

‘Cactus’ by Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo: Grasping Prickly Subjects and their Teaching in Francophone (Post-)Colonial (Eco)Criticism

Mary Orr, University of St Andrews mmo@st-andrews.ac.uk

Among my many satisfactions as a research-led *learner* is to take my students at all degree levels on a journey that trains their fresh pairs of eyes on seemingly impenetrable pre-1945 texts to discover ‘topical’ issues they care passionately about. This article therefore derives from my grasping of two singular opportunities as an academic teacher, the first already known. I am the new convenor of ‘French Literature from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century’, a second year semester two research-led module. Its topics, genres and critical approaches prepare students both for their year-abroad encounters with Francophone cultures and for honours modules offered in the post-Revolutionary period. To enhance student engagement with its primary texts, the majority also new this session, I introduced an interconnecting module theme. Its textual ‘pluralité des voix’ then also reflects the team-taught delivery in the target language by colleague specialists. In early March I was especially looking forward to my new seminar preparation for topics set by the specialist lecturer on ‘La Femme et la Nature’ in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*:

Analysez « Femme noire » de Léopold Sédar Senghor et « Cactus » de Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo. « Les techniques ont contaminé le paysan blanc, mais le noir reste le grand mâle de la terre, le sperme du monde » (Sartre, p. xxxii). Est-ce que les poètes de cette *Anthologie* expriment une vision essentiellement masculine de la femme ?

« De Haïti à Cayenne, une seule idée: manifester l’âme noire. La poésie nègre est évangélique, elle annonce la bonne nouvelle: la négritude est retrouvée » (Sartre, p. xv). Comment cette « négritude » s’exprime-t-elle sur le plan poétique ? Qu’est-ce qui distingue cette poésie de la poésie « blanche » ?¹

While the many thorny gender issues of the *Anthologie* were familiar ground – Senghor anthologizes only male poets, women in their poetry are often objectified – I did not know the work of Rabearivelo (1901-1937). My encounter with ‘Cactus’² therefore matched my students’ first engagement with unfamiliar, even impenetrable, material in content and form. The first part of this article maps how my own fresh reading enlarged its discussion of ‘négritude’ to include ecocriticism and climate change.³ What I could not know, however, was that the untold further climate change of Covid-19 would make this interactive trialing of my ‘Cactus’ reading experiment with my two seminar groups in the classroom the last such experience this session.

The second part of the article thus grasps the unheralded further opportunity. My ‘Cactus’ reading would reveal invaluable *pedagogical* resources that I could not otherwise have (fore)seen for the uncharted territories I suddenly confronted, namely required development and delivery in less than two weeks of online-only teaching and *learning* for this and my other modules.

My first preparatory reading of ‘Cactus’ could not better exemplify *anagnorisis*. As revelation of identities and reversals of situations, the poem encapsulates the *Anthologie* and difficult modern French poetry in the plurality of its ‘uncomfortable’ French-Francophone voices. Highly approachable yet spiky in its content, language and ‘concrete’ poetic form, ‘Cactus’ conveys its immediate impressions and reflective dimensions through its particular attention to key details and their observation. I decided to teach it as direct, and directive, response to these, to grasp the poem’s insistent if unvoiced forms of (self-)questioning, starting with its singular title, ‘Cactus’. The metonymic ‘crown’ centred in larger font atop its concrete poetry form, it operates as primary indicator of its seemingly self-evident, yet thorny, subject(s). *Cacti* are hardly Romantic or, indeed, exotic *flora*. Unlike many plant names in different languages or the allegorical languages of flowers, the Latin nomenclature presents no barriers to understanding, as confirmed by student responses to my ‘basic’ Socratic opening question of the class, ‘qu’est-ce qu’un cactus?’ Upon describing one they had in their room, I knew students were ready to address the key question I had first asked myself. Which might be *le cactus* in particular and as potentially iconic (i.e. ‘indigène’, or ‘noir’/‘nègre’ in Sartre’s terms for the seminar), connoting Madagascar as (singular) ‘Cactus’? I did not reveal the answer because indicative of the prickly (post)colonial, and for me also (eco)critical, *points* of my class and its journey of their revelation. Rather, I enlisted the process of discovering both signifier and signified through Rabearivelo’s distinctive, scientific-poetic, observation of detail. My second question was this. What stood out *in particular* about its physical description in the first stanza as intrinsic to its recognizable identity?

Cactus

Cette multitude de mains fondues
qui tendent encore des fleurs à l’azur,
cette multitude des mains sans doigts
que le vent n’arrive pas à agiter,
on dit qu’une source cachée

sourd dans leurs paumes intactes ;
on dit que cette source intérieure
désaltère des milliers de bœufs
et de nombreuses tribus, des tribus errantes
aux confins du Sud.

Students in both my seminar groups immediately picked out the striking images of the ‘mains fondues’ and ‘mains sans doigts’ despite their ‘paumes intactes’.⁴ Since poems create word pictures that particularize, individualize and universalize human experience through their multi-sensory amalgamation of feeling, thought and form into language and meaning, the next step was to back-translate these otherwise ‘white’, even Dali-like, ‘hands’ into their entirely natural and ubiquitous Malagasy *cactus*. The required signifier, unlocked on my first reading of the poem thanks to my extensive nineteenth-century French natural science research as the ‘Figuier de Barbarie’ or ‘Figuier de raquette’,⁵ supplied my next (bi-lingual) ‘vocabulary-building’ *research* question. I asked my students to find images and *descriptions* for both names *via* their smart phone or laptop. Their moment of group *anagnorisis* was audible, the gasp when ‘Cactus’ appeared on their screens because instantly recognizable from what they had already picked out from its ‘hands’. I could now develop student appreciation of resonant literary-scientific knowledge-making, to identify the larger significance of this species of *cactus* as directly relevant to the poem’s ‘négritude’. Indeed, the bridging two-line second stanza re-articulates and ramifies the detail in the opening stanza of ‘mains sans doigts’, to define the poem’s ‘Ici’ commencing the third of its five-stanza absent-present ‘doigts’, the last as potentially its key ‘indice’ also quoted below:

Mains sans doigts jaillies d’une source,
mains fondues couronnant l’azur.

Ici,
[...]

Je sais un enfant,
prince encore au royaume de Dieu,
qui voudrait ajouter :
« Et le Sort, ayant eu pitié de ces lépreuses,
leur a dit de planter des fleurs
et de garder des sources
loin des hommes cruels. »

Of the sparse literary criticism on the poem I had read, none had asked or addressed my (post-)colonial and eco-critical questions of ‘Cactus’.⁶ To find answers I used botanical name searches in Latin, French and English for *Opuntia ficus-indica*⁷ to focus my researches instead on Malagasy botany in French history of geography and scientific travel since this *cactus* is a native of central (Spanish-colonial) America, although widely known in Mediterranean Sicily, Malta and N. Africa for its fruit. Using the most notable of my research results, Jeffrey C. Kaufmann’s ‘Prickly Pear Cactus and Pastoralism in Southwest Madagascar’,⁸ I had pre-prepared a power point for the class with further images of ‘Cactus’ in Madagascar, to illustrate its centrality to the rural landscape and (gendered) economy. As evoked by Rabearivelo in the last four lines of stanza one with the intensity of poetic realism to encapsulate the interdependent ‘ecospheres’ of daily Malagasy life, the *Figuier de raquette* is used as a protective fencing material, a vital source of water and cattle fodder to sustain (semi-)nomadic herding communities, and for wider human consumption (its *raquettes* and fruits). These did not however reveal the missing French (post)-colonial, but also *eco-critical*, information I had surmised was at stake on my first reading of ‘Cactus’ to address the poem’s ‘Ici’, and why Rabearivelo describes this *cactus* as ‘ces lépreuses’ in stanza five above (echoing ‘ces lépreuses parées de fleurs’ ending stanza three). Its place in the history of French bioprospecting and acclimatization⁹ was again amply documented by Kaufmann in a section subtitled ‘Tranfers:

Prickly pear arrived on Madagascar as defensive hedging. In 1769 Frenchman Count Dolisie de Maudave (or Modave), introduced *figuier de raquette* to Fort Dauphin, an outpost of the French East India Company on the SE coast of Madagascar, to protect the seaward side from pirates and storms (Decary 1947: 456). He imported cactus from either the Île de France (now Mauritius) or the Île Bourbon (now Réunion) (Petit 1929: 164 n. 1), where entrepreneurs had introduced this plant in the hopes of starting a natural-dye business. [...]

The species that Maudave imported to the island was *O. Monacantha* [...]. The cactus naturalized ostensibly in the sandy soils, reproducing from its dispersed seeds. It had no cochineal parasites to contend with until they were introduced by the French in 1923 to combat the ‘impenetrable’ prickly pear fortifications in southern Madagascar (Kaufmann 2001:108). By 1928, the virulent cochineal *Dactylopius tomentosus* had eradicated the Malagasy cactus which covered an area the size of Ohio (Frappa 1932). In the 1930s, in an effort to combat famine and forest destruction, French colonialists transferred diverse vegetable species to nurseries in the south. Malagasy were given bean plants and cuttings from new cacti transfers, thereby introducing new *raketa* into the landscape (Decary 1932:196-97). The spread of *raketa gasy*—the original species—in southern Madagascar was due not only to the plant’s adaptive qualities, seen in anthropocentric and ethnocentric (French colonial) terms as ‘aggressive’ or ‘invasive.’ [...]

Although raketa gasy served primarily as an economic plant for Malagasy pastoralists, it had a secondary political function. Once these plants had been sown and shaped into ramparts around pastoralist places, they stood in other people's way [...]. *They were especially effective against people who were unaccustomed to them, and in the colonial context, the prickly pear helped pastoralists make the region unattractive to potential French settlers* (Kaufmann 1999:148, 2001:88).¹⁰

This complex, double, history of transfer and naturalized accommodation to Malagasy culture is clearly reflected in stanza four of 'Cactus' to explain 'ces lépreuses' and prepare the all-important final poetic moral of its story of anti-colonial resilience 'loin des hommes cruels':

Pénètre la grotte, d'où elles sont venues
Si tu veux connaître *l'origine du mal qui les décime*
— *origine plus nébuleuse que le soir*
et plus lointaine que l'aurore —,
mais tu me sauras pas plus que moi :
le sang de la terre, la sueur de la pierre
et le sperme du vent
qui coule ensemble dans ces paumes
en ont dissous les doigts
et mis des fleurs d'or à la place.¹¹

The prickly subject that is 'Cactus' is therefore central to Rabearivelo's strategic choice of a *non-native* Malagasy plant to exemplify his Madagascar, rather than its endemic, iconic, 'Traveler's tree' (*Ravenala madagascariensis* Sonn) for example.¹² In thus grasping the importance of the poem's innate question, 'Pourquoi (ce) Cactus?', my students had by the end of the class recognized through my guided power point with further online searches the wider significance of 'Cactus' as multi-voiced, *eco-critical*, 'négritude', capable of withstanding (multiple) French colonialism through the adaptively protective 'hedge' of Rabearivelo's poetic transfers. It was then that I asked students to look again at the poem on the page. They had not noticed, but then recognized, its visibly 'spiky' form despite its printing on facing pages.

Time ran out, however, to explore how the problematic positioning of 'Cactus' between Malagasy and French cultures is reflected in its original collection, *Presque-Songes* (in bilingual French and Malagasy), or how the final stanza refracts Rabearivelo's life as Malagasy poet (and factors into his suicide).¹³ Less than a week later I had not expected to find myself also existentially 'position-less' both in Covid-19 lockdown and in confronting immediate online delivery of my teaching. All my familiar 'hands-on' classroom pedagogies had been melted

overnight *and* in the new ‘one-size-fits-all’ online tools rapidly implanted by my Institution, I found none able to capture my interactive, plural, Socratic, teaching ‘voices’. Thankfully, the *Anthologie* was in my laptop bag when my University shut. On rereading ‘Cactus’ I experienced an unexpected further *anagnorisis*. If the poem was indeed about resilience – to a highly infectious viral disease, to being colonized – it was also about a plant capable of acclimatizing successfully in an entirely new ‘biosphere’ as if always already doubly its ‘own’. The lessons of ‘Cactus’ through its telling by showing were in other words *poetic forms of pedagogy*. It was precisely these that I had also inadvertently tested successfully on myself, the teacher, in my experimental classes on the poem with my students. My learning had been in preparing how best *to articulate* suitable discovery methods allowing my students to address strategic questions step-by-step via discussion, use of smartphones and a pre-prepared power point with embedded online research links. The same gasp of realization I witnessed in my students became my own recognition of the further extraordinary ‘applied teaching’ message of ‘Cactus’. Far from trying to turn myself overnight into some projection of the ‘good’ online-teacher as ‘tech guru’ that I am not, I needed only to grasp how entirely *online-translatable* (already) were my longstanding teaching methods. Space does not permit me to unpack the applied lessons from my ‘Cactus’ class that I could then rapidly embed into remaining online-only seminars, since the poem also pre-warns that one should ‘garder des sources/loin des hommes cruels’. Because my students encountered little change in *ethos* in my online-only delivery, however, they continued to engage proactively with the ‘impenetrable’ texts of the module through the bespoke, discovery-led work tasks that I prepared for them, variously requiring individual and group preparation to reveal larger (post-)colonial questioning of issues and genres. End-of-module essays clearly demonstrated the new ‘fleurs d’or’ (stanza four) of students’ more confident independent (online and classroom) learning.

As a research-led teacher entirely new to online-only delivery without any pedagogical guidance in how to make it ‘me’, the finding in ‘Cactus’ of a profoundly ‘literary’ form of pedagogy made all the difference to my onward *online-learning*. But throughout the semester’s online-only teaching weeks ‘Cactus’ also stimulated my ‘paper’ research memory (locked down in box files in my office) informing my original identification of ‘Cactus’ as the ‘figuier de raquette’. My delight was to find a digitized copy of the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Naturelles* to reread the extensive article, ‘Cactier’, in volume six. I had never registered its contributor, signed

‘T’, but the front matter revealed ‘M. de Tussac, auteur de *La Flore des Antilles*’. The Chevalier François Richard de Tussac (1751-1837) published his four-volume work between 1808 and 1827, describing himself as ‘colon de St Domingue’. The second volume of 1818 contains a much fuller description of the ‘Cactus opuntia’ and beautiful colour illustration (plate 31).¹⁴ Kaufmann does not mention either of these important early nineteenth-century French sources or de Tussac, but they confirm more precisely the complex history of French botany and acclimatization in Madagascar that is the *inter*-colonial as well as the *intra*-colonial transfer of the ‘figuier de raquette’ from its native Mexico to the French Antilles including St Domingue (Haiti) and to the Île Bourbon.¹⁵ My class on ‘Cactus’ as a specialist working in nineteenth-century French literary-science(s) rather than in Francophone postcolonial studies only proves the broader excitements of rethinking ‘négritude’ precisely for its striking *colonial* eco-critical faces as exemplified by Rabearivelo, but also other poets of the *Anthologie*.

Conclusions:

In sharing instructive learning points for the translations of poetic and scientific knowledge into the student classroom, particularly in its new online-only delivery, this article is both practical and business-critical. In the watershed of Covid-19 French/Francophone researchers have an unprecedented new opportunity to publish, and better publicize, the multiple insights and inspirations of our expert *researcher-led* teaching that grasps many prickly and difficult subjects. These include the pressing gap I encountered in publications focused on high-level online pedagogy in literary studies. This small article starts to fill it, but also seeks to set further precedents. First is to reprioritize researcher-led curriculum development. Accessible, classroom-tested, *critical* readings of set texts that focus on stimulation of curiosity in literature students, innovation in literature teaching, and interdisciplinary enhancement of its research would instantly secure more vibrant futures for all fields of French/Francophone studies as ‘academic’ discipline and in the Academy. Second is to challenge detrimentally constricting definitions of ‘pedagogical research’ especially in terms of the UK REF and TEF, but equally the two-tier categorization of University-level teachers by means of research-teaching or teaching-(only) contracts. Third is to point up the absence of a dedicated, peer-reviewed, *online* journal free at the point of use as platform for innovative French/Francophone Studies research-led teaching. The remits of *French Studies Bulletin* to promote ‘topical issues and debate’ therefore

provides this article with its outlet to enjoin others to contribute to what makes lessons from French/Francophone literature so urgent and important to its life-blood.

Notes

¹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Paris : PUF, 2019). In thanking Gavin Bowd for permission to reproduce his material for the module handbook, I also henceforth adopt his spelling of Rabearivelo's name in Gavin Bowd, *La Double Culture de Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo : entre Latins et Scythes* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2017), rather than that by Senghor in the *Anthologie* (of 'Rabéarivelo') and C. H. Wake and J. O. Reed, 'Modern Malagasy Literature in French', *Books Abroad*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Winter, 1964), pp. 14-17: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40118364> [last accessed 11-03-2020].

² *Anthologie*, pp. 188-189.

³ Greta Thunberg's recent rally in Bristol, and climate protester damage to its venue, were prescient topics for these 11 March 2020 classes. See indicative BBC coverage of 1 March: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-51696203> [last accessed, 28 April 2020].

⁴ I thank my FR2206 students for permission to share their experiences of new seeing and understanding of this poem on 11 March 2020. At this early point in the seminars we discussed how their answer was guided by the grammar, repetitions, versification, sonorities etc. of this stanza.

⁵ Among my source encounters in my extensive research on Cuvier and his circle is the long entry for 'Cactier' in the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Naturelles*, dir. F. Cuvier, T. 6 [CAA-CAQ] (Strasbourg et Paris: F. G. Levrault, 1817), pp. 99-130, the 'Cactier en raquette' described on p. 102.

⁶ See note 1. For a literary-critical study of 'iconic' indigenous Malagasy *flora* in nineteenth-century French literature that connote the dangerous and the exotic, see Aude Campmas, 'Les Invasions barbares dans *La Curée*', *French Studies Bulletin*, Volume 33, Issue 125 (Winter 2012), pp. 68–71 online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/frebull/kts023> [last consulted 6 March 2020]. For a study of French ecocriticism see Daniel Finch-Race and Stephanie Posthumus eds., *French Ecocriticism: From the Early Modern Period to the Twenty-First Century* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017).

⁷ Had Rabearivelo also played on the Latin name *Opuntia ficus-indica* in this description of its 'raquettes'?

⁸ Jeffrey C. Kaufmann, 'Prickly Pear Cactus and Pastoralism in Southwest Madagascar', *Ethnology*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), pp. 345-361, online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3774032> [last accessed 10 March 2020]. The abstract concludes: 'So pivotal is *Opuntia* in the cattle diet that they categorize it as sakafon-drano (water-food). This plant-human relationship, therefore, is central to an understanding of economic life' (p. 345).

⁹ On bio-prospecting see Valérie Boisvert, 'Bioprospection et biopiraterie : le visage de Janus d'une activité méconnue' in A. Akinin, G. Froger, V. Géronimi *et al* eds., *Quel développement durable pour les pays en voie de développement ? Cahier du GEMDEV*, 30 (2005), 123-136 and Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Kaufmann, pp. 348-9, emphasis added. That the difficult harvesting work due to the spines and their allergens of the 'raquettes' for cattle fodder (large), or for human food (small), is gendered

by traditional male/female roles was noteworthy for seminar power point images, but discussion focused on the spikier subject of ‘Cactus’'s (post)colonial heritages.

¹¹ ‘Cactus’, *Anthologie*, p. 189, emphasis added.

¹² See Nivo H. Rakotoarivelo, Aina Razanatsima, Fortunat Rakotoarivony *et al*, ‘Ethnobotanical and economic value of *Ravenala madagascariensis*, Sonn. in Eastern Madagascar’, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, 10: 57 (July 2014) online at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263920963_Ethnobotanical_and_economic_value_of_Ravenala_madagascariensis_Sonn_in_Eastern_Madagascar [last consulted 20 May 2020].

¹³ See Bowd, pp. 29 and 43.

¹⁴ Le Chevalier F. G. de Tussac, *Flore des Antilles ou histoire générale botanique, rurale et économique des végétaux indigènes des Antilles et des exotiques qu'on est parvenu à y naturaliser* T. 2 (Paris : chez d'Hautel, 1818).

¹⁵ For an indicative study of *inter-colonial* botanical transfer, see Christian Daniels, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), including mention of de Tussac's importance in its networks (p. 194).

3460 words, including notes.

I declare that this article is entirely my own work, and is not offered for submission to any other journal and will not be while under consideration with *French Studies Bulletin*.