"Reading Outside the Mangrove"

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> "I think that underneath, or alongside, a reader's constant response to a text, whatever is needy in him [sic] is taking in whatever the text offers to assuage that need."
>
> Diana Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End*

It was an experiment: how would reading Maryse Condé outside the academy, where I had taught several of her novels over the years to undergraduates, both in French and in English, dilate and interrogate my own reading of *Traversée de la mangrove?* I thought I had long ago made up my mind about its brilliant undecidabilities, its absent center that functions like magnet, its multiplicity of unreliable narrators, its surprising, often humorous hybrid combinations of races, ethnicities and national identities, its deconstructive narrative strategies, intricate personal dynamics. How would defamilarizing the context yield new insights and enrich my own relationship to this inexhaustible text?

When I told my Riverdale reading group that I was going to Stockholm to celebrate Maryse's alternative Nobel Prize in literature, they were excited and curious. None of them had ever read her work. Couldn't we read one of her novels for our next meeting, and what would I suggest?

So it was that eight highly educated, well-read women *d'un certain âge*, all successful professionals and sophisticated travelers, met to discuss *Crossing the Mangrove*, in Richard Philcox's wonderful translation, in January of 2019. I chose that most Guadeloupean of Maryse's novels both because of its intriguing narrative structure, and because it is so rooted in the

Antillean island that I was rather sure none of them had ever visited on their various vacations to the Caribbean. I hoped it would be a kind of double eye-opener for the others, and I was correct. This is not a social club, and these are not naïve readers. Although we enjoy each other's company, we read serious contemporary fiction, from Adichie to Danticat to Ferrante to Modiano to Colson Whitehead and Marilynne Robinson.

The remainder of this essay narrates our reactions and discussions, with the permission of the group.

To begin with, they had never read anything like it. Both dazed and dazzled, they were struck immediately by two aspects of the text.

First, the richness of the lyrical passages describing the lushness of the land. Mira's narration of the meaning of the womb-like gully to her, and Aristide's forays into the equally eroticized mountains, give the author the opportunity to name the country's flora and fauna, and to celebrate them. As I Césaire scholar, I have long known the value of this naming strategy as a of of resistance against the colonial erasure of the autochthonous. Such specificity in detailing the natural environment brings Maryse's native Guadeloupe to life as a very real place.

Then, of course, the debate began around Francis Sancher. Used to reading for form, posing questions about symbol and allegory, I was surprised that the discussion quickly took a moral turn. Is he destructive? Is anything about his character sympathetic? Is he a good or bad person? "Everybody hates him," one says. "Well no," others responded, look at Moise, or Sonny, or Mira and Vilma," and so on. Lively prosecution and defense ensued. His is untrustworthy, he doesn't care what he did or does, no matter how seemingly outrageous. Although he claims he has "come back" to put an end to the family curse, he slithers into peoples' lives, then leaves

them high and dry. On the other hand, he is a catalyst for positive transformation in the lives of some. Yes, but look, there is not one relationship that is happy or loving. In fact, many are characterized by violence, and even brutality. Did he really rape that young girl when he was a revolutionary fighter? Did he really try to abort Mira's baby by drugging her and using a needle? Is he really a doctor? Is he really a writer? Is there any love here at all, are there any redeeming characters? We were reading for the story, for the character of the characters, for meaning, searching for a totalizing one. One woman had even made a schematic sketch, diagramming the text like a wheel, with Francis Sancher as the hub, and all the other characters and their narratives radiating out from him like spokes of the wheel. It was punctuated with many questions around Francis's name. We enumerated ambivalent or negative answers to questions about his identity, and, just like the inhabitants of Rivière au sel, found that most of us were skeptical. From there many remarked how awful the lives of most of the women in the novel are. Married off too young to men they did not choose, unloved by husbands who were unfaithful in cruel ways, scorned and abandoned, they, in turn, had trouble loving their daughters, and transmitted their powerlessness. Rejects and orphans, the girls seek gratification in incestuous relationships, or seductions of Francis Sancher. Most agreed that the text adumbrated a rather cynical view of relationships – familial, amorous, amical. This provoked stimulating questions about the social structures in the Caribbean and whether Guadeloupe was typical or whether Maryse Condé's story was idiosyncratic and totally original, hinting at a feminist subtext.

But the biggest debate came up around the scene where Dinah, Vilma's stepmother, narrates her own "affair" with Francis. When she first sees him, curious as to what all the rumors are about, she describes his mus-

cles, his hair, his complexion, his eyes, through the lens of her desperate horniness. The tone is almost comical: "—Bon Dieu! Avoir ce morceau d'homme nuit après nuit dans son lit!... je suis rentrée à toute vitesse à la maison. Mais le même soir, à travers portes et fenêtres closes, il est venu me rejoindre. Et la nuit suivante, et celle d'après…" (p. 112) Did they or didn't they, that was the question. Is this a dream? Pure wish-fulfillment fantasy on Dinah's part? Imagination or reality? The group was adamant in its divided opinion. I ascribe this to the subtlety of the writing, one of the great "plaisirs du texte." We had become engrossed in conjecture about him, the absent center as object of desire.

Another question that was raised provoked me. Can it be that in this small, tight-knit village, there is really no sense of community? That there are only jealousies, betrayals, suspicions, petty resentments, competitions. xenophobia? And if so, can that lack of solidarity be attributed to the sequellae of slavery and colonization? I thought of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal,* "ce peuple à côté de leur cri, de leur vrai cri…" It struck me that the villagers of Rivière au sel form an interpretive community, and that we in the reading group were amplifying the chorus of opinions, a second, concentric circle, if you will, radiating out from his coffin. We were adding our voices to those at Francis's wake, imbibing white wine in N.Y. rather than rum, but each developing our own reading, actively participating in the debate as to his "true" nature. We became wagging tongues ourselves, condemning or defending Francis. And by a kind of literary alchemy that I will call the Francis after-effect, when our discussion was over, we might very well have mingled with the characters whose lives are transformed at the end of the novel, wondering, superstitiously, "Qui était-il en réalité cet homme qui avait choisi de mourir parmi eux? N'était-il pas le messager de

quelque force surnaturelle? (p.265) The novel worked its magic on us, drawing us into its interpretive web as Francis had done to so many characters.

In the classical *midrash*, that rabbinic exegetical tradition, the ancient rabbis, arguably a prototype for today's reading circles, posed innumerable questions about gaps in the Torah narrative. So they wondered what *manna* tasted like, the food from heaven that the Israelites received when they were wandering in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. They were attempting to reconcile the differing descriptions of this unknown-unknowable nourishment. The most satisfying answers are creative ones that take us back to Diana Athills's epigraph. Some rabbis claimed, "Young men tasted in it the taste of bread, old people the taste of honey, and infants the taste of oil." Others compared it to nursing: "Hence, just as an infant, whenever he touches the breast, finds many flavors in it, so it was with *manna.* Whenever Israel ate it, they found many flavors in it." (*The Book of Legends – Sefer Ha Aggadah*, Bialik and Ravnizky, eds., Willam G. Braude, trans., Shocken; 1992) In other words, it tastes like whatever you want or need it to taste like.

So it is with Francis Sancher. He is a projective test, revealing as much about the describer as the described. Neither the characters in *Traversée de la mangrove,* nor the women in my book group, nor, I suspect, any other readers through time, will ever fully "know" who Francis Sancher is. The mystery of his identity motivates the narrative, peoples the novel, and constitutes the brilliance of its conception and execution. We were left scratching our heads, hungry for more *manna*, and, still mystified after our combined analyses, wondering to each other, "how **did** Maryse Condé accomplish that?" It would be both indiscrete and inappropriate for me to reveal what we might have learned about each in our book discussion that night.

But for eight readers in New York City, *Traversée de la mangrove* put Guadeloupe on the map, and Maryse Condé in the literary firmament.

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