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Post-Colonial Allegory
and the Empire of Rape

Through the figurative actuations of allegorical repetition, history becomes transformed: absolutes become fragmented, non-vision becomes vision, and the false clarities of tradition become the uncertain round upon which an inner confidence and authority in post-colonial cultures can be constructed. (Slemon 1988, 164)

...before your very eyes, lies are turned into truths, history becomes a pimp, and the jester is turned into a sultan. (Salih 144)

In her article entitled "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" Anne McClintock criticizes the term post-colonial for being "prematurely celebratory and obfuscatory" (298). The binary opposition of colonial/post-colonial, she argues, shifts theory away "from the binary axis of power (colonizer/colonized — itself inadequately nuanced, as in the case of women) to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance" (292). McClintock's article deals primarily with the military and political policies of nations that have been labelled post-colonial to reveal how the term cannot adequately account for the multiplicity of powers and histories that constitute these places. My emphasis here lies more with literature than with government policy, but like McClintock, I am leery of the celebratory tone of much post-colonial theory, and I am similarly interested in the political nuances that are often effaced by post-colonial discourse. How is resistance figured and reconfigured in post-colonial writing and theory, and what forms of power do these figurations disguise? What political nuances attend the intersection of the binaries of colonizer/colonized and male/female in post-colonial writing? How is post-colonial discourse inadequate when dealing with the nuances of feminist issues? These are some of the broad questions I wish to raise in this essay.

I will focus specifically on the question of post-colonial allegory, a mode that Stephen Slemon theorizes as constituting a crucial aspect of the liberating and

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resisting impulses of post-colonial writing. Much of my challenge to the optimis-
tic tone of post-colonial criticism is specifically directed at the manipulative
ature of allegory. Allegorical writing, by necessity, issues an hermeneutical
imperative, and demands a contract between author and reader to ensure "proper"
textual interpretation. In order to read post-colonial writings as allegorical
narratives of resistance, one is often required to gloss over political nuances and
subtleties of power relations. By referring to the all too frequently used trope
of rape, I argue that what often appears to be a dismantling of hierarchies and an
undermining of power inequities in one sphere may remain hierarchical and
oppressive in another. Indeed, when rape is figured in an allegory of resistance,
it paradoxically assumes an oppressive function at the same time as it purportedly
liberates.

Before proceeding to my argument, I must begin with how Slemen theorizes
post-colonial allegory. Identifying a resurgence of allegorical writing issuing
from post-colonial cultures in recent years, Slemen employs the concept of
counter-discourse to explain how post-colonial allegorical transformation can be
"an effective means of subverting imperial myths" (1988, 164). Like many post-
colonial theorists, Slemen focuses his analysis of this allegorical mode on the
axis of time in general, and in particular on the transformation of history. Read-
ing allegorically, Slemen finds that texts such as Waiting for the Barbarians by J.M.
Coetzee, Natives of my Person by George Lamming, and Carnival by Wilson
Harris, revise imperial codes of recognition to produce "new ways of seeing
history, new ways of 'reading' the world" (164). These and the other texts he
mentions attempt to "destabilise history's fixity, its givenness, and open it up to
the transformative power of imaginative revision" (150). Referring explicitly to
post-colonial allegory, Slemen challenges critics to learn to read "this new,
'revised' mode of representation in all of its diversity, its plurality, its cultural
and political difference" (166).

One of many examples of post-colonial allegory that Slemen treats towards
the beginning of his article, however, begs the question of whether this new,
'revised' mode of representation can or should be read in the affirmative and
positive way he suggests. Slemen observes that "Ayi Kwei Armah's 'An African
Fable', or specific episodes in Margaret Laurence's This Side Jordan, for
example, allegorically re-activate the rape of the colonised by the coloniser" (159).
This observation occurs in passing, and is not afforded any more attention.
However, the prevalence of allegorical figurations of rape within colonial and
post-colonial writings demands critical attention that does not merely gloss over
the multiple implications of this trope by constructing it exclusively as a figure
of resistance. In order to "learn to read this new, 'revised' mode of represen-
tation," I believe we must also learn to read the trope of rape within it (166). If
post-colonial writing is a site of cultural struggle (Slemen 1987, 11), and if the
trope of rape is a signifier of this struggle, then we must ask, as Lynn Higgins
and Brenda Silver do, what it means, and who benefits from its meanings (2).

It is generally accepted that rape is an act of violence that has not merely
sexual but also social, political, cultural, and economic meanings. What is at
stake, then, in rape is power — power over the body, power over social subjects,
economic power, and political power. Since post-colonial writers attempt to
come to terms with, subordinate, and challenge manifestations of power, it seems
logical that they would turn to the trope of rape, since it so effectively condenses
in a single image the issues that they wish to articulate. Now, I must clarify at
this point that what I call the trope of rape is not the same as literal rape.
Because the trope occurs within representation where it is often impossible to
determine (and often irrelevant) whether a female character has, or has not,
issued her consent to sexual acts, (particularly in texts that are narrated and
localized through a male perspective), the trope encompasses a spectrum of
represented relations that ranges from seduction at one end to violence at the
other. Thus, despite the desires and will of the characters involved, represented
sexual relations can be called rape when they signify violence, violation, and
domination.

I do not wish to posit a simple, causal relationship between the representation
of rape and the act of rape when I observe that representations intersect with the
material world. Many feminists have argued that the rhetoric of violence that
permeates many of our discursive systems can be linked to empirical violence. Word
and world, they show, are bound. Indeed, this is why allegorical narratives
are able to function as tools of resistance; discursive violence can change the real
world of cultural and political relations.

Yet the way that resistance is framed within post-colonial discourse belies a
neglect of the nuances of power relations. Slemen speaks of "a shared typology
grounded in the real world of cultural and political relations" that "provide[s] a
cultural thematics upon which allegorical communication can take place" (1988,
165). However, the typology that permits representations of rape to communicate
alliances of resistance is one that cannot, or chooses not to, distinguish between
institutional violence and individual violence, between colonial power and patri-
archal power. The "rap of the colonised by the coloniser" (159) may be typolo-
gically similar to the rape of a woman by a man, but it is produced by different
ideologies, power relations, institutions, and practices, and has different
significations. In this paper, I wish to undermine and unravel the typology that

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2 All these forms of power intersect specifically with gender, and the power patriarchy
exercises over gendered subjects.

3 The link between representational or discursive violence and empirical violence is discussed
in Teresa de Lauretis, Susanne Kappeler, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, and
Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver.
makes it possible for this mode of allegorical signification to challenge and resist colonial power structures and yet reinforce patriarchal power relations.

Toward this end, I will examine two post-colonial novels that use the trope of rape in their allegories of resistance. Sudanese author Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* was published in Arabic in 1966, and Haitian immigrant to Québec (and later Florida), Dany Laferrière’s *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* was published in French in 1985. Both of these novels emerge from cross-cultural situations broadly defined by an overdetermined, uneven relationship between dominators and dominated. Race, class, culture, and gender intersect in both of these novels to weave a complex web of social relations and practices that determine positions of power and powerlessness.

For both novelists, these unequal positions are not absolute categories but relational ones, structured much along the lines of the relationship between the West and the Orient, as described by Edward Said, when he speaks of the “flexible positional superiority which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7). What makes both of these novels “post-colonial” is that both authors attempt to offer a critique of the imperial power and discourse that maintains this positional superiority, and both authors attempt in some measure to interrogate, contest, and subvert the structures that produce the hierarchy and that generate the inequities within it. *Season of Migration to the North* and *Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre* can each be described as a “literary form of critical intervention and cultural resistance” (Slemon 1987, 10). While Laferrière uses humour and parody to intervene and resist, Salih’s novel is far more serious.

The forms of resistance that these novels take proceed from an idealized foundation: a “concept-metaphor” that equates imperialism with rape (Sharpe 1993, 137). In her discussion of this figure, Jenny Sharpe notes that “there is sufficient evidence to support a reading of imperialism as rape, particularly in those representations that authorize a European claim of ownership through a feminization of the colonial body” (137). Of course real rape of real women did occur as part of imperial ventures, yet this is not the only reason why the “concept-metaphor” is highly effective. The metaphor that substitutes rape for colonialism depends on a “code of recognition” (Slemon 1987, 5). Indeed, the violence of an imperialism that penetrates and possesses territories, the violation of the colonized, their powerlessness and voicelessness, and the web of desires binding the colonizers and the colonized, can all be recognized in this metaphor.

Tayeb Salih, in an interview, reveals that this concept-metaphor is foundational to his understanding of the colonial project: “Europe raped Africa, literally speaking, in a very violent fashion” (Berkley 177). Laferrière is not so explicit, yet the fact that he represents a project of revenge conducted by raping the daughters of white colonizers would indicate that he, too, bases his work on this metaphor. Beginning with this metaphor and then reversing it, Laferrière and Salih weave larger allegories of resistance in which the Empire “rapes back.”

The enigmatic protagonist of Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*, Mustafa Sa’eed, is a British-educated Sudanese man who becomes a reputed economist and lecturer in London. There, he embarks on a “campaign to throw colonialism back on the colonizers” (Makdisi 811). Much of his battle is discursive; Sa’eed authors books with titles such as *The Economics of Colonialism, Colonialism and Monopoly*, and more notably *The Rape of Africa*. However, the word proves to be an inadequate means of waging his battle, and so Sa’eed wages a separate yet related campaign of revenge in the world. Sa’eed’s project of reversing colonialism could be described as a “rape” of England. He describes his praxis: “I’ll liberate Africa with my penis” (120). Literalizing the concept-metaphor that casts imperialism as rape, Salih’s protagonist deliberately “seduces” a series of white English women. Of these women, three commit suicide because of him, and Sa’eed stabs a fourth woman — his wife — in the heart and kills her. Sarea Makdisi writes:

Just as imperialism had violated its victims, Mustafa violates his, and his unwitting lovers become sacrifices in his violent campaign. The acts of finding lovers and engaging with them sexually become scouting operations and skirmishes in a war fought on the personal level. (811)

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4 While Salih’s novel has been adopted by post-colonial criticism, where it has been read as another “writing back” to Europe (Makdisi 820), critics are much more reluctant to call Laferrière’s novel “post-colonial.” For example, Caroline Bayard, who mentions Laferrière’s novel, argues that neither Canada nor Quebec can be said to be in a post-colonial situation, since “both harbour dispossessed colonies within their territories” (21). Sherry Simon locates *Comment faire l’amour* within a ludic post-modernist tradition rather than a post-colonial one, and writes of Laferrière’s novel that “le discours militant anti-colonialiste est mobilisé à la seule fin de devenir son contraire paradoxique” (21). In Laferrière she continues, “la pensée politique n’est pas agissante: elle est plutôt un réseau de références qui ‘signale’ de manière ironique plutôt qu’un certain âge. d’énonciation” (32). Bayard and Simon’s distinctions do show how the term post-colonial is obfuscatory. I would argue, though, that Bayard and Simon fail to trap of focusing on the temporal register when they set the post-colonial in a sequential and oppositional relationship to the colonial. Laferrière does explicitly and intertextually evoke a “discours militant anti-colonialiste,” and consequently must be evaluated at least partly within this discursive framework (Simon 21). It may be tiresome to seek out the politics of *Comment faire l’amour*, as Simon suggests ("Cherchez le politique dans le roman en vous énigmatique"), but even a parodic evasion of a political position remains a political position.

5 Slemon borrows the term from Coral Ann Howells (62).

6 I thank Stephen Arnold (U of Alberta) for this evocative expression.

7 Nadia Elia exaggeratedly explains with reference to Mustafa Sa’eed, that “the colonized, brainwashed into thinking the West is the best, and painfully aware that Western ways will not be offered him, has just one option: rape” (63). Her comment is symptomatic of the blurring of will and desire, of power and subjugation that allegorical readings permit.
Makdisi’s comment unselfconsciously reveals the “code of recognition” that permits an allegorical reading of rape in this novel; there is a constant slippage between the literal level and the symbolic level to the point that they become inseparable. Sa‘e’ed violates English women, literally, but his acts have social and political meaning. That is, individual men and women metonymically represent the larger political and social entities of colonizers and colonized. His literal acts of rape, then, are to be understood as signifiers of his campaign to reverse the power relations of colonialism. Although the novel continually constructs the female partners of Mustafa Sa‘e’ed as willing, desiring subjects, it is my opinion that we are nevertheless witnessing in this novel a powerful trope of rape. Indeed, the question of desire posed within the sexual sphere is crucial to this novel’s critique of imperialism. I will cite a significant passage to demonstrate what I mean. Throughout Sa‘e’ed’s seduction of Isabella Seymour, she appears to be as desiring as he, but at the moment of their sexual climax, she suddenly cries out “No, No” (43). Sa‘e’ed’s response offers important insight into the dynamics of colonial history: “The critical moment when it was in your power to refrain from taking the first step has been lost. I caught you unawares; at that time, it was in your power to say ‘No.’ As for now, the flood of events has swept you along ... and you are no longer capable of doing anything. Were every person to know when to refrain from taking the first step many things would have been changed” (43). This passage invites a reading that moves from the literal to the symbolic; just as Isabella was desiring of a relationship with Sa‘e’ed, so too Africa might have welcomed the first critical stages of European colonialism. However, it is clear that even though Africa might have not adequately objected to European imperial ventures, Africa was colonized and was consequently violated; it should be equally clear that even though this character might have initially consented to relations, she can still be raped and violated. Moreover, Sa‘e’ed is quite explicit that his sexual relations with English women are all motivated by a desire for domination, mastery, and possession. The personal is steeped with political meaning, sexual relations become a way of waging war, and the woman’s body is a battle field: a territory to be scouted, fought over, and possessed, a fertile semiotic field upon which layers of meaning can be projected.

Now, to consider the specific figurations and social meanings of rape and resistance in this novel, I will turn to examine Mustafa Sa‘e’ed himself. Within the web of colonial power relations determined by class, gender, and race, Sa‘e’ed creates a space where these relations may be reversed. This space is physical as well as discursive, and is constructed around the many contradictory stereotypes that Europe fabricates about its Others. In Season of Migration, Mustafa Sa‘e’ed appropriates stereotypes of the African and the Arab world to use as a shield and a weapon. Sa‘e’ed’s carefully decorated bedroom, the site of all his seductions, for example, is reminiscent of a Persian seragli. It is lit with coloured lights, surrounded by large mirrors "so that when I slept with a woman, it was as if I slept with a whole harem simultaneously" (31), scented with burning sandalwood and incense, and is stocked with pungent Eastern perfumes, lotions, unguenants, powders, and pills. While his exotic bedroom parodies something from the pages of the Thousand and One Nights, Sa‘e’ed also draws from images and stereotypes of Africa. His elaborate seductions of English women begin with fabricated "stories about deserts of golden sands and jungles where non-existent animals called out to one another" until he feels he is transformed in the eyes of his English lovers "into a naked, primitive creature, a spear in one hand and arrows in the other, hunting elephants and lions in the jungles" (38).

What is the power of this "den of lethal lies ... deliberately built up, lie upon lie" (146)? Put simply, this space is one where power intersects with desire. Sa‘e’ed explains how he becomes a symbol to one of his lovers, Ann Hammond: "When she saw me, she saw a dark twilight like a false dawn. Unlike me, she yearned for tropical climes, cruel suns, purple horizons. In her eyes, I was a symbol of all her hankerings" (30). Hammond's "hankerings" for tropical climes and exotic landscapes can be seen as a fundamental imperial desires for the possession of foreign territories displaced onto the sexual realm. The desires that Sa‘e’ed arouses in English women through his primitivist tales of naked hunters also must be understood as imperial desires for power, in particular for technological and cultural mastery over a people. Finally, while more distinctly erotic, Sa‘e’ed uses the props of his staged bedroom to arouse in his victims the desires of the Orientalist to possess the wealth and riches, and the sheer excesses of a culture that is distinctly Other. Within a colonial situation, Salih reveals, sexuality is wholly entangled with power, possession, and mastery.

Sa‘e’ed cultivates these hankerings in the women he seduces because he understands that while these desires reflect on and result from the women’s position of mastery, they also place the desiring subjects in a position of vulnerability and weakness. He explains that the emotions he arouses in the English women with his fanciful tales of life in the jungle "will be transformed into a desire upon whose taut strings I shall play as I wish" (38). Thus, by evoking a discourse of colonial desires, Sa‘e’ed succeeds in creating a counter-discourse and a praxis that will manipulate these desires, turning them against the colonizers, thereby reversing positions of power and powerlessness. Moreover, he clearly has no regrets: until the meek inherit the earth, until the armies are disbanded, the lamb grazes in peace beside the wolf and the child plays water-polo in the river with the crocodile, until that time of happiness and love comes along, I for one shall continue to express myself in this twisted manner. (41)

It is his sexual expression that is "twisted," and the image that he uses to describe his sexual conquests, borrowed from the discourse of exploration, reveals that his sole interest is in conquering, claiming, and possessing. Sa‘e’ed continues,
And when, puffing, I reach the mountain peak and implant the banner, collect my breath and rest — that, my lady, is an ecstasy greater to me than love, than happiness" (41). Sa’eed’s sexual acts and Salih’s representation of them are intended not simply to reverse power relations between individuals that metonymically come to represent the social entities of colonizers and colonized, but also to reverse the patterns of history. This novel continuously encourages the act of rape to be read and evaluated within the context of a long, violent colonial history. Allocating responsibility for his own acts of violence and reverse-colonization of women’s bodies, Sa’eed evokes the metaphor of violence as disease, and suggests that his victims were already infected with violence before he ever met them: “The infection had stricken these women a thousand years ago, but I had stirred up the latent depths of the disease until it had got out of control and killed” (34). He explains the colonial origins of the “infection” in a later passage:

The ships at first sailed down the Nile carrying guns not bread, and the railways were originally set up to transport troops; the schools were started so as to teach us how to say “yes” in their language. They imported to us the germ of the greatest European violence, as seen on the Somme and at Verdun, the like of which the world has never previously known, the germ of a deadly disease that struck them more than a thousand years ago. Yes, my dears, I came as an invader into your very homes: a drop of the poison which you have injected into the veins of history. (95)

The responsibility for the violence against British women in this narrative is thus located with their own forefathers, the early colonizers. Sa’eed suggests that his sexual exploits are merely playing out what the forces of history — the inexorable “flood of events” leading to the present — have already determined (43).

The novel thus encourages an understanding of resistance as a reversal of fortune. Sa’eed’s project of revenge can be described as a manipulation of imperial desires for domination, mastery, and possession that reverses the positions of dominator and dominated, master and mastered, owner and slave with the intention of redirecting historically-determined patterns of violence. But it is an ineffective project. Sa’eed only creates victims out of women who are already subordinate within patriarchal culture. Far from reversing history, Sa’eed simply extends the dismal pattern of domination to women.

I have explained how Sa’eed creates a space of resistance that draws from colonial stereotypes to form the foundations for its counter-discourse. The real locus of resistance in this novel, however, is in fact the English woman’s body. Sa’eed’s elaborately staged “den of lies” gives him access to this body where both material and symbolic battles are waged. The novel asks us to overlook the literal by reading violation metaphorically, and by reading women’s bodies metonymically. By participating in this reading, however, we only become complicit in the domination it describes.

The etymological roots of the word allegory, as Semon has pointed out, suggest that it is a figure of resistance appropriate for post-colonial counter-discourse. From the Greek _allos agora_, or “other speaking,” we see how post-colonial allegory can give a voice to those historically dispossessed of one. The root _allegoria_, meaning “speaking otherwise than one seems to speak,” also would seem to indicate a subversive discourse that may appear to be innocent but is in actuality radical and contestatory. Semon cites Gaye Clifford’s thesis that allegory is “a belief in the possibility of transformation” (Semon 1988, 164; Clifford 29). He suggests, moreover, that the transformations enacted by post-colonial allegory are of a different order than those enacted by imperial allegory. Where imperial and neo-colonial allegories speak for the other and are based on imperial codes of recognition, post-colonial allegory, Semon argues, allows the other to speak, and is based on resistance to totalitarian systems (163).

Yet, to read post-colonial allegories of rape as resistance against racial or cultural systems, one must recognize a hierarchy in which women are always already subordinate. The “code of recognition” that underlies such post-colonial allegory is not merely racial or cultural, but rather, is gendered and sexual. Of course, the underprivileged term in the binary oppositions that structure the code is female and always female. Where Semon speaks about the “revisionary” qualities of post-colonial allegory, I would argue that post-colonial allegory is repetitive (164). We are simply seeing the same wearisome power dynamics that post-colonial literature is purportedly subverting and resisting, shifted onto an easy target, playing into what Rey Chow describes as “the oppression of women in its ‘endless variety and monotonous similarity’” (59).

According to Paul Smith "the methodology of postmodern [and, I argue, post-colonial] allegory … consists ultimately in a purblind and vain gesture of will, inscribing itself in a dialectic with previous modes but still operating on the same level of ideological control” (115). Is this the trade-off? Do we achieve the counter-discourse and cultural resistance of post-colonialism in matters of race, and in matters of history, only at the expense of preserving a patriarchal ideological control?

How is post-colonial allegory to be understood in its mobilization of the rape trope? Semon says that the “active and self-conscious participation” of the reader is “enormously important in allegory” (1988, 160). Cliffor, however, downplays the reader’s agency and self-consciousness. As Cliffor understands it, allegory is a persuasive genre and thus requires a reader who can be swayed: “Allegory, like myth, presupposes an audience who will respond to it in specific ways” (36).

Smith goes a step further in his analysis of the role of the reader of allegory when he raises the question of interpellation:

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8 Chow cites Andrew Ross (91, 102), who borrows the phrase "endless variety and monotonous similarity" from Gayle Rubin (160).
The allegorist’s work is placed, then, in order to interpellate the reader, who knows that some power is at work but with a veil before it, and that the discovery of its tenets demands his compliance. This onerous role given to the reader ... is crucial because it is necessary to the allegorist’s power that it be furnished with an audience willing to realize the devastation of the old regime — without necessarily understanding the nature of the new replacement. (115)

The nature of the "new replacement" of the post-colonial allegory I have outlined above is unabashedly patriarchal. Furthermore, the ideology that underlies this replacement interpellates the female subject into the paradoxical position of victim and saviour. Through her willingness to allow her body to become the discursive site upon which a battle is waged that will rectify the evils of colonialism, the white woman absorbs imperial guilt and absorbs the vengeance of the colonized. To read allegorically for resistance, one must gloss over political nuances and subtle power relations.

With the subject of the coercive nature of allegory in mind, I would like to turn now to Dany Laferrière’s Comment faire l’amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer. Like Salih’s black protagonist Mustafa Sa’eed, Laferrière’s black narrator protagonist, referred to simply as “Vieux,” also wages a campaign of revenge against the dominators, figured in this novel as white, American men, by seducing and exploiting a series of white women — by raping back. Vieux cruises white, anglophone, bourgeoisie women, and degrades them: “C’est ça, le drame, dans les relations sexuelles de Nègre et de la Blanche: tant que la blanche n’a pas encore fait un acte quelconque jugé dégradant, on ne peut jurer de rien” (43). His cruising is motivated by hatred, for, as he explains, "LA HAINES DANS L’ACTE SEXUEL EST PLUS EFFICACE QUE L’AMOUR" (19). His sexual exploits are not to be taken lightly; he is participating in "la dernière guerre livrée en Amérique" (19).

Vieux explains how his cruising of Anglo women fits into colonial history when he goes with “Miz Literature” to the house of her parents with the intention of having sexual relations with her: "Cette maison respiere le calme, la tranquillité, l’ordre. L’Ordre de ceux qui ont pillé l’Afrique. L’Angleterre, maîtresse des mers,... Tout est, ici, à sa place. SAUF MOI. Faut dire que je suis là, uniquement, pour baisser la fille" (97). Yet, within the context of his project of revenge, Vieux’s presence is appropriate: "JE SUIS, EN QUELQUE SORTE, À MA PLACE, MOI AUSSI. Je suis ici pour baisser la fille de ces diplomates pleins de morgue qui nous giflaient à coups de stick. Au fond, je n’étais pas là quand ça se passait," Vieux acknowledges, "mais que voulez-vous, à défaut de nous être bienveillante, L’HISTOIRE NOUS SERT D’APRODISIAQUE" (97). Salih outlined a model of colonial history seething with the disease of violence, in which the act of rape is at once the logical outcome of this history of violence, and the solution to it. Laferrière sees imperial history as an aphrodisiac — the hatred and unequal power relations that exist between white and black men motivate rape, but more importantly, make it pleasurable.

Vieux’s real campaign of revenge against the colonizers is fought not in the world, but with the word. Throughout Comment faire l’amour, we follow Vieux as he writes a novel that he dreams will extricate him from his situation of abject poverty, and bring him fame, fortune, attention, and respect. His novel, entitled Paradis du Drageur Nègre, however, merely takes up his sexual praxis in a textual form.

At one point, in a conversation between Vieux and his roommate Boubas, we find a fascinating word play that reveals how textual violence is inseparable from his sexual violence. Sitting at his typewriter, unable to type a word, Vieux daydreams about the centuries of repressed black desires for the white woman ("la Blanche") that are expressed in the blues music of Bessie Smith: "Deux cents ans de désirs enfantés, encaissés, empilés et descendant les bords du Mississippi dans la cale des river-boats. Désirs noirs obsédés par le corps blanc pubère. Désirs tenus en laisse comme un chien enragé. Désirs crétins. Désirs de la Blanche" (99). As if reading his thoughts, Boubas interrupts Vieux and asks what is happening to him, and whether he is afraid. "Peur de quoi?", Vieux responds. "T’as peur de la mauvaise page blanche?", specifies Boubas. The step from the real subject of Vieux’s thoughts — "La Blanche" — to "la page Blanche" is a very short one, consisting of but one small signifier. Vieux responds, "C’est ça." Boubas’s advice to Vieux is to be aggressive: "Tors-la, Vieux," Boubas suggests, "prends-la, fais-la gémir, humanise cette salope de page blanche" (100). When we read over the sig-nifier "page," Boubas’s advocacy of textual aggression becomes an encourage-ment toward sexual aggression. The word play that results from the juxtaposition of "la Blanche" and "la page blanche" in these two consecutive passages indicates that for Laferrière, word is world and the textual is sexual. The image of written text — black on white — is thus linked to the image of the explosive relations between the black man and white woman — "pire qu’une bombe" (124). The white woman, through this trope, becomes a blank page upon which the narrative of history can be rewritten.

When Vieux uses rape to renegotiate the power relations between himself and the dominant race and class of his culture, his mode of resistance, like Mustafa Sa’eed’s, depends upon the subordination of women. When he uses representations of rape in order to create a textual allegory of resistance in his own novel, then, Vieux merely perpetuates patriarchal systems of domination and hierarchies. He is able to extricate himself from his poverty and abject condition by victimizing another, in this case the white bourgeoisie, "la Blanche." When he suggests that structures of domination between the sexes and races are embodied in writing itself, we wonder why he bothers to evade the idea of resistance at all.

Paul Smith writes that “authorial power here [in allegory] almost cynically taunts the reader, who does not always know what it is he must understand, but
nevertheless feels obliged to place a political/allegorical reading upon the author’s supposed sweeping away of previous meanings” (115). In Laferrière’s post-modern and playful text, the reader is both taunted and obliged to read the text in specific ways. Comment faire l’amour creates a contract with its readers and demands a reading strategy that forgets or ignores the rape trope, even though it is on nearly every page of the book.

At the end of the novel, Laferrière’s narrator/protagonist fantasizes that he is being interviewed by Denise Bombardier on Radio-Canada about his just published novel Paradis du dragueur Nègre. Miz Bombardier cuts to the chase immediately: “J’ai lu votre livre, j’ai bien ri” she says, “mais vous n’aimez pas les femmes, m’a-t-il semblé?” Vieux’s response is clever, since it evokes the age-old defense that literature is not the same as life, that representations are not as the same as: “Je vous fais remarquer,” he retorts, “qu’il n’y a, pratiquement, pas de femmes dans ce roman. Mais des types” (111). And indeed, this observation is true. The female characters in Comment faire l’amour are referred to by sometimes humorous, sometimes offensive nicknames which reduce them to a single quality. “Miz Literature” likes to read, “Miz Suicide” is contemplating suicide, “Miz Piggy” is unattractive, and so on. They are one-dimensional and shallow, and practically speaking, are not women. This comment by the author-figure in the novel evades the accusation of misogyny by pointing out the obvious (literary characters are not women), and consequently redirects the reader away from this line of inquiry altogether.

Paul Smith writes that “we can say that in allegory a power is being named, symbolically. To this power the reader is bound to subscribe in order to maintain his recognizable position in a fixed system of values” (119). The power named in this post-colonial allegory of resistance, which goes forward on the figuration of rape, is a patriarchal power, and the reader is coerced into subscribing to it.

Seemingly, in Laferrière’s case, this is a successful strategy, because of the half-dozen or so scholarly articles published on Comment faire l’amour since 1985, not one has addressed the implications of his parodic figurations of rape in this novel. Even female critics of Laferrière’s novel evade the issue of the violence expressed through these sexual relations. Anne Vassal, for example, manages to cast the female characters in Comment faire l’amour not as victims but as villains. For this québécois critic, the anglophone, bourgeois, often McGill-educated female “types” in the novel represent oppressive centres of power, and are rightfully degraded and brought down. Vassal links them with a “culture de mort,” and with “l’idéologie dominante mise en figure par l’Université McGill et par conséquent par le bastion moralisateur Anglo-Saxon montréalais” (189). What Vassal fails to recognize, of course, is that dominant Anglo-Saxon ideology is not simply racist but is also patriarchal; it is patently absurd to suggest that white female students hold enough power within the dominant ideology or within Montréal’s bastion of Anglo-Saxon morals that they should become targets of a campaign of revenge. Vassal’s reading of Laferrière’s novel, like Laferrière’s novel itself and Salih’s novel, agrees to sacrifice the white, Anglo woman in order to achieve a discourse of resistance.

Beyond the novels themselves lies Siemon’s initial hermeneutical imperative that “the challenge for criticism is to learn to read this new, ‘revised’ mode of representation” (1988, 166). In my reading of the representation of rape in post-colonial allegories of resistance, I have attempted to ask not only what it means, but who benefits from its meanings — in both cases, a masculinist, patriarchal order. In an article titled “The Unspeakable Limits of Rape,” Sharpe notes Elizabeth Cowie’s observation that women are produced in culture not only as exchange objects but also as signs, the transaction of which produces value for a particular signifying system (36). The cultural resistance that can be read into the figure of rape in these allegories can be understood precisely as a transgression. The sign of the white woman’s body becomes the site where the colonized and dominated can purchase power by victimizing an Other. The sign of woman is also the place where the colonizers can assuage their guilt, and yet feel complicit because their power is not really threatened but displaced onto the bodies of white women.

De Lauretis observes that violence is not "a breakdown in social order" but rather "the sign of a power struggle for the maintenance of a certain kind of social order" (14). The discursive violence figured in the trope of rape as it is used in these post-colonial allegories of resistance can be grasped in this way, that is, as a struggle not for the destruction of hierarchical systems but for the maintenance of them. If authors like Laferrière and Salih attempt to "renegotiate the series of possible relationships with colonial powers," they do so by preserving hierarchical relationships between the genders (Said 7). If their writings are contestatory, and constitute a discursive site of cultural resistance, they are also highly conservative. By not affording enough attention to the intricacies of figurations of rape in post-colonial allegory, a reading strategy of post-colonial allegory which seeks to find resistance predetermines a sacrificial subject position for women: they must consent to the notion that the site of struggle will be their body. The question that feminism must raise then for post-colonialism, is whose counter-discourse, and whose resistance? and finally, whose hermeneutic informs the process of learning how to read post-colonial allegory? A focus on the axis of time and the question of history produces a radically different reading than a focus on gender and its ramifications within power. I do agree with Siemon on the most crucial point: we must learn to read post-colonial writing, but we must learn to do so critically and cautiously, because so much is at stake.

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9 De Lauretis is citing Wini Breines and Linda Gordon.
Works Cited


