

Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary

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Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary argues that colonial or postcolonial discourses often use rape as a prevalent symbol or trope, but scholars rarely theorize such representations. Worse, when researchers do examine the symbolic conception of sexual violence in the Francophone imaginary, their stance too often decenters the trauma and suffering that violated women's experience. In light of these issues, Régine Michelle Jean-Charles rethinks the uncomfortable dynamics of rape and violence in the francophone context. She concentrates on the Black Atlantic in its diversity: Haiti and Guadeloupe in the French Antilles and Rwanda and Congo in Africa. Jean-Charles's examination of sexual assaults on black women's bodies foregrounds the presence of "*le viol dans la violence*": rape is within violence (55). This scholar stresses the explicit relationship between the two terms as she explains that the French word *viol* is embedded in the French word *violence*. Thus, rape is an integral part of violence. Following in Teresa de Lauretis's footsteps, Jean-Charles mines the connections between violence and gender.

Conflict Bodies focuses on the gendered nature of violence and questions the rhetoric that feeds the representation of conflict zones in Francophone studies. These conflicted areas are not simply territories torn by war or civil unrest but also intimate spaces, the most intimate of which is the body. Given that, the proliferation of women's abused bodies indicates the extent to which human rights and freedom are respected. Hence, for Jean-Charles, Francophone studies need to go beyond discussions of the mere symbolism of sexual violence. Doing so will allow researchers to bypass a culture of silence and rape culture. Scholars will be able to engage in theoretical debates that underscore the agency of victims and survivors. Jean-Charles considers a broad and diverse corpus, including novels, poems, films, documentaries and photographs. She uses black feminist theory and feminist cultural criticism on rape from the Anglophone worlds, mainly from scholars working in the US and Britain. Her interdisciplinary method further enriches postcolonial studies and (Black) Atlantic Studies.

In her introduction, Jean-Charles maps out the four tenets of her theoretical position: "(1) foregrounding of the physical and psychological dimensions of sexual violence, (2) positioning of the raped body, (3)

problematizing violence in relation to the point of origin of primal scene, (4) recognizing the ways the discursive presence of violence brings about the tension between reality and representations” (13).

In her first chapter, Jean-Charles deploys a transnational and black feminist framework to restore the psychological and physical implications of black bodies in pain to the center of postcolonial theory. For that purpose, she analyzes Frantz Fanon and Édouard Glissant’s conceptual frameworks of violence and trauma and contrasts such concepts to Saidiya Hartman’s and Teresa de Lauretis’s gendered and feminist take on the same topics. This approach shows that the focus on the symbolic uses of sexual violence in colonial and postcolonial narratives precludes the efficient theorization of rape in Francophone studies.

The second chapter first unveils the nationalist undertones of political rape in Haiti while examining a brutal myth of origin based on attacks on a woman’s body. Then, this section examines Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Amour, colère, folie* (1968) to destabilize the culture of silence concerning rape in this text set from 1939 and a portion of the Duvalier dictatorship (1957-1986). This chapter then contrasts this story with novels by Kettly Mars, Jaira Placide, and Edwidge Danticat, and human rights reports concerning the soaring number of rapes in camps after the 2010 earthquake. This juxtaposition establishes how political rape does not always originate from political events but rather signals the state of political and national life in which sexual violence thrives.

The third chapter examines symbolic uses of the black woman’s body to represent the feminized Caribbean to denounce the dehumanization such use entails. Jean-Charles chose Guadeloupe to reconceptualize one of the most prevalent images in Caribbean and African literature: rape as territorial conquest. Gisèle Pineau’s *L’espérance Macadam* offers a subversive metaphor of the cyclone as a rapist that rewrites the master narrative of the Caribbean as a tantalizing woman. Jean-Charles juxtaposes Pineau’s novel with data enumerating actual rapes in Guadeloupe. Her method facilitates a dialogue about symbolic and actual sexual violence, presenting a fruitful assessment of cultural production concerning rape and putting the female subject and subjectivity back at the center.

The fourth chapter scrutinizes the multifaceted meanings of sexual violence in the Rwandan Genocide through the study of Yolande Mukagana’s photographs *Les blessures du silence: témoignages du génocide au Rwanda* (2001), Véronique Tadjo’s book *L’ombre d’Imana: Voyages jusqu’au bout du Rwanda* (2000), Boubacar Boris Diop’s novel *Murambi: Le livre des ossements* (2000), and Raoul Peck’s *Sometimes in April* (2004). Depicting trauma and rape in conflicted cultural productions in order to commemorate or educate about the past may perpetuate the (re)victimization of the victims and survivors of genocide and strip Rwandans of their dignity. Hence, victims’ agency as survivors should be the focal point as resourceful individuals struggling to keep a sense of self through telling their story.

The fifth chapter challenges the ways that rape is instrumentalized as a destructive war weapon and exposes the dangers of misusing empathy and sympathy. The Rwandan genocide's influence illuminates the ongoing conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) through the discussions of two plays, Lynn Notage's *Ruined* (2008) and Koffi Kwahulé's *Les recluses* (2010), and Lisa Jackson's documentary film *The Greatest Silence*. Using a global framework, Jean-Charles reveals how the quest for closure and healing and the promotion of human rights may turn Congolese women from "subjects into objects of advocacy" (260).

Jean-Charles's book concludes with a heart-wrenching epilogue that further questions the relationship between gender and violence in a global world: the rape of Haitian Johnny Jean in September 2011 by members of the Uruguayan United Nations forces stationed there who filmed the sexual assault and disseminated it. The horrific attack attests that sexual violence is a rampant global issue in conflict zones.

Conflict Bodies is a thought-provoking addition to Francophone studies that goes beyond representations of abused bodies as national allegories to rethink ideas of self and personhood. However, some chapters trace better than others the conflicting intersections between local, national, and global politics in conflict zones. Bodies under sexual attack say much about political instabilities in the world. If the personal is political, the personal and the political are now also global. Before the recent horrors of Boko Haram and other religious extremists, *Bodies in Conflict* urges scholars to theorize the impact of rape in conflict zones and various cultural productions.

Works Cited

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