

Inventing Antillean Narrative: Maryse Condé and Literary Tradition

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For Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé, the writer's major role is to disturb ("inquiéter") her readers (PF 77).¹ Her own novels, from her earliest, *Heremakhonon* (1976), to *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989), bear witness to this attempt to disrupt or trouble comfortable, normative positions, whether they be ideological or aesthetic. At the same time, the distinctiveness of Condé's literary contributions, as well as her affinity with other contemporary writers, can be traced through her double identity quest: to discover her role as a black woman and as a representative of an Antillean literature.² Understanding the way these two projects coincide—unsettling norms, affirming postcolonial identities through writing—involves taking stock of the literary and biographical confluences that have shaped Condé's writing over the years. Condé's early years in Guadeloupe, her college education in Paris, her ten years in West Africa, her teaching appointments in France and then the USA, and her return to Guadeloupe in 1986, all feed into her fictional trajectory as she repeatedly works through the notion of an Antillean identity marked by race and gender. Her work also openly draws upon the intertexts of world literature. For Condé, Antillean literature speaks through several countries, several cultures, several languages. This black woman "tiraillée entre la tradition et le modernisme" "torn between tradition and modernity" creates a literary amalgam that successfully mixes traditional and modern concerns (qtd. in Shungu 67).

Condé straddles two literary generations: one that has kept to conventional narrative forms, the other that has launched into novelistic experiments. Through formal experimentation, her recent *Traversée de la mangrove* accounts for and enacts a polymorphous Antillean culture, thereby relaxing barriers between textual self-consciousness and a social referentiality. Using forms from both popular and "high" literature, *Traversée de la mangrove* performs a postcolonial investigation revealing the connections between the past of the Antilles and the ever-changing faces of its modernity. For Condé, the feminine paradox is implicit, although paramount: it is through female voices that

social transformations are most strongly articulated, but it is also through them that the link between past and future is maintained. Before discussing Condé's version of the postmodern in *Traversée de la mangrove*, I would like to consider the evolution of her writing.

Literary Antecedents and the Rebellious Daughter

In many ways, Condé embodies Simone de Beauvoir's image of the original writer who attracts precisely because she shocks or scandalizes (Beauvoir 787). Unsatisfied with tidy oppositions of saints and sinners, victims and persecutors, her fiction finds the difference within any simple or pure identity. All idealism in Condé's work is tinged with ironic, self-conscious overtones that belie the writer's own bouts with colonial politics, as well as with race and gender issues. None of her characters is ever constructed unequivocally: idols reveal their weaknesses; the meek show their strength. And while racial, sexual and political oppressions are always denounced, Condé is more often concerned with tracing their complications and intersections than with the clarity of their definitions. In a 1988 interview, Condé assigns this inclination more to women writers than to men: (we) women try to "explorer les profondeurs de nos sociétés sans trop nous concentrer sur les divisions (noir/blanc, race, racisme) que les auteurs hommes tendent à amplifier" 'explore the depths of our societies without concentrating too much on the divisions (Black/White, race, racism) that male authors tend to amplify' (qtd. in Clark 118). While one may contest the generality of such a statement, it does account for the way Condé's novels sound the depths of social interactions, going beyond clear-cut oppositions. Rather than pitting White against Black, man against woman, in direct confrontation, Condé focuses more on internecine battles, the struggles of people of color within themselves, among themselves, or on the psycho-social restrictions that shape men's and women's choices for interaction.

Condé's particular attention to issues of gender and race has tended to set her at odds with orthodox positions of the Left and the Right (in her fiction as well as in her essays). In her book on black women writers of the French Antilles, Condé refuses any unqualified alignment with white feminists stressing black women's oppression, or with Africans idealizing black women's traditional roles.³ Her early protagonists are exemplary as sets of problems, rather than as models to emulate. In a 1984 interview with a journalist from *Jeune Afrique*, Condé takes her distance from African literature (as the model for black writers) by proclaiming her dislike of Léopold Senghor's works

and her love of those of V.S. Naipaul and of black women novelists in the United States, such as Paule Marshall and Alice Walker (Shungu 67). Condé turns away from black African writers espousing "negritude" (such as Senghor) and the premises of the "Black is beautiful" movement, in favor of a group of Anglophone (racially diverse) writers who bring a less celebratory, more critical eye to their societies' particularities. They are the "contestataires," as she appreciatively calls a Naipaul, a Faulkner, or a Philip Roth. Criticism (of oneself, of others) and autobiographical fiction go hand in hand here. Condé shakes up complacent thinking about what a black Antillean woman writer is supposed to think and with whom she might identify. She is most attracted to *critical* constructions of identity.

But Condé's ambivalence about becoming the obedient black daughter embracing an African lineage or an African literary affiliation does not make her turn any more to France for her literary or cultural identifications.⁴ In her 1988 interview, Condé speaks of reacting against all things French; coming from the Guadeloupean black bourgeoisie which revered French culture and proclaimed the black pride of negritude in the same uncomfortable breath, Condé uses references to France (particularly in *Heremakhonon*) that display the paradox of rejecting a culture while ironically using its linguistic and cultural codes.

The only French author with whom Condé seems to find any affinity is François Mauriac.⁵ It might seem surprising that a black feminist writer from the Antilles should relate her efforts to a Frenchman who is part of the classical, conservative French canon. But given Mauriac's sharply critical view of French provincial society, one can readily see how he fits in with writers like Roth, Walker, and Faulkner, whom Condé respects. Her work has been passably untouched by (post)structuralist French influences involving self-enclosed literary phenomena such as those of the New Novel. I will be showing later, however, that certain parallels can be drawn between her most recent work and some of the New Novel's formal experiments.

Condé has, on the other hand, actively promoted and analyzed French Antillean literature over the years.⁶ Although she professes an intense dislike for the idea of becoming "a national writer" (i.e. "representing Guadeloupe"), she does believe in the shared concerns of the Antilles. The one Francophone writer (from the previous generation) for whom she has consistently expressed her greatest admiration is Aimé Césaire, to whose *Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal* Condé devoted an extended commentary. Condé reads Césaire's poetic account of his return to his native Martinique not as a surrealist

work under French influence, but as a specifically Antillean creation that enacts the renaissance of a people, with its faults and strengths, over and against its colonial background. What sets Condé apart from Césaire is in her emphasis on female characters: she portrays black women as the most oppressed, but also as the most active and possessing the potential to change social mores for the better.

Condé belongs to the generation of Antilleans (and Africans) whose work always reminds us of the experience of colonialism, of being taught French history, geography and civilization instead of the culture of one's home. Condé's work can be considered in three phases. In the first phase of Condé's literary career, being Guadeloupean entails a profound alienation common to many writers of the Antilles.⁷ In *Heremakhonon* and *Une Saison à Rihata* (1980), black Guadeloupean characters act out the alienation of the female slave descendent, who unsuccessfully seeks in Africa (and through men) some trace of an original (authentic) identity reminiscent of a precolonial time and place in which racial dichotomies and hierarchies would not have been operative. The failure of these quests will eventually cause the author and her characters to focus again on the Antilles and on an identity link through a female lineage rather than a male one.⁸

In a second phase, Condé creates fictive histories that document a legitimating past for the Antillean. And although Condé avoids idealizing the collective heritage she researches and (re)creates, this is nevertheless an affirmative stage of her writing, one in which she traces in fiction the possibility of black histories and an intercontinental network in which Antilleans would have a sense of their own syncretic culture. She thus moves away from the "image négative de la culture antillaise" 'negative image of Antillean culture' inherited from her parents' generation (Clark 110). Condé's *Ségou* (1984, 1985), the two-volume saga of the fall of the Bambara empire and the African diaspora, blends fiction and historical document, in effect creating the very ancestry that her previous heroines had longed for. In *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (1986), Condé fictively rescues from historical oblivion a Barbadian female slave imprisoned during the Salem witch trials in the colonial United States. In *La Vie scélérate* (1987), she turns to the fictive genealogy of an Antillean family (based on Condé's own) through several generations and with a staggering cast of characters who come and go in and out of the Antilles at a dizzying pace.

Crucial differences in attitude, genre and style distinguish these two phases of Condé's work. First, the reader notices a gradual shift from an emphasis on the individual's alienated quest for identity to a collective, more harmonized perspective on Antillean distinctiveness.

(Even the *Ségou* novels seem to prepare this.) Condé's particular version of a return to her native land has caused her to focus more and more on the range of physical and social attributes of the Antilles (their social structures, plants, language, religious beliefs and politics) and less on the psychology of the individual protagonist. This new view of the Antilles, from the inside out, is less estranged, more comfortable with its syncretism as a form of value (rather than as a negative sign of imitation). Concurrently, Condé's novels and stories of the second phase change optic: from a certain tough-spirited postmodern view that emphasizes the fragmented, *alienated* quality of *contemporary* discourse and life via an alienated black female subject, Condé moves more toward the *historical* epic that underlines the vast *collective* movements of past societies. Even *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*, which focuses on a particular historical figure, takes care to emphasize *typical* traits of Antillean lore, its myths and magic as they are marked by the feminine. And instead of portraying the Barbadian female slave as a pitiful victim, as the character Véronica Mercier might have done in *Heremakhonon*, Condé's later novel gives voice to a resourceful survivor and heroic resister of oppression. Alienation for the black Antillean woman thus becomes less a matter of *internal* conflict than of social inequity (one that is shown in *Moi, Tituba* to be greater for a black woman than for a black man). Like Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Condé's *Moi, Tituba* rewrites the shadowy figure of a "master narrative" (*Jane Eyre* and the Salem witch trials, respectively) and reinstitutes value in the culture of the Caribbean as it is specifically enacted by a woman (in Condé's case by a *black* woman).⁹

Traversée de la mangrove

Traversée de la mangrove belongs to a new third phase in which Condé plays more consciously with the formal possibilities of literary invention. She appears less concerned with a conventional historical treatment of the Antilles in itself than with complex negotiations between the region's present and past. How do technology, evolving race and gender relations, and in general the trappings (good and bad) of a modern, multicultural society interact with tradition, local superstition, and a distinct Antillean environment (climate, geography, etc.)? As in *Heremakhonon*, the plot of *Traversée* takes place in a present that is understood through the memories of the individual. But like the second phase novels, *Traversée* does not limit its focus to one or two characters; rather, it gives expression to the individuals of an entire community. Antillean culture (like a language) is articulated

in a double move: individuals provide detailed examples of the specific dynamics (*parole*, speech, first person narrative) that are staged in a framework of collective beliefs, mores, social and physical structures that exceed the individual (*langue*, language, third person narrative). *Traversée*'s formal gymnastics allow a critique of the social characteristics of Guadeloupe as an Antillean culture of intersections and paradoxes.

Condé's own return to Guadeloupe is anything but an idealized rediscovery of a lost paradise. In fact, in her 1988 interview she speaks of it as a humbling experience for the writer. She notes that Guadeloupean culture is "une expérience vécue plutôt qu'écrite" 'a lived experience rather than a written one' (Clark 110-12), which tends to place her avocation in the margins. Despite the fact that some of the offensive social hierarchies based on race and cultural origin have loosened their hold over the years, the returning writer is by definition an outsider or foreigner, in fact doubly so: the language spoken by most is Creole, and it is the language associated with the politics of autonomy and independence from France. To speak French (not to mention writing it) is thus to align oneself implicitly with the colonizer—so much so that after a radio talk upon her return, listeners phoned in to ask if this French-speaking Maryse Condé were White (Clark 110-12).¹⁰ Condé's alienation from her island must have felt all the more wrenching because she considers Antillean culture to be actively generated by women more than by men: "Aux Antilles, ce sont les femmes qui élèvent, qui éduquent, qui prennent les responsabilités, qui voyagent, qui vont, qui viennent et les hommes qui sont à l'arrière plan" 'In the Antilles, it is women who raise, who educate, who take responsibility, travel, come and go, and it is men who are in the background' (qtd in Jacquey 58). In *Traversée*, Condé will reconcile her own "foreign" activity with the struggles of women of color torn between tradition and modern life.

The Antillean New Novel, with a Difference

In writing *Traversée de la mangrove*, Condé is, as we have seen, alert to the evolving, ambivalent relationship between formal literature and a popular (oral) culture. Like the popular detective story, *Traversée* is structured around the death of one character, Francis Sancher, whose shadowy identity and enigmatic death are presented as two puzzles to be solved. As in a classical tragedy, the plot is clearly limited in time and space: the action takes place in one night in the small town of Rivière au Sel (Guadeloupe); the corpse is discovered in the evening, a wake

lasts during the night—the time for all to reflect on Sancher's effect in their lives—finally, the town's inhabitants disperse in the early morning. But underneath the deceptively simple plot structure teems an abundance of perspectives, desires and hidden stories of social and personal frustration. As in so many French New Novels, the reassuring format of the murder mystery and the classical time frame are undercut: Condé multiplies the number of perspectives to the point that there can be no single overriding truth (or even a synthesized one) about who Francis Sancher was or how he died. In fact, these questions do not even remain central as the characters multiply: the dead Sancher is more a *catalyst* that triggers memories and eventual change than a conventional character. We are soundly ensconced in the “era of suspicion,” meaning here not just a questioning of literary forms and their adequacy to render reality, but also a questioning of what constitutes the real. The detective story leads us to the recognition of the plurality of meaning: between the narrative's first and last chapters there are twenty short chapters representing nineteen different characters' points of view about Francis Sancher. At the end of the novel, the reader has many pieces of information concerning the dead man, many of which challenge our first impressions, but the narrative is still too sketchy and contradictory to provide a definitive explanation of Sancher.

The mangrove of the title, which Francis Sancher was crossing when he mysteriously died, provides a metaphor for the reader's situation and for Guadeloupe, where it is indigenous vegetation. The mangrove's tree branches that send out in all directions a tangle of roots, new trunks and branches, are a physical equivalent to the jumble of stories that overlap, intersect and crisscross one another. In the mangrove's thick growth it is difficult to tell roots from trunks and branches, origins from effects, beginnings from ends. Similarly, the entanglement of contradictory facts, beliefs and attitudes undermines the reader's desire to get to a univocal truth concerning the “root” or “origin” of Sancher's identity and the cause of his death. There are too many clues, too many competing interpretations, too many questions. Did Sancher die of natural causes as the autopsy stated? Was there a mysterious curse on him and his elders (all of whom died at the age of fifty) for the past sins of ancestors who were white slave owners? Did someone kill him for his money (that disappeared)? Was his death the revenge of one of the village inhabitants? Supernatural and rational explanations compete equally for our attention.

On a more general level, the mangrove, as a profusion of tropical growth, corresponds to the rich spectrum of cultures and races that

makes up the population of Rivière au Sel: descendants of East Indians (the most recent arrivals) and of white plantation owners, mestizos, Blacks, Asians, Haitians. All coexist in this small town, and they bring to it the vestiges of other languages and cultures. The mangrove thus offers the image of a complex, sometimes confused, arrangement ("roots" grow off branches and produce new "trunks") that parallels the hodgepodge of cultures. Condé's image of the mangrove as novelistic and cultural model recalls Deleuze's and Guattari's "rhizome" which has neither beginning nor end and eschews the hierarchical regime of trees and their roots. In both cases, there are "déformations anarchiques" 'anarchic deformations,' for example aerial roots (Deleuze 31). Like the rhizome that is "une antigénéalogie" 'an antigenealogy' proceeding "par variation, expansion, conquête, capture" 'through variation, expansion, conquest, capture,' the cultural mangrove of Rivière au Sel emphasizes the loss of a pure origin—racial or cultural—leaving only a complex intertwining of lines that rely on obscure pasts (Deleuze 32). The criss-crossing, multiple perspectives that fuel Condé's novel are analogous to the "plateaux" of Deleuze and Guattari, segments (of writing) that allow for unexpected exchanges from one to the other and generate new meanings through their interaction or "alliance." Condé's novel belongs to a generation of works that imagine new ways of formulating a cultural (hi)story that eludes strict hierarchy (placing one value system over another) and teleology. Antillean culture, as Condé reads it, would appear exemplary of an open-ended postmodern conceptualization.

Condé's title also comes into play as a self-referential literary device. It involves a *mise en abyme*, for Francis Sancher had planned to write a book called *Traversée de la mangrove*. Again akin to the New Novel (one thinks of Nathalie Sarraute's *Les Fruits d'or* about a novel with the same title) Condé's book playfully suggests commentary about her own work via the title. The pretensions of Sancher's title are deflated (and his own fate indirectly recognized) when a young woman character, Vilma, shrugs and comments on the title's inaccuracy: "On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s'empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s'enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre" 'You don't cross the mangrove. You get caught on the roots of its trees. You get buried and suffocate in the brackish mud' (TM 202). The mangrove is a dangerous quagmire, whether one is referring to the tropical swamp of Guadeloupe or to the verbal quicksand in which the writer or reader risks bogging down. As in Sarraute's novel, the words of the title are used to name the book and describe its contents. But the crucial difference between the New Novel's title and Condé's is that the latter evokes both a

literary (self-)reference *and* a nonverbal object. There are mangroves outside the work, and their physical existence is an important landscape feature for the people, whereas the fictitious novel *Les Fruits d'or* inside Sarraute's novel remains a literary, verbal construct, not an extralinguistic object.

For Condé, literature's self-referentiality plays off its mimetic functions. Describing the Spanish Caribbean novel, essayist and novelist Julieta Campos (born in Cuba, living in Mexico) notes a peculiar Caribbean literary focus that could also apply to Condé's fiction. It involves "una porosidad capaz de absorber y almacenar al máximo sensaciones que se fijan en una atmósfera interior en estrecha simbiosis con lo de afuera" 'a porousness capable of absorbing and storing to the maximum sensations that are fixed in an interior atmosphere in close symbiosis with that of the outside' (111-12). The literary mangrove marks the line of contact between cultural insides and natural outsides. And despite Condé's claims to the contrary, her special blend of historically bound scenarios and supernatural possibilities for explaining those scenarios aligns her fiction with the magical realism of her Latin American counterparts (García Márquez, Cortázar, Fuentes). Octavio Paz's definition of magical art obtains: the universe is conceived of "como un todo en el que las partes están unidas por una corriente de secreta simpatía" 'as a whole in which the parts are united by a current of secret sympathy' (154). Condé leaves her readers to ponder whether unexplained coincidences (such as all Sancher's male forbears dying at age fifty) are rooted in superstition or the real.

Intertextualities

Because self-conscious irony is one of Condé's trademarks, it is not surprising that playful self references abound in *Traversée* (as they do in the New Novel). This self-consciousness is particularly endemic to *Traversée* because we are dealing with the Guadeloupean author analyzing her "own" culture. (I place "own" in quotation marks because the returning writer feels rather like a foreigner.) In several ways, the dead man, Francis Sancher, is Condé's double. Like Condé, Francis Sancher is a disillusioned idealist of about fifty when he shows up in Rivière au Sel to write *his* novel. Sancher has traveled all over the world and has a foreign accent (in his case a Spanish one, in Condé's a French one) and is clearly considered an outsider although he claims to be a native. Sancher's sense of simultaneous estrangement from *and* connection to the island allows for a seesaw movement of identi-

fication with and distance from the community—a movement that Condé enacts in all her writing. Sancher's disenchantment with Guadeloupe's desire for independence, with Marxist revolution, with committed literature (capable of changing the world), make him the critical but sympathetic sounding board for the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel, the image of the author who willingly accepts a marginal (if potentially beneficial) role in Guadeloupean society.

In *Traversée*, the self references can also be critical. The character, Lucien Evariste, a revolutionary sympathizer and aspiring writer, remembers being delighted to meet Francis Sancher (whom he thinks is Cuban), because he has been starved for discussions with writers:

Lucien bondit, songeant à Alejo Carpentier et José Lezama Lima et se voyant déjà discutant style, technique narrative, utilisation de l'oralité dans l'écriture! En temps normal, pareilles discussions étaient impossibles, les quelques écrivains guadeloupéens passant le plus clair de leur temps à pérorer sur la culture antillaise à Los Angeles ou à Berkeley.

Lucien jumped up, dreaming of Alejo Carpentier and José Lezama Lima and seeing himself already discussing style, narrative technique, the use of oral speech in writing! Under normal circumstances, such discussions were impossible, because the few Guadeloupean writers there were spent most of their time giving speeches on Antillean culture in Los Angeles or Berkeley. (TM 231)

Condé is playfully describing and criticizing her own frequent departures for the West Coast of the United States where she has held regular teaching appointments. But the topics of the longed-for conversations are precisely those that would preoccupy any politically sensitive Guadeloupean writer (including Condé). Lucien Evariste's friends counsel him to write in Creole, a political choice, but like Condé, it is not the language in which he feels comfortable. Near the end of the novel, Evariste decides to brave the possible criticisms of those who might compare him unfavorably to Martiniquan novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, who deconstructs "le français-français" 'French French' (TM 241) in order to write a history of Francis Sancher. Another character, Emile Etienne, an amateur historian, is encouraged by Sancher to write a history of the island that would be rooted in the oral accounts of its inhabitants.¹¹ One senses here that the import of the discussions about writing the topics, the style, the relationship

between oral and written stories—goes well beyond any vacuous game of self-reference. At stake is Condé's belief in her own activity.

Condé's exploration of her literary relationship to Antillean culture is in earnest, even if it entails a good dose of self-deriding humor. Mimicking the detective story format is in fact an ingenious way of portraying this ambivalent attitude toward Antillean identity: while the search for (extratextual) cultural truths is carried out, the text playfully acknowledges its own fabrications and constructions through the self-references. Significantly enough, Patrick Chamoiseau's 1988 novel, *Solibo magnifique*, also mimics the crime story in a self-conscious study of Antillean oral culture in its relationship to Creole and French. But Chamoiseau's fiction remains more "realistic" and hence more hermetic for the non-Antillean than Condé's: Creole dialogue and regional colloquialisms in Chamoiseau's novel are most often left intact, leaving readers unfamiliar with them to fend for themselves. Condé's work, on the other hand, provides explanatory notes of Creole and regionalisms for French readers. In either case, the author's relationship to his or her readers remains problematic.

For whom does one write? No answer is entirely satisfying for the Antillean novelist. Condé insists on opening up her works to both local Antillean references and worldwide intertexts as they articulate the cultural phenomena that interest her. In one passage, the young Carmélien Ramsaran quotes from his school readings of Jacques Roumain's classic Haitian novel, *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*. Carmélien remembers that as a boy he adopted for his own account (as his textual "source") the Haitian novel's quest for natural springs ("sources") and eventually found one. Ironically, this successful search for a "source" in nature is carried out by a boy who has lost most of his cultural "sources" (origins). With ancestors from India, Carmélien nevertheless has little knowledge of Indian culture: "A Bordeaux, les gens le prenant pour un Indien des Indes, lui parlaient de Satyajit Ray, dont il n'avait vu aucun film" "In Bordeaux, people took [Carmélien] for an Indian from India and talked to him about Satyajit Ray, whose films he had never seen" (TM 190). As she does with the "mangrove," Condé interweaves the multiple resonances of "sources," ranging from the intertextual "source" (Roumain), to the cultural (origin, identity), and the natural (life-giving fountain).¹² Antillean literature's viability relies on its ability to juggle its multiple sources.

Although the reference to Roumain is textually explicit, others are less so, with the result that the novel's intertexts may sometimes exceed a given reader's knowledge. But if some of Condé's readers do not recognize an ironic allusion to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus when

Sancher remarks that history is his nightmare (TM 249), it does not stop them from appreciating the comment in Condé's context. On the other hand, understanding intertextual references does enlarge the novel's field of vision, creating links with other texts and other cultures. In *Traversée*, Vilma, a young woman of East Indian descent, is unloved by her mother and emphasizes this fact with the elliptical remark: "Elle ne m'a jamais tenu la main" 'She never held my hand' (TM 196). This quotation is uncannily close to the original manuscript title of Violette Leduc's French autobiography: "Ma mère ne m'a jamais donné la main" 'My Mother Never Took My Hand' (Leduc 7).¹³ While it is not necessary to know the Leduc reference, it does create certain implications: the supposedly "unnatural" quality of a mother not loving her daughter crosses racial and cultural boundaries (thereby de-naturalizing a "universal" while creating a common ground between Antillean and French cultures).¹⁴ Such overarching ties among women are confirmed when Sancher, a good listener of local woes, murmurs gently to the unhappy woman, Dinah, that women's suffering at the hands of men transcends geographical boundaries and race: "Les Blanches en métropole souffrent pareillement. . . . Nous sommes nés bourreaux" 'The white women in the metropolis [France] suffer in the same way. . . . We [men] are born brutes,' notes Sancher sadly (TM 113).

Traversée's implicit references also pay homage to Faulkner.¹⁵ One of the children Francis Sancher sires in Rivière au Sel is named Quentin—recalling the multiple characters who share the name "Quentin" in *The Sound and the Fury*. This tribute to the repeated name is rendered in Condé's text as a series of coincidences: Quentin's birth coincides with his father's (Sancher's) death and with the spiritual rebirth of his mother, Mira. To add to the parallelism, Mira's own mother had died at *her* birth. It is as if Mira were freed of (an imagined) responsibility for her mother's death through Sancher's death and Quentin's birth. Inside the text, the name "Quentin" becomes the sign of a mysterious cultural linkage, of repeated life patterns that take on the aura of a destiny that cannot be explained with a strictly rational, "sensible" logic. (Quentin is born at the stroke of midnight and will thus have "affaire avec les esprits" 'dealings with the spirits' [TM 101]). As an intertextual device, the name brings into contact two texts (from Guadeloupe and the American South) about the passing from an old world to a new one.¹⁶

Between Tradition and Modernity

In Condé's fiction, subjectivity is always tied to the ability to tell a story, particularly one's own. Unlike Faulkner, Chamoiseau, and most New Novelists who either choose male narrating subjects or construct anonymous voices for which gender markings are only incidental, Condé gives voice to her female characters in a privileged way in *Traversée*. Whereas her male characters' lives are for the most part recounted by an omniscient third person narrator who first quotes a few lines from the character before telling his life story and ties to Sancher, *the female characters all tell their own stories in the first person*. They are not merely the objects of discourse, desire or a rigid social system inhibiting their education, movement, aspirations, and sense of self. By becoming active subjects, the female characters, thinking to themselves during the wake, symbolically break the silence about their personal disappointments and regrets and eventually become prepared to escape from some of the constraints that have shackled them. Their sufferings stem from arranged marriages, the handicap or death of a child, fraternal incest, the lack of love from a mother, the rejection of an only suitor, as well as from the implicit pain of being unheard. (Sancher's role is crucial because he was the first to listen to them.) Each woman emerges from her reflection about Sancher with resolve, and the meditation brings the promise of major transformations: to leave the island, to start afresh, to seek forgiveness, principally for each to free herself from a suffocating past. The character Mira affirms: "Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort" 'My real life begins with his death' (TM 245), as if to confirm the Christ-like role Sancher fills (as the man mysteriously destined to die because of his ancestors' "original" sin).¹⁷ Because the women's pains are primarily private ones that female social roles have imposed on them, the first person narrative seems all the more appropriate to portray these unheard voices. In contrast, the male characters' lives are stereotypically turned more to public life (politics, public image, making money) and for the most part, they are less inclined to reflect on Sancher's death in terms of a transformative event. It is the women who are most clearly poised for change at the novel's end.

But having suggested a methodical opposition between male and female discourse in *Traversée*, I must immediately backtrack, because Condé's gender lines are never so clear. First, the third person narratives of the male characters are often recounted in indirect discourse which places the reader almost as close to the character as first person narrative would. And several of the male characters have also suffered

racial and cultural discrimination. Next, some of the men experience Sancher's presence and death as a liberation for their personal lives just as the women do (for example, Carmélien Ramsaran, Lucien Evariste, Emile Etienne). Finally, among the twelve male characters (and eight female), there are two males whose discourse is recounted in the first person: Joby Lameaulnes, a small boy who hates his rich and powerful father, and Xantippe, the local vagabond madman (or prophet?) who lost his family in a fire, and who seems to know the secret of Sancher's life and death. Both characters are marginal to the men in power and are thus in positions similar to the women.

One might then be tempted to rethink the male/female opposition as one of oppressor/oppressed, but this easy declension does not quite work either. For example, in portraying the somewhat improved racial climate in Guadeloupe, Condé notes critically that the Haitian laborer—the character Désinor, who is darker than most of the locals—is treated as the new inferior, disenfranchised in Guadeloupean society. But the passage pertaining to Désinor is told in *third* -person narrative rather than in the first person. As we noted earlier, Condé's works resist simple oppositions and pigeonholing. But while there are no *absolute* lines separating male and female characters, the consistent first person privilege of the female voice does place the common plights of women in a sympathetic (although not uncritical) light.

In the struggles between the past and present in Rivière au Sel, it is the women who are most often designated to be the support of tradition; marriage, childraising, religion, herbal medicine and healing, school teaching are their domains. At the same time, they try to elude the tradition's more onerous burdens. Masculine models tend to be associated more with the encroaching images of modern technological society, although there is some overlapping of gender roles.¹⁸ Condé's characters note that if the symbols of the Antillean past are sugar cane and the strict racial hierarchy of the plantation, contemporary (male) values revolve around money, power and a growing consumer society. With her usual talent for juxtaposing unexpected cultural items, Condé gleefully sprinkles her text with the icons of foreign influence in ways that unsettle categorical divisions between traditional and modern Antillean life. Next to the local color of a hut ("case"), a Creole maxim, or a remark about the actions of invisible spirits, the reader will find a Toyota (a BMW if it's the local doctor's), or a man sipping his Glenfiddich as he prepares to listen to a compact disc, which he manipulates with "les précautions d'une sage-femme maniant un nouveau-né" 'the precautions of a midwife handling a newborn' (TM 120). Condé's style and comically puts on a par the man's

technology and the woman's childbearing, with "culture" and "nature" feeding off each other's metaphors (as we have already seen in the instances of the mangrove and the source).

Condé does not dismiss traditional social roles, nor does she unequivocally condemn the modern. Humor, hope and skepticism—about the improvement of the world and the people who share it—blend together in a literature that is both specific to the Antilles and in dialogue with literatures from several continents. And although writing may be considered as a male activity in this oral culture—in fact it is barely thought of as an activity at all by Rivière au Sel's standards (TM 38)—Condé transgresses categorical boundaries between the (female) oral and the (male) written. As the female characters envision new possibilities for action like better education, travel, the hope to cure a handicapped child, they reach outside their community and the reader senses that these changes go hand in hand with the women's assumption of their own voices. Taking up what Césaire said fifty years earlier about the Caribbean writer who must be "la bouche de ceux qui n'ont pas de bouche, la voix de ceux qui n'ont pas de voix" 'the mouth of those who have no mouth, the voice of those who have no voice,' Condé gives her women characters a voice (qtd. in Fratta 85). At the same time, she resists turning literature into a simple matter of advocacy. The retention of third-person narrative and the multiple voices allow her to modulate her commentary on Antillean culture, to be both inside and outside it. Ultimately, we recognize Condé's paradoxical status as "native foreigner" exemplary of the writer, both critical and playful, combining ethical imperatives and flights of literary fancy. The strength of this black feminist novelist lies in her refusal either to make her work subservient to a political cause or to forget its social anchorings. If, as Condé sometimes laments, literature cannot transform the world, it can, perhaps, create new ways of reading its dilemmas and taking advantage of its paradoxes.

Notes

1. Unless noted otherwise, I provide my own translations of all quotations from the French.
2. "Antillean literature" in this context would mean the writings of an Antillean and/or the treatment of the Antilles as a topic.
3. See *La Parole des femmes*, 3-4 and 39.
4. Condé has been called the "recalcitrant daughter." See Ngate 5-20.

5. When I say "French" here, I am referring only to metropolitan France. Although Guadeloupe is still part of France, Condé does not think of its identity in those terms. The reference to Mauriac appears in Condé's interview with Clark (116) and is rather elliptical. Clark asks: "Apart from Mauriac, is there any other author whose voice you inherited?" Although one might have thought of *Claude* Mauriac (thus associating the Antillean with New Novel techniques), I think his father, *François* Mauriac, makes more sense here. Condé's ties to the New Novel are only indirect.

6. While away from the Antilles, Condé wrote (in addition to *La Parole des femmes*) *Le Roman antillais* and *La Civilisation du Bossale*. Among her contemporaries, she has expressed admiration for Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau of Martinique, and for Simone Schwartz-Bart of Guadeloupe (Clark 116-17). In her more recent interview with Carla Fratta, Condé sees little communication going on among the different language groups of the Caribbean—French, English and Spanish literatures remain totally separate (Fratta 85).

7. Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Michèle Lacrosil and Marie Chauvet also portray this experience of alienation. See Shelton 351-53.

8. I have traced in detail the female heritage in Condé's works before *Traversée* (involving the act of storytelling and spiritual ties as much as a "natural" or biological link) in my book *Autobiographical Tightropes* (189), and in my MLA talk, "Creating an Antillean Subject: Between Fiction and Autobiography" (Chicago, 1990).

9. See Friedman.

10. In addition, although *Traversée de la mangrove* is a Guadeloupean work, it is written in French and published in France (as are most works from Guadeloupe), thereby estranging the writer even further from a local public.

11. The choice of *male* characters to portray writing subjects suggests a conflicted position for Condé. Although she is a writer, Condé associates Antillean women more with the oral (Creole) tradition.

12. It should be pointed out that the natural source is not "better" than its cultural equivalents. Instead of a nature/culture hierarchy, one finds interlocking connections. The spring is the place where Carmélien discovers a beautiful young woman (Mira) who awakens his sexuality but then scorns him because of his Indian ancestry.

13. The manuscript title is cited by Simone de Beauvoir in the preface.

14. I don't know whether Condé was aware that Vilma's lament repeats Leduc's, but for our purposes authorial intention is not crucial here.

15. I am merely pointing out a few of the intertextual references here, in particular those that have a clear bearing on how Condé constructs her novel and its relationship to Antillean society.

16. Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo magnifique* also evokes this sort of passage. Chamoiseau's novel recounts the passing of the storyteller's oral culture. It is noteworthy that Chamoiseau creates a character bearing his own name and, like Condé, multiplies the perspectives on the supposed "crime" with

testimonies of characters who knew the dead man. In both cases, the "crime" is disputed, because both appear to have died of natural causes.

17. Sancher's character is clearly one of mythic proportions: early in the novel, he is associated with the devil (TM 13).

18. For example, Sancher is also an herbal doctor of sorts, like the female character, Man Sonson.

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