

“Tu es ridicule!”: When Black Women Speak Up and Speak Out in Ferdinand Oyono’s Novels

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Up until the emergence of the *Négritude* movement in the 1930s and 1940s, women in Black Francophone literature remained invisible and silent.¹ Using the colonizer’s language, African and Caribbean writers relished praising the chestnut tresses and the fair skin of the white European woman. Finding inspiration in the tenets of *Négritude* that celebrate and accept blackness, Francophone writers return to the women who birthed, loved, chastised, and inspired them (Wallace 233). Hence, in the preface of *L’enfant noir* (1953), the Guinean writer Camara Laye extols his mother, while the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor sings the beauty and sexuality of the black woman. As male writers break away from the colonial and literary yoke, they take timid steps to forge a literature that accounts for the presence and role of black women.

¹ Although *Négritude* sowed the seeds of a pan-African consciousness among Black intellectuals, silence has engulfed the significant contributions of Jane Nardal, Paulette Nardal, and Suzanne Césaire in giving birth to, and shaping the movement. Critics have called attention to the androcentric nature of the movement and its three founders: Aimé Césaire, Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas. Recently, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting’s *Négritude Women* (2002) and Jennifer Anne Boittin’s “In Black and White: Gender, Race Relations, and the Nardal Sisters in Interwar Paris” (2005) have sought to give them their rightful critical attention.

Still, from 1928 to the late 1950s, the critic Karen Wyley Wallace notes “black Francophone novelists primarily projected images of women in traditional settings, mainly concerned with home and family life,” and in their roles as “earth mothers, dutiful and obedient wives, or as nubile love goddesses,” they lacked “dramatic complexity and strength” (234). While that may be so, this study examines the works of the Cameroonian novelist Ferdinand Oyono, who, along with other African novelists in the 1950s and 1960s, produced a body of literature that some critics call a *littérature de témoignage*, that is, literary works that bear witness to individual lives and to social, cultural and historical realities (Harrow x).

Oyono’s *Une vie de boy* (1956), *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956), and *Chemin d’Europe* (1960) depict women who are respectively mothers, wives, sisters, concubines, mistresses, and businesswomen. Together, these fragmented portrayals merge into a representation of the African woman who is doubly buried in the shadows by both the colonial system and the author who mentions them in reference to the male characters. However, a closer look reveals contributions from these women that are necessary for our understanding of the texts and the society in which they live. Focusing on these women, I analyze the ways in which they give voice to their customs, traditions, and angsts. Most importantly, I argue that when they make their silence speak, which is not always a verbal act,² they play a crucial role in their resistance and in demonstrating their perspicacity, thereby broadening our understanding of the roles of African women in the colonial context.³

² The women in Oyono’s works do not always rely on speech to articulate a desire or displeasure. They directly and indirectly use their bodies, emotions, and stillness to resist, provoke, and confound. Ultimately, they provide a space of reflection for the reader to reconsider what it means to speak and in what way, to ponder on the range of women’s expression as they seek to break the yoke of silence.

³ In the anthology *Ecce homo, Ferdinand Léopold Oyono: hommage à un classique africain* (2007), critics such as Marcelline Nnomo Zanga, Alice-Delphine Tang and Marie-Louise Messi Ndogo study the representation of women in Oyono’s works. While they provide an overview of the struggles of both African and European women, focusing notably on various characteristics and challenges of womanhood within the colonial context of the novels, here I focus solely on the African woman and the ways in which she voices her silence.

FAIRE LA FEMME: THE WOMEN IN OYONO’S WORKS

Early in *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, the entire village gathers around Meka as he announces that he will receive a medal from Paris. Dismissing the women in the crowd and their ululations, the remaining audience of men listens while he tells the joke of a catechist in love with the Chief’s wife who, as he passes one day in the deep forest, she begins to “faire la femme,” or behaving like a woman (31). The catechist tells her that his sacred mouth cannot utter words of love, and points to his groin as having a great need of that, pointing to the groin of the Chief’s wife (31). The crowd of men roars with laughter. This scene exemplifies the particular portrayal of the African woman in Oyono’s fiction. The Chief’s wife does not speak, “elle fait la femme,” by which, according to Meka, “elle faisait voir ce qu’elle voulait dire” (31). Silent, she uses her body to articulate and voice what she wants.

All of Oyono’s works feature men as their protagonists: Joseph Toundi (*Une vie de boy*), Laurent Meka (*Le vieux nègre et la médaille*), and Aki Barnabas (*Chemin d’Europe*). In contrasting the male and female characters in Oyono’s novels, the critic Alice-Delphine Tang observes that “le personnage masculin est manifestement plus focalisé, plus polarisé, plus marqué ; [le personnage féminin] occupe donc un espace prépondérant quoiqu’apparaissant en arrière-plan” (325). Indeed, whether black or white, women appear in the fringes, effaced, and unassuming. The white women depend heavily on their husbands whom they follow to the colonies. Alone and at home, they either passively exist while their spouses turn to exotic African bodies, like Mme Gruchet in *Chemin d’Europe*, or they too acquire lovers, like the wife of the commandant in *Une vie de boy*.

For the African woman, *faire la femme* is one way to speak up. For example, Amalia, wife of Meka’s brother-in-law Engamba in *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* never speaks a word when as a frail, unmarried, young woman, she walks through the village carrying baskets, drawing praise and a crowd, “On sortait des cases pour la voir, une fille qui saura nourrir son mari!” (64). The ten marriage offers attest to her successful maneuver to counter the narrative that she was too weak to marry. In her marriage, her sense of self and identity are tied to the physical tasks that she performs. Through the husband’s gaze, Oyono describes the tasks:

Sa femme, qui allait et venait dans la case, poussa un petit gémissement, puis se dirigea docilement vers l'étagère, prit une calebasse, la plongea dans le seau. Elle revint, la main dégoulinante d'eau jusqu'au poignet tout en maintenant le gobelet [...] Elle marchait à petits pas en gardant horizontalement sa main occupée. Son mari sans la voir, la regardait venir [...] Sa femme attendait. Il lui tendit le gobelet et s'essuya les lèvres [...] Il rota encore, mais cette fois en se grattant le ventre [...] C'était signe qu'il avait bien mangé.” (34)

Active verbs throughout this passage, such as “allait et venait,” “poussa,” “dirigea,” “plongea,” “attendait,” not only speak to the physical aspects of Amalia's activities, but also indicate a repetitive motion. Moreover, the gaze of her husband, who looks at her “sans la voir,” reduces her to the domestic sphere and thereby erases her, albeit temporarily.

A reader stumbling on the noun “gémissement,” the adverb “docilement,” and the verb “diriger” might reasonably infer that the subject here is an animal. Indeed, elsewhere in the novel, Oyono more explicitly depicts Amalia as animalistic: “Elle reprit sa démarche de bête habituée aux bats” (64). Amalia, in laboring, is both active and passive: “les mains derrière la tête,” “baissée comme un âne docile,” “[e]lle tirait sur la fibre de rotin,” “sous le poids des provisions,” “labourait son front [...] ruisselant de sueur” (64). The abundant sweat illuminates her hard work with the feminine symbol of the basket both empowering and trapping her, “Elle en avait porté de lourds paniers ! Paniers de bois, à chaque retour des champs, paniers de sable pour la case, pour la route, paniers de pierres pour derrière la maison du prêtre pour avoir accès à la confesse, paniers à provisions pour les voyages” (64). The weight and the content of the baskets, whether wood, sand, or stone, evoke harshness and grittiness, eliminating any consideration of comfort. They do not cater primarily to her needs, but rather to those of the colonial and patriarchal order.

The reader discovers that she bears on her body the physical markings of her hardship, “Tous ces paniers avaient creusé sur son dos cet angle aigu [...] La peau à cet endroit était devenue aussi épaisse que celle d'un éléphant” (64). Amalia's body and the ubiquitous baskets merge into a public manifestation of her travail. She does not utter many words in the novel, but when she does, it is to exhort her husband to keep up, “Trotte un peu plus vite” (64), thereby casting him as weak. In another passage,

she breaks her silence more forcefully and reconfigures the power dynamic between her and her husband when she literally carries him after he is rendered unable to walk due to a trip: “C’est que ses pieds avaient mal supporté le voyage et qu’il ne pouvait même se rendre derrière la case que sur le dos d’Amalia” (111-112). In this way, her fortitude shatters her silence and shows the reader alternate paths to agency.

Indeed, Amalia repeatedly demonstrates that she is not powerless and makes decisions that benefit her, in spite of what the critic Marie-Louise Messi Ndogo argues when she notes that the black woman, “celle dont on ne parle jamais, qui est installée au bas de l’échelle,” forms the weakest link in a chain of four, comprised also of the black man, the white woman, and the white man as the supreme master (346). As a colonized subject and a woman, Amalia does endure twice the weight of oppression, yet she presses past multiple barriers to articulate and fulfill her desires. In selecting her partner, she deliberately chooses the rich polygamist Engamba over younger single men, believing that the other wives will lighten her duties. She chooses to break traditions by being the only one of the co-wives to marry Engamba in the church. It is evident that Amalia lives in a society that constrains her, yet within the constraints, she attenuates the perception of the African woman as victim, redrawing a narrative of strength in her own terms. As she speaks up, telling her husband “Marche un peu plus vite,” the text indicates that “Engamba jura” (75).

DISTILLING DISSENT, VOICING DISOBEDIENCE

Ferdinand Oyono’s works, set in late colonial Cameroon, open a window to the cruelty and hypocrisy of the colonial experience. The French, through various offices and occupations, aimed not only to “civilize” the African but also to exploit him ruthlessly in the process,” whether this exploitation of traditional society was economic, cultural, or political (Linnemann 64). Consequently, in achieving her *mission civilisatrice*, France relied heavily on the Catholic Church. Oyono’s work vehemently denounces its pervasive abuses. In *Une vie de boy*, the Church maintains separate white and African sections, with further separation between the indigenous men and women. Europeans sit comfortably on velvet cushions while Africans sit on tree trunks. The whites depart before the sermon, while catechists, armed with sticks, ensure that the remaining

Africans pay attention to sermons riddled with obscenities. Bodies of African women turn into visible and malleable pawns at the hands of the Church. In one instance, Father Vandermayer returns from the bush with five Christian women “enlevées à leur mari polygame” (25). He strips naked indigenous women who have committed adultery, beats them, all the while inquiring about their last sexual encounters.

In *Le vieux nègre*, colonial authorities rely on Father Vandermayer to condemn the *arki*, the local alcoholic beverage made from bananas and corn. From the pulpit, the priest paints an image of the *arki* that darkens the teeth and souls of the congregants, a mortal sin ensuing from each sip. His hypocrisy obscures the true economic reason behind the ban, which is for Africans to consume instead the more expensive European wine and liquor. It is in this context that women in Oyono’s works make and sell the *arki*.

In *Chemin d’Europe*, economic preoccupations drive a mother to break the law. Barnabas’s mother distills and sells the *arki* clandestinely to feed her family, “Ma mère s’était mise à fabriquer clandestinement de l’alcool de maïs et cette répréhensible industrie suffisait à nous nourrir” (109). While Barnabas, as a result of his colonial education, condemns the industry, he also benefits from it. In addition to feeding him, the *arki* helps defray the cost of his trip to Europe : “Elle se rendait tous les matins pour distiller clandestinement l’alcool de maïs qui devait me permettre de payer mon voyage en France” (143). Braving sociopolitical and economic challenges, women take the law into their own hands and voice their resistance through meaningful disobedience.

Similarly, in *Le vieux nègre*, Mami Tati turns up the volume on discriminatory practices by selling the drink at her restaurant. The text describes her as coming “des bords de mer” and as having a reputation for distilling the *arki* that is “sans précédent” (11). She defies the Church, the powerful ally of the colonial system. While the daily threat of prison looms over her, she astutely subverts the ban, turning her business into a necessary stop for Africans, “Si Gosier d’Oiseau avait pu se lever à une certaine heure matinale, il aurait remarqué qu’une animation incroyable régnait au quartier indigène et en particulier chez Mami Tati” (12-13). In her domain, Mami Tati is in control and is quick to speak to restore order. When an insolent young man refuses to give his seat to Meka, she fearlessly confronts him and alternates between sternness and sweetness to placate him.

When the men in the restaurant start mocking Meka, she not only silences them—“Essayez de la boucler!”—but also restores Meka’s dignity, “Des hommes comme lui... il n’y en a plus” (14). In the masculine setting of her restaurant, Mami Tati exudes confidence and strength. Her actions—“hurle,” “écrasé des pieds,” “venir se planter devant le jeune homme”—attest to her fearlessness (12-13). Another passage points to how her “puissants biceps saillaient sous l’effort qu’elle faisait en promenant une volumineuse bobonne d’alcool de groupe en groupe,” rendering her appearance even more masculine (14).

By serving the forbidden drink, Mami Tati gives voice to the “African cultural expression and economic development” that the Church attempts to stifle (Larrier 32). Her courage and her strength prevail as she stands up to colonial power and demands her visibility. Indeed, her space embodies both a space of solace and empowerment from which the powerless can challenge abusive authority. The novel shows that Mami Tati and Amalia allow their physical presence to speak for them, which in no way negates their womanhood.

SCREAMING WOMEN, GRIEVING BODIES

While some women in Oyono’s works stubbornly refuse to fall victim to a cruel and unfair system, mothers in particular find it hard to escape an unsuitable situation because of their children, as Barnabas reveals in *Chemin d’Europe*: “Bien que ma mère en fut contrariée, elle demeurait prisonnière de la peur que lui inspirait son mari : elle craignait qu’il ne se vengeât sur moi” (10). The narrator observes the way his father could dare again to “offenser, humilier impunément” as she lives under the “tyrannie du vieillard” (18, 34). However, the silent and cowering mother eventually morphs into a lioness when she stands in front of a tribe of elders while seeking financial assistance for her son’s trip to Europe. The narrator describes the collection of old men as dying “en dehors du temps,” whose morbid fear about their “débile autorité” shuts out the mother’s wishes (105).

The illiterate, lascivious patriarch Fimsten Vavap wraps himself in ancestral yet fading glory, completely out of sync with the changing times. As he dismisses her, her son, and her impertinent request in unflattering terms, she explodes, “Je n’aime pas qu’on parle ainsi de mon fils!” (102). The mother’s rage and brazenness rattle an entrenched order, figuratively

and literally, “Ce vieillard devenu soudain pitoyable s’était affalé sur le dos, ahuri, comme s’il venait d’être la victime de la ruade d’une monture” (102). One can infer that the mother, in speaking out, fights for her son’s dignity while reclaiming hers. When she first arrives in the village, the old man barely hides his sexual interest, imagining the mother as another conquest, “Ce vieillard, dont les femmes de la tribu se faisaient un saint plaisir de partager la couche, avait fini par se croire irrésistible et devait penser que ma mère, elle aussi” (99-100). The mother and son leave the village without achieving their objective, but the mother’s defiance, similar to how her yell rips through the silence, perturbs the quiescent traditional order.

Women like Barnabas’s mother who speak up and speak out do so against traditional African society and colonial power. Kelara in *Le vieux nègre* offers another example. In the days leading up to the ceremony in which the colonial administration intends to confer a medal to her husband for his contributions to the Church and the State, Kelara is cautious. She has not let any of the excitement anesthetize her common sense nor her clairvoyance. For instance, in preparation for the festivities, Meka has a questionable suit made, gathering the praise of all around him, except that of Kelara. She quickly points out: “Tu es ridicule, tu aurais mieux fait de te confectionner une vraie soutane! [...] Je suis sûre que si les Blancs te voyaient demain avec ça, ils ne te donneraient pas leur médaille! D’ailleurs je ne vais pas te coudre les boutons” (86). In this scene, which is emblematic of her marriage, Kelara ensures that her husband understands her disapproval, which she reinforces by not sewing the buttons on his suit, an act of discord that he would certainly comprehend.

The reader perceives women’s voices speak up and speak out in various ways. Indeed, for the women in the novels, being in tune with their surroundings and intently listening inform the way they ultimately speak out. For example, at the ceremony, tears of joy stain Kelara’s eyes while her husband receives his medal. When she overhears a criticism from a young indigenous man she is forced to interrogate not only the ceremony, but also the character of her husband: “Elle vit son mari, le crane luisant au soleil, sourire bêtement au Chef des Blancs [...] Meka lui apparut comme quelqu’un qu’elle n’avait jamais encore vu. Était-ce bien son mari qui souriait là-bas?” (106). Seeing her husband with new eyes compels her to conclude, “L’homme qui était là-bas ne lui était rien” (106). Kelara’s growing sense of consciousness begins when she looks at her husband, then inwardly at herself: “Elle eut peur d’elle-même,” and finally

by acknowledging the voice of reason with a “Merci” (106). Crying all the way back to the village, she eventually sits in the dust lamenting her fate and the death of her sons:

Quelle femme, quelle mère est plus malheureuse que moi ! J’avais cru épouser un homme, un costaud . . . Mon Dieu ! pourquoi ai-je épousé un derrière plein de m... ! Mes enfants, mes pauvres enfants, on vous a vendus comme Judas a vendu le Seigneur . . . Lui au moins il l’avait fait pour des sous... L’homme qui a couché avec moi pour que je vous enfante n’a pas vendu cher ses gouttes de liquide ! Vous valez tous les deux, mes pauvres petits, une médaille . . . (112)

Kelara’s emotional outburst in the novel concerns her as a woman, a mother, and a wife as well as a colonial subject. Her disillusionment gives her fresh eyes through which she sees her husband as weak and pathetic. While it is evident that Meka’s humiliating experiences and imprisonment eventually breed a collective disenchantment in the community, Kelara’s actions of listening and speaking out succeed in denouncing colonial abuse and her husband’s participation in it.

In *Le vieux nègre*, Kelara articulates her despair using her body and her voice: “Elle agitait les pieds et les mains, rampait, s’agenouillait, s’allongeait encore, soufflait, crachait, déchirait sa robe en dévoilant son vieux corps, criant de plus belle, ne se relevant que pour s’abattre de nouveau sur le sol avec une violence accrue. Amalia l’imita ainsi que d’autres femmes” (165-66). In *Le vieux nègre* and *Une vie de boy*, women protest grief and injustice by making noise, noise that bothers and often embarrasses. In *Une vie de boy*, Toundi, the sister of the main character, is disturbed at the sight of her brother arriving at her doorstep with white officials in the middle of the night, “Le cri violent qu’elle poussa troubla le silence de la nuit” (168). Not only do her cries perturb, but they also wake up members of the indigenous community, particularly other women, who join in her agony: “Les femmes étaient les plus insupportables. Elles gémissaient de toutes leurs voix stridentes en se tirant les cheveux autour de ma sœur qui n’arrêtait pas de crier que les Blancs allaient tuer son frère, son unique frère au monde” (168). In both novels, a sisterhood of protest forms, and the words “violence” and “violent” capture the emotional intensity displayed by the women. The novels also show that in speaking out with their bodies, the women disturb the norm, often eliciting a rebuke. For example, in *Une vie de boy*, Toundi calls the

women “insupportables” and he notes, “Cette coutume de pleurer inutilement [...] m’exaspérait” (168). Toundi’s annoyance echoes the elderly men’s discomfort regarding the cries of Barnabas’s mother. It also stresses the necessity of such outbursts in ultimately breaking the enduring silencing of women’s voices in various discourses.

SEXUELLEMENT REBELLES: EXPRESSING (DIS)PLEASURE

When screaming bodies in Oyono’s works are not leaving the shadows to occupy the center, most of them espouse the traditional mantle of the wife, mother, and guardian of cultural values. Virtue and piety inform their roles as they counsel, devote themselves to, and take care of their husbands and children. Nevertheless, some African women break away from that mold, choosing sexual emancipation and, negotiating with their bodies, freedom and survival. Their unleashed voices express discontentment and desire, seemingly unconcerned about societal censure. The reader discovers that often at the heart of such insouciance lies the intersection of race and sexuality, which is not without its own complications. The novels show that African women adroitly use their sexuality to defuse explosive racial and colonial tensions, at times to the detriment of their dignity and their community.

In *Chemin d’Europe*, “filles du carnet” or “filles du commissaire,” are ladies of all sizes and ages, who like “taxis en stationnement” offer themselves at all hours of the day and night to the European men (112). These African women, “devenues sexuellement rebelles,” stand as an affront to the local men; their “excentricités, décrépage des cheveux, perruques, rouge à lèvres, engouement pour le pantalon, fume-cigarettes” express loudly their desire “pour se libérer [...] de l’inhumaine sujétion de la femme africaine” (112-113). In adopting such behavior, these “traîtresses” deliberately bring to the fore what happens behind closed doors, publicly airing out the hypocrisy that underlies the forbidden.

African women who have white lovers can be voiceless and invisible, as in the case of the concubine of M. Fouconi, France’s representative in Doum in *Le vieux nègre*. Although she is nameless and constantly hidden, her effacement takes place in his home, around his fellow whites, but not in her indigenous community: “Il vivait avec une femme indigène qu’il cachait dans le magasin aux fournitures, au rez-de-chaussée, quand il recevait ses compatriotes” (55). At the eve of the governor’s arrival, he

sends her back to the indigenous neighborhood in an attempt to maintain the appearance of respectability, which does not involve sexualized black bodies. In *Chemin d'Europe*, Mr. Gruchet fails to join his indigenous troops in the north; instead, he: “vint filer le parfait amour au quartier indigène avec une jeune négresse aux rondeurs phénoménales” (44). The indigenous neighborhood serves as a territorial space that both hides and reveals the sexual transgressions of white men: “[Mr. Gruchet] trottait à cheval au quartier noir où l'on reconnaissait un peu partout ses bâtards café au lait et ses pyjamas de soie en train de sécher” (45). Since displaced bodies of African women in European neighborhoods do not have the same privilege of visibility that white men assert in their neighborhood, pain and humiliation lurk beneath their brave posture.

If in *Une vie de boy*, Sophie, the indigenous mistress of an “ingénieur agricole,” endures the same treatment of concealment as M. Fouconi's concubine, she nevertheless voices her lassitude and plans to escape to nearby Guinea: “Vois-tu, je suis fatiguée d'entendre ‘Sophie, ne viens pas aujourd'hui, un Blanc viendra me voir à la maison,’ ‘Sophie, reviens, le Blanc est parti,’ ‘Sophie, quand tu me vois avec une madame, ne me regarde pas, ne me salue pas’” (42). She shows contempt for both him and France— “Je me f...de son pays comme de lui”—sees their relationship as transactional—“nous autres négresses ne comptons pas pour eux. Heureusement que c'est réciproque”—and digs at his sexual performance as sorely lacking—“Tu sais bien que le Blanc n'a pas ce qui peut nous rendre amoureuses” (42). Further, in the novel, Sophie speaks out against the violence her body endures because her status as a “cuisinière-boy” constrains her to sit on wooden crates in the back of a pick-up: “Merdre alors! Qu'est-ce qu'elles ont . . . Qu'est-ce qu'elles ont de plus que moi? Je me demande ce qu'elles ont de plus que moi” (59). Again, she asks: “Mais qu'est-ce qu'elles ont et que je n'ai pas?” and points out, “Les bonnes manières des Blancs, si c'est seulement pour entre eux, merdre alors! Mon derrière est aussi fragile que celui de leurs femmes qu'ils font monter dans la cabine” (60). Sophie uses her status as a woman to question the system that renders her inferior and invisible. When speaking out, none of the powerful whites hear her, but when she flees with the wages of her lover's workers and his clothes, her defiant act speaks louder than the words uttered in the dark.

In *Une vie de boy*, the reader encounters another woman who speaks up with her voice and body. Toundi describes the chambermaid, Kalisia, as “une jeune gourgardine, toute en derrière” with breasts still firm, and

as “une vraie fille de chez nous” (137). He notes, “Les Blancs sont fous de son derrière” (137). At some point, she lived with a white man who wanted to marry her, prompting Toundi to remark, “Vous savez, quand un Blanc épouse une fille de chez nous, c’est souvent un morceau de chef” (137-138). Passersby could see the white man all day long sitting with Kalisia “sur ses maigres genoux” (138). The text does not explain Kalisia’s departure, except that one morning, she goes away, leaving the white man completely devastated: “Le Blanc pleura, remua ciel et terre pour la retrouver. On craignit pour sa raison et le commandant de là-bas le fit rapatrier” (138). Toundi concludes that “Kalisia, qui en avait assez des Blancs, vécut longtemps avec un nègre de la côte” (138). Kalisia exudes a potent sexuality such that, according to Toundi, “Un homme qui vit ne peut la voir sans...,” and worries that her presence could adversely affect them all (139).

In her interaction with Madame, the wife of the commandant, Kalisia breaks her silence, fixing her “avec cette indifférence insolente,” “sans intérêt,” and remaining calm while the white woman sweats, stamps her foot, and turns around her. Kalisia does not affect the submissive demeanor of the other African workers, which exasperates the white woman. Although Toundi repeatedly stresses that Kalisia was a real girl of the soil, her brazenness destabilizes him. For instance, inquiring about whom Madame might have as lovers, she quickly zeroes on Toundi, pinching his butt—“De petites hanches comme les tiennes sont souvent le nid des grands boas”—then she grabs his sexual parts and hoarsely exclaims: “Tu vois, j’avais raison, ça a déjà mangé la chair blanche... j’en suis certaine. C’est toi! C’est toi, l’homme de Madame!” (144). Toundi finds Kalisia “sans-gêne” and her “manque de tenue” exasperates him (145). However, Kalisia does not allow Toundi to silence or regulate her sexuality, much like Anatatchia in *Chemin d’Europe*.

As a prostitute, Anatatchia openly takes white lovers and briefly enjoys a liaison with Barnabas, whom she overtly mocks in front of her friends: “Moi je m’étais laissé chausser par curiosité, une passade quoi, mais le sacripant, lui, voulait s’installer comme s’il avait acheté ma banque” (CE 146). Referring to her sexual parts as a “banque” points to the transactional nature of her intimate relations, while buttressing her body as her property. Anatatchia, for whom Barnabas was “le premier amant noir,” resents his control over her. Early in the relationship, she sexually reeducates him, making his “élans” more aligned with those of her past white lovers from whom she also learned. She maligns him further

by stating, “Il a la folie des grandeurs comme tous ces hommes longtemps sevrés de femmes.... Ce n’est pas à moi qui me tape les blancs qu’un nègre et un fauché va faire son petit malin” (146). In a world where domination regulates the African woman’s body, Anatatchia signals the degree of oppression she finds acceptable. Paradoxically, in rejecting the African Barnabas and in embracing European men, she starkly reaffirms a hierarchical order in which the white man upholds his privileged status, deploying strategies of power that her sexuality arouses. Ultimately, women like Sophie, Kalisia and Anatatchia draw the line and voice their displeasure. Sophie runs away with her white lover’s clothes, thereby stripping him of his masculinity. Kalisia shuns her white lover and his apparent benevolence. Anatatchia throws Barnabas’s pants into the dark of night, intimating that his presence is unwelcome. Marginalized, these characters nevertheless inscribe their voices in words and in action.

When considering the Caribbean, a reader might encounter the same phenomena of silence and erasure, notably in literature. In fact, the Guadeloupian critic and author Maryse Condé remarks how “little known” early Caribbean women writers are, with their works “forgotten, out of print, misunderstood” (160). Her astute observation speaks to the ways in which, both historically and geographically, the black Francophone woman has been systematically ignored, both inside and outside the texts. Adding their voices to Condé’s, Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory, editors of *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990), conceptualize “voicelessness” to capture “the historical absence of the woman writer’s text,” to denote “articulation that goes unheard” and to bemoan “the absence of a specifically female position on major issues” that range from slavery, and colonialism to decolonization and social and cultural issues (1).

From the muting of *Négritude* women to voiceless female characters, the dominant and masculine discourse has determined the existence of Black women. For that reason, the undoing of systematic silencing demands that women uproariously occupy the middle with their voices, bodies, and texts. Indeed, this study attests to the ways in which the women in Oyono’s works use their voices and bodies to disturb and to speak up. In such instances, their aim is to destabilize oppressive male and colonial domination. Whether this order collapses completely remains elusive, but by making their presence felt, these female characters nevertheless chip away at a dominating structure, showing us readers that silence does speak volumes.

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