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CROSSING THE MANGROVE OF ORDER AND PREJUDICE

Traversée de la mangrove, Maryse Condé's fifth novel and her first set solely in Guadeloupe, is structured around intertwined quests that reflect the search for identity grounding much of Caribbean literature. The death of its main protagonist, Francis Sancher, and his subsequent wake, provide the villagers of Rivière au Sel with an opportunity to reflect on their past and current plights and to ponder their future. Neither Sancher, who sought to unearth the truth about his forbears' plantation, nor the villagers, who offer glimpses of their hopes and thwarted dreams, succeed, however, in unweaving the complex web of village life. Aware of the opacity that shrouds Caribbean origins, Condé purposely fails to provide any insight into Sancher's death or any clear path away from the ethno-social order and the prejudices pervading Rivière au Sel. As Priska Degras argues, "*Traversée de la mangrove* is as much an exploration of the painful opacity of individual and collective stories as a luminous demonstration of the multiple possibilities offered by novel writing."¹ The purpose of this essay is to examine the strategies Condé employs to explore the difficult quest for Caribbean identity by challenging the past, revealing a complex present, and tracing a potential future through a re-examination of island topoi.

Throughout the novel, Condé only scatters clues to her characters' elusive past, complex present, and uncertain future. Drawing upon one of the salient geographical features of the island, one character argues that Sancher's quest for identity is as fruitless as any attempt to cross a mangrove. She explains "you'd spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You'd be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud."² Though several aspects of the novel support Vilma's comment, the very success of Condé's own literary endeavor paradoxically negates this statement. In her novel, she not only explores the mangrove of order and prejudice prevailing in Rivière au Sel, but also introduces readers to strategies for crossing it. An analysis of geographic markers in the novel, both natural and man-made, reveals that while the layout of Rivière au Sel reflects the enduring heritage of slavery and indentured servitude, forest tracks no longer

1. Degras, 73. (All translations mine except for quotes from *Traversée de la mangrove*, which are taken from its English version *Crossing the Mangrove*.)

2. Condé 1995, 158.

lead inhabitants to a permanent refuge in the *mornes* [hills] as they supposedly did for marooning slaves, nor do all roads down to the plains lead to alienation in the canefields. Though Rivière au Sel may bear witness to the fact that the Caribbean past still structures ethnic and social relations in Guadeloupe, Condé alludes to a potentially different future for her Caribbean characters through her inversion of the symbolism associated with *mornes* and plains.

At the time in which Condé situates *Traversée de la mangrove*—the mid to late twentieth century, slavery has been abolished for over one hundred years, indentured servitude is no longer practiced legally, and the French Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique have ceased to be plantation economies. In a 1967 study entitled *Morne-Paysan, Peasant Village in Martinique*, the sociologist Michael H. Horowitz uncovers, however, a rural world where the past still dictates the division of land and power. Two aspects of life in Morne-Paysan shed light on the representation of village life in Condé's Rivière au Sel: the organization of economic exchange, and housing patterns. Though, as Horowitz explains, most of the villagers of Morne-Paysan grow crops both for home consumption and for Fort-de-France's markets, this integration of village life into a market economy has not yet wreaked havoc on traditional community life. Family members help each other readily with day care, transportation, field work, and major repairs. This communal life is reflected in the layout of housing. Though most houses are occupied by nuclear families, they are not fenced in; free passage between yards allows for an exchange of goods and services, as well as of much local gossip.

Some rifts are noticeable, however, especially among the wealthier inhabitants. At first sight, these tensions seem to follow political affiliations, but closer analysis reveals that they actually fall along ethnic lines. Most of the villagers who control large plots of land inherited these plots from white ancestors in the nineteenth century, while teachers and the main local shopkeeper also trace their lineage back to white planters. All belong to the same political party and fill local administrative positions. The opposition party, on the other hand, recruits mostly among more recently settled villagers. Though Horowitz conducted his study in Martinique, several of his conclusions apply to Guadeloupean village life, notwithstanding a few island-specific factors.

Both Morne Paysan and Rivière au Sel are set in relatively isolated mountainous areas, are comprised of inhabitants who can trace their ancestry back to both planters and slaves, and are the sites of some form of communal life. The inhabitants of Rivière au Sel are drawn, however, from more varied backgrounds. There are descendants of European planters, Indian indentured servants, and Chinese migrants, as well as several foreign residents. The community spirit that draws villagers to Francis Sancher's wake is somewhat deceiving, as both the very structure of the novel and the layout of housing reveal.

Traversée de la mangrove is divided into three unequal parts: a short introduction, a main section comprised of twenty chapters and a three-page conclusion. Each of the twenty chapters is dedicated to a single character who reflects upon his or her past. In opting for such an intertwined tale of parallel lives, Condé emphasizes how individualist pursuits influence village life. Condé

thus denounces racial, sexual, and political oppressions but, as is often the case in her novels, she is more "concerned with tracing their complication and intersection than with the clarity of their definition."³ The individual focus is reinforced from the outset by the mailman's perspective on Rivière au Sel. Contrary to what his first name might suggest, Moïse is not considered an inspired leader among the villagers but more of a tolerable nuisance, like the mosquito to which he owes his nickname. His job as mailman allows him some insight into the villagers' lives and draws him to conclude: "You have to have lived inside the four walls of a small community to know its spitefulness and fear of foreigners."⁴ Walls, whether physical or emotional, do not only keep foreigners out but isolate inhabitants within.

Several French Caribbean novelists have illustrated how the layout of the plantation reflected the ethnic division of labor and power during the time of slavery. In *Texaco*, Patrick Chamoiseau describes the topography of the plantation as follows:

The Great House rose at the center of other buildings and huts. From the latter, the fields, the gardens, coffee trees would climb up the slopes covered with trees providing precious woods . . . Black men could see it from anywhere they worked on the plantation.⁵

However far away they might have been, fieldhands could not avoid seeing the plantation house, could not forget that it dictated their destiny. In these conditions, the mere idea of going into a Great House would be both fascinating and terrifying. Chamoiseau describes his main character's first foray into this forbidden realm as such:

He was fascinated by a marbled dresser that looked alive, by four-poster beds strung with mosquito nets. Some magic emanated, or so it seemed, from the posts and planks tied together. He wondered what kind of work had raised this, brought together those trees, tamed these winds, these soft shadows and these lights. His admiration was at its highest when he reached the forsaken attic where a whole geometry of beams bound together the Great House.⁶

The profusion of terms pointing to the submissiveness of the material used (strung, tied, tamed, bound) recalls the role played by the master on the plantation and the enduring legacy of this power position. Contrary to the flimsy slave huts, the Great House gives an impression of solidity and fixity. The

3. Hewitt, 80.

4. Condé 1995, 22.

5. Chamoiseau, 55.

6. Chamoiseau, 54.

heavy and massive furniture seems doomed to remain anchored to its designated space. As Simone Schwarz-Bart recalls in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*, the planters' furniture also reflects their stronghold over the land: "the furniture made of solid mahogany [is] anchored firmly to the ground, immutable."⁷

The demise of the plantation economy at the end of the nineteenth century did not modify the power structure in Guadeloupe. Gisèle Pineau's portrayal of fieldhands in *La Grande Drive des Esprits*, set in the twentieth century, points to the enduring model of labor division in Guadeloupe. The only change is the plant being cultivated as sugarcane has given way to bananas. "In each banana-tree, [Prospère] saw an ebony tree, a suffering soul from another century, a spirit rooted into this earth, prisoner for eternity."⁸ In *Traversée de la mangrove*, the plantation economy is also alive and well, albeit with new products and new masters.

Two characters carry on the tradition of the plantation: Loulou Lameaulnes grows flowers in his nurseries while Sylvestre Ramsaran produces bananas, limes, and crayfish. Loulou is proud to trace his ancestry back to "the first of the Lameaulnes, Dieudonné Désiré, the owner of a sugar plantation near Marin in Martinique, [who] used to take aim at his slaves' heads and fire bullets into them."⁹ Loulou actually bemoans these times gone by "when might was right"¹⁰ and wishes he could still treat his employees in the same fashion. Like his forebears, he hires imported labor, namely Haitian fieldhands, depends on the exportation of his goods, and dreams of being named sole purveyor to the Queen of England. As Edouard Glissant argues, however, Loulou's very line of business cuts him off, ironically, from any real contact with Guadeloupean flora:

[T]he flowers that grow today are cultivated for export. They look like neat and delicate sculptures. They are also heavy, full, lasting ... but have no smell. They are all shape and visibility.¹¹

The same comment could be applied to Loulou himself, who is so focused on making money through growing flowers from all over the world that he has no time to invest in his family life.

The location of his home reinforces his alienation from his island. Contrary to the Great House built amidst lesser buildings and shacks, the Lameaulnes' house is set apart from the village, hidden behind a fence, "at the edge of the

7. Schwarz-Bart, 92.

8. Pineau, 213.

9. Condé 1995, 97.

10. Condé 1995, 97.

11. Glissant, 80-1.

dense forest, deprived of light and sun, a paradise dripping with lovers' chains and anthuriums."¹² Indeed, its location contributes to isolating the family from the other villagers.

The other family who made a fortune in the village is the Ramsaran family. Unlike the Lameaulnes, they do not trace their ancestry back to French planters but to Indian indentured servants. In many other ways, however, the Ramsarans mirror the Lameaulnes.¹³ Sylvestre Ramsaran makes a living selling crayfish to restaurants throughout Guadeloupe, depends on hired labor, and is more focused on his business than on his home life. Like Loulou, he laments the good old days of the sugarcane when he "used to hand out the pay to the workers [and] . . . snapped his whip over the head of the oxen."¹⁴ His house is also built away from the village center, close to the forest, secluded behind a hedge. The location of both houses could be seen as an asset as it allows the Lameaulnes and Ramsarans easy access to the forest, which provides a means of escaping the pettiness of village life. For Dina Lameaulnes and Rosa Ramsaran, however, their husbands' homes are nothing but prisons: Dinah calls it "my prison, my tomb,"¹⁵ and Rosa Ramsaran's first impression of her new lodgings points to the contrast between her past and her life to come:

When the sun had risen, I ran to the veranda and was suffocated by what I saw. A dark green tangled mass of trees, creepers, and parasites. . . . In the Grands-Fonds, where our family comes from, the land is flat as the back of your hand. The waves of the sugarcane reach to the horizon.¹⁶

Both locations seem to offer limited opportunities for personal growth: the suffocating forest literally and metaphorically chokes Rosa's new surroundings, while sugarcane masked the horizon in her past.

Several other characters are portrayed as living on the edge of the village, a location that reflects their position in society. Léocadie, the retired primary school teacher, lives in a house with a veranda, a sign of social status in the village, set "at the crossroads near the top of the hill"¹⁷ while Emmanuel

12. Condé 1995, 78.

13. Given the similarities between Loulou and Sylvestre, it is no coincidence that Condé chooses to list the chapters dedicated to each of them one after the other. The adjacent placement further emphasizes the fact that Loulou and Sylvestre belong to the same social class, or at least adopt similar perspectives on the socio-economic order in Guadeloupe and their place within it.

14. Condé 1995, 109.

15. Condé 1995, 78.

16. Condé 1995, 131.

17. Condé 1995, 121.

Pélagie, an engineer, first lives “in a company villa in Le Gosier with seven acres of grounds.”¹⁸ Though neither Léocadie nor Emmanuel can trace their lineage back to a planter, both are associated, through education, with the French influence on Guadeloupe. Léocadie is a primary school teacher who teaches her students to uphold French values, and Emmanuel is an engineer married to a pale-skinned woman who “only [feels] at ease with the French who streamed through [their] dining room.”¹⁹ Characters living at the other end of the social spectrum, namely Haitian workers and the local story-teller, Xantippe, also live on the outskirts of the village. Haitians congregate there to escape prejudice. The narrator explains, “[n]o less than a dozen men from Jacmel, Les Cayes, and Les Gonaïves, recognizable by the very blackness of their skin and by the way they stole back furtively to their corrugated iron and mud huts, had settled together in a place called Beaugendre.”²⁰ Xantippe settles “on the edge of Rivière au Sel . . . at the crossroads in Bois Sec in a hovel where two charcoal burners, Justinien and Josyan, used to take shelter.”²¹

In locating several characters outside Rivière au Sel, Condé underlines that though the plantation is no longer the dominant Guadeloupean topos, it still greatly influences life in Rivière au Sel. Characters from both ends of the social spectrum lead segregated lives, mingling only for work. Her analysis sheds little light on the alienated present inherited from the times of slavery. However, her main character, Francis Sancher, does force the reader to question the Caribbean past, read the present in more complex terms, and ultimately pave the way for a potential future away from the enduring curse of slavery.

The house with the most unusual features in Rivière au Sel is undoubtedly the one selected by Sancher. As with other lodgings, an analysis of the house, its history, and its location reveals much about Sancher's status in the village. The Alexis house, as it is called, stands “just outside the village, hemmed in by the forest which had begrudgingly left an opening of several miles and was anxious in its greed to win back the lost ground.”²² The house had originally been bought by a French man named Perier de Marcilhac who sold it upon determining that “Rivière au Sel was no better today than . . . years ago. Situated in the midst of the dense forest, it was a wet spot.”²³ Its second owner, a school teacher, used it as a “change of air’ house” and planted “a 30,000 square foot orchard”²⁴ around it, thereby further isolating it from its sur-

18. Condé 1995, 171.

19. Condé 1995, 172.

20. Condé 1995, 165.

21. Condé 1995, 12.

22. Condé 1995, 3.

23. Condé 1995, 195.

24. Condé 1995, 16.

roundings. Interestingly enough, the first two owners of the home squarely place it among the homes of the mid- to upper-classes. The death of the second owner soon reveals, however, that the house no longer fits the needs of mid- to late twentieth-century Guadeloupe. Though first owned by a Frenchman, the Alexis house was actually no Great House. And though subsequently transformed into a country home by a well-to-do teacher, it was never truly able to fulfill this role due to its dismal location. It is, then, no surprise that the house sits on the market for years until the "For Sale" sign "[falls] to the ground in pieces and [is] forgotten."²⁵ After a few years of local use as a place to collect mangoes and fatten pigs, the house meets its true destiny as a place of doom. The mysterious death of three Haitian field-workers combined with the perceived presence of some evil spirit keeps the villagers away until the right person comes along to claim it. This person is Francis Sancher, a man of unknown ethnicity and origins who traces his family back to Guadeloupean planters but spent years in Cuba. Francisco Sanchez—or is it Francis Sancher? Condé never even provides any indication of his actual name—is a misfit whose arrival wreaks havoc in the village.²⁶ Indeed, Francis Sancher could not have chosen more appropriate lodgings: like his home, he can claim a French ancestry; like his home, he is a pariah in Rivière au Sel; like his home, he risks being swallowed up by the forest and, like his home, he holds a certain attractiveness for several of the other characters.

Moïse the mailman, Sonny, a local school kid, Dinah, Loulou Lameaulnes' wife, Mira, Loulou's daughter, Rosa, Sylvestre Ramsaran's wife, and Vilma, Sylvestre's daughter, all go to see Sancher. They hope to find some solace in his presence, some escape from the prejudices pervading village life and some window onto an outer world they can only dream of. Moïse's half-Chinese ancestry and Sonny's mental handicap have made pariahs out of them. In coming to the house, Moïse however risks further rejection from the village while Sonny is actually exposed to the very place of his torment, as the verandah of the house, where he loves to play, offers a perfect view of the school yard where the taunts of his schoolmates make his life a living hell. The women who seek out Sancher's presence do not fare any better. Dinah and Mira both suffer from a feeling of abandonment as Loulou spends more time caring for his plantation, his sons, and his mistresses than looking after his home. Rosa further feels uncared for by her husband and isolated in her grief for a fair-skinned daughter lost in infancy while Vilma feels rejected by a mother who reproaches her her dark complexion.²⁷ All find only temporary solace in Francis' home.

25. Condé 1995, 16.

26. As René Larrier points out, in "A Roving 'I': 'Errance' and Identity in Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*," Francis Sancher's name itself is open to multiple readings, one of which, "sans chez" [without home], points to his lack of anchoring.

27. All of them can claim some non-African ancestry, be it Indian, Chinese, or Caucasian.

Francis has not come to Rivière-au-Sel to play healer or messiah but to pursue his own identity quest. Various factors impacting his quest account for Sancher's attitude toward the men and women who seek out his help: he has come to Rivière-au-Sel to seek more information about his own ancestry, which he traces back to a local planter's family; he believes his own lineage is cursed by the particularly gruesome murder of slaves in times gone by; he wishes to put an end to the curse by dying heirless; and, finally, he longs for a quiet place to write his own *Traversée de la mangrove*, undoubtedly an exploration of his life past and present. Even a local historian looking for information and a like-minded literary soul fail to elicit his interest. It may be argued that Sancher's choice is significant, as both Emile Etienne and Lucien Evariste, who dream of writing about the heyday of the maroons, find themselves incapable of doing so. Given his intent on not founding a family, and his focus on his personal past and future as a writer, he has no time to commit to any relationship, be it as a friend or lover, or to any sterile professional connection. Man and house are thus a perfect match, as all the characters trapped in their own illusions and false expectations of Sancher end up more hurt than healed.

Like all the characters who ultimately fail to find solace in Sancher's home, Sancher himself falls prey to his fascination with his ancestral home. Saint Calvaire, the aptly-named plantation house, which Sancher desperately seeks in order to trace his ancestry, lures him into the forest but eludes him up to the very end. Although Sancher is unable to locate its remains or even find tangible trace of its existence, it imprisons him in the family curse he is trying to flee and claims him as its last victim. Like the slaves that his ancestor ruthlessly murdered, Sancher ultimately dies in a futile attempt to locate the source of the family curse and to atone for the crimes his ancestor perpetrated in the past.

During the times of slavery, the prison to escape from was the plantation system. In Rivière au Sel, the houses of the middle-class are all somehow related to this past—to the plantation system that ruled the island's economy, politics, and social stratification. Given this heritage, it is worth exploring the means by which several characters escape Rivière au Sel, and seeing whether such attempted escapes fit within the historical pattern set by the marooning slaves who fled the plains to find refuge in the *mornes*.

The *mornes* were the safe havens of choice for fugitive slaves who could easily hide on their forested slopes.²⁸ The verticality and rugged impenetrability of the *mornes* mirror the invincible, indomitable image of the maroon such as it emerged less from historical studies than from local folklore and literary portrayals. Thus, though historical research indicates that marooning was lim-

28. In Jamaica, the Blue Mountains still support communities that trace their ancestry back to marooning slaves.

ited in time and scope, and was never wholly independent of the plantation system, the literary *topos* of the maroon came to dominate throughout the Caribbean.²⁹ Given the limited scope of marooning in small islands and the constant interaction between maroons and planters, one is then left to wonder how it was that the maroon emerged as “the only real popular hero in the Caribbean.”³⁰ As Richard Burton argues in *Le Roman marron*, the historical realities of marooning did not prevent it from assuming mythical proportions in Caribbean literature. Since the publication of *El Cimarrón* by Esteban Montejo, numerous writers have featured maroons. Césaire made the maroon the central figure of his play *Et les Chiens se taisaient* and wrote a biography of Toussaint-Louverture, while *Au Seuil d'un nouveau cri* by Bertème Juminer, *La Mulâtresse Solitude* by André Schwarz-Bart, and *L'Isolé soleil* by Daniel Maximin all feature maroons.

Within a system of domination that precluded the emergence of any other local hero, the “(male) Maroon has emerged as the absent but necessary hero of West Indian history.”³¹ This legendary maroon is, however, a problematic figure, as he contributes to the elaboration of a masculine image of resistance tied to the verticality of the *mornes*³² and in so doing, excludes himself from the plantation system. The presence of plantation houses in both the *mornes* and the plains did not preclude the *mornes* from becoming symbols of male resistance while the plains were symbolically subjugated and feminized. An apparently docile landscape of flat lands, wide open to agricultural endeavors, the plains came to signify the submissiveness of slaves and the indolence of a fertile woman ready for the planters’ embrace. The constant threat of slave insurrections or acts of vandalism was all but ignored. A gendered reading of *mornes* and, by opposition, of plains, emerges from several French Caribbean novels. In effect, male authors tend to focus on the role played by *mornes* in *marronnisme*—a literary portrayal of maroons that owes little to history—while women writers, Condé in particular, are more aware of the *mornes* as life-giving *topoi* where rivers are born and emotionally wounded characters may find solace, and of plains as a locus of oppositional strategies.

29. Though by 1815 there were no longer any organized groups of maroons in Martinique, Arnold argues that “nowhere in the Caribbean is the literary *topos* of the maroon more prominent than in Martinique” (Arnold 2000, 165).

30. Glissant, 101.

31. Arnold 1992, 27.

32. For a more detailed analysis of the characteristics of male and female marooning in the French-Caribbean and its representation in works of fiction, see Pascale De Souza, “Demystifying Female Marooning: Oppositional Strategies and the Writing of Testimonios in the French Caribbean,” *International Journal of Francophone Literatures* vol 3.3, Fall 2000.

In *Moi, Tituba Sorcière ... Noire de Salem* Condé challenges the *marronniste* myth and denounces the selfish objectives of certain maroons. In her novel, Tituba's mother and her guardian warn her of the maroons' propensity for violence and selfishness:

What are you doing among these Maroons? They are bad Negroes bent only on killing and stealing!

They are ungrateful, that's all, they leave their mothers and brothers in servitude while they give themselves freedom!³³

Tituba is also reminded of the "unspoken agreement"³⁴ that binds the maroons to the plantation owners, whereby they must denounce any plan for revolt among the enslaved in order to preserve their own freedom. Christopher, the leader of the maroons, is indeed more interested in securing his own safety and enjoying female company than in ransacking plantations or freeing other slaves. In her essay on *Moi, Tituba*, Bécél argues that Christopher's tactics of survival, motivated as they are by selfish interests, are not only marginal to the slave community but even "ultimately harmful"³⁵ to it. Indeed, Christopher eventually denounces plans for a rebellion and thereby deprives the community of Tituba's care as a healer. As the only hero deemed worthy of recognition in Caribbean letters, the male maroon contributes to making the *morne* the symbol of rebellion in contrast with the plains, where multiple acts of opposition such as sabotage, induced abortions, poisoning of animals and planters often go unrecognized and unrecorded.

In *Traversée de la mangrove*, Condé not only challenges the dichotomy between *mornes* and plains, but also inverts it. While the *mornes* become associated with a futile return to a mythical past, the plains are perceived as opening the way to a viable future. Condé proposes a controversial reading of three characteristics that have previously contributed to the perception of the *mornes* as positively-charged sites: the tracks (*tracées*) leading up their slopes, their vegetation, and their rivers and gullies.

In no other novel by Condé do tracks play such a prominent role. Contrary to the threads that run from house to house in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée-Miracle*, Rivière au Sel is made up of isolated homes. Characters hardly ever go into one another's home but remain on the doorstep, even when they have important news to share, as does Léocadie when announcing Sancher's death. Those tracks that enjoy steady traffic do not lead

33. Condé 1986, 234.

34. Condé 1986, 236.

35. Bécél, 612.

from house to house, as they did in Monre-Paysan, but up the *mornes*. At the novel's inception, Léocadie finds Sancher's corpse on a seldom-used track, thereby suggesting that certain tracks may be naught but literal dead-ends. Most of the characters follow such tracks, nonetheless, hoping to find solace away from Rivière au Sel. Rosa Ramsaran climbs "the Saint-Charles forest path ... [and] strike[s] off into the depths of the woods;"³⁶ Mira and Aristide Lameaulnes walk them for hours on end; Man Sonson follows them to find herbal remedies; Joby prefers them to the road leading directly to school; Sonny seeks peace from villagers' taunts on long walks; and Sancher and Xantippe spend most of their time exploring them, the former hoping to find the remains of a plantation, and the latter viewing the forested slopes and their paths as his domain. While tracks only lead to a temporary refuge for Rosa, Aristide, or Mira, who all go back to the village after their wanderings, they never lead Xantippe back to the village permanently.

In "Reflections on Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*," Patrick Chamoiseau argues:

[I]n reading the title, *Traversée de la mangrove*, I hear as, and would certainly have written: *Tracée de la mangrove*, in order to evoke both the path of the runaway slave and the Creole act of crossing.³⁷

Chamoiseau's comment sheds light both on his reading of tracks as traditionally associated with marooning and his failure to see the novel as proposing a different perspective on *mornes* and tracks, as striving to challenge the very linkages Chamoiseau insists on here. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, Condé argues that because *tracées* lead nowhere but to a mythical past, they provide no real opportunity to cross the mangrove of order and prejudice and to seek a future away from Rivière au Sel. Any *traversée* undergone in the novel must reject *tracées* into the *mornes* in favor of roads leading to the plains.

Tracks bear the memory of the Amerindians and maroons who cut them through the forest. They can, therefore, provide no exit for characters associated through lineage or education with the French, such as Sancher, Mira, Aristide, or Léocadie. Sancher is found dead on an overgrown, seldom-used track. Mira only finds temporary refuge in the *mornes* and discovers her beloved ravine through pure chance rather than intimate knowledge of the forest tracks. Aristide bemoans the loss of his hunting ground. As for Léocadie, she prefers to keep to the same path for her daily walk, a well-delineated route that does not penetrate deep into the forest. The only time

36. Condé 1995, 132.

37. Chamoiseau, 390.

she veers off her itinerary is when she comes face to face with death as she discovers Sancher. On the contrary, Mama Sonson, Xantippe, and Désinor—the Haitian worker—who all trace their ancestry to slaves, know which track to follow to find the right herbal remedies or to come ‘home’ to Xantippe’s shack.

The exuberance of nature in the *mornes*, as well as the presence of ravines and rivers, easily lends them to symbolic interpretation as maternal, life-giving places. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, several emotionally-deprived characters find an ephemeral but real respite in the *mornes* as they seek out the reassuring presence of a lost mother. Xantippe, who lost his whole family in a fire, Mira, who lost her mother, Léocadie, the old maid, Dodose, the neglected wife, Sonny, the mentally handicapped child rejected by one and all—all go up to the *mornes*. Aristide “could never live far from the mountains. Every morning, he delves deep into their belly.”³⁸ Mira “would huddle up under the leaves of the giant rhododendron”³⁹ and first makes love with Sancher “on the bed of leaves at the foot of the giant fern trees.”⁴⁰ Rosa would wander “between the columns of trees that held high their crested heads. [She] would sit between their roots and stay there for hours on end.”⁴¹

The image of a return to an Edenic past, to a mother’s embrace does not, however, withstand further scrutiny. Throughout the novel, Condé maintains a dual position with regards to the plant-life found in the *mornes*, underlining both its exuberance and its propensity to stifle. As Rosa Ramsaran points out, the vegetation forms “a dark green tangled mass of trees, creepers, and parasites.”⁴² Dodose Pélagie feels similarly stifled by “this dark, dank place,”⁴³ explaining,

I look for the sky but it is hidden from the eye by the Spanish oaks, genipas, and the giant mountain immortelles arching over the bayrum and coral trees and the pink cedars, that in turn hang over the wild birchberry and guava trees. All these ageless creatures sink their heavy roots into the dark, spongy soil, while the creepers swing, pointing their forked tongues at face level, and the epiphytes feast voraciously on the trees and branches.⁴⁴

38. Condé 1995, 38–9.

39. Condé 1995, 31.

40. Condé 1995, 37.

41. Condé 1995, 132.

42. Condé 1995, 131.

43. Condé 1995, 131.

44. Condé 1995, 174.

Even the orchids have turned into voracious predators. Moïse, who is the first to denounce the prison-like life in Rivière au Sel, provides the clearest perspective on the forest when, upon being rejected by Sancher, he states: "the trees of Rivière au Sel had once again tightened their hold around him like the walls of a jail."⁴⁵

Water imagery is similarly associated both with life and death. The mangrove's waters teem with life but any attempt to cross them would fail as one would, as mentioned earlier, be "sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud."⁴⁶ Rivière au Sel, as its name indicates, cannot draw fresh water from its local river while the village itself is wet, dank, and damp. The ravines found in the *mornes* are likewise associated with suffocation, though Mira Lameaulnes mistakenly seeks them out to nurture her wounded soul. She recalls her first "meeting with the water, the scarcely audible babble, and the smell of *rotting humus*."⁴⁷ Further forays into the water lead her to oblivion:

The time to go down to the gully is when the sun has set, when the water is black, in places quiet like a dark hole over the black of nothingness, in others running and leaping over rocks, indistinguishable to the naked eye.⁴⁸

A few pages later, the association with death becomes much clearer: "I had just got out from the deserted Gully whose waters had wrapped themselves round my spurned body like a shroud."⁴⁹ Instead of wrapping her in a loving embrace, the waters of the ravine only evoke her mother's death or her own demise.

Even when associated with childbirth or used in metaphors, water retains its stranglehold on characters. Shortly after Sancher makes her drink herbal tea, Vilma dreams of a return to her mother's womb: "I was floating, swimming with happiness in her uterine sea"⁵⁰ only to be awakened with a terrible pain as Sancher tries to induce an abortion with a sharp needle. After being rejected by Sancher, Moïse feels that "his life [has] resumed its taste of brackish water."⁵¹ At the end of this chapter, another association between water and

45. Condé 1995, 29.

46. Condé 1995, 158.

47. Condé 1995, 34 (my emphasis).

48. Condé 1995, 31.

49. Condé 1995, 43.

50. Condé 1995, 83.

51. Condé 1995, 29.

salt remains: that of the tears Moïse sheds over his lost friend: “an unknown pain ripped across his chest and salty water welled up over his eyelids.”⁵² Contrary to what Ellen Munley argues in “Du Silence de la mort à la parole de la vie: à l’écoute de l’eau et du vent dans *Traversée de la mangrove*,” water does not lead to rebirth and empowerment but back to the lost womb of dead mothers and the dead-ends tracks of silent fathers. Characters must then reject tracks and seek another route should they wish to escape the stifling life they lead in Rivière au Sel.

Though several characters remain unable to seek out that other route, three women vow to change their future. Two of them literally opt for a new path and, in so doing, reject the traditional image of tracks meandering to/through a nurturing natural environment connected to a marooning past, and of roads leading to alienating plains. Léocadie always follows the same tracks for her walks and thus never discovers her own true path in life. Aristide, Sylvestre, and Joby remain unable to commit to a new life away from Rivière au Sel.⁵³ Condé tellingly concludes the chapters dedicated to Aristide, Sylvestre, and Joby with interrogative sentences, respectively: “After all, wasn’t he off to begin his real life?”⁵⁴, “Was Sylvestre Ramsaran forgetting where he was and what was kicking in his daughter’s belly?”⁵⁵ and, “but what?”⁵⁶ She thereby suggests that none of them will travel down to the plains, contrary to Mira and Dodose. Mira “sets off down the road,”⁵⁷ while Dodose asserts “I’ll go to the end of the world, if need be. I’ll leave Emmanuel, locked in his bitterness, and Rivière au Sel stuck in its perpetual meanness.”⁵⁸

The choices made by several characters in *Traversée de la mangrove* reflect Maryse Condé’s own plight as a French Caribbean woman writer. Aware that “in the mangrove’s thick growth it is difficult to tell roots from trunks and branches, origins from effects, beginnings from ends,”⁵⁹ Condé rejects any exploration of Guadeloupean village life as an opportunity to seek out beginnings—either her characters’ or her own as a Guadeloupean-born writer. Given that the past has too often been mythified to the detriment of women and women writers, Condé refuses to vindicate it. Instead, she “shakes up complacent thinking about what a black Antillean woman writer is supposed to

52. Condé 1995, 31.

53. Condé 1995, 177.

54. Condé 1995, 59.

55. Condé 1995, 110.

56. Condé 1995, 75.

57. Condé 1995, 44.

58. Condé 1995, 177.

59. Hewitt 85.

think.”⁶⁰ It is no coincidence that Condé forsakes the maroon path. Her portrayal of a historian and a novelist who both remain unable to resurrect the silent maroon, and her dual representation of *mornes* as sources of solace and oblivion point to the complexities of exploring the Caribbean quest for identity through [literary] discourse. On the other hand, by distancing herself from the village, Condé is able to explore anew the ethno-social legacy of slavery and indentureship in a French Caribbean village and to propose new ways to read the Caribbean quest for identity. Mindful of any dead-end return up the *mornes*, she opts instead for the road leading down to the plains and beyond to the outer world. In the true spirit of opacity, however, she does not provide any indication of success for Mira and Dodose beyond their hopes for a better life. As in most of her other novels, such as *La Vie Scélérate*, *La Colonie du Nouveau Monde*, *La Migration des cœurs*, or *Desirada*, she instead leaves the door open to explore further disorder and freedom in the Caribbean quest for identity in future novels.

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60. Hewitt 81.

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