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Keisha Simone Allan

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A Fanonian Reading of Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Amour*

Keisha Simone Allan

Baruch College

As part of the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the following reflections are akin to his critical work on the psychoaffective impact of colonialism. Fanon's notion of the epidermalization of inferiority has inspired my analysis of the socio-political struggles in Haiti and the complex antagonisms shaped by colonialism, contemporary political personalities, and constantly clashing perceptions of race, gender and nation. I turn to Fanon's notion of the epidermalization of inferiority in *Black Skin, White Masks* to explore the effects of French colonization on the female protagonist's psyche in Marie-Vieux Chauvet's *Amour*. Chauvet was born just short of a decade prior to Fanon, and writes, like him, in the moment of anti-colonial struggle in the Caribbean, exploring like *Black Skin, White Masks* the psychological effects and affects of colonialism. A Fanonian reading of the text illustrates the psychological impact of colonialism on women in post-colonial societies that remain deeply governed by the former colonizer's values.

In *Amour*, (1968) Marie Vieux-Chauvet explores the heightened racial and political tensions that plague Haiti. *Amour* is the journal entries of the protagonist, Claire Clamont, who belongs to an affluent mulatto family - the epitome of Haiti's bourgeoisie society. Claire is the darkest member of the family. Her mahogany skin tone has made her the object of ridicule in her family and their social circle. From the first pages of the narrative, Claire unveils her despair. She describes her unenviable fate as an unmarried virgin. At the age of thirty-nine, with diminishing prospects for marriage and motherhood, she attributes her internal anguish to her skin color. The consequences of Claire's inferiority complex are twofold: she internalizes it and lives with a self-demeaning identity and at the same time externalizes it by committing acts of violence. She yearns to free herself from the burden of her "corporeal malediction." Claire's self-contempt in *Amour* is inextricably linked to the racial tensions in her socio-political milieu. The novel is set against the backdrop of a power inversion where the new black middle class has usurped the political power of the formerly dominant mulatto elite.

Claire's feelings of self-hatred are compounded by the presence of the black police commandant, Calédu, who tortures the community. She harbors resentment towards this dark man and the dark masses who have gained political power in recent years. Claire nourishes plans of vengeance against the new political elite, personified by Calédu. Ultimately, Claire murders the dictator when the opportunity arises during an attempted revolt. In the end, Claire kills Calédu almost incidentally-in a symbolic act of vengeance against the black body- the source of her epidermic malediction.

Claire's inferiority complex echoes Frantz Fanon's description of the epidermalization of inferiority where the experience of the black subject under the white gaze produces both an internal and external crisis. Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that the "inferiority complex" of black people is a result of incessant oppression that subsequently develops into a negative association with skin color. Fanon explores the factors that engender an inferiority complex in colonized subject, illustrating the psychoaffective impact of colonization. He insists that the white-dominated society managed to perpetuate discriminatory practices through the propagation of negative racial stereotypes. Commenting on the negative stereotypes ascribed to the black subject, Fanon writes:

The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly. The white world, the only honorable one, barred me from all participation. A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay within bounds, to go back where I belonged.¹

Here, Fanon describes the psychological impact of the white panoptic gaze on the black subject. He asserts that "in the white man's world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity."² Under the weight of a barrage of negative stereotypes of "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships" the black man experiences feelings of self-contempt. Fanon illustrates how anti-black racism is internalized by the colonized subject and how that internalization engenders feelings of "self-hatred" and the propensity to emulate the powerful colonial, a process which he called epidermalization of inferiority.

In *Amour*, paralleling Fanon, Claire's inferiority complex is a direct consequence of a negative association with skin color. From the onset the text, she attributes her internal anguish to her dark skin: "Tugged at by the delicate ambiguity of my situation, I suffered from an early age because of the color of my skin."³ As the darkest of the three sisters, she despises the black blood that surreptitiously flows in her veins. She asserts that "the mahogany color that I inherited from some great-grandmother went off like a small bomb in the tight circle of white and white-mulattoes with whom my parents socialized."⁴

Commenting on Claire's racial anxiety, Munro notes, "Claire's alienation is determined largely in and through the body, by the dark shade of her skin. Seeing the light skin of her two sisters Félicia and Annette, she is also seen (by herself and others) as "stained" by darkness, "the surprise that mixed blood had in store for her parents."⁵ Claire experiences a double form of alienation as she is isolated from both the light-skinned bourgeoisie and the dark-skinned lower classes,⁶ which heighten her feelings of despair.

Claire's internalized self-hatred stems from her childhood as she is constantly upbraided by her father because of the color of her skin. She is subjected to incessant verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her father who believes that it is his duty to protect her from the detrimental effects of her blackness. Any act of disobedience is severely punished and attributed to her problematic skin color. When Claire disobeys her father by befriending another societal outcast, Agnès Grandupré, the paternal whip is used to correct her deviant behavior. In the aftermath of one of his brutal assaults, her father declares that the black blood she inherited requires the whip: "Ours is a race lacking in discipline and our old slave blood requires the lash."⁷ After this incident, she became aware of her darker skin color and its stark difference from the light skin tone of her family members: "At that moment, I noticed the milky whiteness of his skin, hardly more tanned than my mother's. I stared with astonishment at the dark arms resting on the sheets. Was I really their daughter? No, it was not possible. How could I be the daughter of two whites?"⁸ Her skin color becomes repulsive to her as "she renounces love believing herself monstrous."⁹ She carries within herself feeling of "shame," "self-contempt" and "nausea." As she identifies her complexion as the root of her despair, Claire experiences her skin as an "epidermic fatality."¹⁰

Claire's personal trauma is the nation's trauma. This tense family drama might be read as a metaphor for the intra-familial psychological drama that constitutes a national psychological drama. Her internalized self-hatred is intimately connected to the story of the nation. In *Amour*, Claire and those of her class distance themselves from their African ancestry and feel an allegiance to the European mother country, France. The presence of Jean-Luze, the Frenchman and husband of Claire's sister Felicia, underscores the persistence in Haiti of the former colonizer's values that hierarchize European civilization, whiteness and enlightened rationality over their imputed "others," savagery, blackness and superstition.¹¹ Jean-Luze is the love interest of the Clamont sisters as they are enthralled by his European ancestry. Considering Claire's alienation from her black self, it is hardly surprising that she is scripted as nursing a secret longing for Jean-Luze.

In her adulthood, Claire writes in her journal to assuage her internal anguish. In the intimacy of her room, Claire reimagines her reality by creating a fantasy world to fulfil her repressed sexual desires. Her bedroom becomes the only place where she can truly exist as she creates an imaginary homeland

that is the antithesis of the exterior environment in which she lives. Within this fictive world, Claire is consumed by fantasies for her sister's husband Jean-Luze. Claire never openly admits her feelings but confesses to her journal her repressed desires: "Bless this love that imprisons me, praise be to Jean-Luze the Frenchman who enralls me so much that nothing matters apart from our love."¹² She lives vicariously through her sister Annette whose relationship with Jean-Luze is the sole avenue for Claire to satisfy her desires that "burned in silence like a torch." This illusionary world becomes the vehicle through which she escapes from her despondent reality. Symbolically, unable to fully and openly live in her society as woman and black, she retreats and dreams of communion with the white expatriate.

Claire's internal crisis is juxtaposed with the overtly political crisis that has befallen her town. From her window, Claire witnesses the constant violence that has erupted in her community: "Quietly like a shadow, I watch this drama unfold scene by scene."¹³ She observes the victimization of women at the hands of the black police commandant, Calédu, who takes pleasure in torturing the mulatto women. As Claire explains, Calédu and his gendarmes violate the bodies of these women by whipping their genitals or raping them so violently that they are permanently crippled: "He loves to whip women, and once in a while he has them arrested just like that, one or two times for his pleasure."¹⁴ She witnesses the victimization of her childhood friend Dora who is captured and returned to the town permanently disabled after Calédu's abuse. Claire describes Dora's brutal torture at the hands of Calédu: "She came back two days later haggard and unrecognizable, followed by the taunts of the beggars roaring with laughter to see her walk with open legs like a cripple."¹⁵ Claire sees Dora collapse in the middle of the streets and rushes to her aid and accompanies her home. She seethes with rage as she observes Calédu's sadistic violence as he takes pleasure in mutilating the mulatto women in the community: "You spread your cruelty, I know how to hide mine. You bite, I sting-stealthily, my eye trained by a bourgeois education imbibed like mother's milk, which makes me the most cunning of enemies, I wait for my moment."¹⁶ She suppresses her hatred and waits for an opportune moment to fight back against Calédu's reign of torture.

The question of politics, race, and skin takes us beyond *Black Skin, White Masks* and into Fanon's later work, which moves away from the question of racial formation in the Caribbean toward a broader global politics. The political turmoil in *Amour* reflects Fanon's analysis of the cycle of violence that has characterized the process of decolonization. In *Amour*, Calédu, like his predecessors, perpetuates acts of violence against the masses. Claire describes the colonial legacies of violence and hatred that persist in her community: "The police force has become vigilant. It monitors our every move. Its representative is commandant Calédu, a ferocious black man who has been terrorizing us for about eight years. He wields the rights of life and death over us and he abuses it."¹⁷ Calédu represents the Duvalier regime, one that

imprisons and violates mulatto women from the bourgeoisie. Reflecting on Calédu's reign of terror, Hellman-Keller notes,

Under the Noiriste regime personified by Calédu, the racial hierarchy is reversed as light skin no longer promised privilege but assured danger as Calédu's rise to power consequently marks the moment when the mulatres-aristocrates become a target for revenge.¹⁸

Claire reflects on how the rise of Noirisme has transformed the social order in the community as the oppressed have usurped the power of their oppressors. Calédu's enforcers, analogous to Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes (a group of paramilitary thugs often recruited from the lowest strata of Haitian society), are described by Claire as "armed beggars." While the mulatres-aristocrates have endured economic hardships under the new regime, the petit-bourgeois and Blacks have accumulated wealth and power. Claire remarks that Calédu's Black associates, such as the Trudors have attained social mobility: "Other houses, twins to ours, line the Grand—rue on both sides are at odds with the modern villa of the new prefect, Mr. Trudor, a figure of authority whom everyone greets with a bow. We have lost our smugness and will greet anyone with a bow. Many a spine has been bent from all this scraping."¹⁹ Prior to the rise of the Noiriste regime, the Trudors would have been shunned by the mulatres-aristocrates. Even M. Trudor remarks that "all that has happened is the roles have been reversed. As the Haitian proverb goes: 'Today it's the hunter's turn, tomorrow the prey's.'"²⁰ Claire expresses her disdain for the recent social climbers, stating that they have "certainly found a gold mine."²¹ Here, Claire perpetuates the discriminatory practices of those of her own social class. She perceives the rise of Calédu's black associates as a threat to the mulatres-aristocrates who have suffered under the new social order.

Claire explains that Calédu's Noiriste regime tortures the inhabitants, subjecting them to incessant surveillance and corporal punishment:

Calédu recently spit in my path with contempt. His armed beggars are aggressive and act as if they were great leaders in their rags. They track us down like wild beasts. We walk around like beaten dogs, tails between legs and noses to the ground. Terrorized and tamed by flea-bitten bums and upstarts.²²

Commenting on Calédu's reign of violence, Myriam Chancy notes that "Calédu's viciousness is born of his own past oppression: now risen from the lower classes to assume a role of power as a commander of the state's police, he turns on those he sees as purveyors of class inequalities."²³ As Duvalier and his Tonton Macoutes infiltrated both the public and private spaces of Haitians' lives, the police commandant Calédu's incessant surveillance and corporal punishment demonstrates a similar pattern of violence for the inhabitants of the town.

Claire's inner world of despair coupled with the heightened racial tensions in the private and public realm engender violent compulsions. She contemplates the possibility of surrendering to her existential angst through an act of suicide. Claire's plans are thwarted by the riots that have erupted in the street:

I lift the weapon to my left breast, when the cries of a riotous mob, shake me out of my delirium. Stretching out my arm with the dagger, I listen. Where are the cries coming from? Now my attention is turned away from its goal. Life and death, do they depend on chance? I hide the dagger in my blouse and I come down.²⁴

In the end, though, the cries of the people bring her out of her self-enforced isolation to involve herself in the public realm-and act decisively. Claire sees Calédu approaching her door, looking for refuge. Claire writes: "He's afraid, alone in the dark, hounded by beggars he himself armed. He is moving backward to my house. Does he realize that? Behind the blinds of the living room, I watch and wait for him."²⁵ She turns the dagger away from herself toward its proper target - the ferocious black man who is causing pain to the mulatres-aristocrates. She externalizes her rage toward the noiriste regime personified by Caledu. Her final act can be read as an aggressive act of retaliation against the black body—the source of her existential crisis.

In *Amour*, Claire is afflicted with a debilitating psychosis reflective of what Fanon calls the epidermalization of inferiority. Claire's internalized self-hatred culminates into acts of violence, entrapping her in a dystopic world where she is completely alienated from reality. Her only imaginable strategy for redress from her corporeal malediction is through violence. When the opportunity arises during an attempted revolt-she takes action against the dark-skinned police commandant who has terrorized her community, externalizing her suppressed rage on the black body. Claire stabs Calédu-almost incidentally to death in a symbolic act of anti-black racism.

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- ¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trs. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 111.
- ² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 86.
- ³ Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie* (Paris : Gallimard, 1968), 10.
- ⁴ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 12.
- ⁵ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 11.
- ⁶ Martin Munro, "Chauvet the Prophet: Writing the Future and the Future of Writing," *Yale French Studies* no.128 (2015): 43-56.
- ⁷ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 96.
- ⁸ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 96.
- ⁹ Ronnie Scharfman, "Theorizing Terror: The Discourse of Violence in Marie Chauvet's *Amour, Colère et Folie*," in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, eds. Mary Jean Green, Karen Gould, Micheline Rice-Maximin, Keith L. Walker and Jack A. Yeager (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 229-45.
- ¹⁰ Joan Dayan, "Reading Women in the Caribbean: Marie Chauvet's Love, Anger, and Madness," in *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, eds. Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 10.
- ¹¹ Valerie Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and U.S. Imperialism* (Lanham. Lexington Books, 2008), 10.
- ¹² Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 40.
- ¹³ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 1
- ¹⁴ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 14
- ¹⁵ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 14
- ¹⁶ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 50.
- ¹⁷ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 10
- ¹⁸ Helene Lee-Keller, "Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate: Haiti, Decolonization, and Women in Marie Chauvet's *Amour*," *Callaloo* 32, no. 4 (September 2009) : 1293-1311.
- ¹⁹ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 9.
- ²⁰ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 78.
- ²¹ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 76.
- ²² Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 120.
- ²³ Myriam Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*. (Temple University Press, 1997), 191.
- ²⁴ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 150.
- ²⁵ Vieux-Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie*, 151.