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Jacqueline Couti, *Dangerous Creole Liaisons: Sexuality and Nationalism in French Caribbean Discourses from 1806 to 1897*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. x + 276 pp. Bibliography and index. £85.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8301-8.

Review by Grégory Pierrot, University of Connecticut at Stamford.

In the opening to *Dangerous Creole Liaisons*, Jacqueline Couti evokes the general strike that brought life in the French West Indian islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique to a halt in the early months of 2009. A coalition of trade unionists, political, social, and cultural activists named LKP protested the cost of living and demanded the end of economic profiteering. French people of the metropole had seldom heard about the Caribbean outside of evergreen reports on summer vacations or the carnival, but they were now finding out about the age-old bedrock of socio-racial strife that underlay the sunny beaches of the French West Indies. As their voices were being heard in the national media, representatives of LKP summoned a history of economic exploitation rooted in the region's colonial, slaveholding past. Descendants of the islands' old white families—*békés*—still own most of the land and factories. They also control much of the island's supply and distribution network, imposing outrageous prices on food, fuel, and other subsistence products. The stark and unavoidable confluence of race, class, and economics came as a shock to many French people raised on the myth of the colorblind Republic, notably in the form of "Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique," a television documentary that exposed the absolute control and extreme racism levied by *békés* on the small island.[1] One of the most notable passages in the film showed rich *béké*, Alain Huyghues Despointes lamenting race-mixing and explaining what he saw as a defining trait of his ethno-class: "on a voulu préserver la race"—we wanted to preserve the race.

The emphasis by white planters on race preservation is a tacit recognition that in the French West Indies, interracial relations have always complicated purist understandings of ethnic and national belonging. For Jacqueline Couti, interracial sexuality is the central issue of French Caribbean culture, and "the struggle for control of the female body and its representations" is the essential theme in the literature and culture of nineteenth-century Caribbean at large and Martinique in particular (p. 2). Couti's corpus and time frame mean to be provocative. The island is best known for its male titans of black philosophy and literature—Césaire, Fanon, Glissant, or Chamoiseau—and its literature prior to the twentieth century is routinely denigrated. But Couti's book exclusively studies nineteenth-century writings by white authors, *békés* and outsiders (metropolitan French and American). The title somewhat misleadingly plays on Choderlos de Laclos's epistolary novel of sadistic libertinage to suggest the extent to which matters of sexuality and discourses of domination have been intertwined in the French Caribbean. These texts are concerned with "white creole national consciousness" and offer a series of female bodies as national allegories that contributed to a transatlantic sense of French national identity, but also provide the foundation of "the black Caribbean imaginary as we know it today" (p. 5).

Couti's book is organized chronologically, following a legacy of representation in writings about the Caribbean by white writers. The first chapter focuses on *béké* author Prévost de Sansac de Traversay's 1806 novel *Les Amours de Zémédare et Carina*. Couti sees the novel as a "laboratory and *fabrique* of

nationalism” in which Traversay reflects on the collapse of the ancien regime (blamed on Marie-Antoinette’s moral failures) and on the social and racial egalitarianism of the French Revolution to propose a vision of the virtuous creole family as the ideal symbol for French, transatlantic monarchist nationalism. After the death of her strong, righteous mother, the young white Creole Carina is seduced by the lecherous metropolitan libertine Mélidore, whom she chooses over her cousin Zémédare. Traversay means to negate prior portrayals of creole planters as indolent and concupiscent: Here, interracial relations are exclusively the domain of perverted metropolitans. Traversay erases the messy fact of West Indian interracial relations to promote a self-serving vision of racial purity. Women “must be the agents of their own virtue,” and on that virtue rests the racial order of the colony. For Traversay, this order necessarily implicates France at large: After Mélidore dies, Carina and Zémédare get married and build their family on both sides of the ocean. Traversay’s creole family protects the island’s racial order from metropolitan threats, but it also offers it as a model applicable throughout France.

Chapter two discusses Jules Levilloux’s *Les créoles* and Louis de Maynard de Queilhe’s *Outre-mer*, both published in 1835 in the wake of the 1830 Revolution and the advent of the *monarchie de Juillet*. Couti deems the two texts “failed national romances.” Contrary to Traversay, the two authors acknowledge the ubiquity of interracial sexual contacts in creole society, but only to identify them, along with the republican value of racial equality, as the cause for the collapse of the old creole order. In *Les créoles*, Edmond, son of Guadeloupian white planters, returns from France with a mixed-race friend, Estève, whom he foists on his sister as a fellow white planter. The revelation of Estève’s true racial nature precedes a series of catastrophes that destroy the family. In *Outre-mer*, Marius works to promote the civil rights of his fellow free people of color before leading a violent revolt against the plantocracy. His desire for the creole heiress Julie de Longuefort is thwarted by the discovery that they are both children of a wealthy Martinican planter. Levilloux portrays blackness as a poison that can fatally contaminate creole whites through miscegenation. Maynard’s novel portrays interracial sexual contact as “the crime that forever destroyed Paradise for European colonists” (p. 106). In Maynard’s Gothic-influenced take, “the main threat associated with sexual licentiousness between races is not rape but incest,” a change of focus that allows him to ignore completely the brutality of slavery (p. 68).

A short section follows that focuses on the self-ascribed mission of creole historians to protect creole history from the threat of erasure at the hands of biased metropolitan peers. Representations of creole women in purportedly historical depictions of creole society followed the same precepts as fictional representations. Daney’s *Histoire de la Martinique* praises the creole past to its creole audience in depicting the contributions to world history of three notable Martinican creole women including Joséphine de Beauharnais. Daney bends historical facts to build a self-serving, positive creole history for creole readers, showing that “Creoles can reclaim their agency through revisiting their history” (p. 117). In his concern for the preservation of creole memory, Couti argues, he announces twentieth-century French Caribbean thinkers of color.

Chapter three turns to writings about Martinique by foreigners, namely the celebrated American author Lafcadio Hearn’s memoir *Two Years in the French West Indies* and his novel *Youma*, and metropolitan French writer and journalist Jenny Manet’s *Maïotte*, originally published as a serial in the Martinican newspaper *Les Colonies*. Both authors portray mixed-race, light-skinned women living for the love of white men, and dark-skinned women as primitive and threatening. Hearn and Manet recycle sexualized visions of Martinican society borrowed from *béké* myth, ignoring in the process the complexities of life in a society in transition, yet their outsider positions were instrumental in rendering these ideas palatable to people of color in Martinique.

Chapter four shows how the advent of the Third Republic led to drastic changes in Martinique. The unrestricted adoption of universal male suffrage signaled the end of *béké* political hegemony, progressive reform in education, and a rearrangement of political alliances among the rising bourgeoisie of color. The more progressive elements among Martinique’s political figures “turned to the Motherland” as a viable

alternative (p. 215). Progressive *béké* writer René Bonneville evokes the benefits of the Third Republic for people of color in his novel *Le Triomphe d'Églantine*. The titular character is a kept woman of color who, after her *béké* lover abandons her and their two children to marry his more socially acceptable white cousin, becomes a *famn poto mitan*, “an exemplary maternal figure” doubling as a “transatlantic allegory of the republican *mère-patrie*” (p. 171). Églantine achieves her social triumph by adopting the values and practices of the secular, bourgeois Third Republic. She develops a successful business, puts her children through school, and watches her daughter marry a famous lawyer and her son become mayor of Saint-Pierre. Bonneville’s “Creole Marianne” and her model Republican matrifocal family subvert a century-long tradition of representations by his fellow *békés*, but the reversal was short-lived. As the Third Republic gained in stability, it also endorsed colonialism that belied egalitarian precepts, and the figure of the submissive *doudou* became the prevalent image of Caribbean women of color in French culture.

Couti’s book is an important contribution to the study of French Caribbean literature, in conversation with recent work by Maeve McCusker and Marlene Daut.[2] It makes a compelling case for her definition of French Caribbean colonies as “*fabriques* of modernity” in which *béké* voices, in their effort at constituting a new white colonial identity after the collapse of the ancien regime, opened rhetorical spaces in which they might maintain *béké* particularism within the French nation. Couti’s strongest and most provocative point is arguably that the legacy of these overlooked creole literary efforts lives in the writings and ideas of contemporary Caribbean writers of color. At times, it is expressed in somewhat puzzling terms: Couti asserts that nineteenth-century *béké* historians of the mid-nineteenth century sound like twentieth-century Caribbean thinkers of color when they raise “issues about the preservation of memory, the gaps in French Antillean history, and the erasure of that history” (p. 111). But certainly, *béké* complaints about the dearth of archives and potential disappearance of their history belong to the same rhetoric of victimization Couti describes elsewhere as essential to their national positioning in the nineteenth century. This rhetoric has been instrumental in silencing the history of slavery, to borrow Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s turn of phrase.[3] *Békés* have archives, or in any case the power to turn their legends into history. Another striking moment in “Les maîtres de la Martinique” featured white patriarch Despointes demonstrating the purity of his lineage by exhibiting the family trees of the entire *béké* community of Martinique organized in concentric circles leading back to their alleged single Adamic ancestor, Jean Assier. Most black Martinicans entered the official record in 1848. What gap-filling recreations of history Caribbean writers of color have produced cannot quite compare to that of Despointes. He is no writer, but he points to what ultimately lends *béké* stories their power: the “stifling incestuousness of *béké* identity,” the irony of which shines all the brighter in the light of incest’s role in nineteenth-century *béké* Gothic, and, more crucially, close to four centuries of economic hegemony.[4]

Couti does discuss economics when she evokes the often untold but profound differences between free people of color and slaves and their respective descendants, and it may be that she has specifically free people of color in mind when she makes the aforementioned argument. Economics ultimately led to political alliances between the *békés* and the bourgeoisie of color, and Couti is at her most convincing when she shows that the most undeniable link between *béké* and contemporary black male Caribbean thinking really is patriarchal thinking, which has allowed disturbingly racist and gendered outlooks to persist in Martinican writings. Couti’s analysis of the puzzlingly lasting popularity of Hearn is as compelling as it is frustrating on this point: The genealogy of creole motifs connecting the French West Indies and the United States is compelling, but it may strike Americanists as crippled by the absence of Victor Séjour, the Louisiana-born free man of color whose writing career bloomed in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Séjour quite literally embodies how intertwined French, French Caribbean, and American literary treatments of race and gender were. His famous 1837 short story “*Le mulâtre*,” a tale that merges themes found in the writings of his contemporaries Maynard and Levilloux—and in the American “tragic mulatto” motif—was, after all, published in Martinican man of color Cyril Bissette’s *La Revue des Colonies*.

But Couti sets out to focus on white writers, and she mostly and effectively sticks to her plan. The dangerous liaisons tying *béké* myths and writings by authors of color is the subject of her next book project, *Sex, Sea and Self*. One can only hope that book will be as engaging as this one.

NOTES

[1] “Les Derniers Maîtres de la Martinique,” directed by Romain Bolzinger. *Canal Plus*. January 30, 2009. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N0OS2f4xVg (accessed January 19, 2018).

[2] See notably Maeve McCusker, “Figuring Abjection: The Slave Mother in the Early Creole Novel,” *French Studies* 67.1 (2013): 61-75; “The ‘Unhomely’ White Women of Antillean Writing” *Paragraph* 37.2 (2014): 273-289; and Marlene L. Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[3] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

[4] Maeve McCusker, “All Creoles Now? *Béké* Identity and *Éloge de la créolité*,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 21.1 (2017): 220-232, p. 230.

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