Fanon and Mayotte Capécia

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to first present Fanon’s assessment of Mayotte Capécia’s writing and then analyze the content of Capécia’s writing from the novelist’s own perspective. I argue that, within oppressive colonial situations, the oppressed can self-narrate a coherent sense of identity that substantially reflects their personal situation. The race narratives of the heroines, Isaure and Mayotte, are questioned by the characters within the novels and then by the author’s contemporaries. As a result, Capécia’s contemporaries, such as Fanon and Leonard Sainville, question the racial and ethnic authenticity of Capécia herself. With the attempt to blur the line between the author and her characters, Fanon suggests that because of the heroines’ own ambivalence to their racial/social condition, these women, the author included, cannot self-define. What Fanon finds racially ambivalent within the social condition of the heroines are the relationships the women have with men. Because of this, the heroines and the author lose racial credit in Fanon’s eyes. In this paper, I seek to examine how particular social contexts signify personal identities that are perpetually called into question. Finally, since my paper is situated within the colonial context of Martinique, my thesis will give examples of how an oppressed person gains agency in a male-dominated colonial society.

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I. Introduction:

I argue that, within oppressive colonial situations, the oppressed can self-narrate a coherent sense of identity that substantially reflects their personal situation. In this paper, my objective in analyzing the race narratives of Isaure and Mayotte is not to question the racial and gender situation of these women of color. Instead, it is to discover how they are women of color and discover whether it is possible to specify through race narratives the social signifiers that mark them as women of color. I seek to examine how particular social contexts signify personal identities that are perpetually called into question. Since my paper is situated within the colonial context of Martinique, my thesis will attempt to give examples of how an oppressed woman in particular gains agency in a male-dominated and colonially based racist society.

In view of my argument’s outline, I use feminist analysis to reassess, and include the writings and, therefore, social analysis of Mayotte Capécia within Francophone discourses. Historically and presently, Capécia’s writing provides us with race counter-narratives on the condition of women of color in Martinique. The use of feminist analysis gives race narratives a sense of integrity and legitimizes these narratives by creating space for questioning the subject position from which a race narrative is told, without undercutting the content of the race narrative.

Moreover, although the main body of my paper focuses on the writings of a black female Francophone Caribbean writer who assertively has the interest of black Caribbean women in particular, the feminist analysis that I present comes from the work of individuals from various gender, sex, and ethnic backgrounds. Primarily because I am
concerned here with issues relating to identity construction and gender, sex, and racial oppression, I chose to include in this paper the work of women and feminists, inclined scholars, who are directly informative to my project. Accordingly, I integrate, in order of appearance, the work of Beatrice S. Clark, Rey Chow, Christiane P. Makward, Gwen Berger, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Jane Kenway, Sue Willis, Jill Blackmore, Leonie Rennie, Mirian R. Hill, Volker Thomas, Chris Weedon, E. Anthony Hurley, and Diana Tietjens Meyers within my analysis of Capécia’s writings.

As to the context of my analysis, as I present the race narratives of the heroines from Capécia’s novels, Isaure and Mayotte, the reader will notice that the self-described narratives with which these women define their racial and gender situations are called into question, in part because these women are not regarded as autonomous enough to self-define. In other words, Frantz Fanon and Leonard Sainville assume, for example, that these women do not have enough personal resources to accurately define their own identities. Their race narratives are first questioned by the characters within the novels and then by Capécia’s contemporaries. However, my paper suggests that the race narratives of these heroines are questioned precisely because they do not seem to reflect the normative racial and gender situations of women of color in Martinique in the 1930s and the 1940s.

In the next section, I explain why exploring Mayotte Capécia’s writing is philosophically worthwhile. I do this by briefly describing how Capécia has been traditionally received by some key figures, primarily Franz Fanon and Leonard Sainville, within colonial studies. I do this to shift the perspective from which these key figures
have interpreted Capécia’s writing. Traditionally, these critics have claimed that the colonial interracial context of Capécia’s narratives shapes what they referred to as the questionable identities of the heroines. However, in the next section, contrary to the views of these critics, I claim that the context of the colonial working condition within Capécia’s narratives is what shapes the identities of the heroines. This is what I will explain as worthwhile in Capécia’s writings.

II. Fanon on Mayotte Capécia

Among philosophers and colonial studies scholars more generally, the name Mayotte Capécia is common only to those who are familiar with Frantz Fanon’s work, particularly Black Skin, White Masks. As Beatrice Stith Clark notes, one

... of the earliest women writers from the Francophone Caribbean, Capécia is most remembered today because of Frantz Fanon’s scathing dismissal of the autobiographical heroine of [I am a Martinican Woman] as a woman whose narrated life story reflects her alienation from the African roots of a bi-racial heritage.¹

In a footnote in Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon also dismisses Capécia’s only other novel, The White Negress.²

Specifically, in the second chapter of Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon presents his analysis of the work of Capécia. In the second chapter, “The woman of color and the white man,” Fanon argues that, despite the positive European reception of I am a Martinican Woman, the book “is cut-rate merchandise, a sermon in praise of

² Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, (New York: Grove Press, 1967 (1952)), 52 (footnote 12).
corruption.”³ By claiming that the book is a “praise of corruption,” Fanon suggests that *I am a Martinican Woman* presents a dishonest and undesirable account of the living condition of a woman of color and people of color in general. According to Fanon’s reading, the issue is that Mayotte, the heroine, “loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life.”⁴ The problem, according to Fanon, is that the racialized context of the main relationship reflects the troublesome and corrupted nature of the colonial situation the author presents.

Fanon also finds problems with Capécia’s other book, *The White Negress*. Fanon says,

… after [*I am a Martinican Woman*], Mayotte Capécia writes another book, [*The White Negress*]. She must have recognized her earlier mistakes, for in this book, one sees an attempt to re-evaluate the Negro [both male and female]. But Mayotte Capécia did not reckon with her own unconscious. As soon as the novelist allows her characters a little freedom, they use it to belittle the Negro. [...] In addition—and from this one can foresee what is to come—it is legitimate to say that Mayotte Capécia has definitely turned her back on her country. In both her books only one course is left for heroines: to go away. This country of niggers is decidedly accursed. In fact, there is an aura of malediction surrounding Mayotte Capécia. But she is centrifugal. Mayotte Capécia is barred from herself.⁵

In his brief review of *The White Negress*, Fanon argues that the problem is not only that the author is closed off from herself and her own country, but the heroines reflect the attitude of the author by being closed off from themselves and from members of their own ethnic group. Because of this, they become interested only in “whiteness.” They opt

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³ Fanon, 42.
⁴ Fanon, 42.
⁵ Fanon, 52 (footnote 12).
for relationships with white men and move off of the island. To Fanon, these actions reveal that they have moved away from members of their own ethnic group. Because of these acts, he claims that the women’s actions belittle the “Negro.” The diagnoses that Fanon reveals here is what he assumes to make up both the author’s and the heroines’ own “unconscious”—the very racial prejudices that these women have not well reflected on but have only internalized in return. Furthermore, Fanon’s “description of the women of color are paradoxically marked by their non-differentiation.” The differences between the subjectivity of the author and the subjectivities of the author’s heroines are blurred. This lack of distinction enables Fanon to infer wrongly that what applies to the heroines applies as well to Capécia.

Fanon presents Capécia’s writing primarily for insights into how the living conditions of Capécia herself have been racialized. However, recent research shows that Capécia’s writings are not fully based on the author’s own life. Retrospectively, what this research has proven about Capécia’s writings further show that Fanon’s analysis of the heroines does not reflect the life of Capécia herself. Her books are broader than her

6 It should be added here that methodically, what Fanon says of Capécia and her heroines fits with his general argument concerning colonial subjects in Black Skin, White Masks. In the third chapter titled, “The Man of Color and the White Woman,” for example, Fanon examines how the racial prejudices that a black male novelist, René Maran, has internalized, unreflectively inform his social life. However, I claim that Fanon’s analysis on Capécia and her heroines differs from his analysis on René Maran in the sense that he applies more sexual restrictions and taboos in the evaluation of these women of color’s gender situation and sexual choices.


life and partially reflect the social reality in Martinique during World War II. Both of Capécia’s books are “not an authentic autobiography as the reader will readily discern after contrasting [them] with the foregoing version of the writer’s life.”

On top of this, in his reading of *The White Negress*, Fanon is concerned about the racialized context of Capécia’s book. Ultimately to Fanon, because of the heroines and even the author’s own ambivalence toward their racial social condition, these women cannot self-define. For example, in examining the childhood of the heroine in *I am a Martinican*, Fanon shows that Mayotte is more concerned about discovering that she has a white grandmother than she is about accepting that she is actually black. He says, “instead of recognizing her absolute blackness, she proceeds to turn it into an accident. She learns that her grandmother was white. […] We are thus put on notice that what Mayotte wants is a kind of lactification.” As a result, he regards these women as unable to both accurately understand and describe their own racial social condition.

As my analysis will show, both Capécia novels describe certain aspects of interracial relationships in Martinique. But interracial relationships remain a race and gender subject that does not put everybody at ease. The historical literature shows that, while interracial relationships occurred in Martinique, they were not always well-regarded. This particular fact is well-reflected in Capécia’s writing. In the main body of my paper, I will present the aspects of interracial relationships that Capécia develops

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9 Clark, “Foreword: An update on the Author” in *I am a Martinican Woman*, xi
10 Clark, “Foreword” in *I am a Martinican Woman*, xi.
11 Fanon, 46-47.
in her novels.

Because of this, the interracial context of her novels has blindfolded critics from considering Isaure and Mayotte’s personal progress toward becoming self-sufficient women of color. Ultimately, what can be troubling in Capécia’s novels is the characters’ association with whiteness and with white people.\(^\text{13}\)

Capécia won the prize for Caribbean literature in 1949.\(^\text{14}\) However, her contemporary intellectuals and writers of color and those who followed, like Fanon, were very critical and dismissive of her writing. For example, Leonard Sainville, a Martinican writer, included excerpts from *I am a Martinican Woman* in his anthology of representative prose from the African Diaspora.\(^\text{15}\) Of her writings, he says, *I am a Martinican Woman* “is a detestable book. If, however, we mentioned it, it is only because we wanted to give a literary sample of the sickness, incurable for some, that racism produces.”\(^\text{16}\) Sainville’s criticism is, in many ways, no different from Fanon’s,

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\(^\text{13}\) Fanon criticizes others, such as Jean Veneuse, a black male character in René Maran’s novel, *une homme pareil aux autres*, along the same lines. Jean Veneuse and a white woman, Andrée Marielle, are romantically interested in each other. However, Jean Veneuse’s recognition of his racial status prevents him from carrying out his love for Andrée. What Fanon finds troubling about Maran’s character is how his racial inferiority complex prevents him from reciprocating the relationship he may officially have with the white woman he loves. In the case of Capécia’s heroines, on the other hand, Fanon is troubled about why these women would want to be involved with white men.


\(^\text{15}\) Clark, “Introduction” in *I am a Martinican Woman*, 7.

revolving around the avid inclusion of interracial relationship in her narratives.\textsuperscript{17} Moreover, there is much more of this kind of criticism that views Capécia’s work as an example of racial sickness.

I claim that Fanon is troubled with Capécia’s writings precisely because the gist of his analysis on the colonial condition of men of color is not, to him, necessarily applicable to the colonial condition of women of color. Specifically, Gwen Berger notes that writing “out of the context of the French Caribbean, Fanon asserts that [B]lack identity is shaped by the oppressive sociopolitical structure of colonial culture.”\textsuperscript{18} To Fanon, the oppressive sociopolitical structure of colonial cultures has led Blacks to hold an inferior social status in the colonies. Because of this, Blacks have carried themselves as if they have an inferior identity.

Of the analysis that Fanon presents, he says,

“the analysis that I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this, it is apparent to me that the effective alienation of the [B]lack man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:

—primarily, economic.
—subsequently, the internalization—or better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority.”\textsuperscript{19}

The key to understanding this passage and how it relates to Fanon’s dismissal of the writings of Capécia is that he is only talking about the alienation of “the Black man.” As a man of his time, Fanon overlooks the fact that, throughout the two novels, the main

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{18} Gwen Berger,\textit{ Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex and Psychoanalysis}, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 2.
\textsuperscript{19} Fanon, 10-11.
heroines, as I will show, rise above their poor working-class economic status despite their failed relationships with men. Instead, he criticizes the heroines because he fails to acknowledge the degree to which the racial and economic conditions of these women of color have alienated them from their situation as women of color. Fanon does not see that, on their own, these women of color can experience the sense of alienation that he associates with the colonial situation of black men.

As Paravisini-Gebert suggests, the main characters, Mayotte and Isaure, in their attempt to financially support themselves, strive for a social status that is generally desired by men—by men of color.\textsuperscript{20} Precisely because he associates social economic struggles solely with the condition of Black men, in his analysis of Mayotte, Fanon measures her social achievement by the man she is with and by the men she is not with. He fails to see the social achievement this woman of color has accomplished by working.

Despite Mayotte’s or Isaure’s drive for better living conditions, both also seek their place in society as Black women. However, both characters are frank enough to acknowledge that the colonial and male-dominated social structure in Martinique has alienated these women from their condition as women of color. What do these women do in return? They turn to work.

But to Fanon, the fact that Mayotte begins to make her living as a laundress (thus beginning to work) shows that, metaphorically, she wants to bleach her skin like the clothes she washes. Of this issue, Fanon says, “there were Loulouze and her mother, who

told her that life was difficult for a woman of color. So, since she could no longer try to blacken to negrify the world, she was going to try, in her own body and in her own mind, to bleach it. To start she would become a laundress.\textsuperscript{21} Being aware of Fanon’s assumptions about work and whiteness disrupts Fanon’s assumptions about their aims to be white. In other words, Fanon may have mistaken the heroines’ economic achievement with the desire to be white.

Fanon completely fails to see that Mayotte works as a laundress because it is the job that Loulouze, a childhood friend of Mayotte, could find for her as a newcomer to Fort-de-France and she wants to improve her financial condition. But to Fanon, Mayotte is only seeking another way to whiten herself. Fanon fails to see Capécia’s characters as women of color who can make self-interested, deliberate choices about their own economic conditions. And evidently, as Christiane Makward suggests, Fanon takes at face value that “life is difficult for a woman of color” without any further critical assessment of her social struggles.\textsuperscript{22}

As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting suggests, the terms of Fanon’s assessment of Capécia’s work reveal a patriarchal desire to police the bodies of Black women.\textsuperscript{23} Soon after, Sharpley-Whiting complicates her suggestion and adds that the fact that Fanon is not silent on gender issues that concern women not only shows his desire to police the bodies of Black women, but also shows, in part, his deliberate interest in questions that

\textsuperscript{21} Fanon, 45.
\textsuperscript{22} Makward, 21.
feminists are as well concerned with.\textsuperscript{24}

Fanon includes her writing in his book because he considers Capécia’s \textit{I am a Martinican Woman} to be autobiographical when it was published in 1948. He presents Capécia’s writing to gain insight on parts of the living condition of racialized women of color of Francophone origins. In reality, Fanon solely seeks to racially examine how women of color are racially defined in terms of the men they are with. Although, from a feminist perspective such an examination can give us an insight on the condition of women of color, the condition of women of color cannot be understood strictly from their relationship with men.

Given this, I begin my analysis of the race narratives of a woman of color in Capécia’s writing. But first, note the emphasis on feminist analysis within this analysis is to show that when race narratives are understood as \textit{discourses} coming from \textit{texts}, they portray norms reflected in political, social, and cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{25} My engagement with feminist analysis will be fully fleshed out through my analysis of the passages that I draw from Capécia’s novels. By approaching Capécia’s writing from a feminist standpoint, I seek to examine the objectivity of her writing. Like Fanon, I present Capécia’s writing to gain insight on parts of the living conditions of racialized subjects of Francophone origins.

However, while I want to note that it is the writing of Fanon that makes me turn to

\textsuperscript{24} T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 11.
the writing of Capécia, my analysis moves beyond Fanon’s dismissal of her writing in the sense that I seek to first know the value of Capécia’s race narratives and recover how they reflect, in part, the social experiences of at least some Francophone women of her time, all in accord with Capécia’s own terms. In examining Capécia’s writing from the perspective of feminism, I question Fanon’s understanding of the race narratives presented by Capécia.

In the next section, primarily through the race narratives of Isaure, I examine the relationship between work and personal identities that are constructed under colonialism. First, I briefly explain what work means to Isaure. Second, I describe and provide textual examples of how others portray the status of Isaure’s identities. I do this to give a basis to the social situations that lead Isaure to personally identify herself the way she does. And third, I examine how work shapes her self-identity, despite the disparaging remarks others (and at times herself) identify her with.

III. Contextualizing the race narratives of a woman of color

Isaure, the protagonist of The White Negress, is a young woman of color who attempts to affirm her distinct racialized and gendered identity through the independence she gains by financially supporting herself in Martinique, an island in the eastern Caribbean Sea that is an overseas department of France and former colony of France. The social development of Isaure is also what the book is about. She manages to become an entrepreneur by owning and running a bar in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique. To Isaure, her work experience has enabled her to conclude that work is a woman’s
Prior to asking for her hand in marriage, Pascal, her childhood friend, tells Isaure that she should consider giving up her bar and stop working to earn a living altogether. I “‘want to earn my living,’ Isaure answered. ‘Even if I had enough money, I would like to keep on working. Work is a woman’s dignity.’” In her response, Isaure associates three concepts with the idea of work: financial support, independence, and dignity. Isaure wants to earn her living not just because it enables her to make some money, but also because of the non-material values that come from working. Not only does working make her independent, it also gives her a sense of self-worth that she identifies as dignity. Work gives her a proper sense of self-respect and self-satisfaction.

Despite listening to Isaure’s preferences, Pascal wants to convince her otherwise. He asks if her view of work would change if he married her. But to Isaure, “that’s not possible.” Here, given the context of the situation, it is hard to determine what exactly is impossible to conceive for Isaure. To Isaure, neither marriage in general nor marriage specifically to Pascal will secure the sense of self-respect and pride she feels from working.

Isaure responds to Pascal but creates a situation where their particular ethnicities conflict. Pascal is a Béké, a term that refers to whites or white creoles born in

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Martinique.\textsuperscript{30} Some white creoles in Martinique can be of mixed ancestry. Isaure is a woman of color. The narrator voices Isaure’s doubts about her racial identity and says, “[S]he too, had some black blood and when one has black blood, one is black.”\textsuperscript{31} From this, we learn that Isaure is a black woman of mixed ancestry.

Yet, for Isaure, ethnic status is perpetually changing, depending on the situation and the social setting. While Isaure can easily project to others the importance of work in her life, she faces challenges projecting to others the way work relates to her identity as a woman of color. Isaure tends to be identified by others in ways that do not reflect the way she actually defines herself.

Before I examine the relationship between work and Isaure’s self-defined identity, I give three passages from Capécia’s narratives that show the various ways others identify Isaure. The three passages from \textit{The White Negress} are the first bar scene, Isaure’s conversation with du Taillant, and Isaure’s conversation with her mother-in-law.

At the beginning of the book, a white sailor enters the bar to hide from black men who have chased him. In the bar, there are the remaining two white higher-ranked naval officers. Isaure warns the three that they must not leave. You “must not leave, they’ll kill you!”\textsuperscript{32} We learn that there is a mob of blacks outside the bar waiting for them to emerge. Isaure refers to them as “dirty niggers” and “savages.” Of the mob outside she says, “I know them, major, believe me… I swear to you… I swear to you that these dirty

\textsuperscript{31} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 196.
\textsuperscript{32} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 161.
niggers, when they are worked up, they’re capable of anything […] They’re savages.”

Given the situation in the bar, she is described as being of mixed-blood. In this passage, Isaure appears to side with the white officers. The narrator attempts to relate Isaure to the officers to give reason why she may want to side with these very naval officers. She “was one of those many mixed-bloods, so common in Martinique: her skin had a touch of banana, orange, coconut and coffee; her lips full, her teeth dazzling, but her face, highlighted with a bit of rose on the cheek bones, had the look of a white person. Lastly, everything about her, even her accent and her gestures, indicated that she was of mixed-blood.”

Isaure is described as being of mixed ancestry. In addition, her demeanor is that of a person of mixed ancestry. Instead of relating Isaure’s attributes to her African ancestry, the narrator relates them to her European ancestry. We are told that, despite the colors of her skin, she has the look of a white person.

Later that night, when Major Miquet suggests calling the police, to their surprise, Isaure tells them to not “mix the police in this.” She says this in a sharp tone. This shows that Isaure does not necessarily think ill of the blacks who are outside her bar. By not wanting them to call the police, Isaure appears to be familiar with scenes of this sort. In other words, to Isaure, the tension between the blacks and the whites is something that is much too common.

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The question becomes, if Isaure is already familiar with the racial tension, why does she denigrate the blacks outside her bar in front of these white naval officers? Either Isaure calls the blacks “dirty niggers” and “savages” to appease the officers so that they do not take any serious actions toward these blacks or she calls them names because she, in part, means to call them “dirty niggers” and “savages.” It could also be for both reasons. Moreover, she might resort to racist name calling in order simply to protect her bar from being destroyed in a potential mob fight.

Note that Isaure repeatedly refers to herself in racially charged derogatory terms as well. After Isaure warns them to not call the police, she suddenly leaves the bar and moves into the street. By this time, the mob is gone. When the two higher-ranked officers catch up with her, she tells them, “[L]eave me alone, I’m only a wretched negress, I’m not worth the trouble you’re taking.” Despite this, the officers “firmly and gently, they had led her home.” In this section of the book, Isaure claims to be just as dirty and savage as the blacks she denigrated earlier.

This passage can be better understood through the analysis of Mirian R. Hill and Volker Thomas, who note that “in a racist social context, a person’s racial identity is constructed from racist narratives. People caught in racist contexts sometimes simply resign themselves to these stories, simply because the drive to integrate all one’s emotions, thoughts, and selves into a cohesive whole is so great.”

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37 Capécia, The White Negress., 166.
38 Capécia, The White Negress., 166.
show that Isaure can be caught up as well in describing her identity according to racist
remarks made about people of color. In other words, Isaure faces the trouble of
identifying herself with the racist narratives constituting her colonial situation.

In the next passage, as she befriends the other higher-ranked naval officer,
Lieutenant du Taillant, he tries to invite her to a local dance organized by the Békés.
Isaure refuses and claims, “At the Lido [dance]? Impossible. You know they don’t allow
blacks.” In this context clearly, Isaure identifies as black. Despite the fact that she
states her ethnicity, du Taillant, a white Frenchman and not a Béké, challenges Isaure on
how she identifies her ethnicity. He says, “but you’re not black, Isaure. You’re hardly
métisse, your skin is almost white. In a few years when you have earned millions with
your bar, you’ll have a house built high in Didier and you’ll pass for a Creole.”

To du Taillant, since Isaure can appear to be “almost white” and not even mixed,
she cannot identify herself as black. Co-defining race and class, he even believes that as
she acquires wealth through her business, she can buy her way into the white social
status.

By challenging Isaure’s ethnic narrative, du Taillant resists the account that she
gives. This is an example of what Robert S. Chang means when he says that race
narratives face potential resistance. What du Taillant is challenging in Isaure’s race
narrative is its honesty and integrity. But to Chang, challenging the honesty and

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*Relations*, vol. 49 no. 2 (2000), 197.
integrity of a race narrative is to question the objective truth of such a narrative. This “argument about honesty is really about objective truth. […] When the real question about objectivity is asked, further questions are revealed. What counts as knowledge? What counts as evidence?”

In this case, du Taillant challenges the assumption that Isaure makes about classifying herself as black. Perhaps du Taillant knows that the Békés at the Lido do not tolerate blacks at their dance. But he invites Isaure because, to him, she is not black. He goes on to describe her skin as being “almost white” because, to him, Isaure’s skin tone is not “almost black” or black for that matter.

By claiming that Isaure is “almost white,” du Taillant suggests that Isaure’s body gives contradictory evidence to the narrative she gives about herself as a black person. However, what du Taillant fails to recognize is that the meaning associated with “black” as a race reflects the bodies of people with various distinct and exceptional shades and social histories. Calling Isaure’s body “almost white,” du Taillant measures the body of Isaure to a standardized conception he has of the black body and to a standardized conception he has of the white body. Given these measures, he can only say with the use of language that Isaure is “almost white.” Du Taillant believes that there are essential criteria that define blacks as black. But the essentialist views associated with race, similar to du Taillant’s view, have all been contested by feminist analysis.

Chris Weedon confirms this view through her analysis of sexual and gender

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43 Chang, 1276.
differences. She says that feminist theory “has challenged all theories of sexual and
gender difference which appeal to the fixed meanings of bodies. The basis for this
challenge is the assumption that there is no such thing as natural or given meaning in the
world. [...] The meanings ascribed to bodies are culturally produced, plural, and ever
changing.”

Since sex and gender have the social possibilities of marking and differentiating
people in essentialized characteristics, Weedon’s analysis also applies to racial and ethnic
differences. Moreover, as is the case for Isaure’s body, Weedon’s analysis applies to the
intersectionality between sexual, gender, racial, and ethnic differences. As a
consequence, this analysis enables me to claim that since a standardized conception of
racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies, reflects essentialist characteristics, Isaure can
be compared neither to a standard white body nor to a standard black body.

The disempowered “find ourselves in a peculiar position of the very [narratives]
that are now disbelieved or excluded because they are only [narratives]. In this way,
rules of evidence silence us. In order to get our [narratives] into evidence, we need to
broaden or change the very meaning of evidence.” Because of the subjective standpoint
from which race narratives are told, race narratives are doubted as a viable form of
evidence that can confirm the disempowered’s racial experiences.

The question then becomes, when it comes to race narratives, what counts as
evidence and who says so? A race narrative becomes a personal narrative. Following

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44 Chris Weedon, *Feminism, theory and the politics of difference*, (Massachusetts:
45 Chang, 1277.
Chang, I propose that it is the very content of the race narrative, its distinct personal features, that serve as evidence. Race narratives, which are subjective in character, “would be offered to challenge the current formulation of objectivity, but not the notion of objectivity itself.” Unlike Chang, I argue that challenging the formulation through which race narratives become objective is to also challenge the objective standpoint from which race narratives become legitimized. In short, challenging the current formulation of objectivity challenges objectivity itself. A racial “personal narrative is being offered to show [for example] that objectivity may actually be a disguise for white male subjectivity, which takes away the subjectivity of the disempowered.”

In regard to the conversation between du Taillant and Isaure, this analysis of race personal narrative shows that du Taillant’s claim about Isaure’s ethnicity reflects his personal views on her ethnicity rather than his objective assessment. But, Isaure is well aware of this. After listening to du Taillant, Isaure responds and directly confronts him.

I don’t want to be insulted. […] I won’t go. I’m from this country and I know them. Those béké goyaves [same as Békés] are terrible snobs and even you, white as you are, if you settled on this island, they wouldn’t let you go to the Lido, if you were a millionaire. But you’re here for a short time, so they invite you as a spectator to admire their wealth. Isaure is certain she won’t fit in with the Békés at the Lido. She knows that she would be insulted and discriminated against. She supports this by claiming that, unlike du Taillant, she is from the island. She knows how race relations work on

46 Chang, 1278.
47 Chang, 1280.
Martinique. Du Taillant has been invited to the Lido simply because he is a white visitor. Because of this, the wealthy Békés do not take issue with his social status. To them, du Taillant is just an honorary naval officer. Had he been a native-born white from the island, his social status would matter. Isaure implies that Pascal, given the origins of his social class, has not been invited to the Lido. Pascal is a Béké of poor origins who grew up alongside Isaure and other blacks.

It is Isaure’s own experience with racism that enables her to give meaning to her body as being black, at least in certain social contexts. Thus “the meanings ascribed to bodies are culturally produced, plural, and ever changing. Moreover, these competing meanings are part of broader relations of power and have implications for both women and men. They affect femininity and masculinity as forms of lived and embodied subjectivity and women and men’s positions in society.” In the conversation between du Taillant and Isaure, since Isaure’s body can be ascribed various sets of convergent and divergent meaning, there is a tension between du Taillant’s and Isaure’s meanings and descriptions.

However, since the meaning we give to other people’s bodies reflects the context of a particular social setting, du Taillant may have social motives in his ethnic description of Isaure. Du Taillant is a white man who is clearly attracted to Isaure. He might choose to identify Isaure as “almost white” to ease the social crossover he wants to make. In other words, du Taillant wants to see Isaure as non-black. In identifying Isaure’s race, he defines her in relationship to himself. This enables him more easily to relate to Isaure

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49 Weedon, 102.
and eases his attempt to seduce her.

Furthermore, Isaure claims to hate Békés because they made their money exploiting blacks. There “are enough of them who have gotten rich on rum and sugar cane by exploiting blacks and ruining the country. […] I detest them.” We see that Isaure is not willing to side with all whites.

Her conversation with du Taillant shows how race, work, and wealth are intertwined. Pascal makes a living by overseeing the Basse-Pointe plantation. We can assume that black workers at Pascal’s plantation are not well-paid. However, Pascal is not the owner. So his income as an overseer cannot compare to what the owners of Basse-Pointe make. We also know that a large portion of Isaure’s bar customers is white. While Isaure is not in a job that exploits any ethnic groups, she crosses racial lines to make a living. The same can be said of Pascal and most people who work in Martinique. Isaure, for example, finds herself at the bar serving and taking money from wealthy Békés who will attend the Lido. Despite this, Isaure detests these Békés - not only because of the excess income they acquire from sugar cane plantations, but also because her own income comes, in part, from serving these very wealthy Békés.

We see that, depending on the social context, Isaure is either identified or identifies herself either as a mixed-blood, a negress, a black, and an “almost white” person. Depending on the situation, her racial identity is perpetually described in various ways. There is no single social condition that solidifies Isaure’s racial account of herself.

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50 Capécia, *The White Negress*, 182. The sentence order of this quote is based on my emphasis.

The question is not whether Isaure is a woman of color but rather how is Isaure a woman of color? Are there social signifiers that mark her as a woman of color?

Isaure’s experience with racism allows her to self-identify as a woman of color. The title of the book, *The White Negress*, refers to a discussion that Isaure has with her mother-in-law after Pascal dies. This brings us to the third example. The mother-in-law, like du Taillant, claims that Isaure is “almost white” when Isaure tells her that she is expecting Pascal’s child and is leaving Martinique. The mother-in-law wants to have a grandchild by Pascal. So, despite the fact that she disapproved of Pascal’s decision to marry Isaure, she will reconsider. Isaure becomes “almost white” because she wants the child Isaure says she is carrying. Their conversation goes as follows:

Mrs. Guymet: For the love of Pascal, stay with us. For the love of this child who will bear his name, the name of my husband.

Isaure Guymet: I am a negress.

Mrs. Guymet: But that’s not true. Your skin is almost as white as mine.

Isaure Guymet: A white negress, if you wish, but a negress all the same. My ancestors were slaves, and we are no longer slaves, we are lepers.\(^{52}\)

The title of the book refers to the identity that Isaure is specifically subjected to beyond the way she gives an account of herself.

Since I have provided the reader with three passages that illustrate the way others define the identities of Isaure, I now examine how work shapes the identity with which she defines herself despite the disparaging remarks of others – and at times herself.

While Isaure is aware that the money she earns from the bar cannot enable her to

\(^{52}\) Capécia, *The White Negress*, 258.
buy her way into white social circles or change her racial status, she is nonetheless aware that her relationship with men as a woman is transformed because she earns her living. The transformation of her social-gender status that she gains from her work also carries over to how she identifies herself as a woman of color. By earning a living that is well above the median income of the black working class and poor blacks in the late 1930s and 1940s, Isaure transforms the meaning of her social condition.

Despite the self-transformation she gains from earning a living, Isaure still faces racism. For example, while married to Pascal, Isaure is still discriminated against by her in-laws.\(^{53}\) The purpose, then, of giving an account of Isaure’s self-transformation is to show how an oppressed person gains agency in a male-dominated and colonially based racist society. It is the power dynamic of being a woman of color in a male-dominated and colonially based racist society that gives Isaure the incentive to associate her identity with work.

Given the context that gives rise to Isaure’s personal attachment to work, it is important that we consider the meaning of work within the construction of Isaure’s identity. Isaure began working at 16, a year after she lost her mother,\(^ {54}\) in a chocolate factory in Fort-de-France before gradually making her way to become the owner of a bar. As she begins to earn a living, Isaure becomes pregnant. She gives birth to François and becomes a single mother,\(^ {55}\) the sole financial supporter of François. Earlier in the book, Isaure had a relationship with Daniel. Despite her relationship with Daniel, Isaure never

\(^{54}\) Capécia, *The White Negress*, 182.
asks for money. In a conversation with her mulatto brother, she confirms this. The brother, Gustav, asks for 300,000 francs from his sister. Isaure tells him that she does not have that kind of money. Gustav suggests that she should get the money from the white man she sees. Isaure responds that she never asks for money and that she makes her money by working.\textsuperscript{56} In her response, Isaure implies that she is not a “prostitute” and she is not seeking financial upward mobility through white men. The brother responds by claiming that she is more stupid than he thought.

He then wants to know why she is sleeping with Daniel.\textsuperscript{57} Isaure reminds him that her private life only concerns her and that she is free to do what she wants. Then she asks Gustav to get out.\textsuperscript{58} Gustav assumes that his sister might have more money than he because, in addition to owning a bar, Isaure has a relationship with a man—more precisely with a white man. Isaure tells him that her relationship with Daniel is not based on money. Perplexed, the brother wants to know how else a woman of her social background can be with a man if the relationship is not based on financial support.

Isaure, along with her brother, Gustav, and her sister Ophelia, grew up impoverished. In the book, we first learn that Gustav is a fisherman but as the war progresses, he acquires money by smuggling people and goods.\textsuperscript{59} Like Pascal, Isaure and her brother and sister bring themselves out of poverty by working. Despite this, Gustav assumes his sister cannot be living so well without financial contribution from the man.

\textsuperscript{56} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 184.
\textsuperscript{57} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 184.
\textsuperscript{58} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 184.
\textsuperscript{59} Capécia, \textit{The White Negress}, 220.
she sees. At the end of the conversation, Isaure asks him to get out. Here, Isaure affirms herself. She feels dignified enough to kick her brother out right after he attempts to sexually belittle her.

By assuming that Isaure takes money from Daniel, Gustav affirms her status as a woman. Given the context of the culture, Gustav is not off-track when he assumes his sister is receiving money from the man she is seeing. By saying to Isaure that she is stupid not to take money from Daniel, Gustav challenges the way that she affirms herself as a woman. To Gustav, she is stupid because she tries to live against the social norm.

By challenging the narrative that Isaure gives of her financial condition, Gustav shows that, despite the ethnic differences between a man of color and a white man, they share one thing in common. Both Pascal and Gustav agree that a woman should not necessarily be financially independent. By going against the norm, Isaure affirms her independence and challenges gender roles.

In her analysis, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues that Isaure can challenge the female role precisely because she is a mulatto woman. “[D]isenfranchised by gender, when not by gender and race, [Isaure] seeks a measure of the power traditionally held by men in Caribbean societies. As [an] enterprising or professional [woman] precariously perched between the upper class world of the rich Békés and the hand-to-mouth world of the peasantry, [she] must assert [her] power in a world which frowns on female assertions.”

In contrast to Paravisini-Gebert’s analysis, I argue instead that Isaure becomes an

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60 Paravisini-Gebert, 67.
enterprising woman not because she is a mulatto woman but primarily because of her personal ambition. In the novel, Isaure has a sister, Ophelia, who is of the same ethnicity. Yet Ophelia does not become an enterprising woman. On the other hand, in Capécia’s other novel, *I am a Martinican Woman*, Mayotte, the protagonist, born to a half-black mother and a black father, becomes an enterprising woman who aspires to the same financial independence as Isaure.

Isaure and Mayotte seek financial independence because they both want to improve their living conditions. As Mayotte moves to Fort-de-France, she takes a job as a laundress. However, she becomes unsatisfied with the work and wants a more ambitious career. Of this she says, “life in the workroom soon lost its attraction. […] I earned only enough to feed myself. Now, I would have liked a business of my own, to be altogether independent with the prospect of earning more and more. I was, and still am, ambitious. Maybe that’s weakness, but if I couldn’t change the color of my skin, I had the determination to better my condition.” This ambition that Mayotte as a black woman has enables her to open a little shop.

While Mayotte knows that the color of her skin will never improve her living condition, she is acutely aware that a good income can improve certain things about her life. E. Anthony Hurley claims that in Fort-de-France, “she is astute enough to recognize the association between personal power and white skin. Her intelligence convinces her of the impossibility of a personal transformation and she opts for material success through

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63 Capécia, *I am a Martinican Woman*, 100.
entrepreneurship as a practical substitute.” What Hurley says here primarily alludes to Mayotte’s racial status. Accordingly, in addition to what Hurley says, I want to claim as well that Mayotte’s pursuit of material success has a transformative effect on the gender and sexual side of her personal life. Through material success, she gains some personal power by being financially independent from men—primarily from either her father or her white lover. Moreover, the financial independence she gains through material success influences, in turn, the gender relationship she has, as a woman of color, with men in general.

It is the case, of course, that in the 1930s and the 1940s in Martinique, men are more likely to pursue a satisfying income than a woman would. In this aspect, I agree with Paravisini-Gebert that Isaure, in her time, by seeking financial independence, is seeking a part of the power traditionally held by men of color and white men in Caribbean societies. However, the desire for financial independence with a good income is a desire that is not limited strictly to mulatto women but is open to potentially any woman of color. But because of social constraints in the 1930s and 1940s, Mayotte sees her ambition as weakness. In other words, normal women of color do not seek to become enterprising.

“An illegitimate child and now herself the mother of an illegitimate child, had seen her economic success as a bar owner as the path to social mobility for herself and

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64 E. Anthony Hurley, “Intersections of Female Identity or Writing the Woman in Two Novels by Mayotte Capécia and Marie-Magdeleine Carbet,” in The French Review, Vol. 70, No. 4 (American Association of Teachers of French, 1997), 582-583.
While, of course, the account that Isaure gives of herself as a working woman is questioned first by her brother Gustav and second by Pascal, the significant income she earns solidifies the narratives she tells others about her being an independent working woman of color. No matter what Gustav and Pascal tell her, they both cannot deny that she earns her living. The proof: she does not ask either of them for money. In her conversation with her brother, we see that Isaure embodies her belief. As she tells Pascal, work - and not a man - is a woman’s dignity.

By embodying her belief, Isaure attempts to create a shield against the sexism she routinely faces. What “diverse women are like and now how individual women go about conducting their lives are issues that go to the heart of feminism. Because patriarchal societies consider women inferior beings, and because these societies severely constrain women’s choosing and acting, all feminists—theorists and activists alike—regard the questions of why women suffer these wrongs and how they can be righted as crucial.”

The belief that Isaure embodies as the result of the self-transformation she gains from earning a living shows that, despite the presence of racism and sexism in Martinique, Isaure has not internalized the dominant prejudices against women of color. To Isaure, the status of women is not necessarily about their binary opposition to men. To Isaure, the status of women is also based on the non-material assets she gains from work: dignity, self-respect, and self-satisfaction.

When Gustav and Pascal question Isaure about the status of her working

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65 Paravisini-Gebert, 71.
condition, they do not question the sense of self-satisfaction and self-respect she gains from working. Instead, they primarily question Isaure’s sense of independence. Moreover, they question the degree to which she is dignified. Of course, to them, an entrepreneur is worthy of respect. However, being with a man and taking money from a man is even more respectable. But to Isaure, the contrary is the case. As a result, Isaure attempts to reform the conception of gender roles. Yet as feminist theories suggest, “whatever the moment or the level, the meaning of gender reform will be constantly contested, negotiated, and appropriated.”67 This is just what Isaure perpetually experiences in the midst of affirming her identity in a male-dominated and colonially based racist and sexist society. Despite her attempt to self-define, Isaure’s self-narratives are perpetually called into question.

IV. Conclusion:

As the body of my paper shows, the race narratives of the heroines, Isaure and Mayotte, are questioned by the characters within the novels and then by the author’s contemporaries. As a result, Capécia’s contemporaries, such as Fanon and Leonard Sainville, question the racial and ethnic authenticity of Capécia herself. With the attempt to blur the line between the author and her characters, Fanon suggests that, because of the heroines’ own ambivalence to their racial social condition, these women and the author herself cannot self-define. What Fanon finds racially ambivalent within the social condition of the heroines are the relationships the women have with men. Because of this, the heroines - and the author - lose racial credit in Fanon’s eyes.

Rey Chow insightfully claims that “Fanon’s admittance of the sexual agency of the woman of color signifies her inevitable expulsion from her community.”\(^{68}\) Observing that the sexual choices of women of color will not always be based on racial fidelity—the motivated choice of only sexually partnering with Black men—Fanon suggests that a concrete communal definition of what it means to be racialized cannot necessarily be based on the experiences of women of color. This shows, then, that Fanon’s focus on women of color, in the chapter, “The woman of color and the white man” is actually a dismissal of women of color. By reducing the condition of women of color, “the Negress and the Mulatto,”\(^{69}\) strictly to analysis of skin color complexes and sexual taboos, Fanon fails to additionally call into question, as he does for men of color, the condition of women of color in terms of the complexity of the socio-economically alienating system of colonialism. By failing to do so, Fanon’s account on the condition of women of color becomes limiting. In the end, and from a feminist standpoint, the gender and sexual characteristics of women of color disengaged Fanon from substantially grasping their situation as self-defining complex colonial subjects.

\(^{69}\) Fanon, 54.