, tender, loving woman, yet Béroard appropriates it to characterize a good man. The song begins: *Mwen di’w siwo ba mwen / An nomn’ dous’ kon siwo / Mare’y épi ralè’ y vini* (I say, give me a good man / as sweet as honey / Catch him. Grab him for me).⁶ This strategy of reversal and the double-layering playfulness leads to a belief in change. Addressing women directly, Béroard preaches a lesson on how to negotiate. She wants a Caribbean man who knows how to have fun and respects women. The hard-driving heavy-on-the-bass rhythm of “Siwo” is perfect for promoting the message: I want a good man who will treat me right. In a candid interview, Béroard remarked: “I’m not trying to take the place of a man. I’m a woman. Also, I am not saying I am a man’s equal. We [women] are different... We’re different, but we complement men. Nevertheless I love teasing men, because they are really so macho most of the time from Caribbean countries...”⁷

The popular songs of Béroard and Ursull break the silence about duplicity and commitment. They articulate concerns that make men feel uncomfortable, and define the range of expectations women have for their relationships with men. Coming from an oral tradition, where people listen to the radio and watch television instead of reading, the two women songwriters are well aware

that their songs are considered extensions of themselves. In the Caribbean community, there is less distinction between the message of the songs and the singer's persona. In order to remain popular and to sell her product, Béroard writes her Creole songs carefully, to redirect herself from male domination and reclaim her forebears' resistance to oppression. On the literal level, "Pa bizwen palé" and "Siwo" conform to the status quo, but on a figurative level, they are challenging. In crafting these songs, Béroard carves out a place to contest male power indirectly, in love songs that address duplicity or commitment.

The French Caribbean people have an old saying that celebrates the strength, resilience and determination of their women: *Une femme déchue tombe comme une châtaigne / Un homme déçu tombe comme un fruit à pain trop mûr* (A hurt woman falls like a chestnut, a hurt man like an over-ripe breadfruit). The leaves and fruit from the chestnut and breadfruit trees are similar. However, the breadfruit splatters when it falls on the ground, whereas the chestnut, protected by a hard shell, does not break easily.

Béroard penned a clever song titled "Fanm chatenn" (Chestnut Woman). Surprisingly, she wrote it from a male point of view, with Marthély as the singer. The first stanza asks: Who can a woman rely on? Where has the man gone? In stanza two, Marthély shifts, advising the woman not to cry even if she and her children are hurt by a husband and father who strays afar. In the third and fifth stanzas, the singer's advice to the abandoned woman is, *Pa blamé tout sé nonm la* (Don't blame all the men).⁸ If the woman's ex-husband chooses to father children who

live in another household, Marthély cautions not to be aligned to such a man: *Ou sav mwen menm sé nonm osi / ni dé jou nou ka pri* (You know that I'm just a man / We can get lost in our games sometimes). Most importantly, the man equates the woman's survival skills to that of a chestnut: *Chatenn tonbé / ka ripousé, umm sa vré* (It's true that a chestnut falls / then sprouts).

Accompanied by a snappy, uplifting beat and strong backup singing, Marthély concludes the song with insistence that a woman's life does not end with her man's departure. If her husband's departure leaves her as the sole provider, she can nevertheless draw upon her inner resources, reevaluating herself and rediscovering her identity as an independent woman. Lonely but not loveless, her children, friends, and other family members comfort her. After this experience, she will be more careful in her choice of another mate.

The open-ended final question, *Es ou pa ka di nou pé rivé chanjé sa?* (Should we be able to change that?), sung as a refrain three times, is weighed down with hope and optimism, confirming the woman has not given up on men. The next man who enters her life will be different, because she, like a conjurer who changes into an animal, sheds her old skin and puts on a new one. In the future she will play a more active role, making sure that her voice and opinions are heard. Verbalizing pain is a prelude to ending it; therefore, the Creole proverb comparing a woman to a chestnut is a testimony to her durability.

With this optimistic faith in a woman's spirit and belief in romantic relationships, Béroard's "Fanm chatenn" (Chestnut Woman) sums up the positive messages

in French Caribbean women's novels and songs. First, French Caribbean women know how to rebound from disappointments; they will not lose faith in being involved in a committed relationship. Second, women crave to be loved, but also want faith, trust, and mutual self-respect for themselves and their man. To love involves courage and confidence in oneself and one's partner. The search for romantic love and the selection of a faithful mate coincide with a woman's self-esteem.

Popular songs tend to express the range of attitudes and expectations that characterize an era. French Caribbean women songwriters today write about women who suffer, regain hope, and redefine themselves. The songwriters tone down the anguish and despondency so prevalent in the novels.

To circumvent a society that believes that women must submit to men, these writers seem to suggest that women are powerless. Yet their novels and songs provide a subtext of opposition, by breaking the silence about abandonment and the effects of sexual oppression. Despite the duplicities and frustrations they experience, the writers do not give up hope. Although the dominant image is of women with a soft exterior, there is an underlying toughness that enables the "chestnut women" to cope with unhappiness and disappointment. In truth, writing novels and composing songs are themselves forms of self-empowerment, creating the patterns for new relationships and experiences.

Brenda F. Berrian

NOTES

1. *Zouk*, a loud, hot tempo dance music introduced by Kassav' in the late 1970s, is a fusion of music from the Caribbean and Africa.
2. Joëlle Ursull, "Joujou," *Comme dans un film*, Col 473923-2.
3. —————. "Amazône," *Black French*, CBS 466854-4.
4. Jean-Philippe Marthély and Patrick Saint-Éloi, "Pa bizwen palé," *Ou pa ka sav*. G. Debs LP 034.
5. Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff actually wrote the lyrics and music for "Turn Off the Lights" (1978) and "Close the Door" (1979).
6. Jocelyne Béroard, "Siwo," *Siwo*, G. Debs 036.
7. Berrian, Brenda F. Interview with Jocelyne Béroard, 24 May 1995, Paris.
8. Kassav'. "Fanm cha tenn," *Difé*, Columbia CD 480607-2.

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Berrian's research interest is contemporary African American, African, and Caribbean women writers. She has compiled and edited two major bibliographies: *Bibliography of Women Writers from the Caribbean* (Three Continents, 1989) and *Bibliography of African Women Writers and Journalists* (Three Continents, 1985). She is book review editor for *MaComère*, journal for the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars. Berrian's recent book *Awakening Spaces: French Caribbean Popular Songs, Music, and Culture*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in June 2000. Her current book project, *That's the Way It Is: African American Women in the New South Africa*, is a collection of thirty-five oral narratives about African American women's cross-cultural experiences.

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