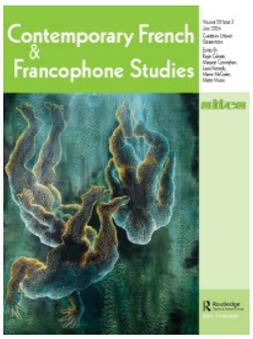

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"Comment devient-on une écrivaine?": Pineau, Kanor, Octavia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* (2007), Fabienne Kanor's *Je ne suis pas un homme qui pleure* (2016) and Gaël Octavia's *La Bonne Histoire de Madeleine Démétrius* (2020). Striking similarities between the texts produce a coherent vision of the contemporary Antillean woman writer as a rounded, independent figure who balances individual, collective, personal and literary elements of her life and adopts a singular approach to the intergenerational dynamics that are so important in Antillean culture. As a woman, she seeks to end painful intergenerational family legacies; as a writer, she detaches herself from the overdetermining, backward-looking and vertical metaphor of the literary family tree (whether patri- or matrilinear), in favor of a more horizontal fellowship of black women writers that creates space both for her and for other writers who might join her.

KEYWORDS French; Caribbean; women; literature; Pineau; Kanor; Octavia

Four widely-acknowledged elements of Antillean literature and culture form the starting-point for this chapter about the position of the woman writer in three novels published between 2007 and 2020.

First, from Glissant's Longoué and Béluse (1964) to Pineau's Dorius (2018), the measure by which time is understood in much of Antillean literature tends to be provided by the notion of familial generations, with intergenerational trauma, rooted originally in slavery, clearly established as a driving engine of plot, character, themes, and expression (McCusker 2007, 127–149; Milne 2007, 199–202; Suk 2000, 74–83; Thomas 2010).

Second, despite the matrifocal structure that famously predominates in "afro-descendent" Antillean families, this should not be confused with matriarchy: rather, as the sociologist Stéphanie Mulot observes, even matrifocal, matrilinear families are subject to the conditions of a "viriarcat"[1]

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characterized by such phenomena as "le pluripartenariat masculin" and "l'obligatoire expression ostentatoire d'une hétérosexualité [masculine] conquérante" (qtd. in Messu et al. 2023, 138), such that many Antillean women today openly decry the masculine domination of Antillean society "dont les manifestations principales resteraient le machismo et la violence faite aux femmes" (140).[2] Thus while, as we shall recall below, Antillean women novelists often evoke legacies handed down from one *woman* to another, they do so within the constraints that render women subaltern in a viriarchy and are indeed often internalized by them: in the Antilles, these include not only violence and machismo but expectations of women, including those that place a high premium on "maternal and family merit" in any performance of female respectability (Mulot and Lefaucheur 2018, 153).

Third, the modern Antillean *literary* family tree is traditionally conceived in patrilinear mode, aligning with a convention in existence "from the sons of Homer to the sons of Ben Johnson" (Bloom 1973, 11) and crystallized in the 1970s by Harold Bloom's famously patriarchal *Anxiety of Influence*, a work that cast all literary enterprise in an oedipal framework of masculine intergenerational struggle pitting the younger poet against his paternal predecessors. In relation to the Antilles, writers and critics alike have repeatedly represented Aimé Césaire as the iconic "father" of modern writing, almost invariably quoting his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1956) as a "seminal" work—a generative, and gendered, reference point for newer generations of writers. Even the Créolistes, whose *Lettres Créoles* (Chamoiseau and Confiant 1999) set up the creole "conteur" at the very earliest origins of Antillean letters, declare themselves "à jamais fils d'Aimé Césaire" (Bernabé et al. 1993, 18), and acknowledge his masculine lineage in other texts (for example Chamoiseau 2021; Chamoiseau 2002, 809–813).

Against this background, women authors have been concerned not only to portray the real, lived experience of Antillean women in a viriarchal culture, but also to find ways of claiming their own place as writers among the branches of a patrilinear literary family tree. Among the powerful commentaries on this phenomenon by both scholars and creative writers themselves (Pineau and Abraham 1998; Rinne and Vitiello 1997; Thomas 2006), Maryse Condé's withering 1993 critique of longstanding masculinist domination remains a landmark; deploring the "commands" (151) issued by successive generations of men to dictate "acceptable" politics and aesthetics in Antillean literature, Condé approves the disobedience of women writers in "transgressing the image of the male" (164) and addressing "unacceptable" subjects such as skin color, female sexuality, and individual psychological, as well as collective political, experience. In the years after Condé's article, an increasing corpus of literature by women attested to the fact that, as Sam Haigh demonstrated in 2000, many—even Condé herself, despite her

evident respect for Césaire—had indeed struggled to position themselves in relation both to this canonical "forefather" and to "the 'patriarchal discursive construct' that is negritude" (Haigh 2000, 71). However, as Haigh observed, by the late 1990s, women writers were no longer prepared to remain "excluded from the Antillean tradition" (215) and were now developing plots, themes and characters that involved a greater emphasis on female agency and female solidarity as well as "maternal genealogy" to replace traditional preoccupations with paternity (211). Spooling forward another twenty years, Kaiama L. Glover noted in 2021 that "(Afro-)feminist" scholarship emphasizing the presence of solidarity and alternative genealogies in black "herstories" has flourished since the early 1990s (18–22); indeed, Connell and Gras's 2023 volume dedicated to one of the writers discussed below, Gisèle Pineau, characterizes her entire oeuvre as one of "resistance." Thus, a fourth widely-accepted notion we might add to the three set out above is that Antillean women's writing is now routinely seen as "transgressing" or "resisting" male-dominated social and literary structures while promoting positive images of female solidarity, especially in the transmission of knowledge from grandmothers to mothers and daughters.

This chapter will examine how these gendered and intergenerational tropes play out in three novels from the early twenty-first century: Gisèle Pineau's *Fleur de Barbarie* (2007), Fabienne Kanor's *Je ne suis pas un homme qui pleure* (2016), and Gaël Octavia's *La Bonne Histoire de Madeleine Démétrius* (2020).[3] As yet under-studied by scholars despite their high quality and significant thematic interest, these texts stand out from other women's writing of the period in that, in each, the subjective development of a female protagonist is intertwined with a discourse about her evolution *as a writer*. An additional distinctive feature is that, in contrast to the many Antillean novels that insist on traditional creole environments, these texts feature protagonists based in Paris, confronting the challenges of metropolitan life as well as their hereditary culture as "négresse[s] hexagonale[s]" (Kanor 2016, 104). The texts also converge strikingly in their thematic content. All three commit Condé's "transgressions" by producing commentaries on female psychological development and women's relation to the politics of skin color, class difference, black history and slavery, alongside the Antilles' status relative to the Hexagon and the persistent subordination of women to viriarchal norms; and all present intergenerational dynamics in which fathers are weak, dysfunctional or simply absent, while mothers and grandmothers are influenced by the viriarchal culture they inhabit. Most pertinently for our focus here, all three address female literary identity directly through autodiegetic narrators, each grappling with a new book and using the space of the text to explore the intersectional issues that beset them as

women, black, French, Antillean, and writers. As we shall see, these authors, mobilizing both the psychological and literary levels of their protagonists' development, engage with intergenerational dynamics to propose a coherent vision of a balanced, independent, and forward-looking contemporary Antillean "écrivaine." As the content of each text is contemporaneous with its publication in the evolving twenty-first century, we shall examine them in chronological order.

Like many of Pineau's novels, *Fleur de Barbarie* (2007) is a tale of family and identity. Born in Guadeloupe to the teenaged Pâquerette, the protagonist Jo has been raised first by a metropolitan foster family and then her natural grandmother Théodora in Marie-Galante. Now living in Paris, Jo longs to understand why she was abandoned but meets only cruel silence from Pâquerette and Théodora. The identity of Jo's father is never revealed and there is a strong insistence on the handing down of family secrecy, shame and misery from one generation of single mothers to the next, each suffering from failure to achieve the ideals of love and social respectability.

Driven from her earliest years by the need to write, becoming a "femme de lettres" (Pineau 2007, 85) is central to the adult Jo's sense of self; however, the damaged identity which drives her writing leads to anxiety about the largely autobiographical work she produces. In the novel that we see Jo battle to complete, a young woman like herself searches for identity and attempts to compose her family tree by returning to her origins. However, as for Jo when she visits Théodora later in life, "l'arbre généalogique n'avait donné que du bois mort, des branches cassées, des fruits talés" (229). The identity-related "return" plot element can be found in a significant number of texts by female Antillean novelists and, as a distant but inevitable echo of Césaire's *Cahier*, it raises the question of a younger writer's place in relation to the established patrilinear generations of Antillean letters. Pineau's implication here, through Jo and Jo's heroine, is that the "retour" and the "arbre" are equally fruitless dead-ends both for women and for women writers.

Jo's position, however, is no easier when she compares herself with her female exemplar, the internationally-acclaimed Marie-Galantaise "femme de lettres" Margareth Solin, whose iconic status and literary reach irresistibly call to mind the outspoken challenger of male domination herself, Maryse Condé. The highly assertive, driven Margareth continually expands her prolific, politically-motivated *œuvre* which self-evidently has "un sens et une force," for "[l]'ambition de Margareth était de donner à voir le monde dans toute son horreur […]. Elle mettait son talent au service des déshérités de la terre" (Pineau 2007, 289). By contrast, the introspective focus of her own work leads Jo to doubt her personal validity,

for she is "effarée par l'étroitesse des mondes que je dépeignais. […] je ne parvenais pas à me libérer du sentiment d'insignifiance […] à la relecture de mes propres écrits" (299). These doubts are compounded when Jo is attacked during a public reading for failing to follow "les écrivains de vos régions […] [qui] racontent le vécu, la guerre, le racisme […] les séquelles de l'esclavage […] l'Histoire" (301). Jo defends herself in response to this glorification of precisely the kind of work produced by the exemplary Margareth; but her reply makes her feel like an impostor for "j'avais brandi mes ancêtres esclaves, […] mis dans ma bouche les mots de Margareth […] S'ils avaient pu lire dans mon esprit, les gens auraient vu que tout cela n'était que fanfaronnade" (303). Until her personal identity is resolved, Jo's confidence in her writing will also remain tenuous and fragmented, as reflected even in her very name which appears in various forms (Jo, Josette, Joséphine, Joss, Josy …) throughout the novel.

Resolution comes toward the end of the novel and depends largely on three events. First, Margareth finally explains what she knows of Jo's family: Margareth and Théodora are half-sisters by their father (thus, Jo's great-grandfather) and, respectively, his wife and the household servant. For the first time, with the open acknowledgement of their kinship, there appears between Margareth and Jo a sense of the personal "solidarity" between women identified by Haigh, as they embrace "comme mère et fille" (Pineau 2007, 370) and Jo at last feels she no longer needs to discover the identity of her own father (387). Second, more importantly, Margareth confesses that these family circumstances are doubtless instrumental in her own drive to write: conscious of her sheer luck in conforming to the cultural ideals of legitimacy and affluence, and the unjust difference between her own life and Théodora's, she admits: "[t]out ce que j'écris, Jo, vient de là … De cette enfance trop belle … De ma culpabilité" (370). This momentous revelation is a turning-point that appears to remove from Jo the burden of comparison with an impossible model by showing that she and Margareth are not in fact so different: while their works may diverge in scope and style, their motivations are equally rooted in personal insecurities and, with Margareth now cast as a less intimidating literary example, it becomes legitimate for Jo to tell her own story in her own way. Third, Jo undergoes a cathartic episode in which she attacks a friend (376). In the ensuing calm, each woman shares her traumatic story for the first time, fulfilling together Jo's devout wish to "en finir avec les secrets et la honte" (328).

These three steps are positioned in the plot as precursors to Jo's at last sensing personal liberation (Pineau 2007, 381); acknowledging that she is ready to build a future with her lover, David (387); and, finally, finishing

her novel—thus confirming the truism that "[f]or all literary artists […] the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 17). Jo's achievement of social, psychological and literary identity is celebrated in the novel's final scene, as Jo discovers one of David's paintings:

> Une femme couleur anthracite.
>
> Créature dont la tête était coiffée de lettres bleues mêlées les unes aux autres. […] Des mots tressés serré dans sa chevelure.
>
> Des mots qui partaient en mèches folles.
>
> À ses pieds, des fleurs nées de la boue.
>
> En arrière-plan, des animaux guettaient, les mandibules baveuses, les crocs affûtés. (Pineau 2007, 405)

David's canvas depicts a figure poised between "barbarie" (the animals with their threat of danger) and hope (the flowers growing from mud) who is a veritable "femme de lettres," the letters literally part of her as well as surrounding her like a crown. Her family story largely elucidated, her personal motivations for writing legitimated, her full identity now acknowledged by David, we may assume Jo sees herself in this portrait: and yet, the text does not tell us explicitly that she is its subject who is, simply, "[u]ne femme couleur anthracite." The Antillean writer, in this text, needs to know herself *and* to be known by others in order to find her place. But portrayed alone in the painting, she is related not to other writers (whether male or female) but to her personal past, future, fears, and hopes, among which she is now *seen*—acknowledged—as intrinsically a "femme de lettres," the generator of her own words that flow as naturally from her as her hair.

In Kanor's *Je ne suis pas un homme qui pleure* (2016), published and set nine years after Pineau's novel, the unnamed narrator, her parents and sister live in metropolitan France but retain much of their Martinican culture. Relations are governed by poor communication and the mother's oppressive expectations, as the one exception herself in a family "où les maris sont des fantômes" (Kanor 2016, 76), that her daughters should present her with a good marriage, professional success and grandchildren—none of which the narrator has delivered. Rather, having dropped a decent career to write several unsuccessful books, she has recently been abandoned by the latest in a long line of partners. The novel consists of her riotously "transgressive" reflections and adventures as she seeks to mend her heart and make progress with a new book.

The strong persona of the narrator is a striking element of this text: she addresses the reader directly, drawing us in with episodes from her life (both tragic and banal), sardonic observations, and experiments in

love and literature, the most notable of which—in a comically literal depiction of phallogocentrism that sends up patriarchal approaches to writing—is a messy attempt at automatic writing with a plastic penis dipped in ink. For all her apparent clear-sightedness, however, it is evident that the narrator is constantly struggling to break out of numerous interconnected constraints imposed by herself as well as others: her family's expectations and taboos; her own, and societal, myths of love; her sensitivity to the trauma of black history; her black, female, Antillean, French identity; and the writing expected of such a woman. These constraints lead to conflicting views and behaviors both in her daily life and, more pertinently for us, in relation to literature. She claims, for example, to be an unenlightened reader, having grown up in an environment where "l'art" meant a "statue debout à un rond-point" (Kanor 2016, 178) and a household where the only books—never read—were French classics "imposed" on the family by a white travelling salesman "attifé comme un missionnaire" (20). Her stance is not only a protest against literary colonialism, however, for she also asserts that she has never finished a poem by Senghor. Yet despite these declarations, the text brims with references to literature, both overt—with allusions to Duras, Ernaux, Condé, Himes, Baldwin, Césaire, Cabrera Infante and others—and covert, for example in a nod to Virginia Woolf's famous essay when the narrator envies successful female writers with "rooms of their own" (1929, 47).

At a personal level, literature is seen as a force of liberation throughout the text: writing is the narrator's escape during a period with an abusive partner; reading performs the same function when she returns home after that experience to a family who refuse to discuss it. Literary success is seen as a means also to achieve freedom from the expectations of her mother, the ignominy of singledom, and poverty. Yet here too she is constrained and longs to break free: she is tired of being categorized with the same black Francophone writers at every festival, and feels imprisoned in a cliché of black women's writing, noting of her first book that she undertook copious research on the Songhai Empire, only to produce "un roman féminin noir type" with "des femmes qui souffrent, des hommes qui n'en ont rien à suer, des viols et des cas d'inceste" (Kanor 2016, 136). Like Pineau's Jo, the narrator is concerned by the narrowness of her own thought horizons (246), lacks confidence in her work, and even undergoes the same experiences of doubting herself during a public reading (30–31) and being accused of ignoring "la grande histoire" (135).

The book project intended to surmount this dilemma however also seems inherently confused: the narrator has decided to refresh her style and earn money with a best-seller, promising her editor both a picaresque francophone novel and a "biographie fantaisiste" of Maya Angelou

(Kanor 2016, 45) which will address the question: "comment devient-on une écrivaine ?" (124 and 125). These two approaches seem fundamentally at odds with one another, especially when the protagonist struggles, for example, to write an unavoidable, but hardly "picaresque," scene of sexual assault in the Angelou narrative: "[…] je sèche parce que ce n'est plus moi qui tape à l'ordinateur. Qu'avec le sang, j'ai reçu l'histoire et une manière commune aux écrivaines noires de la retranscrire. Atavisme littéraire, c'est de cela que je souffre" (135). Once again, the narrator is trapped: to write about the true experience of generations of black women that is her inheritance—going back specifically to her own grandmother who was "analphabète, […] *soumise, trompée, violée, humiliée*" (115)—is to lose her individual identity and creative originality, with the result that she cannot write anything at all. And it is not only this collective legacy that the narrator finds intimidating: in contrast to the other authors she mentions, she finds Angelou an imposing figure whose talent and history threaten to undermine the narrator's own. On the one hand, she feels, Angelou's path was easier than hers for she "avait écrit aussi naturellement, librement, qu'elle avait aimé et voyagé" (124). On the other hand, in comparison to Angelou, the narrator notes, "[j]'ai si peu vécu, j'en ai si peu bavé pour de vrai, moi," panicking that this relative privilege might rob her of anything "*de nécessaire à transmettre aux autres*" (126). Like Jo faced, initially, with Margareth's overwhelming reach and reputation, the narrator contemplating Angelou feels like an impostor, unequal to the example set by this social and literary forerunner. The characteristics of this writer's block linked to impostor syndrome are something other than the "anxiety of authorship" first described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their 1979 feminist revision of Bloom, based on white Victorian writers, in which the female author—due to patriarchal socio-literary domination and want of literary "foremothers"—struggles to see herself as a writer at all and leaves traces of her "inferiorization" in her own texts (50). Nor does it quite conform to this theory as revised in turn by Dianne Sadoff to take account of (American) black women's experience: for Sadoff, like (ultimately) Pineau's and Kanor's narrators, the younger woman sees the senior female writer as enabling rather than silencing; however, she continues to "misread" her predecessor in intertextual references, a symptom that does not seem applicable in our texts. We shall return to the writer's relationship with predecessors below, but for now let us note that, from the temporarily stifling effect of a senior woman on the younger narrator's confidence as a writer, it is clear that for both protagonists female literary precursors are significantly more relevant than any "paternal" ones.

For her situation finally to be resolved, Kanor's narrator at last determines to "en finir avec les secrets et la honte," as Jo puts it, by announcing openly to her family that she cannot have children and has failed to find a partner, declaring: "[l]e seul courage qui me reste, c'est celui d'écrire, mais il me faut votre bénédiction pour continuer" (Kanor 2016, 255). This provokes a cathartic family rapprochement reminiscent of Jo's experience with her friend. In addition, like Jo in relation to Margareth, Kanor's narrator realizes belatedly that she does have something in common with Angelou. Recalling a scene in Ghana from *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), where Angelou endures a vision of captive Africans headed for slavery, she acknowledges that Angelou, too, felt the burden of her ancestry: "[e]lle aurait pu être du convoi. Elle est eux. On n'échappe pas toujours à son histoire" (Kanor 2016, 239). Having identified this experience which is so similar to her own—both generally, in terms of black inheritance, and specifically, since the narrator is familiar with the memorial sites of West Africa—Kanor's narrator decides shortly afterwards to visit America and Africa in order to "partir sur les traces de Maya pour de vrai" (257). This marks a contrast with the trivializing fictionalizations of Angelou's biography she has drafted so far (180–181) and places her in a more mature—but also more sympathetic—relationship to her powerful forerunner.

As Kanor's novel closes, we see the narrator freshly returned from her travels, opening a letter from the ex-partner who now wants her back. Instead of rushing to acquiesce, she lies peacefully back on the bed where four generations of women in her family have known birth, love, and death: "Elles vivaient à travers moi et je redécouvrais, avec leurs yeux, la vie. Elle n'était pas assez longue et n'avait pas assez de dents pour nous mordre bien longtemps, la vie. On pouvait être blessé et se relever, trébucher encore et s'en remettre" (2016, 257–258). The inspiring intergenerational presence of these women, together with the intertextual hint at Angelou's famous "Still I Rise" (1978), here suggest a newly balanced and hopeful relationship both to the narrator's personal inheritance as a black Antillean woman and to her status as the author of her new book, suggesting that to become "une écrivaine" is to address one's own experience with all that it implies, including one's intergenerational history—both narrow and "grande," as well as literary—supported by those who count the most: in this case, both the family and, through the newfound identification with Angelou, a sense of sympathy, replacing that of intimidation, with a senior writer. This balance is further confirmed by the fact that the fast-moving and occasionally rascally tale that we have just read, telling how the narrator has reached this point, certainly qualifies, at least in parts, as a picaresque Francophone novel. With the Angelou project in

promising gestation and the picaresque work of "*entertainment*" (Kanor 2016, 45) sought by her editor already successfully completed, the narrator is no longer trapped by these improbable alternatives, but well on her way to breaking free by accomplishing both. Like Pineau, Kanor presents a closing image of the "écrivaine" at a final point of delicate balance between individual, collective, and literary realization, and reconciled to her literary forerunner.

In our third text, the (again unnamed, and wryly amusing) narrator of *La Bonne Histoire de Madeleine Démétrius* (Octavia 2020) also comes from a poor background of single mothers, where writing—again practiced compulsively from an early age—would be ridiculed. Now professionally established in Paris, her occasionally barbed relationship with her mother in Martinique is inflected by a legacy of intergenerational shame in a "lignée de femmes qui, chacune, méprisait sa mère" (245). In this novel, however, the focus is on friendship as much as family, as a source of self-esteem that fluctuates while the narrator re-evaluates her writing. The plot is triggered when an old "lycée" friend from Martinique, Madeleine Démétrius, contacts the narrator with a "bonne histoire" for a novel. It involves the "collégienne" Madeleine, a metropolitan soldier stationed in Martinique, and another teenager, Cynthia, whom Madeleine describes (to the narrator's chagrin) as "la plus grande amie que j'aie jamais eue" (29). Cynthia and the soldier regularly disappear into the latter's bedroom leaving Madeleine alone outside (41).

The narrator recognizes this opportunity to recover the literary ambition of her youth and write a more serious work than her usual, white-heroine "chicklit" romances (Octavia 2020, 26). Yet for weeks, instead of writing Madeleine's "bonne histoire," she pours herself into "[des] journaux intimes anachroniques" (91) that analyze her younger self and relationships. Thus she realizes that the beautiful, lighter-skinned and socially privileged Madeleine gave her a sense of self by deciding, years ago, to "me choisir – moi que rien ne distinguait – parmi trente condisciples, me signifier ma valeur […], me pousser à m'accomplir" (177). And yet the inevitable comparison with Madeleine also has less positive effects for, as the narrator observes: "[j]e n'ignore rien de cette honte indissociable de ma condition de fille sans père, de notre quartier de pauvres, de Betty, ma malheureuse mère inculte" (92). More troubling yet is the revelation of how this still affects her: "[c]e que je découvre […] c'est que j'ai honte de ma honte" (94). The text suggests that, trapped by conflicting memories of the young Madeleine who both bestowed and (however inadvertently) undermined self-worth, and overwhelmed by the weight of Madeleine's demand for a novel based on the testimonial she has confided, the narrator is creatively paralyzed and unable to write the "bonne

histoire." This is taken a step further when, somewhat to her surprise, she adds the heading "*esclave*" to her largely empty draft, linking it upon reflection to the ambiguous power-play in the "triangle pervers" of Madeleine, Cynthia and the soldier, and wondering "[q]ui avait manipulé qui, en verité ?" (111). The positioning of this thought within the context of her attempt at writing suggests a new triangular power-play involving Madeleine and her two friends—Cynthia and the narrator—that Madeleine dominates.

What finally unlocks the novel of the "bonne histoire" is the narrator's subversion of those power dynamics, by making Cynthia, not Madeleine, her protagonist. The resulting novel is written with a fluency she has never known before (Octavia 2020, 151 and 154), from an original perspective and in an entirely different mode from her previous formula: the narrator uses careful factual research as well as elements of Madeleine, Cynthia, herself and her family to create, "transgressively," a black heroine undergoing a complex development that brings into play the politics of colonialism, class, gender, and skin color, in a French and Antillean setting (161). Above all, for the first time, the depiction of the protagonist draws on the narrator's experience of shame (154), her own defining emotion, and that of generations of women in her family. The new book is thus written from an authentic understanding of self rather than merely simulating "les codes de l'autofiction" (92) as her previous novels do; it also reaches back into the experience of generations of Antillean women more generally. The quality of the resulting novel is swiftly recognized in a contract with a prestigious publisher, yet Madeleine's intimidation is not yet quite dispelled for, when her new editor proclaims herself "[m]ordue!" by the manuscript, the narrator reflects "curieusement, ce sont les dents de Madeleine Démétrius que j'imaginai aussitôt plantées dans ma chair" (153).

Liberation is achieved only after two twists occur. First, Madeleine suddenly changes her mind and forbids use of her story. Having begun to free herself by writing the "bonne histoire" in her own way, the narrator rejects this constraint through the vocabulary of power she has used before in this context: "[*e*]*sclave. Je ne suis pas ton esclave, Madeleine Démétrius*" (Octavia 2020, 157). But when Madeleine has a stroke and falls into a coma, the narrator realizes that she must part with her friend forever, whether by death or by lawsuit, and seeks a gentler resolution. The closing pages of the book see her enter the unconscious Madeleine's hospital room together with Madeleine's mother, her own mother, and her daughters, carrying objects that symbolize other female friends including Cynthia. Thus surrounded by women, the narrator addresses the unconscious Madeleine in her mind, evoking the elements of her "bonne

histoire" and its repercussions, and declaring: "[j]e veux lui signifier que j'accepte la rupture, à condition qu'elle soit sans colère" (265): and this "condition" that the separation (or perhaps, given the grammar of the sentence, Madeleine) should be "sans colère" is important. Like Pineau and Kanor, Octavia offers us a writer holding her life and her writing in equilibrium. Like the other protagonists, she "transgressively" draws on her own individual experience, including her personal and intergenerational history, to write a book that will also resonate more widely for black Antillean women. Like them, she defies shame, taboo, and secrecy in order to do so. But like them, this writer also can neither be fully herself nor write, without reference to those—her close family and old friends—whose love has enabled her self-worth. And once again, as for Margareth and Angelou, we see an ultimate expression of reconciliation and fellow-feeling with a woman, Madeleine, who is the generator of a story.

In many ways, then, these novels no doubt confirm the trend in Antillean women's writing identified by scholars from Haigh to Glover and mentioned as our fourth widely-accepted phenomenon above: their protagonists display strong female agency and do not bow to socio-cultural expectations; they benefit to some degree from the solidarity of other women; and they are positioned by family dynamics in which paternal figures are utterly eclipsed by mothers and grandmothers as the intergenerational vectors of a "maternal genealogy" that dominates their development.

And yet it can be all too easy for critical conventions to program our readings, and we should be attentive to the detail of what the texts themselves are telling us, especially when it goes subtly against the grain of expectations. However true it is that "supportive female communities are a particular feature of the texts of French Caribbean writers" (Thomas 2006, 13), we should recall that, as Glover argues, even feminist "discursive challenges to a masculine order are marked by the constraining presence of gendered expectations and thus risk flattening, albeit differently, the experience of individual women" (Glover 2021, 21–22). Indeed, this relationship between the subjective and collective as applied by Glover to scholarly criticism closely echoes our narrators' accounts of the creative dilemma they face when their own individual experience threatens to be "flattened" by the overwhelming power of other, or collective, women's testimony. For the rather more nuanced reading these novels deserve, therefore, we shall draw further on Glover's analysis to revisit our protagonists' psychological development, before suggesting conclusions about these texts' vision of the contemporary Antillean "écrivaine." Our focus here will be our texts' intergenerational dynamics.

The protagonists Glover examines are very different from ours: her radically "disorderly" women refuse to comply with "asserted parameters of feminine solidarity" so completely that they "forgo love or alliance" and adopt "a practice of bold self-regard" (2021, 221) as a means of survival, rather than drawing strength from the "regard" of others. Ours, by contrast, as we have seen, do need strong connections to those whose love and "regard" help them to find their place. However, they also confirm Glover's perspective when, referring to aspects of feminist scholarship of the last thirty or so years, she warns against: "[…] the presumption that women's politicized self-conception is inherently and, ultimately, freeingly based in either maternal or sororal community—the presumption that a woman's recognition of herself as responsible for protecting and preserving a transgenerational feminine community is essential to her coming to full subjectivity" (21). As we have seen, our narrators' intergenerational female relationships are not presented as unproblematically, inherently positive. On the contrary, our protagonists' achievement of "full subjectivity" depends largely on painfully processing, countering or rising above the cruelty (Pineau), expectations (Kanor), or shame (Octavia) passed down by generations of women; and all three show an uncompromising determination to "en finir avec les secrets et la honte" by openly confronting this intergenerational pain. In this way, they do not "protect […] and preserv[e] a transgenerational feminine community" (Glover 2021) as it stands. Instead, while they recognize their grandmothers' and mothers' experience and influence, they intend to bring the matrilinear legacy of pain to a *close* with their own generation. Such reconciliation as they achieve in this context is established on the protagonists' own terms, which are resolutely forward-looking, as Jo plans her future with David whether or not Pâquerette ever reappears in her life (Pineau 2007, 387); Kanor's narrator understands that she can always get (herself) back on her feet (2016, 258); and Octavia's refuses to see her own daughters through the lens of her mother's expectations (2020, 247). Independent rather than outright "disorderly," our narrators strike a balance between acknowledging and rejecting intergenerational solidarity with their female lineage. A similar feat of funambulism will become apparent when we look at their positioning in relation to prior generations of male and female *writers*.

In the texts' literary discourse, the protagonists' anxious mode of reflection about writing is affected by gender to the extent that expectations associated with literature are, like social ones, dominated by masculinist paradigms: literature based on personal experience is initially denigrated in Pineau and Kanor as "littérature de bonne femme" (Kanor 2016, 135) while Octavia's narrator recognizes the low status of "chicklit"

(2020, 259). However, the relative absence of literary "forefather" figures is particularly striking. Male writers, when they are named or quoted, are mentioned in secondary terms; they are certainly not erected as key models for the narrators, even problematic ones. Indeed, we have already observed that Pineau's depiction of the "retour au pays natal" reveals the paternal "arbre généalogique" as hopelessly broken: in a similar vein, the penis-writing experiment in Kanor ends in débâcle (2016, 79); and while Octavia's protagonist refers to Condé, Schwarz-Bart, and Pineau as "[les] grandes romancières guadeloupéennes" (2020, 160), she conspicuously fails to pay any similar compliment when mentioning Chamoiseau and Confiant. In contrast with the twentieth-century texts examined by Haigh, there is no apparent attempt by these protagonists to insert themselves into a patrilinear genealogy of Antillean (or indeed French) authors: the paternity-based model of legitimacy is, in the literary as in the social economy of these texts, largely, and magnificently, ignored.

Rather, for our protagonists, the writing self is realized only when the narrator finds her particular balance between the expression of her own experience and the collective intergenerational narratives she has inherited as a black Antillean *woman*. As all three novels suggest in different ways, a contemporary personal story or testimony can be experienced as trivial in the face of the enormous injustices of black women's history; or it can seem depressingly clichéd to the extent that, as we have seen, Kanor's protagonist is at one point prevented from writing anything at all due to "[a]tavisme littéraire." In addition to this view of other women's stories as inhibiting for the writer (re-confirmed by the initial stalling over Madeleine's testimony), successful authors like Margareth (read: Condé) and Angelou are also initially experienced as intimidating to the point of silencing. Only when it is understood that these imposing figures themselves are subject to the urge constantly to rewrite their own heritage can their successors begin to identify with them and thus perceive any entitlement to the status of "écrivaine" for themselves. Legitimacy, then, comes from reassurance that each narrator's writing adequately contributes to a larger, collective reworking of women's witness, where she may humbly take her place alongside others—whether Madeleine, Angelou, Margareth, Condé, or a much wider chorus of black women. In these *mises en abyme* of their own situation as writers, Pineau, Kanor and Octavia interestingly "transgress" traditional—and indeed scholarly—literary historiographies of the kind conceptualized by Bloom, with their tightly hierarchical, combative, and paternal structure, to hint at a model shaped by women. However, in a further act of independence and originality, here too they "unsettle customarily positive readings of intergenerational knowledge transmission between women" (Glover 2021, 22), for they refuse also to

mirror the masculinist "family tree" with an opposing one in which "[a]s literary *daughter* […] the black woman writer will overtly idealize [literary] fore*mothers*" (Sadoff 1985, 18; my emphasis). In these texts, it is notable that established story-tellers, while sometimes belonging to an older generation, are not portrayed in maternal or family terms in our three novels: Madeleine, although the "author" of her story, is viewed as the narrator's generational peer throughout; Angelou is senior but in no way maternal for Kanor's protagonist; the moment where Margareth appears briefly "comme [une] mère" belongs very clearly to the narrative of Jo's psychological development, while her persona as a writer is demandingly professional, not maternal: indeed, in none of the novels do we find lexical or rhetorical choices suggesting that the protagonist transfers her connection from an absent or difficult biological mother onto a writer, or sees her place in literature in familial terms. Black "écrivaines," then, are portrayed ultimately not as mothers and daughters but rather as compeers engaged—albeit at different stages and times—in the same arduous project as one another. Our authors thus once again turn away from conventional intergenerational dynamics to refute the notion that literary "generations" must necessarily be conceived in terms of filiation. Instead, when our three narrators finally overcome their writer's block, their anxiety resolves into an emphasis on sympathy with their precursors and sources, to propose a model of female literary endeavor we might see as a species of horizontal fellowship rather than a vertical family tree. By breaking away from the overbearingly restrictive metaphor of genetic inheritance, the writer frees herself from tightly pre-determined relations to other authors and acknowledges her fellow "écrivaines" on a more equal footing. She thereby retains the space to develop her own literary identity in the way that suits her best and, by practicing her craft in this way, also contributes to the potential of literature to "enable" other black women writers "as a pool from which people can draw and to which they can contribute" (Goodwin 2023, 82), rather than a tradition to which they are bound by the overdetermining—"flattening"—and backward-leaning intergenerational metaphor of family. This is by no means to deny the reality that Antillean women are descended from slavery and "portent en dedans d'elles, dans leurs pensées, leurs paroles et leurs actions, l'héritage de leurs ancêtres" (Pineau and Abraham 1998, 13): but the contemporary "écrivaine" depicted here wishes to be no longer restricted to, or by, her burdensome intergenerational history.

In these refreshingly modern and assertive novels, then, Pineau, Kanor and Octavia together present a coherent vision of the Antillean "écrivaine" in the early twenty-first century. This richly rounded embodiment of a complex and hard-won equilibrium balances the social, cultural,

and emotional elements of her personal identity along with her writing self, since neither is complete without the other; and as a writer she is, in turn, poised between her personal experience and collective history. Yet while acknowledging the importance of the past, her independent approach to the intergenerational dynamic that is so much a part of literary and Antillean culture shows that her ultimate purpose is turned outward and forward, toward fellow and future women and writers who will themselves achieve their independent equilibrium in their own way.

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Notes

1. The term used by Mulot was first proposed by Malcolm Waters, analyzing "masculine gender systems (MGS)": "In a patriarchal MGS the senior male members of extended kinship systems have control; in a viriarchal MGS all adult males have control but not necessarily directly by virtue of their location in kinship systems" (1989, 203).
2. Many twenty-first century texts do retain a critical focus on viriarchal Antillean structures and the damage men wreak upon women: see for example works by Maryse Condé, Estelle-Sarah Bulle, Suzanne Dracius and Dominique Deblaine as well as others by the three authors examined here.
3. The family of Pineau (born 1956) is from Guadeloupe; Kanor's (b. 1970) and Octavia's (b. 1977) are from Martinique. Like their protagonists, all three have lived in both metropolitan France and the Antilles.

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