

The Power to (Dis)please: Supernatural Horror and History in *Célanire cou-coupé*

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A few pages into Maryse Condé's 2000 novel *Célanire cou-coupé* (*Who Slashed Célanire's Throat?*), the director of an orphanage in colonial Ivory Coast, a French colonial named M. Desrussie, is bitten on the penis by a tarantula while in bed with his sixteen-year-old mistress and promptly dies (18). Shortly thereafter, Alix Pol Roger, the colony's governor, is set upon by lions until all that remains is a pool of blood, scattered bones, and a "paire de jambes encore engoncées dans de hautes bottes de cuir brun" (44-45) 'pair of legs still standing in tall, brown leather boots' (35). These are only the first of a series of strange deaths frequently attributed to the eponymous Célanire Pinceau, an enigmatic figure alternately framed as demon and savior, monstrous creature and inspired creator, ardent feminist and cool narcissist. Both deaths expedite Célanire's social ascension during her time in Côte d'Ivoire; her social, political, and cultural clout is further consolidated upon her return to her native Guadeloupe. In *Célanire cou-coupé*, Condé offers a speculative vision of a historical world dominated by the seemingly unstoppable Célanire, who triumphs over her enemies as well as overcoming a slew of racist, sexist social constraints.

As a fan of campy horror such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the *Leprechaun* movies, I read these early violent episodes through the lens of horror, as both the bawdy offing of Desrussie and Pol Roger's severed leg in a boot are familiar camp horror tropes. Molded by this horror literacy, I found each man's absurd demise both funny and satisfying. With regards to Desrussie, the source of humor lies primarily in the on-the-nose, ribald nature of his death-by-spider. Pol Roger's death is an instance of similarly burlesque horror, as the contrast between his fragmented remains—pure gore—and his intact boots—an everyday object—both magnifies and undercuts the gruesomeness of his demise. Beyond this campy humor, Desrussie's death also provides pleasure in that it constitutes a fitting punishment for his crimes, as the spider bites him on a body part that presumably plays a significant role in his sexual abuse of young girls. Pol Roger is another unsympathetic figure, representing a colonial apparatus whose abuses have already been referenced in the novel, including the brutal practice of labor conscription for railroad construction (38). Thus, the image of Pol Roger's dismembered legs stuffed in a pair of boots generates a measure of satisfaction as the symbol of a righteous comeuppance.

Numerous other mysterious deaths follow. The causes of death are generally violent and the aftermath grisly, frequently involving dismemberment or mutilation. If we judge based on their consequences, these deaths are far from

arbitrary: in general, they either augment Célanire's social and political power or avenge an act of horrifying violence inflicted on her in her infancy. As a newborn, Célanire was found on a trash heap, throat slashed, head dangling by a thread, having been sacrificed in a ritual to bolster the political career of a white Creole planter in Guadeloupe. Her body was brought to the office of one Dr. Jean Pinceau, an avid reader of *Frankenstein*, who fulfilled his dreams of creating life by repairing Célanire's body (116). This surgery, which leaves a prominent scar on Célanire's neck, seems to perpetuate the violence of the botched sacrifice.

As the killings pile up, it becomes increasingly illogical to suppose that they are not linked, given their similar *modi operandi* and consistent motives. While *Célanire cou-coupé* has often been read through the lens of the fantastic, an interpretive framework invited by its subtitle "roman fantastique" 'fantastical tale,' this coherence in manner and motive drives the novel towards a supernatural reading. Tzvetan Todorov suggests that when a reader arrives at absolute faith in non-rational explanations of strange narrative events, the text exits the realm of the fantastic and enters the neighboring genre of the supernatural or "merveilleux" 'marvelous' (35, 29).¹ If the reader of *Célanire cou-coupé* renounces the hermeneutical uncertainty of the fantastic to accept a supernatural explanation for the bizarre deaths that occur in Célanire's orbit, then these deaths coalesce as the work of a unified malefic force rather than a disparate set of curious incidents. In framing *Célanire cou-coupé* as horror rather than a *roman fantastique*, I do not mean to suggest a categorical opposition between the two genres, as fantastical horror, vacillating between supernatural and rational explanations, certainly exists. However, in *Célanire cou-coupé*, it is impossible that all of these killings, with their overlapping motives and *modi operandi*, were carried out by the same human agent. For instance, Dr. Pinceau dies mysteriously in the Cayenne penal colony while Célanire is thousands of miles away. Approaching Condé's novel as a supernatural narrative reveals the deaths as an expression of the protagonist's cold, calculating will and aligns the text with specific horror subgenres.

In positing Célanire as a supernatural creature of horror, we set aside the epistemological ambiguity of the fantastic, but this move in fact generates new questions about the meaning of the violence that can thereby be ascribed to her. Critics who have read Célanire's monstrosity within a fantastical framework have focused more on her metaphorical threat to social hierarchies and the oppressive ideologies that underpin them. If we accept Célanire as a literal demonic force responsible for horrific acts of supernatural violence, then we can share in a different line of inquiry, namely, Condé's reflections on the complexities of interpreting histories of violence. As the narrative unfolds, the reader's potential enjoyment of Célanire's bloody acts is complicated by a growing sense of

¹ Except where indicated, translations are my own.

complicity with real agents of violence as Condé has Célanire reenact historical atrocities. Célanire targets colonial administrators and the white planter who paid for her to be sacrificed, but her victims also include her loving adoptive mother Ofusan, who is killed in a manner that explicitly references the brutality inflicted on Maroons in the context of the slave plantation economy. Similarly, the final installment of Célanire's revenge arc, the killing of her biological father, who sold her to be sacrificed, evokes an obscure historiographical intertext, Peruvian author Juan de Arona's narrative of the 1881 Cañete Valley massacre in Peru during the South American War of the Pacific (1879–84) in his 1891 treatise *La inmigración en el Perú* ('Immigration in Peru'). Arona's account demonizes African-descended Peruvian women, singling them out as the authors of horrific acts of violence against Chinese plantation laborers. I argue that Condé hints at the unreliability of Arona's account, which has long been an important source for historians (Gonzales 141; Young 78–79). However, even as Condé calls attention to the dubiousness of Arona's claims, Yang Ting's murder and its aftermath seem to confirm Célanire's status as a bloodthirsty, supernatural monster.²

By examining Célanire as the agent of monstrous supernatural violence in relation to real-life historical violence, we can see how *Célanire cou-coupé*, while turned towards the past, anticipates Condé's subsequent exploration of global terrorism in her 2017 novel *Le fabuleux et triste destin d'Ivan et Ivana* (*The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana*). The later novel was a response to the January 2015 terror attacks in Paris, particularly the killing of a Black Martinican police officer, Clarissa Jean-Philippe, by a Black French citizen of Malian descent. For Condé, this murder "demonstrated . . . the myth that racial identities create affinities that give rise to (anti-colonial) political solidarity" (Simek, "The Inhuman" 31). In an interview following the publication of *Le fabuleux et triste destin d'Ivan et Ivana*, Condé declared that "la mission de la littérature doi[t] se modifier" (Célestin 155) 'literature's mission must change' in response to new paradigms of violence exemplified by the 2015 attacks. *Célanire cou-coupé*'s narration of the violence committed by its protagonist already suggests the limitations of referring to colonialism and its legacy for explaining such violent phenomena, despite its early-twentieth-century narrative setting. While *Célanire cou-coupé*'s horror narrative evokes broader forms of anti-colonial or anti-patriarchal counter-violence, there are limits to this allegorical reading, and, consequently, potential limits to the pleasures typically associated with horror texts.

² More recently, Vincent C. Peloso and Heidi Tinsman have contested Arona's version of events, convincingly demonstrating that Arona's narrative is shaped by the racist political ideology of *La inmigración en el Perú*, which concluded that Afro-Peruvians, regardless of gender, were unfit to participate in Peruvian nation-building.

The Good and the Average: Condean Literacies

The horror literacy that I bring to my reading of *Célanire cou-coupé* has played a significant role in facilitating my appreciation of it. I was therefore startled that Christiane Makward explicitly positions cinematic horror literacy—among other popular reference points—as an impediment to understanding or even enjoying the text. Makward asserts that Condé writes for a narrow readership, one whose sensibilities have not been “endommagée[s]” (41) ‘damaged’ by popular films, specifically excluding a wide variety of cinematic genres, including horror and thrillers. Makward further insists that readers must be equipped with a sophisticated sense of irony to locate the humor that Condé has insisted is present in her writing, and that Condé’s literary production is, in general, “truffé de clins d’œil au (bon) lecteur plutôt qu’au lecteur lambda” (38) ‘stuffed with winks at the (good) reader rather than the average reader.’ The notion that a certain kind of literacy is necessary to interpret Condé’s work has been advanced from multiple perspectives, from VèVè Clark’s influential theory of diaspora literacy to Emily Apter’s suggestion that the subtle ironies of a work like *Heremakhonon* (1976) demand more intellectual rigor than that needed for “translatable” or “accessible” historical novels such as Condé’s 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... noire de Salem* (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) (Apter 91). While Apter would likely categorize *Célanire cou-coupé*, a historical novel, among Condé’s more “translatable” works, and thus accessible to “good” and “average” readers alike, she shares Makward’s view that Condé’s œuvre and readership are divided between the high-brow and the popular. Although Apter’s statements are unabashedly elitist, she does more to acknowledge Condé’s status as a popular author than Makward, whose take on *Célanire cou-coupé* exemplifies what Chris Bongie sees as Condé’s critics’ refusal to consider her engagement with what he terms the “inauthentically popular” (282).

I heartily agree with the notion that various literacies can open up new interpretive horizons for Condé’s work, and likewise affirm that her novels, including *Célanire cou-coupé*, are laden with wide-ranging cultural references. However, I contend that popular literacies can be just as useful as more arcane cultural knowledge for interpreting this and other Condé novels. Rather than create a hierarchy of appreciation, I propose to simply highlight the variety of pleasures that different literacies can afford a readership that Apter implicitly acknowledges to be diverse. My approach responds to Bongie’s injunction to take seriously Condé’s use of popular literary devices, as well as to confront what he calls the “blatant unoriginality” of her participation in the postcolonial tradition of revising canonical Euro-American works (303). While I will not explore in detail *Célanire cou-coupé*’s relationship to its most prominent intertext, Mary Shelley’s seminal horror novel *Frankenstein*, I am interested in its participation in the same

genre. I argue that many of the elements in Condé's novel that have been deemed unoriginal are in fact horror genre conventions. Attention to the novel's popular literary devices, such as its horror-influenced narrative structure and imagery, can help us to enjoy and offer new takes on Condé's representation of what horror film scholar Barbara Creed terms the "monstrous-feminine" in her study *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993). In framing the novel as a horror story, I am not suggesting that this is the only way to read *Célanire cou-coupé*, but rather that such a narrow focus can open up a range of new perspectives, including the novel's relationship to other genres such as the historical novel.

My study is not the first to take seriously Condé's engagement with popular literary devices in *Célanire cou-coupé*. Nicole Simek convincingly links the novel's dedication to Condé's granddaughter ("Pour Racky, qui ne me lira pas" (9) 'For Raky [*sic*], who will not take the trouble to read me') to Condé's explicit presentation of the novel as fantastical. Simek suggests that "Condé's adoption of the fantastic can be read . . . as an attempt to infuse the literary with mass appeal" in order to reach a younger generation that is, according to Condé, uninterested in books (*Eating Well* 74). However, as Simek recognizes, this "desire to be more 'popular' . . . does not play out textually in any straightforward way" precisely because the parameters of the fantastic genre are so fuzzy (*Eating Well* 75). At the same time, Condé's interest in expanding her audience to include her granddaughter exists in tension with a feeling expressed in an interview published shortly before *Célanire cou-coupé*: "je crois que j'ai perdu un peu le pouvoir de déplaire. C'est quelque chose qui me manque" (Le Pelletier 71) 'I've somewhat lost the power to displease. It's something that I miss.' Reading *Célanire cou-coupé* as horror provides a means to understand how a narrative where Condé "[se] montre délibérément choquante et déplaisante" (Gyssels, "Histoires" 308n45) 'is deliberately shocking and unpleasant' might embrace these qualities precisely to appeal to a wider audience. A key feature of horror's popular appeal is the hybrid affective response that it generates, in which pleasure is paradoxically intertwined with other forms of emotional engagement such as terror and horror, as well as what Stephen King qualifies as the "least fine emotion engendered by horror": revulsion (Holland-Toll 8).

Kathleen Gyssels, who offers the most sustained analyses of *Célanire cou-coupé*'s series of grotesque deaths, dismisses the notion that the novel might frighten the reader (*Passes* 69). In fact, in her discussion of Condé's multiple lengthy descriptions of putrid corpses, Gyssels affirms that the macabre odors emitted by these bodies are "banalisées" 'rendered banal' by the narrator's detached tone, contributing to Condé's larger effort to "désacraliser" 'desacralize' death itself (*Passes* 71). For Gyssels, the reader's lack of emotional investment in such sequences is at least partially the result of their ubiquitous presence in

Condé's work in the 1990s-early 2000s; the perceived unoriginality of this and other aspects of the narrative also diminishes any possible enjoyment *Célanire cou-coupé* might provide. However, Gyssels's own characterization of the novel's repetitive features inadvertently aligns them with the genre conventions of horror, inviting a different interpretive framework. Given that such repetitiveness in both "narrative structure and *mise-en-scène*" is a defining feature of the horror subgenre of slasher films (Creed 124-25), the novel's parade of *femmes fatales* and eerie landscapes (Gyssels, "Histoires" 308n45) can be seen as contributing to the elaboration of a coherent malefic force. Moreover, the novel's proliferation of gruesome deaths and decomposing corpses can be seen as an attempt to generate an affective response in the reader, perhaps the "least fine emotion" of revulsion, or, as I discuss below, the pleasures generated by Célanire's monstrous femininity. Meanwhile, the fact that Condé anchors the series of killings in relation to real historical horrors suggests that the novel invites a meditation on the meaning of violent acts, rather than death itself.

From Slashee to Slasher: The Monstrous-Feminine in *Célanire cou-coupé*

In many ways *Célanire cou-coupé* exemplifies the syncretic blend of "natural horror" and "art-horror" that Kinitra D. Brooks, Alexis McGee and Stephanie Schoellman theorize as central to the "aesthetics of a racially, gendered horror discourse" in Black women's horror writing (241). Their analysis forms a critical rejoinder to horror critic Noël Carroll's notion that "art horror" and "natural horror" form two distinct categories, each meant to generate a different affective response. Carroll illustrates "natural horror" with wide-ranging examples including ecological disasters and historical atrocities such as the Holocaust; meanwhile, he defines "art-horror" as the "product of a genre" (Carroll 12-14). In contrast, Brooks, McGee, and Schoellman position these categories on a spectrum (240-41). Their approach recognizes the important place that "natural horrors of the Black experience (chattel slavery, Jim Crow, police brutality, etc.)" occupy in Black women's horror discourse, but "rejects the idea of enslavement as the primogenitor of Black horror," highlighting other sources and shifting the discourse "toward a more creative and artistic construction" (239, 238).

Exploring *Célanire cou-coupé*'s narrative structure, characterization, imagery, and other literary devices characteristic of "art-horror" allows us to read Célanire's monstrosity in a different light. Several critics have convincingly demonstrated how Célanire's status as a "slashee," in multiple senses, constitutes a threat for her contemporaries (Fulton 100-101; Mardorossian 175-76). The scar on Célanire's neck renders her an almost caricatural figure of Freudian feminine monstrosity, as its resemblance to an excised vagina (119) doubles the castration threat embodied by female victims in slasher movies as "bearers of the bleeding

wound” (Mulvey 58). The monstrosity of her scarred body is compounded by her identity as a woman whose social and sexual practices transgress expectations of feminine behavior.

Approaching Célanire’s monstrosity from another angle, I suggest that the cathartic pleasures associated with Célanire’s bloody revenge arc and rise to power coalesce around her embodiment of another form of monstrous femininity, that of the slasher rather than the slashee. Here I am using the term “slasher” loosely, to signify Célanire’s role as the agent rather than the victim of violent acts, and not as a reference to the figure specific to slasher films. I will examine the slippage between Célanire’s role as righteous avenger and psychotic slasher in more detail below. First, however, I will explore how framing Célanire’s monstrosity in terms of her role as an agent of violence can help us to tease out what pleasures are specific to *Célanire cou-coupé*. In a 2001 interview, Condé announced her desire to “[f]aire entrer les Antillais dans un monde qui ne soit pas celui qu’ils connaissent . . . les faire posséder leur monde, devenir cette fois les gagnants” (Dana) ‘[b]ring Antilleans into a world that is not the one they know . . . make them possess their world, become the winners this time.’ While it is difficult to read the novel as an allegory of communal triumph, approaching the novel as supernatural horror reveals how the reader might still derive pleasure from the fantasy of one Antillean’s violent triumphs.

Although they do not belong to the revenge arc, Desrussie’s and Pol Roger’s deaths are exemplary in this sense, liable to trigger laughter mixed with glee in camp horror fans. Of the long string of gruesome killings that constitute the horror narrative, only the macabre humor of Desrussie’s and Pol Roger’s deaths elicited laughter from me. However, many of the deaths punishing those involved in the sacrifice ritual offer a satisfaction similar to that provoked by the first two. This pleasure is also found in cinematic texts focusing on monstrous white women such as *Carrie* (1976) and *Jennifer’s Body* (2010), as well as in Black horror films like *Sugar Hill* (1974), in which an army of Black zombies wreaks bloody havoc at the behest of Sugar, who seeks to avenge her boyfriend’s murder by the underlings of a white crime boss (Means Coleman 139-40). These horror narratives invite their audiences to identify or at the very least empathize with succubae and zombies as these monstrous figures exact satisfying revenge on figures of oppression. Moreover, unlike the eponymous *Carrie* and *Jennifer*, but consistent with the fate of the female protagonists of many rape-revenge narratives (Creed 123), Célanire is not punished for her (admittedly contested) involvement in any of the novel’s mysterious deaths. Célanire is a monster who emerges victorious over her foes, whether those who have wronged her or those who simply stand in her way.

In this, *Célanire cou-coupé* represents a departure from the representation of Black femininity (or lack thereof) in the vast majority of mainstream horror

texts. While Célanire's racial identity remains one of the novel's many mysteries, given that many characters read her as Black, it is important to explore the novel's relationship to such texts. As Kinitra D. Brooks points out, most horror texts featuring heroic women such as the slasher film's Final Girl (a lone woman who emerges victorious over the slasher villain), the rape-revenge narrative's righteous avenger, and the zombie apocalypse film's female survivor "unfortunately default to explorations of white womanhood" (19). Black women are often erased from popular horror texts produced by non-Black artists, even when white women's and Black men's experiences are included (Brooks 6). Black women who occupy a more prominent role as the horror text's principal monster are generally not destined to survive their conflict with the narrative's white heroes. Such is the case for vampire Katrina in *Vamp* (1986) and vampire queen Akasha in *Queen of the Damned* (2002) (Means Coleman 165-66; Hudson 148). Robin R. Means Coleman argues that those Black women who are featured in 1970s horror films, the decade when women first rose to prominence in mainstream horror, constitute a variation on the "Final Girl" that she terms the "Enduring Woman," whose fight continues after the defeat of the film's monster. The latter, "often amorphously coded as 'Whitey,'" frequently represents broader forms of systemic oppression that do not disappear with the closing credits (132).

In contrast, Célanire is the ultimate winner, both monster and survivor, whose lack of vulnerability, despite her multiply marginalized position as a dark-skinned queer woman, offers the reader a sense of catharsis. Even if *Célanire cou-coupé* is read as a historical novel, Célanire's rise to power affords an analogous form of satisfaction, as her political and social savvy seems to protect her from the fate of women in similar positions. If we read the novel as a supernatural horror narrative, the sense of Célanire's invulnerability only grows, as her shrewdness is compounded by her ability to deploy occult forces. Such an affective response to Célanire's assertion of power aligns this novel with women's revenge narratives, and recalls research by Annette Hill on female viewers of films featuring violent women, which revealed how some such spectators experienced catharsis "in relation to their own sense of vulnerability, particularly in terms of gendered violence and sexual assault" (Heller-Nicholas 114). While it is not rape that drives Célanire's quest for revenge, the botched sacrifice is framed as gendered violence; the grotesque scar that results from Dr. Pinceau's operation is described by the doctor himself as "violacée comme un sexe infibulé" (119) 'purplish as an infibulated labium' (109). The reference to female excision here recalls an impassioned (if satirical) speech delivered elsewhere by Célanire, who decries the practice as an "intolérable agression perpétrée contre les femmes pour contrôler leur sexualité" (34) 'intolerable aggression . . . perpetrated against women in order to control their sexuality' (24). Given these parallels, it is useful to explore *Célanire cou-coupé*'s relationship to

the broader category of the “woman’s revenge film” (Creed 123), even though rape is generally the triggering event in such texts. Despite the trauma inflicted on the infant Célanire, any subsequent appearance of vulnerability on her part is revealed to be mere performance, as each threat to her social status or bodily autonomy is countered by deft maneuvering or brutal violence.

Beyond this question of shared affective investments, *Célanire cou-coupé* bears remarkable similarities to the narrative structure of revenge horror narratives. Jacinda Read explains the rape-revenge narrative structure as “a sequence of narrative events (rape, transformation, revenge) occurring in a particular order, combined with a specific set of character functions or spheres of action (victim, rapist, avenger)” (242). Read’s modeling of the rape-revenge cycle is particularly helpful for isolating *Célanire cou-coupé*’s variations on this structure. While the novel’s key narrative events unfold in the chronological order that Read identifies, the triggering event of gendered violence is not narrated until the middle of the non-linear novel, long after the mysterious deaths have begun. Thus, the first deaths we see position Célanire as a calculating social climber, whose traits associate her more with the psychotic slasher than with the righteous avenger.

While Desrussie’s and Pol Roger’s deaths offer a pleasure akin to that afforded by an act of vengeance, the death of Charlotte de Brabant—another early killing—is unlikely to provide the same satisfaction. As the wife of colonial administrator Thomas de Brabant, Charlotte is certainly implicated in the colonial enterprise, and yet, it is difficult to read her death as a blow to this system. Rather, it serves to deepen Célanire’s complicity with the administration, paving the way for Célanire to marry her lover Thomas and subsequently return home as the wife of Guadeloupe’s new colonial governor. Charlotte’s death is an early indication that Célanire’s violent acts, including the revenge arc, will ultimately resist being read as an allegory of revolt against oppressive forces.

The actual circumstances of Charlotte’s death form an ellipsis, and its cause remains unknown. The condition of her mutilated corpse leads some from the local community to attribute her death to another wild animal attack. However, as with the peculiarly focused lions that descended upon Pol Roger, Charlotte’s demise smacks of the supernatural. Her body is found in an inaccessible part of the forest; moreover, no lions had been seen in the area (62). These facts lead some observers to seek another explanation; readers who approach the novel as a supernatural horror narrative might likewise search for another cause of death. The narration of the events leading up to Charlotte’s disappearance certainly suggests Célanire’s involvement, as Charlotte is last seen at the door of the “Foyer des métis” (16) ‘Home for Half-Castes’ (4), where she has gone to confront her rival, now director of the Foyer. As the narrator recounts through indirect discourse, Charlotte imagines Célanire lurking in the Foyer like an “araignée

carnivore emmêlée dans sa toile” (60) ‘flesh-eating spider spinning her web’ (49). Richard Philcox’s translation replaces the passive form “emmêlée” with the active verb “spinning,” thereby assigning agency to the creature. This translational drift seems to implicate Célanire more directly in Charlotte’s death than in Desrussie’s, where an actual spider was involved, as Célanire herself attributed Desrussie’s death to a helpful intervention by her “patron” (19) ‘Master’ (7).³ This is one of many examples where Célanire is compared to an animal, recalling the long history of dehumanizing racist and misogynistic clichés about Black women (Mardorossian 179-80). Nevertheless, as suggested previously, the accumulation of bizarre animal attacks with similar *modi operandi* over the course of the narrative renders it increasingly improbable that this violence is unrelated to Célanire’s will.

Moreover, the image of the carnivorous arachnid associates Célanire’s purported monstrosity with her position at the Foyer, reinforcing the sense that her intentions are far from benign, as the narrator has already signaled how Célanire’s activities there have clear, if complicated, ties to French colonial interventions in Côte d’Ivoire. Célanire systematically exploits the colonial apparatus to transform the dilapidated Foyer into a well-oiled capitalist machine. Condé highlights the economic motive behind the Foyer’s new wellness regime, explicitly comparing Célanire’s scrutiny of the Foyer’s eager new female recruits to physical inspections “du temps des marchés aux esclaves” (27) ‘as if she were back in a slave market’ (17). Describing how Célanire examines each candidate “[d]epuis les dents jusqu’à la plante des pieds” (27) ‘[f]rom their teeth to the soles of their feet’ (17), Condé transfers the slave market, a site of historical horrors, to the Foyer’s Edenic gardens (27). Thus, the image of the spider in its web is both reminiscent of the dehumanization of Black women and an apt metaphor for Célanire’s own dehumanization of the women who come to the Foyer seeking a better life. Beyond this moral dubiousness, the violence done to Charlotte’s body is implicitly linked to that inflicted on the infant Célanire herself, as the term “spectacle” is used to describe both the ghastly sight of Charlotte’s mangled corpse (62) and the “spectacle inouï” (164) ‘incredible sight’ (154) of the human sacrifices performed by Célanire’s would-be executioner, Madeska. This echo suggests that, having transformed from victim to victimizer, Célanire now has

³ Philcox—both Condé’s translator and her husband—asserts that his translation of *Célanire cou-coupé* is largely faithful to the original (“Fidelity” 34). However, he also affirms that his intimate relationship with Condé, particularly his familiarity with her sources of inspiration, authorizes him to “flesh out” certain aspects of the original works, including by making them more accessible to Anglophone readers (31). While I am hardly suggesting that Philcox’s translation constitutes a definitive interpretation of *Célanire cou-coupé*, it is tempting to look for insights into Condé’s notoriously slippery discourse by reading between the two versions.

much in common with Madeska; her role as an agent of violence does not map neatly onto the third position of “avenger” common to rape-revenge narratives.

Despite the novel’s structural similarities to rape-revenge narratives, the deaths presenting more self-interested motives align Célanire with the slasher.⁴ As Creed observes, in many popular 1990s horror films featuring a female slasher villain, the slasher is an outsider intent on “possess[ing] what has been denied her” (122). While both the psychotic slasher and the heroic avenger demonstrate cunning in pursuit of their goals, many of the mysterious killings that take place around Célanire in Côte d’Ivoire seem coldly calculated to allow Célanire to possess greater social advantages: a superior position at the Foyer, a powerful husband. Whereas Read contrasts the fantasy world of the slasher film with the more reality-based world of the rape-revenge film, highlighting the latter’s connection to the socio-historical development of second-wave feminism (25), I argue that both the psychotic slasher and revenge arc aspects of *Célanire cou-coupé*’s horror narrative inform the novel’s commentary on the difficulties of interpreting violent events: the horrors of history.

Historical Horror(s)

Early historians of the 1881 Cañete Valley violence framed the massacre’s agents precisely as inhuman monsters, drawing on Juan de Arona’s unsubstantiated, hyperbolic account of the attack in *La inmigración en el Perú*. More recent historians have interpreted both the circumstances of the massacre and Arona’s representation of it through reference to Peru’s history of slavery and colonialism. Notably, Condé declared the latter historical reference point to be of limited usefulness for interpreting new patterns of violence such as the January 2015 terror attacks (Célestin 155). As Simek observes, for Condé, “contemporary terrorist violence breaks with prior models of revolt, and thus requires new explanatory frameworks” (“The Inhuman” 31). Although it took place more than a century before the 2015 attacks, the Cañete massacre is relevant to what Condé sees as a dimension of contemporary terror in that the conflict in Peru was not an expression of the “divorce entre le monde développé et le monde sous-développé” (Célestin 155) ‘divorce between the developed world and the underdeveloped world.’ Instead, both the agents and the victims of the violence belonged to marginalized groups in nineteenth-century Peruvian society, albeit to different ethnic groups. The gruesome deaths of Célanire’s adoptive mother Ofusan and of her biological father Yang Ting seem to suggest that those involved in acts of violence cannot always be neatly grouped in the categories of victim and

⁴ Creed defines a slasher film as one in which “a psychotic killer murders a large number of people, usually with a knife or other instrument of mutilation” (124), which applies to *Célanire cou-coupé* if we consider the numerous killer animals as her “instrument[s].”

oppressor. While the intertextual relationship with Arona's narrative prompts a reexamination of his demonization of the Afro-Peruvian women who participated in the Cañete violence, reading *Célanire cou-coupé* as a horror narrative suggests the limits to reading Célanire's violence as an allegory of anti-colonial or anti-patriarchal revolt. Critics have convincingly demonstrated that Célanire's status as a female slashee is monstrous in that her sexuality, her racial indeterminacy, and her transgression of gender roles represent a threat to the hierarchies underpinning the dominant social order in colonial Côte d'Ivoire and Guadeloupe (Mardorossian 175-78; Fulton 100, 103). However, references to these oppressive structures do not fully explain her monstrosity as the slasher.⁵

Before turning to Yang Ting's death, I will briefly explore Ofusan's killing, which similarly references a historical atrocity. When Ofusan announces her intention to leave her husband and take Célanire to live among her people in the mountains, she is mauled to death by a mastiff of extraordinary size and strength, whose behavior—it goes straight for Ofusan and then disappears—recalls that of Pol Roger's lions. Despite the similar *modus operandi*, this killing stands out from the others on several levels. Firstly, Ofusan adored Célanire, showering her with unreciprocated love. Given her distaste for her mother and immoderate passion for her adoptive father, Célanire would not have wished to accompany her mother to her remote homeland; Ofusan's murder is motivated by a child's desire to have her own way. Secondly, as indicated above, the attack on Ofusan is explicitly aligned with the horrors of plantation slavery, as the dog is described as “pareil à ceux des chasseurs des nèg mawon” (119) ‘like those used to hunt down the maroons’ (109). If we accept the theory voiced by a member of Ofusan's Wayana community that she was killed by a demon at her daughter's behest (181), then Célanire here resembles a calculating narcissist, closer to a psychotic slasher (Creed 126) than a righteous avenger. This episode of the horror narrative is lent further weight by previous deaths with similarly cold motives. These deaths do not fit smoothly into a narrative structure that would legitimate the violence as revolt against an oppressive system.

Within the logic of the horror narrative, Yang Ting's death culminates a revenge spree that bears remarkable similarities to other women's revenge narratives, and tempts the reader with many of the same cathartic pleasures. If we accept Célanire as the author of his brutal murder, what is the nature of her monstrosity? Does she appear here as an avenger? Or does this killing

⁵ In this, the novel differs from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), to which *Célanire cou-coupé* has been compared (Gyssels, *Passes*; Debrosse). Means Coleman suggests that Morrison's novel, unlike its filmic adaptation (1998), presents *Beloved* not as the “exotic, grotesque freak” or spectacle of monstrosity that she appears in the film, but as a “metaphor for history, memory, and trauma” in the context of American slavery (186).

contaminate all the pleasures afforded by previous installments of the revenge fantasy?

Yang Ting's mutilated corpse is found in Lima—where he has fled from Guadeloupe—after he leaves his favorite bar with a woman, Amparo, whose physical description bears a striking resemblance to that of Célanire, and who subsequently vanishes without a trace:

Le corps de Yang Ting était nu, couvert de morsures, de profondes entailles, de griffures, de contusions. Pourtant, le détail qui portait l'horreur à son comble, c'était que le sexe avait été arraché et placé, tel un cigare, dans la bouche entrouverte. (224)

Yang Ting's body was naked, covered with bite marks, deep gashes, scratches, and bruises. But the horror was capped by the sight of his male member, which had been ripped off and stuffed into his half-open mouth like a cigar. (214)

The manner and motive of Yang Ting's murder align it with several previous deaths; and yet, the intertextual fabric of its narrative sets it apart. The deaths of Desrussie, Pol Roger, and Charlotte, as well as the numerous targets of Célanire's revenge spree, appear unrelated to specific historical events; the narrative of Pol Roger's death even emphasizes its own fictitiousness through the explicit reference to Amadou Hampâté Bâ's semi-autobiographical novel *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin* (1973).

The rare reader familiar with Arona's narrative of the Cañete massacre will recognize another intertext in Yang Ting's murder scene, although unlike the allusion to Hampâté Bâ, the citations of Arona go unacknowledged. The most gruesome aspect of Condé's depiction of Yang Ting's mutilated body—his severed penis, placed in his mouth like a cigar—is lifted nearly verbatim (albeit in translation) from Arona's account:

Los cadáveres de los chinos . . . servían de profanación báquica y canibalesca á las mujeres y á los muchachos. Las mismas negras que habían compartido el contubernio regalado de las víctimas, escarnecían sus cuerpos mutilándolos y poniéndolos por irrisión en la boca entreabierta, figurando un cigarro, los miembros sangrientos y palpitantes que les amputaban. “Déjalo ese para mí!” gritaban las negras disputándose las víctimas, ebrias de sangre como las mujeres que descuartizaron á Penteo. (51)⁶

⁶ Many thanks to Carmen Moreno-Díaz for help in translating this passage.

The bodies of the Chinese . . . were subjected to Bacchanalian and cannibalistic defilement by the women and the boys. The same Black women who had shared an illicit cohabitation gifted by the victims ridiculed their corpses, mutilating them, cutting off their bleeding and palpitating members and placing them in their mouths like a cigar, as a joke. “Leave that one for me!” the Black women yelled, fighting over the victims, drunk on blood like the women who tore Pentheus to pieces.

This citation of Arona is preceded by a reference to the history of the massacre itself. Condé presents the Cañete violence in a more ambiguous way than Arona’s historiography, associating historical details with the idle talk of bar patrons. These commentators dip into racist clichés about Chinese masculinity and sexuality as they observe Yang Ting’s departure from the bar arm-in-arm with the mysterious Amparo:

Certains demandaient si Yang Ting ne savait pas ce qui était arrivé dans la vallée de Canete quand, en une seule journée, on avait massacré plus de mille Chinois parce que l’un d’entre eux avait osé toucher à une *zamba*. D’autres ne se gênaient pas pour faire des comparaisons désobligeantes entre les performances sexuelles des Chinois et celles des nègres, plus gaillards et plus virils. (223)

Some of the regulars wondered whether Yang Ting had heard of the incident in the valley of Canete, when over a thousand Chinese had been massacred in a single day because one of them had dared lay hands on a *zamba*. Others had no scruples making offensive comparisons between the sexual performance of the Chinese and the blacks, who were more hot-blooded, more virile. (213)

Scholarly consensus supports many of the claims circulated by these gossips. Heidi Tinsman affirms that “[t]here is no doubt that Chinese people were targeted and killed in large numbers in 1881 [in Cañete and Lima] because they were Chinese. . . . [A]nd African-descended Peruvians, including women, were certainly involved in the attacks” (281). However, as Tinsman convincingly argues, a rare Chinese account of the attacks differs strikingly from Arona’s narrative in that it “did not attribute murderous acts to Africanness or black women’s depravity,” even as its authors “acknowledged gender and racial conflict between black and Chinese people” (298-99).⁷ While Condé’s version of the

⁷ I use the term “Chinese” rather than “Chinese Peruvians” to refer to the victims and survivors of the Cañete violence, as it is difficult to ascertain how these individuals perceived their national

Cañete violence aligns closely with the details of Arona's account, its association with gossip and stereotypes places it on uneasy footing with historical fact; even the reader who does not recognize Condé's citation of Arona can sense the dubious character of the historical account offered by the mingled voices of the narrator and the bar's regulars.

This ambiguity grows when one turns to the source material. Examining Condé's novel and her intertextual writing practice in relation to Arona's narrative, the reader is struck by the strangely literary quality of the latter. For instance, in the passage cited above, Arona refers twice to the myth of Pentheus, a Theban king who refused to recognize the divinity of Dionysus and was subsequently torn apart by a group of women caught in the throes of a Bacchic frenzy. Pentheus is a minor character of Greek mythology, and figures rarely in its interpretations; the most prominent and detailed evocation of his story is found in Euripides's tragedy *The Bacchae*. While Arona's first reference to the myth is subtle, metaphorically evoking Bacchic rites in the image of the "profanación báquica y canibalesca," the second directly compares the women involved in the Cañete violence to the Bacchantes who dismembered Pentheus. In borrowing from Arona, Condé aligns Yang Ting's murderer with these historical actors. One might wonder whether, in citing Arona, Condé is positioning Célanire as one of the Bacchantes from Pentheus's tale, and thereby suggesting that the killing of Yang Ting—and by extension the Cañete violence—is justified. Another postcolonial revision, Wole Soyinka's play *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973), more explicitly frames the attack on Pentheus as the action of "a coalition of the marginal and oppressed elements in pursuit of liberation," dramatically expanding what is only a "subtext of social conflict" in the original (Okpewho 45).

This moment in Condé's novel allows for a reconsideration of Arona's version of historical events by suggesting the similarities between Célanire, a fantastical or even supernatural figure, and the purported agents of the Cañete violence. Arona's evocation of Bacchic ritual toes the line between metaphor and hyperbole, and the prominent place of literary intertexts calls attention to the rhetorical construction of his narrative. For readers of *Célanire cou-coupé*, Arona's representation of the Afro-Peruvian women allegedly involved in the violence is strongly reminiscent of various figurations of Célanire: a sensual woman with a voracious appetite; a monster with a blood-smeared mouth. A comparison between the texts casts doubt on Arona's account, but does this doubt contaminate the horror narrative?

identity. Although there had been Chinese contract workers in Peru since 1849, Tinsman contends that many of the plantation laborers had arrived more recently and were still indentured in 1881 (312n58).

The suggestion that Célanire has been wrongly demonized by superstitious gossips is repeatedly dangled by the narrator in relation to the supernatural explanations of the mysterious deaths that take place in her orbit. Some of these commentators are involved in supernatural practices themselves; others are casual observers who form a Greek chorus of local gossips that is reconstituted in each of the successive narrative settings. One of the Foyer's employees alleges that Célanire can shrug off her body like a snake its skin, and claims to have seen her return home in the wee hours, "la bouche barbouillée de sang" (84) 'her mouth smeared with blood' (75), and slip back into the pile of skin awaiting her on the floor.⁸ Unsurprisingly, given that Condé frames her narrative as a fantastical tale, the narrator undermines confidence in such stories by intimating that they are born of jealousy over Célanire's meteoric social rise, as well as anger over her persistent flouting of cultural and social norms. For instance, the story of Célanire's shape-shifting is punctuated by the rhetorical question, "Peut-on réellement avoir foi en pareilles bêtises et malparlances?" (85) 'Can one really believe such nonsense and malicious gossip?' (75).

On the contrary, the nature of Yang Ting's murder and its aftermath seem to confirm Célanire's status as a bloodthirsty monster. Célanire's monstrous appetite is once again evoked when she falls ill in Lima, and is nursed back to health by a mysterious woman, Mme Eusebio, who reportedly puts Célanire on a fortifying diet of blood and offal. The narrator leaves little doubt that Célanire's illness is linked to Yang Ting's murder, as the description of her condition—"[o]n aurait dit qu'elle venait de livrer une bataille qui l'avait complètement vidée" (228) '[i]t was as if she had just waged a battle that had completely drained her' (218)—links it to the crime scene, whose disorder suggests that "une bataille furieuse s'était livrée" (224) 'a furious battle had been waged' (214). It is possible that Condé is again parodying narratives of women's special relationship to the occult, as she declared regarding *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...* (Pfaff and Condé 60). Such a reading is certainly suggested by an on-the-nose allusion to Isabel Allende in the wake of Yang Ting's death, as his house is said by subsequent residents to be haunted and is dubbed by locals "la Casa de los Espiritus" (225) 'the House of Spirits.' However, even if we are not meant to take this portion of the narrative seriously, it is hard to consider the violence inflicted on Yang Ting in the same vein as the Allende wink. Although an exploration of the Arona intertext calls into question his representation of the historical actors in the Cañete violence, there is no doubt that it is an enormously violent history.

⁸ Célanire's purported ability to shed her skin and her appetite for blood recall the *soukougnan* or *soucouyant*, a female vampire of Caribbean folklore (Anatol 35). Indeed, Célanire is explicitly compared to a *soukougnan* (151).

Readers who bring horror literacies to their reading of *Célanire cou-coupé* will not necessarily have the same affective response to the culminating episode of the revenge arc, which may previously have offered satisfaction. For instance, the demise of occult practitioner Madeska presents an equally gory spectacle, as his body is found with “le ventre ouvert à la cisaille, les tripes à l’air” (156) ‘his belly slit open with his guts oozing out’ (146); scavenging raccoons have disfigured his face almost beyond recognition. Madeska’s brutal disembowelment “à la cisaille” (literally, ‘with shears’) aligns his death more closely with the typical slasher *modus operandi* than any other in the novel. And yet, as we recall the countless infants he sacrificed (164), his death affords a sense of grim satisfaction. Meanwhile, Yang Ting’s seduction by the enigmatic “Amparo” as a prelude to castration is a classic trope of rape-revenge narratives (Read 41). Even among those with knowledge of the Arona intertext, the scene of Yang Ting’s death may afford cathartic pleasures similar to those offered by other installments of the novel’s revenge fantasy, including Madeska’s death, as well as by several episodes of Célanire’s rise to power, however much the latter arc implicates her in the colonial system. Other horror-literate readers may find it difficult to contemplate Yang Ting’s demise without thinking of the Cañete Valley history. In light of its parallels with Ofusan’s killing—and despite the link with Arona’s projection of the Pentheus myth onto the Cañete massacre—it is hard to see Yang Ting’s death as an allegorical form of legitimate counter-violence.

A study of this intertextual moment certainly allows the reader to participate in a reflection on the difficulties of interpreting violence. However, the notion that one must recognize the Arona intertext to understand or enjoy *Célanire cou-coupé* is absurd. To my knowledge, Arona’s treatise has not been translated into French or English, and the Cañete violence has received scant attention even by historians of the War of the Pacific (Tinsman 279-80). Similarly, I do not mean to suggest that one must acknowledge Condé’s engagement with popular horror to appreciate the novel. Makward’s dismissal of popular culture’s relevance for the novel did not prevent her from enjoying it; by maintaining an ironic distance, she finds humor in grotesque elements that might perturb the overly serious, “novice” reader of Condé (29). The final episode of *Célanire cou-coupé*’s horror narrative exemplifies how readers bringing different literacies and cultural references to the text can open up different readings of the novel. Popular literacies can generate reading pleasures and new interpretive horizons not unlike those granted by recognition of the more high-brow filaments of Condé’s intertextual practice. I suggest that there is no more an ideal or “good” reader for *Célanire cou-coupé*, or indeed any of Condé’s novels, than there is an “average” one.

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