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“When the Details Are No Longer Too Much”: The Embodied Citizen-Subject in Régine Michelle Jean-Charles’s *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary*

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Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 320 pp.

Régine Michelle Jean-Charles’s *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary* (2014) is a stunning first book by a dynamic scholar working at the intersection of Africana Studies, Disability Studies, Human Rights Studies, Feminist Studies, and literary studies in French. Jean-Charles’s title, *Conflict Bodies*, gestures to the context of “conflict zones” as identified by human rights institutions. It also refers to how the body of the victim-survivor is at once one that has survived, but whose survival reinscribes the body with new subjectivities, subjectivities that are informed both by the extremely intimate, and by the vastly globalized. In other words, as the fictions, photo essays, memoirs, and cinema analyzed by Jean-Charles demonstrate, rape is not just more visible in the conflict zone, it is literally used as a weapon of war, wars that are officially recognized as such, and wars that take place under the auspices of supposed ‘peacekeeping’ missions. That is, the raped body is one that has recorded a specific “*script of violence*” (9), which has been generated not by any one perpetrator, but by “the epistemic violence of colonialism and postcolonialism” (9).

Its most riveting contribution is its subtle, but powerful discussion of the dangers of representations that are predicated upon empathy or sympathy (212). Jean-Charles encourages that more narratives of rape survivors be structured around the strength of surviving rather than the vulnerability assumed in the stance of the “victim”. She advocates that we write and read narratives of rape, which highlight “the way structural and institutional marks of the colonial legacy or contemporary cultures of globalization continue to and in many ways provide a context for this suffering” (220). Jean-Charles’s study of literature, documentary, and photo essays on women in Haiti and Central Africa, is at once a rigorous review of twentieth and twenty-first century narratives of women thriving in some of the world’s most dangerous zones of conflict; it is also, a stunning ode to the women who are the subject – in all of the complexities of what it means to be a subject of these narratives.

In addition to resonating with the above intellectual contexts, Jean-Charles’s work also belongs within the growing body of literature known as

Disability Studies. While not denying the pain – physical, psychological, sociological – associated with the initially disabling and perennially traumatic circumstances, Disability Studies argue that in the mid- and long-term, for the person or community concerned, the victim often, in Christian Flaugh’s words “re-operates” the disability to their advantage. What is lacking however, is that most mainstream and even expert narratives of suffering privilege the experience of pain rather than that of survival. And even more dangerously, as Jean-Charles shows, often the narratives of suffering wrap-themselves-up quickly, providing a seeming closure to the problem, pretending that the issue has been resolved. Jean-Charles’s work is exemplary because it moves beyond criticizing disabling narratives, so as to craft “abling” narratives. *Conflict Bodies* identifies narratives that honor both the experience of pain and that of the continued challenge to survival, whereby “the problem of representation lies in shifting the focus from the conflict to the body, though not necessarily the pained body” (254).

As the fourth book in the dynamic Transoceanic Studies series curated by Ileana Rodríguez at Ohio State University Press, Jean-Charles’s book takes its place alongside the must-reads of scholarship on gender-based violence (GBV), such as Margaret Mitchell Armand, Elizabeth D. Heineman, Nicki Hitchcott, Carine Mardorossian, Sorcha Gunne, and Zoe Brigley Thompson, as well as fictional work based on the testimonials of women survivors, such as Kettly Mars, whose novel *Savage Seasons* Jean-Charles reads closely, or Slavenka Drakulić, *S. A Novel about the Balkans*, Mukoma Wa Ngugi’s *Nairobi Heat*. *Conflict Bodies* also fits in with research in disability studies such as that of Flaugh, Madelaine Hron, or Julie Nack Ngue, which show how disability is only a function of the narrative ascribed to it. Finally, in its focus on how gender-based violence is dealt with by the international community, particularly in Haiti and Central Africa, it also contributes to scholarship that *should* be read by humanitarian aid workers and international human rights policymakers: for example, Myriam J.A. Chancy’s *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, Benedetta Faedi Duramy’s *Gender and Violence in Haiti: Women's Path from Victims to Agents*, or Valerie Kaussen’s new research on “the informational economies of humanitarian aid”. I say, “should” because unfortunately the work of the academe, especially work that is not emerging out of economics or political science, is often ignored by the practitioners or policymakers.

Most strikingly, Jean-Charles has crafted a narrative that asserts its legitimacy to knowledge about her topic, while all the while avoiding her own authority over that knowledge. In other words, she is extremely aware of her role as purveyor of knowledge, constantly diverting the attention back onto, not the topic of her research (i.e. gender-based violence), but rather engages as fully as she possibly can the subjectivities of the named and nameless, mostly women, but also men, who revise their personal narratives so as to integrate, claim, and share – rather

than obfuscate – the lived experience of gender-based violence into their worldviews.

In line with Jean-Charles’s unsaid intention to communicate her findings in such a way as to respect the topic of her research and the human subjectivities it is meant to represent, Jean-Charles’s work is reverently and intelligently understated in making its claims. And yet, the chapters build on each other in such a way that the final arguments are rivetingly convincing. Her most assertive claim is that empathy “obviate[s] the women who are on the receiving end of those emotions” (212), and that such empathy “assume[s]” that women “require a (Western) vehicle in order to be able to tell their story” (213).

The introduction poses the central interrogation of the book, “Can the Subaltern Survivor Speak?”. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jean-Charles argues that the overarching dilemma for a person who has experienced rape is that the rape overwhelms not only the life of the person in question, but it also determines the person’s life-narrative in ways that are limiting and debilitating. In most narratives of rape, the very notion of rape is rarely “re-operated” to empower the person who has survived the rape. The shame or tragedy associated with the rape becomes more important than the actual person who is its victim-survivor. In other words, the experience of victimization obfuscates that of survival. An alternative to producing endlessly pathetic narratives that inspire pathos rather than admiration lies in “calling our attention to raced, sexed, gendered, and Third World positionalities” (3). To shift the focus to the vitality of the body that survives rather than lingering on the pain of the body that is attacked “provides a critical methodology for understanding the way subjugated bodies self-assign meaning rather than always being caught in a field in which meaning is assigned to them” (3).

The first chapter titled “‘Bound to Violence’: A History of the Rape Trope in Francophone Studies” provides both an inventory and analysis of the texts that have most sculpted how rape is discussed in intellectual and literary contexts in the French language in the Caribbean and Western and Central Africa. She frames her loosely chronological inventory with discussions of Yambo Ouologuem and Frantz Fanon, two master figures of anticolonial literature. In meditating on Ouologuem’s novel *Le devoir de violence*, Jean-Charles meditates on the ambivalence of the word *devoir*, which has been translated as both “bound to violence” and “duty to violence”. The difference in the translations designates at once the notion of “duty,” which implies a choice to either follow or reject orders, while “bound” calls upon a history of non-choice, of the chains that have bound Africans across the geographies of the transatlantic into a history of slavery. Jean-Charles also interrogates how the French word for rape, “viol’,” is inscribed within the word *violence*. Jean-Charles concurs at once with the criticism of Fanon’s work in its privileging of masculinity, but she also analyzes Fanon’s *L’an V de la Révolution*

Algérienne [A *Dying Colonialism*, in its English translation], which considers how the role of rape “is tethered to the colonial enterprise,” and in so doing “assigns absolute passivity to the raped women in question” (21).

Jean-Charles’s first chapter is thus extremely thorough, providing a valuable literary intellectual history, especially to scholars new to the field, who may be less familiar with the canonical history of French anti- and postcolonial literature and film. It also rereads this canon offering a critique of the way in which problematic representations of rape meta-textually permeate a significant corpus of postcolonial literature in French. Jean-Charles’s inventory is almost appalling in how it illustrates that the rape trope pervades so many of the revered texts of the postcolonial canon. Jean-Charles’s work then elucidates Kwame Nimako’s. Nimako argues that in Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, on the one hand humiliation gives rise to an inferiority complex, while at the same time in *Wretched of the Earth*, it inspires revolt as a means to reclaim dignity. In juxtaposing Jean-Charles’s and Nimako’s work, it becomes clear that such a narrative of humiliation has everything to do with rewriting the politics rape employing the alternative modes of “rape representation” (title) for which Jean-Charles advocates. In other words, to recast narratives of rape has as far-reaching effects as re-operating narratives of humiliation into narratives of conflicted-ness and survival, not just for victims of rape, but for entire communities.

In each of the four chapters that follow Jean-Charles devises a clear format, which leads the reader to appreciate the texts which Jean-Charles suggests offer a respectful way of representing rape. That is, texts that privilege the conflict body as an exemplary site of wisdom for contemporary worldviews. For each chapter, the initial discussion is dedicated to a polite and thorough analysis of how certain texts produce or reproduce representational modes that do a disservice both to the survivors the given text attempts to depict, as well as to the readers or spectators who seek elucidation on such an incomprehensible, yet pervasive reality. The final portion of each chapter analyzes one or more texts, which deviate from the typical narrative, and allow the survivor to “operate as a fully embodied citizen-subject whose violation surpass[es] its symbolic meaning” (264). All narratives of rape, all narratives of the conflict body must at once own the experience of victim-survivor, but also must inscribe themselves into a discourse of belonging, that of the “citizen-subject” (264). Given how many persons are raped as a result of conflict, victim-survivors cannot be relegated to the margins; their experience, as well as the sheer number of persons they represent within the population makes it essential that their experience find its way into the public arena in a respectful and non-exceptionalizing way.

Following this schemata then, Chapter 2 focuses on Haiti, and the work of Edwidge Danticat, Jaira Placide, and Kettly Mars is put forward as offering examples of how “the relationship between political rape and the victim-survivor’s

situated knowledge” (89) must be renegotiated so as to bring the rape survivor out of her or his isolation. Jean-Charles pays special attention to Kettly Mars’s work noting that it is “no longer too much” to recount rape in all of its details, since only the “details” – which are never “too much” – can help both the victim-survivor and the society to which she (or he) belongs to begin to heal (99). Chapter 3 shows how certain women writers – particularly Gisèle Pineau in her novel *L’espérance macadam* – have re-appropriated the “rape of the land” metaphor to allow themselves to articulate an otherwise repressed memory of personal rape. These two chapters also re-read the “pleasure-pain” conundrum so often used to further relegate rape victim-survivors to the margins. In so doing, Jean-Charles’s work resonates with Kaiama L. Glover’s work on the “disorderly feminine” and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s reading of how eroticism cannot be so neatly unpacked into the realm of the politically ethical.

Chapter 4 argues that rape survivors within the context of genocide are exceptionalized to the point of no longer being allowed to participate in society. In seeking a certain respectful normalizing of both the genocidal and rape-as-weapon-of-genocide, the experience of rape is taken more seriously than when, as it is in most cases, relegated to the realm of the exceptional. In other words, narratives of rape within the context of genocide run the risk of distancing the subject, even shunning them to the margins of society. Narratives that concentrate on “*how* rape is represented rather than *what* it represents” don’t offer solutions, but they begin to do the work of creating multiple narratives of rape – what Jean-Charles names an “aesthetic of multiplicity” (206). These multi-voiced narratives, which offer varying perspectives on the rape, allow even the ‘perpetrators’ to come to the talking table. As such “rape becomes a figure of dynamic divergent multiple meanings” (203). This chapter culminates in a thorough reading of rape literature about Central Africa through the analysis of Yolande Mukagasana’s *Les blessures du silence: Témoignages du génocide au Rwanda*, which combines Mukagasana’s writing with Alain Kazinierakis’s photography: the testimonies featured in the writing-photo process refute the assumption that “sharing one’s story is a necessary feature of the advocacy process” (190), in other words “visibility” does not necessarily imply “recognition” (191).

The entire book comes together stunningly in Chapter 5, a chapter in which Jean-Charles critiques “the investment in narrative closure as a way to manage these stories of suffering, asserting that the deployment of devices to garner empathy, sympathy, and compassion can severely compromise the visibility and viability of Congolese women as subjects” (206-07). In so doing, Jean-Charles critiques Western discourses of aid, that only further ensconce Congolese women into being “bound” to positions of objectification. The chapter offers the photo-documentary *Berrlyze’s Story* by photographer Sherrlyn Borkgren, which tells the story of a nine-year girl “after the conflict, without exoticized suffering” (246). It

focuses on additional stories than those usually told, that for example of Berrlyze's father "wounded by his inability to protect his daughter", and as such protection – not pain, not suffering, not shame – becomes one of the "dominant tropes that accompanies stories about the war" (248).

In short, *Conflict Bodies* reads an entire corpus of transatlantic literature in French in such a way as to critique how the notion of the body as conflictual space undergirds larger narratives, yes, about rape victim-survivors, but also about the masculinities and femininities that inform our communal, national, intra- and international narratives about ourselves and each other. In his novel *In the United States of Africa*, Abdourahman Waberi depicts a world of the future, where Malaïka, a young woman traveling back to a debilitated Europe from Africa, explores an unidentified cultural-racial-national heritage. Malaïka is neither happy nor sad; her trajectory is not about resolving a problem; she does not seek something that is lost and must again be found; her life is meaningful, methodical, profoundly calm, and based on listening and observing what is around her. She is what Achille Mbembe describes as the future of the postcolony, a future that has nothing to do with the West's obsession with happiness. As such, Malaïka's is a future full of "possibilities" (Mbembe 241). Is Malaïka a victim-survivor of rape? With Jean-Charles's work, one need not know precisely, because her world-citizenship is based on many more variables than the constricting colonial and postcolonial exigencies that relegate rape to the category of the exceptional. And yet, Malaïka is exemplary of Jean-Charles's "conflict body," of the citizen of tomorrow, non-gender, intersex, transgender, female, male. In this future, and far-from-utopic space, rape is inscribed with the more operational meanings that Jean-Charles elucidates through her brilliant readings of primary texts from throughout the Caribbean and Africa, as well as secondary readings from scholars from throughout the world's intellectual spaces. Jean-Charles's epilogue draws on Claudine Michel's poem "Unequal Distribution," and its plea that we look at bodies not for "what they represent" to 'human rights discourses' but that we turn to them for 'what they represent for the individual being represented' (Jean-Charles quoting Michel, 267). The corollary to Michel's poem then is "equal distribution." Such equal distribution implies a space that is less happy or utopic for those who are today the most privileged, one that is outwardly focused, one that listens more than (or at least as much as) it speaks. The answer to Spivak's question for Jean-Charles, maybe then is, not "Can the subaltern survivor speak?", but rather, "How are we listening"?

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