

by Julie C. Nack Ngue

# Postcolonial Feminist Re-presentations of Disability (Studies)



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**A** FEW DAYS AFTER PASSING MY dissertation orals, feather in cap, I found myself excitedly explaining my project to a Comp Lit professor (Finally, I thought, I can talk about my project with a smile and a certain air of—dare I say—confidence!). When I told him that I was doing a disability studies reading of novels by African and Caribbean women whose protagonists are typically read as “alienated,” he looked not impressed but dubious—and fairly amused. “Be careful,” he said, “we’re not even sure that’s a real field of studies yet.” But isn’t that what they said for so long about Women’s Studies and Postcolonial Studies? “Yes,” he admitted. And finally, “Well, good luck to you.” After an awkward adieu, I returned to my prospectus with, let’s say, a tempered zeal.

Thanks to a CSW Travel Grant, however, my enthusiasm returned when I tested the waters before the newest of my colleagues and critics—scholars of disability studies. Presenting a paper at the annual SDS (Society for Disability Studies) conference in Washington, D.C. was crucial for the development of my research not only as a DS scholar but also as a women’s studies and postcolonial studies scholar. Despite the profusion of cases of physical and psychological disability and chronic disabling illness in postcolonial literature, the number of scholars who seek to integrate disability studies research into a study of these literatures is disappointingly few. And it should be said that within disability studies itself, there is still much work that needs to be done considering the analytical categories of race, class, and gender of those cultural contexts outside the United States and Western Europe. I am happy to say that my next presentation at SDS in 2007 will be on a panel with two other scholars whose work, like mine, seeks to draw productive links between the oft-segregated fields of disability, postcolonial and women’s studies.

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Contrary to most critical studies of Francophone Caribbean and African women's fiction, my dissertation adopts a broader analytic framework which draws not only from postcolonial studies and feminist theory, but also from disability studies, the history of medicine, and the medical humanities. In step with disability studies scholars such as Catherine Kudlick and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, I read the disabilities of the novels' protagonists not only in terms of their material realities but their problematic historical and contemporary cultural constructions. As numerous feminist theorists have shown, women's bodies and women's health are inextricably bound up in relations of power that define notions of normalcy and normative health within a given cultural context. As such, my analyses focus not only on the subjective experience of illness or disability but on the naming of the ill or disabled subject and how she names herself within the multiple discourses of illness and disability, whether Western, African or Caribbean, colonial or contemporary. These novels, I argue, at once acknowledge the weight of these idioms and signs while simultaneously repositioning and destabilizing their authority. Unable to overcome illness or disability and their concomitant discourses, they propose new ways of living with, or very close to these states of being, all the while rewriting their languages and meanings. Following Gayatri Spivak, I would suggest that these writings reveal a commitment to an ethics of disability. Not only do they respond to the daily struggles in postcolonial women's lives but they call for new relationships to all subjects of illness or disability.

For example, my first chapter argues that the novels *Amour* (1968) by Haitian author Marie Chauvet and *Juletane* (1979) by Guadeloupien-Senegalese writer Myriam Warner-Vieyra, which depict women whose bodies are marked by sexual and racial difference read as aberrance, articulate a new politics of "staring back." As mixed-race, childless women, like the "monstrous" mulattos of colonial-era racial biology, they become the object of the stare, in Rosemarie Garland Thomson's understanding (2001). Such compulsory visibility and enforced pathologies, however, do not keep them from staring back and indicting their observers and abusers. Their journals, I argue, complicate the notion of legibility. In my second chapter, I examine how the autobiographical narratives by Guadeloupien novelist Maryse Condé (*Heremakhonon*, 1976) and Senegalese author Ken Bugul (*Le baobab fou*, 1982), while exposing the psychic and somatic crises that follow in colonialism's wake, illustrate the limits and limitations of narratives of disability and illness. Not only do Bugul and Condé critique Western and indigenous discourses of healing which

often deny the ill or disabled subject any place outside the paradigm of cure or tragic end, but they interrogate the very possibility of expressing or transmitting one's narrative of illness or disability. In the final chapter, I move on to more contemporary portraits of disability in the politically and socially corrupt postcolonial space. Senegalese Fama Diagne Sène's *Le Chant des ténèbres* (1997) and Bugul's *La Folie et la Mort* (2000) comment on the place of the 'madwoman' and her political, medical and socio-cultural treatments in modern-day Africa. While their protagonists resemble docile bodies, in Foucault's terms, their narratives reveal the power of bodies that defy conformity and reclaim subjectivity through their very mobility and grotesqueness.

Like postcolonial scholarship, disability studies address and redresses those master narratives—of imperialism, of medicine, of culture—that have defined and circumscribed the subject. In this way, one can start to imagine new languages of illness and disability through which negative implications are destabilized and effectively refigured. Through these works, I argue, we can identify other possible figures of illness and disability which challenge the dominant paradigms of women's bodily and psychic health which seek to exclude, deny, or eliminate the lived experiences of postcolonial women. Indeed, disability as material thing and as a category of analysis is crucial to our understanding of postcolonial literatures, no matter what some scholars might have to say. My project, grounded in the triumvirate of "new" fields, might benefit from some luck, to be sure. But I am hoping that its voice will emerge from its irreverence—confident and triumphant.



**Julie Nack Ngue** is a doctoral candidate in the UCLA French and Francophone Studies Department and holds a *Maitrise* (Master's) in French from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal. Her dissertation, written under the direction of Françoise Lionnet, considers selected

novels by Francophone African and Caribbean women within a disability studies framework to illustrate the ways in which these texts refigure oppressive discourses of illness and disability. Her research interests include postcolonial literatures and theory, narratives of illness and disability, feminist theory, and disability studies. In addition to publishing an interview with Senegalese novelist Fama Diagne Sène in *Mots pluriels* (20), she has two forthcoming publications, a chapter in a book anthology on Ken Bugul and an article in "Intersecting Gender and Disability Perspectives in Rethinking Postcolonial Identities," a special issue of the journal *Wagadu*.