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Alternative Intimacies, Sympathy and Sexuality in Voltaire's *Zaire*

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Abstract

In 1793 Laurent Jolicoeur, a freed black in Saint-Domingue petitions for the release of an enslaved woman whom he calls *Zaire*. As proof of her virtue, he notes that all of her children were “de sa couleur” – the appropriateness of her non-miscegenated sexual desire stands in for proof of her virtue. While we never ascertain *Zaire*'s outcome, the fate of her literary predecessor in Voltaire's 1732 *Zaire*—one of the most popular plays performed in Saint-Domingue—ends in tragic murder. As an enslaved French girl raised in captivity under the Muslim Sultan Orosmane, the fictional *Zaire* and her captor have fallen in love. However, Orosmane ends up murdering his fiancée *Zaire* in a fit of jealous rage when he suspects her of meeting her lover Nérestan. The tragic irony is that Nérestan is actually her brother, and she was rushing to see him in order to be baptized secretly in the Christian faith. But is *Zaire*'s desire to see her brother entirely bereft of incestuous, queer overtones? The play thus turns on the tragic pun between both senses of “infidèle” (religious and amorous) but also questions the limits of appropriate affective attachment, bond, and faith. The question remains: what emotions sway Jolicoeur to petition for the enslaved *Zaire*'s release, and why does he refer to Voltaire's drama in nicknaming the woman? What affects push the theatrical *Zaire* to hasten to her conversion? I examine the fantasy of deep recognition, or a type of forceful sympathy that ignites a call for justice. In this article I take up Eve Sedgwick's attention to queer affect theory to suggest that what Sedgwick terms “paranoid reading”—a is the hermeneutics of suspicion enacted by Orosmane that races proleptically forward, full of paranoid anxiety. In contrast, the Jolicoeur case and *Zaire*'s unexpected loves enact Sedgwick's “reparative reading,” a type of reading practice motivated by surprising sympathies, unexpected attachments, and pleasurable, if fleeting moments of recognition and reconstitution. I ultimately put forward a theory of “carceral sympathies” in the vein of Regina Kunzel's work on situational queer intimacies in prisons; I examine the ways that an incarcerated situation already positions bodies at the limits of humanness and of reason. In this liminality, it is the cultivation of emotion, and in particular strong sympathies, that most powerfully negotiate the bonds of captivity.

KEYWORDS: 18th Century; Voltaire; *Zaire*; sexuality

Alternative Intimacies, Sympathy and Sexuality in Voltaire's *Zaire*

An image of sympathy: onstage, in Voltaire's 1732 play *Zaire*, the eponymous French Christian slave is moved to tears. She has pleaded with her beloved fiancé, the Muslim sultan Orosmane, to free another captive Christian, and the sight of the newly released man elicits her pity. Despite her elevated status as the soon-to-be wife of the powerful sultan, she cannot help but cry.

Another appeal to compassion: in 1793, Laurent Jolicœur, a freed black in Saint-Domingue, petitions the citizens of the city of Saint-Marc for the release of his slave in the *Moniteur Générale de Saint-Domingue*. Curiously, he draws upon Voltaire's play *Zaire* to make his case, underscoring that the woman, whom he pseudonymizes as *Zaire* in his text, was a model of virtue: "Zaire [his slave] n'est pas une personne ordinaire, et si elle n'avait pas été réduite en esclavage, elle aurait pu rivaliser avec n'importe quelle citoyenne en terme d'élévation des sentiments" (cit. Camier and Dubois 39).

It initially might seem curious that Jolicœur used Voltaire's celebrated tragedy to make his petition. However, Voltaire's play was one of the most popular plays performed in Saint-Domingue and in the metropolitan theaters of France, which signals that Jolicœur was savvy about exploiting the drama's popularity and vibrancy in the public imagination to thrum the heartstrings of sympathy. The rhetoric of Jolicœur's plaint hinges on the mobilization of compassion, sentimentality, and a certain kind of sexuality. Voltaire's tragedy arguably offers a number of themes usefully relevant to Jolicœur's situation.

In the play, Voltaire depicts the plight of *Zaire*, a French Christian who has been raised since infancy in the harem of Orosmane. The play is set against the backdrop of the thirteenth-century Crusades, in which the Christian French soldiers are attempting to wrest control of Jerusalem from the sultan. Onstage, however, the violence is more internal than explicit. *Zaire*, poised to marry the sultan Orosmane, is unaware of her origins or her true identity; the only clue to her past is a wooden cross that was discovered on her person as a baby. She expresses a certain open-mindedness toward the dogmatism of religion and nation:

L'instruction fait tout, et la main de nos pères
 Grave en nos faibles cœurs ces premiers caractères
 Que l'exemple et le temps nous viennent retracer,
 Pour moi, des sarrasins esclave en mon berceau,
 La foi de nos chrétiens me fut trop tard connue (I, i, 109-113).

Despite not being Christian, she has great affection for the religion:

J'honore, je chéris ces charitables lois
 Dont ici Nérestan me parla tant de fois;
 Ces lois qui, de la terre écartant les misères,
 Des humains attendris font un peuple de frères;
 Obligés de s'aimer, sans doute ils sont heureux (I, i, 123-127).

Thus, on the surface, the play would offer themes resonant to Jolicœur: the notion of a woman elevated out of captivity through the appeal of her own sheer virtue and the power of love to transcend

national, racial, class, or hierarchical divides. However, what Jolicœur skims over is the fact that in Voltaire's tragedy, this dream of universal tolerance is slowly shattered—a tragedy not only diegetically, in the literal misunderstanding and misinterpretation of signs, amorous sighs and letters, but also a tragedy on the level of the incompatibility of co-existing, competing ideologies. Therefore, on a deeper level, it seems initially strange that Jolicœur would turn to a drama that is ultimately about the *failure* of compassion and the impossibility of universalizing connections.

While this article does not aim to resolve the historical mystery of the real-life Jolicœur and the enslaved woman, their case illuminates an avenue of inquiry regarding the drama itself. It provides a rich example of the spectatorship of the play, and highlights some of the subtler, more complex emotions that the tragedy elicits. *Zaïre* has previously been analysed with regards to spatial images and metaphors of imprisonment (L. Brian Price) or the effects of such “Orientalizing” tragedies onstage (Angelina Del Balzo). The play is primarily imagined to demonstrate “strong” emotions such as envy, love, faith, or national solidarity. The case of Jolicœur invites the notion that there are subtler, “lower-level” emotions that pull on the spectator; many of these fleeting feelings have been ignored in favor of focusing on grander feelings of religious fervor or universalizing love. However, Jolicœur's petition points to the possibility of what might be called “alternative intimacies.” These are the tenuous tendons of connection and sympathy that aren't easily explained by pre-existing identificatory structures. Rather, Jolicœur's writing highlights one man's inexplicable, tender sympathy for another's plight, just as *Zaïre* is inexplicably moved to tears by the sight of the newly-freed Lusignan. This article will hew closely to such “low level” emotions in order to investigate how sympathy and sexuality tie people together, unexpectedly, in alternative intimacies.

When the mysterious Nérestan returns to ransom the freedom of *Zaïre* and other enslaved Christians, a series of sudden reversals unfolds. Nérestan is shocked to discover that *Zaïre* does not wish to be freed; she will stay with her beloved Orosmane in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the one political prisoner whom Orosmane refuses to release is the deposed Christian king Lusignan, who has languished in a sunless cell for the past twenty years, and must there remain due to his potential disruption to Orosmane's absolute authority. To her great surprise, *Zaïre* learns that Lusignan is none other than her father and Nérestan is actually her brother. Her family is devastated to realize that she will be marrying the Muslim sultan. Nérestan urges her to be rebaptized in Christianity and subsequently die for her faith, as a martyr. Meanwhile, Orosmane, unaware of the family ties that were revealed, suspects that the surreptitious on-goings between *Zaïre* and Nérestan indicate a romantic betrayal. The whole tragedy ends in an *Othello*-like turn, in which the racialized lover (Orosmane) is overcome by feelings of jealousy. When *Zaïre* rushes to meet Nérestan at night for a secret baptism, Orosmane misinterprets the meeting as a romantic tryst, and murders *Zaïre* in a fit of jealousy, crying out, “Misérable *Zaïre*, tu ne jouiras pas” (V, 7, 1514). As Caroline Weber has shown, both the Muslim lover and Christian brother “recoil from her incomprehensible desire—the obscene enjoyment she would ostensibly attain through the simultaneous entertainment of mutually exclusive symbolic claims—and so work pitilessly toward its elimination” (44).

The play's drama hinges on the word *infidèle*, a term that triggers a chiasmus between faith and bond. That is to say: the love that binds Orosmane and *Zaïre* generates a certain type of lover's fidelity but a religious infidelity (she is aligned with the *infidèle*, and violates her Christian heritage). The ties that bind *Zaïre* to her religious faith – tenuously represented by the cross that she bears and Lusignan's narrative – cast her love to Orosmane as a national, racial, and cultural treason, or being another kind of *infidèle*.

Certainly, the very literary/theatrical depiction of emotion is essential to elicit compassion and sympathy for the situations and characters being viewed. As Del Balzo writes (regarding Aaron Hill's *Zara*, the English translation of *Zaïre*), "Oriental tragedy not only plays with competing ideals of sympathetic exchange—requiring imaginative identification with the exotic characters yet reminding viewers of the construction of difference on display—but also opens up the possibility of physical contagion beyond the spectator's control" (503). It is precisely the space of this excess "physical contagion" or unaccountable emotions that interests this article. Rousseau even says, in his praise for *Zaïre* in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*:

Je serois curieux de trouver quelqu'un, homme ou femme, qui s'osât vanter d'être sorti d'une représentation de *Zaïre*, bien prémuni contre l'amour. Pour moi, je crois entendre chaque Spectateur dire en son cœur à la fin de la Tragédie : ah ! qu'on me donne une *Zaïre*, je ferai bien en sorte de ne la pas tuer. Si les femmes n'ont pu se lasser de courir en foule à cette pièce enchanteresse et d'y faire courir les hommes, je ne dirai point que c'est pour s'encourager par l'exemple de l'héroïne à n'imiter pas un sacrifice qui lui réussit si mal ; mais c'est parce que, de toutes les tragédies qui sont au théâtre, nulle autre ne montre avec plus de charmes le pouvoir de l'amour et l'empire de la beauté (105-106).

For Rousseau, even the most hardhearted spectator, well-inoculated against pitiable scenes or mushy romance, would be provoked to imaginative fantasy, "beyond the spectator's control." Male spectators are prompted to view themselves in Orosmane's place; they position themselves as paternalistic caretakers of a *Zaïre* without succumb to the weakness of jealousy or religious zeal. *Zaïre*'s pureness of virtue supposedly elicits such gentlemanly compassion. An equivalent gesture of the play inspiring a man to save a helpless woman—one's own personal *Zaïre*—is enacted by Jolicœur himself when he pens his entreaty.

In contrast, Rousseau is somewhat stymied by the notion of female spectatorship. Such powerful identificatory force does not, and cannot, extend to women's spectatorship (in Rousseau's view), for that would lead to women's over-emotional self-sacrifice. Rousseau instead vaguely attributes women's theatrical pleasure to the play's depiction of "le pouvoir de l'amour" and "l'empire de la beauté." While Rousseau does not state this explicitly, it may be possible to imagine that he is alluding to not the larger-scale emotions of the drama (such as the drive to sacrifice, or dying for love), but rather to a range of lower-level emotions that thread throughout the play and that interweave to create such tenderness or beauty.

Jolicœur's petition, Rousseau's complicated diagnosis of imitative spectatorship, and the play's plot all prompt a bigger question: what kinds of emotions arise in the wake of in sympathy's *fractures* and *failures*? There is a certain cosmopolitan fantasy of equality evoked by Voltaire's play as well as in Jolicœur's petition: a kernel of belief that if compellingly told, certain kinds of stories or people can elicit compassion, and that it is compassion that is potentially liberating. The play invites an experience of compassionate spectatorship while that which it stages is the very *impossibility of compassion to universalize*, or to operate as a bridge. Orosmane's love that transverses the master-slave divide and *Zaïre*'s enthusiastic acceptance of all religions ("J'eusse été près du Gange esclave des faux dieux, /Chrétienne dans Paris, musulmane en ces lieux [I, i, 107-108])—are shown, in the end, to be but false fantasies of universal tolerance.

In the dedicatory epistle to Mr. Falkner, the English ambassador to Constantinople, Voltaire proclaims, "La terre est couverte de nations aussi puissantes que nous. D'où vient cependant que nous les regardons presque toutes avec peu d'estime?" (26) In Voltaire's rhetorical question, emotions serve

as the transversal bridge over geographic, gender, ethnic, or religious divides. And yet despite such optimism in the power to depict other nations, the fantasy of universalism falls short. In her analysis of sentimental literature, Lynn Festa asserts that “by designating certain kinds of figures as worthy of emotional expenditure and structuring the circulation of affect between subjects and objects of feeling, the sentimental mode allowed readers to identify with and feel for the plight of other people while upholding distinctive cultural and personal identities” (3); sentimentality, in this light, operates as doubly fantasy-generating. It offers certain people the illusion of connection across borders, boundaries and positions of power. But then, in sentimentality’s ricocheting reversal, arms outstretched in pity can just as easily become arms that serve to distance; sentimentality’s second kind of fantasy is the one that serves to solidify the us-versus-them boundaries, a double-facedness that Katherine Ibbett calls “compassion’s edge” (3). Compassion, in this light, is “a technology that governs social relations, bringing out the structural affiliations of affect” or a “sifting mechanism” (Ibbett 3-4). Many of these affective affiliations suture together emotional communities that “define themselves as much by what other do not feel as what they themselves do; the figure of the pitiless is as important [...] as the pitier himself” (Ibbett 3-4). This type of compassionate sympathy, then, holds out the tantalizing illusion of commonality while using this idealistic belief to cover over compassion’s winnowing functions, its judgment of who is and is not worthy of compassion.

However, the project of universality was set out to fail from the beginning because of the ways that compassion and universalism were themselves defined. In other words, rather than emotions serving as the bridge between established but mutually respected differences, the ways that Jolicœur and Voltaire depict their pitied characters highlight the necessity of orienting these characters towards strategically deployed *samenesses*. Jolicœur’s petition to free his “Zaïre” illuminates the ways that racial fidelity, being true to one’s lover and to one’s race, is held up as the evidence of virtue. He affirms that Zaïre’s children were all of the same color, suggesting that she did not participate in miscegenation. It is therefore a purity of attachment, of sanctioned intimacy, and properly controlled emotions that serves as proof of this woman’s exceptional virtue. “Quelle citoyenne peut prétendre, comme elle, avoir accepté les caresses de ceux qui lui ressemblaient et de ceux-là seuls?” Jolicœur writes (cit Camier and Dubois 59). The historians interpret this compliment, saying, “Dans une colonie où les relations sexuelles interraciales étaient communes, avançait-il [Jolicœur], Zaïre avait prouvé ses dispositions à la liberté à travers sa loyauté raciale” (Camier and Dubois 59). Therefore, the slave’s properly managed sexuality becomes the instrumental tool of her emancipation. But in Jolicœur’s rhetoric, proving the historical Zaïre’s virtue through a model of emotional attachment across race and class boundaries, the only the fact that she loves within “her own kind” means that she is worthy of compassion.

Similarly, in the play the character of Zaïre is continually pulled toward sameness. Those around her insist that she is only worthy of love if she is made to be the same. Characters must convert to be *entirely* like the religion, culture or tradition of the other. In contrast, Zaïre constantly imagines that virtue alone is enough to bridge the differences: “Eh! pourquoi mon amant n’est-il pas né pour lui? / Orosmane est-il fait pour être sa victime? / Dieu pourrait-il haïr un cœur si magnanime? / Généreux, bienfaisant, juste, plein de vertus, / S’il était né chrétien, que serait-il de plus?” (IV, i, 1082-1086) Zaïre cherishes Orosmane because of his own intrinsic, unique magnanimity—a virtue that transcends religious or ethnic bounds. Orosmane, in contrast, buys into the game of self-stylizing as the same, homogenizing his love relation to be more akin to Zaïre’s “Western” culture. He underscores that while “notre loi, favorable aux plaisirs, / ouvre un champ sans limite à nos vastes désirs” (I, ii, 163-164), he will forsake the “Muslim” right to multiple mistresses: “de ne choisir que vous pour maîtresse et pour femme/ de vivre votre ami, votre amant, votre époux” (I, ii, 190-191).

Orosmane's unique magnanimity is insufficient; he believes he must behave like an Occidental lover. Love and proof of virtue seem contingent on adhering to samenesses (whether in religion or in cultural tradition), and thus the emotional, intimate connection is only fostered and only valid when it pairs like with like, instead of loving another in spite of (or because of) marked differences.

To return to my preliminary question, in the wake of compassion's failure, in the aftermath of the dream of universalism being shattered, what other kinds of emotions emerge? Are we so focused on the larger scale work of emotions (that victoriously suture or detrimentally winnow out) that we are ignoring a whole range of minor, fleeting emotions in the drama? What kinds of emotions that get discounted because they are not as easily legible as the larger-scale sentiments of anger, disgust, sorrow or passion? In what follows I will briefly touch upon three different kinds of alternative intimacies in the play. These are ephemeral, even queer connections that are forged by the force of compassionate touches or strange desires. While on the whole, the drama tells the story of emotion's failures—the dream of compassionate outreach that is undone by ideological rigidity—the drama also depicts several moments where the force of fleeting emotions proves to be stronger than the bonds, terms, names, and divides by which we are normally accustomed to identifying groups and communities.

Alternative Intimacies

One of the strange emotions that the play depicts are carceral intimacies, a sympathy for fellow prisoners that resonates more vibrantly than national or religious ties. Nérestan's request to free the aging prisoner Luisignan has been rejected, which means he cannot fully experience relief or joy after the release of the many other Christian prisoners. "Quel indigne soldat voudrait briser sa chaîne/ Alors que dans les fers son chef est retenu?" (II, i, 374-375), he asks rhetorically. His friend Châtillon despairs that "Luisignan, le dernier de cette auguste race" (II, i, 389) is still imprisoned "dans un cachot, privé de la lumière" (II, i, 421). Nérestan expresses his solidarity or what Ibbett might call "fellow-feeling" not with racial or nationalistic sentiment, but by recalling the affective experience of the prison: "je connais ses [Luisignan] malheurs, avec eux je suis né [...] / votre prison, la sienne, et Césarée en cendre, / Sont les premiers objets, sont les premiers revers, / Qui frappèrent mes yeux à peine encore ouverts" (II, i, 428; 430-433). Carceral sympathies, here, convince each character of the other's compassionate empathy more forcefully than the invocation of national ideologies (such as the shorthand of "French" or "muslim," for example) and serve as both justification and cause of the men's empathetic attunement.

Similarly, Zaïre has no real reason to free Luisignan other than her sympathies for a fellow prisoner. But she takes advantage of Orosmane's affection and makes a special request. When she comes to Nérestan with the announcement, she too draws upon the affective experience of imprisonment as evidence of her sympathy. She employs the "nous" form to highlight their shared sentiments:

Seigneur, nous nous craignons, nous rougissons tous deux;
Je souhaite et je crains de rencontrer vos yeux
L'un à l'autre attachés depuis notre naissance,
Une affreuse prison renferma notre enfance;
Le sort nous accabla du poids des mêmes fers,
Que la tendre amitié nous rendait plus légers (II, ii, 479-484)

This carceral sympathy, comprised of shared emotions of shame, fear, and suffering, unites the two; Zaïre points specifically to the ways that space and experience of prison itself elicits a unique kind of

fellow-feeling. After Luisignan has been freed, she also points to the figure of tears that escape her—emotions that are, themselves, fugitive to reason and to rational control, tears that flow in spite of herself, primarily because of her firsthand incarcerated experience: “Mes larmes malgré moi me dérobent sa vue. / Ainsi que ce vicillard j'ai languie dans les fers; / Qui ne sait compatir aux maux qu'on a soufferts?” (II, ii, 514-516) Nérestan immediately recognizes a sympathetic resonance with her tears: “Grand dieu! Que de vertu dans une âme infidèle!” (II, ii, 517)

Carceral sympathies are significant because of their force “malgré soi”. Zaïre initially imagines that she could be malleably altered by the location in which she is raised; one’s upbringing and national-cultural context “forment nos sentiments, nos moeurs, notre créance./ J’eusse été près du Gange esclave des faux dieux,/ Chrétienne dans Paris, musulmane en ces lieux” (I, i, 106-108). However, despite these grand declarations of universal possibility, it appears that the carceral experience trumps the national ideologies, propelling her to “compatir” with the sufferings, shame, and despair of her fellow prisoners more so than her adopted nation or religion.

The second form of alternative intimacy can be found in the immediacy of what might be termed the “refugee family.” Cross-applying the rather anachronistic term of “refugee” allows us to better see the fleeting emotions and intimacies at hand. In the play, the father (Lusignan), son (Nérestan) and sister/daughter (Zaïre) only share the stage for a brief scene of recognition as they are momentarily rejoined before Lusignan dies. Prior to the moment of revelation itself, Lusignan and Châtillon recount the horrific splintering of their family. Châtillon says, “Je tenais votre fille à peine en son berceau” and reveals that he barely managed to baptize the girl before “les Sarrasins de carnage fumant/ Revinrent l’arracher à mes bras tout sanglants” (II, iii, 588; 591-2). While the play takes place against the backdrop of thirteenth-century Jerusalem and the historical Crusades, the narrative of families being shattered and torn apart by violence and religious warfare seems presciently and eerily modern. Like many refugee families today, Lusignan’s family must recompose itself hastily, drawing upon fragile archives, such as memory, the markers of scars, friends’ testimonies, and fragments of objects to rebuild the ties between them. While the play itself does not question the veracity of Lusignan’s recognition of his children, it is apparent that the characters have been seeking and yearning for a family for some time. Zaïre even says, near the beginning of the play, “Le ciel m’a-t-il jamais permis de me connaître? / Ne m’a-t-il pas caché le sang qui m’a fait naître?” (I, i, 89-90). The drama highlights these emotions of familial longing and recomposition more than verisimilitude of action or even the likeness of this composed “refugee family” to a traditional family unit.

Significantly, these powerful emotions—the desire to find one’s family and to be, in turn, found—are the *first* to sway the characters; the characters even self-reflexively remark upon their own forceful experiences of sentiment that lies outside of their reason or comprehension. Zaïre says “De quel trouble nouveau tous mes sens sont atteints!” (II, iii, 608). Lusignan cries out, “Je revois... Je succombe à mon saisissement” to which Zaïre replies, “Qu’entends-je? et quel soupçon m’agite en ce moment? / Ah, Seigneur! ...” (II, iii, 615-617). Their emotional recognition takes the place of linguistic expression; their remarks highlighting the force and intensity of their sentiments serves a type of phatic function, merely affirming and confirming that the other, too, is experiencing some unnameable, profound movement of sympathy, in excess of language itself. Following the sympathetic “trouble” and “agitation,” Lusignan weaves together the markers that identify his family: a scar on Nérestan’s chest and a cross found with Zaïre as a baby.

Later in the same scene, Lusignan begs Zaïre to undertake an ad-hoc performative utterance in order to confirm her Christian faith. As Weber argues, “Whereas Nérestan’s allegiance to Lusignan and the Catholic people is inscribed in his very flesh—over his heart, no less—Zaïre’s is figured more superficially by a crucifix that she can don or remove, expose or display at will” (50). While Zaïre,

Lusignan, and Nérestan initially constituted a “refugee family” knitted together by the attunement of their sentiment, once they are reminded of the larger-scale structures of identification (religions, ethnicities, nations) Lusignan requires *Zaïre* to verbally re-inscribe herself in the filial role. “Ah, mon père!” cries *Zaïre*, “Cher auteur de mes jours, parlez, que dois-je faire?” (II, iii, 689-690). Lusignan demands, “m’ôter, par un seul mot, ma honte et mes ennuis, / Dire, Je suis chrétienne” (III, iii, 691-692). *Zaïre* replies affirmatively, but brokenly: “Oui... Seigneur... Je le suis” (III, iii, 692); her speech act proves to be insufficient. Later, Nérestan decides to bestow a second baptism, as a means of performatively imposing her Christian identity. He is furious to discover that she is betrothed to and loves Orosmane, and Nérestan’s words ring with violence and threat. He says of his arms: “Il [ce bras] ne souffrira pas qu’à son culte engagé, / Entre un barbare et lui ton cœur soit partagé. / Le baptême éteindra ces feux dont il soupire, Et tu vivras fidèle, ou périras martyre” (III, iv, 881-884). We seem very far from the harmonious attunement and “natural” force of emotion and recognition that the “refugee family” embodied, however fleetingly composed or re-constituted. Thus, the force of the first “refugee family” ties, however harmonious and emotionally powerful, are subsequently rendered null by the re-imposition of traditional family forms.

The third type of alternative intimacy might be found in a queer reading of the relationship between the siblings. Orosmane erroneously accuses *Zaïre* of harboring a romantic interest toward Nérestan. But the spectator or reader can also imagine a sense in which the jealous inkling that Orosmane alludes to might actually be a spark of a connection: familial, incestuous, carceral sympathy or otherwise. We are set up to believe this, too, insofar as the revelation of the family tie is given as a sudden surprise, only a few scenes after we hear of the mystery of *Zaïre*’s origins and the entrance of Nérestan. We remember the laudatory idealizing tones with which *Zaïre*’s friend Fatime describes Nérestan. That eroticized vision of Nérestan overlaps with *Zaïre*’s eagerness to see him. Fatime says:

Avez-vous oublié
Ce généreux Français, dont la tendre amitié
Nous promit si souvent de rompre notre chaîne?
Combien nous admirions son audace hautaine!
Quelle gloire il acquit dans ces tristes combats
Perdus par les chrétiens sous les murs de Damas! (I, i, 27-32).

It is thanks to the quickness with which this transition occurs that we have a kind of “persistence of vision” that confuses the eroticized anticipation with the sisterly pleasure. Persistence of vision describes a kind of optical illusion in which two scenes—for example a bird and a birdcage—are individually printed on sides of a coin. When the coin is rapidly spun, our vision blends the images of the two sides to produce the illusion of the two images overlapping: the bird in the cage. Or, in this case: the veneration of an admired man is confused between *Zaïre*’s love for him as a sibling or the desire for him as a venerated soldier. The temporality of the play’s events, in abrupt contrast to the slowed, waiting tempo of incarcerated life, yields such queer, quasi-incestuous persistence of vision.

Much work in queer studies has been done on “chosen families” and other forms of non-biological, ad-hoc kinship (Kath Weston) as well as carceral intimacies (Regina Kunzel).¹ But regardless of the possibility of cross-applying these contemporary theories to an eighteenth-century tragedy, the play does depict the strange bonds that are forged in the queer time and place of the

¹ These include Kath Weston’s *The Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Regina Kunzel’s *Criminal Intimacy* (University of Chicago Press, 2008)

prison/palace/harem (the stage directions vaguely indicate “au sérail de Jérusalem”). In other words, the emotions that tie the characters together in carceral sympathy or the unite the recomposed refugee family might be considered wayward ones, aslant or askance from the normative economy of emotions that orients affects to national, political or religious ideologies. Even though these moments of sympathy or strong affinity are only briefly present and later usurped by the larger-scale drama of Zaire’s murder, such delicate queer ties are no less significant. Jack Halberstam argues that

Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding [...] Foucault’s radical formulation [that] queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life (3).

Thus, perhaps what is arguably stamped out by Orosmane’s jealous retribution or even Nérestan’s quasi-violently demanded baptism are precisely these fleeting, yet errantly eccentric emotions. If prisons can be considered a “queer” time and place—an aberrance in the normal rhythm of family life or the nation-state, then Zaire’s carceral sympathies or the force of the fleetingly-formed “refugee family” may be queer indeed. In this liminality, it is the cultivation of emotion, and in particular the fostering of ephemeral sympathies, that most powerfully negotiate the bonds of captivity.

Paranoia

The subtler emotions and alternative intimacies experienced by Zaire, Lusignan, and Nérestan in the queer time and place of captivity are present, but often overlooked in favor of the drama of stronger emotions. One of the main emotions that overrides these more fleeting and “low-level” feelings is the depiction of Orosmane’s jealous paranoia. Orosmane says to Zaire as he proposes marriage at the beginning of the play:

Je l'avouerais, mon cœur ne veut rien qu'ardemment;
Je me croirais haï, d'être aimé faiblement.
De tous mes sentiments tel est le caractère.
Je veux avec excès vous aimer et vous plaire.
Si d'une égale amour votre cœur est épris,
Je viens vous épouser, mais c'est à ce seul prix;
Et du nœud de l'hymen l'étreinte dangereuse
Me rend infortuné s'il ne vous rend heureuse (I, ii, 207-214).

His language announces the “caractère” of his “sentiments” that refuse mixity or half-hearted emotions, as a means of boasting of the intensity of his feeling. But this discourse also sets up a totalizing hermeneutic that prioritizes strong, totalizing feelings over weak (or even low-level) sentiments such as those that I analysed in the previous section.

Orosmane’s jealous paranoia is, in two senses, “strong.” Paranoia’s tautological, self-confirming structure makes it, in Eve Sedgwick’s words (via Silvan Tomkins) a “strong theory” of

affect.² In fact, paranoia self-reproduces in a rather unnatural, almost viral manner. Sedgwick writes that paranoia “seems to grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding *or* things to understand” (131). Secondly, paranoia is strong because of its diegetic force: every attempt made to appease or assuage Orosmane’s paranoia only results in amplifying and redoubling it, and the paranoia itself is the animating motor of much of the plot.

Paranoia might be thought of as an addictive emotion, especially as depicted in the drama. It appears that Orosmane enjoys the pleasures of paranoia more than love itself. In other words, while he purports to merely demand Zaïre’s love, much of what propels his reactions and thinking might more precisely be characterized as feeding into his paranoid addiction. When he first observes Nérestan and Zaïre together, he begins to revisit and replay the interaction between the two over and over in his head.

OROSMANE: Corasmin, que veut donc cet esclave infidèle?
 Il soupirait. Ses yeux se sont tournés vers elle;
 Les as-tu remarqués?
 CORASMIN: Que dites-vous, seigneur?
 De ce soupçon jaloux écoutez-vous l'erreur?
 OROSMANE: Moi, jaloux! Qu'à ce point ma fierté s'avilisse?
 Que j'éprouve l'horreur de ce honteux supplice? (I, v, 297-301).

Caroline Weber has highlighted that Orosmane has an “anxious, almost prurient wish to know *what the infidel wants?*” (53), but Weber merely reads this probing imagination as evidence of Orosmane’s jealousy. Might Orosmane also masochistically enjoy (or fear) the spectre of *l'infidèle*, whether in the body of Nérestan, or in the abstract invocation of Zaïre’s infidelity?

For Sedgwick, paranoid reading is strongly associated with a specific kind of temporality, a heightened, fearful relationship to the future. Such “unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward” (Sedgwick 130). This burrowing is necessary in order to prevent the unexpected: “because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known,” (130). When Zaïre asks to defer the marriage (in order to have time to convert), the mere fact of the delay (itself a “bad surprise”) provokes the uncontrolled blossoming of Orosmane’s paranoia. The future orientation is troubled. He says:

Je t'aimerai toujours. Mais d'où vient que ton cœur
 En partageant mes feux, différerait mon bonheur?
 Parle, était-ce un caprice? Est-ce crainte d'un maître,
 D'un soudan, qui pour toi veut renoncer à l'être?
 Serait-ce un artifice? épargne-toi ce soin;
 L'art n'est pas fait pour toi, tu n'en as pas besoin:
 Qu'il ne souille jamais le saint noeud qui nous lie! (IV, ii, 1177-1183).

² Tomkins writes, “Conversely, a negative affect theory gains in strength, paradoxically, by virtue of the continuing failures of its strategies to afford protection through successful avoidance of the experience of negative affect.... It is the repeated and apparently uncontrollable spread of the experience of negative affect which prompts the increasing strength of the ideo-affective organization which we have called a strong affect theory” (cited in Sedgwick 134-135).

With the future tense “je t’aimerai” he tries to reassure himself of the constancy of a future orientation that is pleasing to him. However, the paranoid questions creep in and begin to spiral out of control. He scrutinizes every possibility of emotion that could have caused such delay: from Zaïre’s capriciousness to fear to feint. As Orosmane confronts the possibility of Zaïre’s unfaithfulness, he is not content to face stoically the possibility of rejection; he must know it, investigate it, and stage it for himself. Orosmane later envisions a replacement for Zaïre, pre-empting the blow of infidelity that he fears. He says, “Madame, c’en est fait, une autre va monter/ Au rang que mon amour vous daignait présenter; / Une autre aura des yeux, et va du moins connaître/ De quel prix mon amour et ma main devait être” (IV, ii, 1137-1140). Thus, the force of paranoia prompts Orosmane to sacrifice his love, to fast-forward past the imagined hurt. He assuages his fears (or fantasies) of being replaced by exaggeratedly staging a feigned replacement for the one who will (might) spurn him. We see that Orosmane’s own paranoia begins to usurp his feelings of love or compassion. Such “strong” feelings obliterate the possibility of a universalizing, difference-bridging love due to the addictive sway of paranoid pleasure.

The significance of Orosmane’s paranoia is that it models a means of spectatorship that challenges a compassionate viewing. Sans the paranoid viewpoint, the spectator might have openly sympathized with the pitiable image of Zaïre, imagining her plight. Instead, such moments of sentiment (and the spectrum of alternative intimacies wrought by more subtle emotions) compete with Orosmane’s all-encompassing scrutiny that prompts moments of paranoid skepticism, (scouring the surface image to imagine the worst possibilities). The “strength” of Orosmane’s paranoia thus obscures our attention to the fleeting and more fragile forms of tenuous connections in the drama. All three of the aforementioned alternative intimacies—the carceral intimacies, the recomposed refugee family, and the quasi-incestuous longings—trouble the totalizing vision of Orosmane’s jealous paranoia, in different ways, for they represent various kinds of surprises (good and bad), various queer cravings, and intimate connections that cannot be fully discerned through paranoid scrutiny alone.

Certainly, the emotions that the theater can elicit differ from the historical sentiments of compassion expressed in the Saint-Domingue journal. While I do not wish to overly conflate or equalize between history and fiction, the letter does prompt a question that sheds new light on the play. What was it about the drama that inspired Jolicœur to use Zaïre as an example of connectivity, compassion and sympathy? In the Jolicœur letter, sexuality as a virtue still limited the historical Zaïre to her reproductive capacities, to the exclusion of any other merits—she was lauded only for the fact that she only had children “de sa couleur.” The historians Camier and Dubois point out that the Jolicœur letter might well have been a rhetorical exercise, a satire, or even a fictitious attempt for public sympathy, drawing upon the popular play. We may never know whether Jolicœur’s public plea for compassion was successful, or even if there was a real-life “Zaïre”. But in contrast to the rhetoric of the letter, in which normative sexuality is the justificatory and liberating force for the enslaved woman, Voltaire’s play paints a *range* of intimacies, sympathies and attachments—not necessarily reproductive sexuality, but a spectrum of fleeting, even queer desires that persist. Therefore, even if the arc of the drama shows that the fantasy of cosmopolitanism or Enlightenment equality is only that—a fantasy—there still remains a range of oft-overlooked subtler, alternative or wayward emotions that link together the characters in surprising ways and reveal the potential force of strange, yet fleeting, affects, desires and intimacies.

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