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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 39(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/F7392031106

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A Life Lived Between Autobiography, Fiction, and History: Maryse Condé

Sanyu Mulira

Abstract

This article explores early criticism of Maryse Condé's first novel, Heremakhonon (1976), which characterized the text as a veiled yet accurate depiction of the author's time in West Africa. This paper makes the argument that the historical value of the text is lost when viewed as an autobiography. On the contrary, the power of Heremakhonon's narrative is best understood when the differences between Maryse Condé's life and the central character of Veronica are recognized. Only then can the reader glean historical value in Condé's work of fiction inspired by her experiences in post-colonial West Africa.

Maryse Condé's first novel, *Heremakhonon* (1976), was one of the least praised and most controversial works of her career. *Heremakhonon* chronicles the three-month *séjour* of Veronica Mercier, an upper class Guadeloupian philosophy teacher from Paris, who travels to an unnamed West African country strikingly similar to Sékou Touré's Guinea of the 1970s. Veronica believes that the salvation of the diaspora can be found on the African continent. Thus, she ascribes to mythological notions of Africa that have been popularized by the Negritude and Afrocentricity cultural movements. Veronica travels to Africa in an attempt to reverse the sails of the middle passage and to heal the alienating wounds of slavery and colonization. *Heremakhonon* is a story filled with familiar diasporic tropes of displacement, identity fragmentation, and the valorized return to the homeland. Ultimately, the Africa that Veronica finds is not one of a fantastical pre-colonial past, but one of a disjointed and encumbered post-colonial present. In the end, Veronica returns to Paris as confused and lost as she departed. Having not found the mythological Africa that she was searching for, she opts to forge a bond with her fatherland through

a sexual relationship with a man she dubs “a nigger with ancestors.”¹ She desires a man whose family has not suffered the trauma and alienation of slavery. Assuming the position as the mistress to the Minister of Defense and the Interior, Ibrahima Sory, Veronica convinces herself that the joining of their bodies is synecdochal for the bridging of the gap between the diaspora and the fatherland.

Veronica’s narrative was not initially well received by literary critics. As a result, *Heremakhonon* fell out of print for a number of years before, following the modest success of *I, Tituba: Black Witch of Salem* (1986), reemerging on the French market under the new title *En attendant le bonheur*. Critics of *Heremakhonon* have often had difficulty resolving the parallel elements of the fictitious character Veronica with the life of Maryse Condé. The default literary response has been to take *Heremakhonon* as a veiled autobiography of Condé’s time spent in West Africa and ascribe the narcissism, naïveté, and rootlessness of Veronica to Condé herself. Condé as an individual is an important historical voice, as she spent a large section of her own life living in West Africa during the independence era. As a self-professed militant Pan-Africanist/nationalist in her youth, it is imperative to consider the divergent aspects of Condé’s and Veronica’s narratives when attempting to glean a concrete message from *Heremakhonon*.² I suggest that Condé drew from the successes and failures of her own time spent in Africa and wrote *Heremakhonon* to warn her diasporic peers of how not to approach their ancestral homeland—in this subversion lies Condé’s historical voice. Literature is not commonly used in the construction of historical narratives but can inform historical research when approached with caution. By considering *Heremakhonon* in relation to Condé’s own life and her reactions to her critics, I aim to suggest that Condé’s harsh presentation of Veronica’s heritage voyage to Africa is a veiled manifesto of her own Pan-Africanist political stance. This stance is similar to that of Edouard Glissant’s notion of *diversion*, the desire to look outside of one’s home country for a sense of self. Thus, with the tale of Veronica, Condé suggests that Caribbeans cannot expect random African countries or individuals to make them feel whole nor to heal the wounds of forced migration. Caribbeans themselves must atone for their historical legacies, transgressions, and racial/ethnic stems to feel whole and healed.

Before delving into the narrative of Veronica and the life of Condé, it is useful to examine the theory of *diversion*, as outlined by founder Edouard Glissant. The Martinican scholar, writer, and teacher Edouard Glissant is often cited for his positivist stance on the influence of literature when specifically constructing Caribbean histories. As plural cultures woven from native Caribbean, French, and African fibers, creolized Caribbean cultures should never attempt to view their history within a singular framework. Multiplicity is the key to self-discovery through history; Caribbeans are the product of multiple origins. However, the notion of a singular origin was the basis upon which the French exerted their racial, cultural, and physical dominance over Caribbean peoples during slavery, colonialism, and departmentalization. Slavery attempted to flatten the African personality, and colonialism forced African-descended peoples to assimilate to French culture. Post 1946 departmentalization, Caribbeans have found their cultural differences glossed over in favor of a whitewashed and singular French national identity.³ Of this paradox, Françoise Lionnet has stated, “Glissant argues that Caribbeans tend to favor models of resistance which are universalizing and self-defeating because they follow the same pattern of mimetic illusion.”⁴ As long as Caribbeans attempt to define themselves within the same illusionary confines as their oppressor, they will always come up short, as they are continually denying the multiplicity of their origins. The impulse to identify with a singular Africa stems from a place that Glissant calls *diversion*, the desire to look outside of one’s own country for home. Glissant states, “. . .to be unable therefore to manage to live in one’s country, that is where the hurt is deepest.”⁵ In his own career, Glissant has used literature as a tool to shed light onto the hurt that diversion can cause. It was Glissant’s hope that literary narratives like *Heremakhonon* could contribute to the eventual eradication of intellectual energies wasted on single root histories and promote the study of multi-rooted histories. Of the quest for self in the cycle of diversion, Glissant has stated:

It is very often only in France that migrant French Caribbean people discover they are *different*, become aware of their Caribbeanness; an awareness that is all the more disturbing and unlivable, since the individual so possessed by the feeling of

identity cannot, however, manage to return to his origins (there he will find that the situation is intolerable, his colleagues irresponsible; they will find him too *assimilé*, too European in his ways, etc.), and he will have to *migrate again*.⁶

For the French Caribbean caught in the cycle of diversion, the shores of West Africa are usually the last stop on their journey. As Glissant and Condé have elucidated in their novels, this last stop can either cause a total acceptance of self or further one's identity confusion.

Veronica's quest for her identity in Africa is one of *diversion*. Guadeloupe may be her home, but it is also the location where her African ancestors were forced to survive for 300 years in the face of adversity. In the process of their survival they became Caribbeans. In relation to the Caribbean islands being haphazard homelands, Veronica states in the beginning of the novel, "...where would we be if Christopher Columbus hadn't crossed the Atlantic with his ships hold full of sugar cane plants taken from the Moslems in Cyprus?"⁷ Veronica is well aware that without the violent impetus of slavery the Caribbean home that she grew up in would not have existed. Although a dreamland for many, Paris for Veronica is a liminal space, a place between her physical home of Guadeloupe and metaphysical homeland, Africa. Here, she contemplates her tenuous relationship with each.⁸ Growing up as a part of the black bourgeoisie, it was not until Paris that her desire to visit Africa reached its boiling point. At the time of her departure from Paris, it had been nine years since she had been to Guadeloupe, nine years of living in liminality.⁹ Nevertheless, Paris is the place where her racial alienation is most profoundly felt as a black French woman, as she finds herself not French enough to be a true Parisian and no longer Caribbean enough to return home. Thus, she hopes that Africa can offer what she was always looking for: an unmitigated sense of black historical pride.

On History and Biographical Writing

Biographical and autobiographical writings can be amongst the supreme historical documents for charting the lived experiences of marginalized populations. Biographies and autobiographies help historians not only understand the social constructions and perimeters of various societies around the world, but through these

intimately esoteric narratives one can digest how what it was like to live within these societies. These sources are particularly useful when attempting to understand the lived experiences of peoples who were not in the position to write their own official histories, as in the case of every colonized society. It is important to create historical narratives with both the historical input of the colonizer and the colonized as each often lived in highly disparate realities.

Personal histories (autobiographies), personal essays, and biographies have been famously essential in proliferating the Black French experience historically. The negritude movement ushered in an era of the francophone empire talking back, talking back to their colonizer opposing their oppression using their lived experiences as their platform. Negritude was followed by a literary tradition of *témoignage*, which translates as “testimony.” This genre of literature is highly biographical and speaks to the internal conflict that arises within the colonized person in their quest to be accepted by their colonizer.¹⁰ Foundational francophone novels of this tradition are *L’Enfant noir* (1953) by Camara Laye of Guinea and *L’Aventure ambiguë* (1961) by Cheikh Hamidou Kane of Senegal. Both reflect feelings of malaise and revolt that young African men felt in the colonial system, as they recount the stories of young men who leave their home countries for studies in France. The narratives that emerge from these pages are testimonies to the complex ambiguities of cultural hybridity through assimilation.

Within the context of the francophone diaspora, black women have been marginalized from historical and national narratives in multitude of ways. First, being of African descent in a racially stratified society has truncated their potential for self-determination. Secondly, in the Caribbean they are removed from their continent of origins, so they are not just marginalized, but completely cut off from their motherland. And finally, they are women. The aforementioned tradition of *témoignage* was exclusively masculine. There are nearly no female *témoignage* texts. Thus, women are largely absent from both official colonial histories and testimonial histories of the colonized.

The starvation for women’s historical narratives is what has led to the desire to view *Heremakhonon* an autobiography and not a work of reality-inspired fiction. There has been an intense hunger for the testimonial literature from a women’s perspective,

to create the building blocks of a colonized women's history. Maryse Condé is a woman whose life could be a fundamental building block to this history. Veronica Mercier's narrative can only contribute thematic veins that can trigger exploration, but it cannot be considered a historical account.

A Caribbean Goes to Africa

Heremakhonon is stylistically written as a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The reader is brought into the mind of Veronica so they can follow each emotional quiver of joy or dismay as she embarks on the final leg of her quest for an Afrocentric identity. Rarely does the reader leave Veronica's inner dialogue for more than a few lines. It quickly becomes clear that Veronica does not journey to Africa in search of female friends. For Veronica, Africa does not need to be a nurturing motherland; it needs to be a strong-willed and proud fatherland. Although she did not voyage to Africa with a dubious sense of exotic adventure in the traditional sense, she does possess an eroticized sense of what the African male should be.¹¹ Because her father never gave her access to her African past, she yearns for this connection through her affair with political minister Ibrahima Sory. Furthermore, she rejects her African reality by keeping her emotional distance from her politically reactionary host and employer, Saliou, who during the course of her stay is removed as director of the school where she teaches.¹² The character of Saliou acts as a figure who provokes Veronica to examine her relationship with her africanity in a way that she never had before. She begins to reflect upon her upbringing to discover why, above all, she has an overwhelming need align herself with Ibrahima Sory.

In the text Veronica claims that it was her family's lack of interest in Africa that propelled her own interest in the continent. The lack of an African-centered education at home is what sent her to Paris in search of educating herself about *le pays d'avant* (the land of before). Although her family may not necessarily have been ashamed of their blackness, they had no desire to connect with Africa.¹³ Her father, whom she refers to as the Mandingo *marabout*, never revealing his true name, was a proudly assimilated man. He took pride in his financial success within the French colonial system and his daughters' marriages to mulatto men. To

the Mandingo *marabout*, French history is his history; it was the history of the people who liberated him from the backwardness of Africa. Blackness in Veronica's childhood was something to be proud that you overcame rather than a facet of your identity from which to draw inspiration. In the eyes of Veronica's father, no young black girl raised in a good family would leave her comfortable life in Paris with her white boyfriend, Jean-Michel, to find herself. What more could a black Caribbean girl want than to live in Paris and marry a white man? Referring to her father's opinion of her journey, Veronica states, "Left wing intellectual. Whore. These were the names a father calls his daughter."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Veronica is not afraid to learn the truth about who her African ancestors were before they were enslaved.¹⁵

Veronica goes to Africa not to give but to receive. In her opinion, Africans of the soil owe black people of the diaspora for their participation in the slave trade. When she tells those around her that she is from Guadeloupe, they refer to her as a "lost sister" of Africa. Each time, she laments in her mind that she and her ancestors were never lost at sea—they were *sold* into cattle slavery.¹⁶ The historical betrayal of new world black people by their distant African brothers and sisters is a transgression from which Veronica draws contempt for the Africans of the present.¹⁷ While trying to choose a theme for her first lecture at the National Institute, Veronica cheekily considers, ". . . my first lecture here is going to be on the West Indies. The Slave ships set off again from the Bight of Biafra. All that blood on the glazed eye of the sea. And those jolly sharks, jolly ancestors of the Ku Klux Klan."¹⁸ Before she is able to concern herself with the political and economic problems of modern Africa, she must forgive the ancestors for their part in the transatlantic slave trade.

Veronica views this "Guinea" type country as a place with dignity despite its poverty. The President, Mwalimwana, is a charismatic figure who presents himself as the father of the nation who drove out the whites and restored freedom. However, this political freedom has come at the price of individual freedom. Despite the fact that Maryse Condé has affirmed that she based the country that Veronica voyages to on Sékou Touré's Guinea, the name of the country in the text is never stated outright.¹⁹ However, Condé does leave some clues to her readers. Below is a verse of a national song from Guinea at the time of independence:

Everybody loves Sékou Touré
 Independence is sweet;
 Nothing is more beautiful than
 To be independent chez soi.
 Vive Sékou Touré
 Vive Sékou Touré, our clairvoyant chief!²⁰

And here is the appropriated verse created by Condé for the national song of the country in which *Heremakhonon* takes place:

Mwalimwana notre père
 Mwalimwana est venu
 Mwalimwana ce que tu fais me plaît
 Mwalimwana je te salue
 Mwalimwana, roi des hommes forts.²¹

[Mwalimwana our father
 Mwalimwana has come
 Mwalimwana pleases me
 Mwalimwana the king of strong men]²²

One can see that in both Guinea and the novel, the public is trained to view their president as man dedicated to the continued freedom of his people. In the text the ministers that work alongside and under the direction of the president are considered to have hands that are dripping with the blood of the people. The connotation of brutality as synonymous with her “nigger with ancestors,” Ibrihama Sory, only heightens Veronica’s perception of his historical endurance and power.²³ Her affair with Sory is the first time that Veronica has been attracted to a black man whose lineage has not been diluted by forced European intervention—he is the Africa that she has been looking for.²⁴ The first time that she and Sory make love Veronica ponders:

This man who is about to take me does not know that I am a virgin of sorts. Of course the wrapper won’t be stained with blood and the griot won’t hold it up proudly to reassure the tribe. It will be another blood. Heavier and thicker. Before letting it flow black and fast. I now realize why he fascinates me. He hasn’t been branded with the mark of separation, slavery, etc.²⁵

Heremakhonon is the name of Sory’s estate where he and Veronica make love. Heremakhonon is a Malinke word that translates into French as *en attendant le bonheur*, “waiting for happiness.”²⁶ It is at Heremakhonon that Veronica waits for Sory, where their

bodies join in the sexual act that symbolizes her return to the fatherland. Veronica's affair plays out against the backdrop of political unrest, which she forces herself to ignore in order to preserve the sanctity of her happiness at Heremakhonon. To justify her commitment to remain deaf to the sound of rebellion that surrounds her, Veronica affirms, "I came to seek a land inhabited by blacks, no negroes. . . I am not interested in the present."²⁷ As long as Sory remains the phallic symbol of unmitigated Africanity that she desires, she can disconnect herself from the breaches of individual freedom that take place before her.²⁸ Sory does take some time to poke fun at Veronica and her need to separate herself from her bourgeois French family and their terrified conviction of their own inferiority. He jokes that Veronica will soon be like a young black American woman who "ended up having her hair plaited like our women and having herself renamed Salamata."²⁹ Sory is happy to serve as her phallic fatherland, rooting her in his country through their love making, so long as her interest in politics remains uninspired. Sory reminds her that it is his job to "rebuild the country that colonialism has drained of its strength" by any means at his disposal.³⁰ Sory cautions Veronica against making his African country her leftist battleground.

In Veronica's opinion, oppositional reactionaries grossly aggrandize the depth of repression in Mwalimwana and Sory's regime. Her decision to remain neutral in the political arena is greatly challenged by Saliou, the director of the institute where she works. Saliou, with whom she also lives, is one of the most outspoken leaders of the political opposition dedicated to toppling the current regime. Coincidentally, Saliou and Sory are in-laws. To the dismay of their bourgeois family, Sory's sister, Oumou Hawa, married Saliou and accepted the modest life of a revolutionary's wife. On the contrary, Sory and Oumou's sister, Ramatoulaye, married a high-level government official. Thus, the subversive activism of Saliou is both politically and familially damming. Like Sory, Ramatoulaye considers student protestors too young to remember how restrictive life truly was under European colonialism, and that they should grant their liberators full political allegiance. Consequently, when a student named Birame III from the institute goes missing, no one but Saliou seems truly concerned for his well-being. In a feeble attempt to assuage any morsel of guilt over her indifference, she inquires about Birame III's safety with

Sory and choses to believe him when he claims that this “missing” student is in the north building roads to pay his debt of treason in full.³¹

Sory may be a “nigger with ancestors,” but he is also a national figure whose sexual life is just as politically charged as his professional one. Veronica tries her best to keep their affair private, but it becomes an open secret that precedes her everywhere she goes. No one else in this country can offer her the return to *le pays d'avant* that she so desires, no other man's love making can transport her mind to the great empire of Kano and the palace of Shaku Umar, no one else's love making can make her feel as though she has African roots in her creolized body.³² Friends wonder why she could not have chosen an honest man. At times Saliou even wonders why she would not consider assuming the position as his second wife.³³ Although Saliou too is an African man, Sory exemplifies the African past that her family had always tried to separate themselves from. Sory represents the singular African root that ceaselessly darkens their skin no matter how many generations of rape took place on sugar plantations. He is the unmitigated African root that her journey requires, and she does not expect her continental African peers to understand how essential this sexual relationship is to healing her diasporic wounds.³⁴ During her stay Veronica is presented with options with which to choose what kind of man she wants to facilitate her “return” to Africa. She is able to choose the between the type of Africa that she wants to bond herself with. She decides that Ibrahima's africanity is of the sort that cannot be watered down; it cannot be weakened by generations of whitening—he is an Africa that will not be conquered and thus he can free her from the rift of the diaspora.

As Veronica reaches the middle of her stay in this West African country, it becomes increasingly more difficult for her to drown out the chaos of the political climate that surrounds her. Initially, when Saliou is dismissed from his position at the Institute, Veronica barely takes notice. She claims to be “like a horse with blinders to all this,”³⁵ and carries on with her idea that “life is a bitch with a bum leg.”³⁶ But, when Saliou is imprisoned twice in 36 hours following an Independence Day attempt on Mwalimwana's life that results in the inadvertent killing of six people, Veronica is forced to remove her blinders.³⁷ During this time of unrest, she

hides out at Heremakhonon. However, against Sory's wishes she ventures into the city center during the day to gain a true sense of how the state of the government in affecting the lives of everyday citizens. She is instantly reminded of the dignity of this country's poor people. Despite the imprisonment of over 2,000 suspected revolutionaries in a matter of weeks, they are able to carry on with everyday life.³⁸ One night, as the city center is set ablaze in protest, Ramatoulaye remarks to Veronica, "Mwalimwana wanted to plant the tree of socialism and then realized what fruit he was collecting [,] so he is trying to uproot it, but it's probably too late."³⁹ This idea of a failed socialism causes Veronica to wonder if members of the political opposition are really so obscurely idealistic, or if their only fault is their desire for the government they were promised at independence. It may be better to be poor and free than rich and enslaved, but are people like Saliou and Birame III truly undeserving of freedom of speech?⁴⁰

As Saliou sits in prison, Veronica begins to question her relationship with Sory and whether it is indeed worth ignoring the pain that he has brought to the people he claims to serve. Furthermore, she wonders if their love will truly have a transformative effect if it is neither real nor mutual.⁴¹ As Sory and Veronica spend more time together at Heremakhonon, the veneer of happiness begins to wear thin. One night, during a heated discussion over Veronica's relationship with Frenchman Jean-Michel, Sory exclaims, "I wonder how one can love a white man. After all they did to us. For me, only whores should deal with white men."⁴² Veronica decides to let this comment pass, attributing it to Sory's mounting affection towards her exacerbated by the stress of the current political climate. However, she cannot seem to shake the feeling that Sory lied to her about Birame III, especially since his own brother-in-law, Saliou, was toiling away in prison, and he had not offered Oumou Hawa any help in releasing him. One night, Veronica exclaims:

You sent your soldiers into the Institute again to terrorize defenseless children, take away the bravest, have them recite a concocted self-criticism on a platform decorated with the national flag, make them tar roads up north, and kill them like you killed Birame III? You killed him, didn't you? Stop lying.⁴³

Directly after she finishes this statement, Sory slaps her across the face for accusing him of lying. As the bulk of the text is written from inside Veronica's thoughts, it is important that one of her longest external statements is her confronting the truth about her "nigger with ancestors." She is no longer able to draw a line between her need for a fatherland and the tyrannical regime of her lover. The next day, Sory is promoted to president of a public welfare committee in charge of judging all subversive elements in the country. Not long after, Saliou is found dead hanging in his prison cell.⁴⁴ Upon hearing the news of his brother-in-law's death on the radio, Sory says to Veronica, "It's better that way."⁴⁵

First Birame III, now Saliou. Veronica can no longer pretend that her "nigger with ancestors" is the beacon of post-colonial strength and freedom when he is in the business of killing innocent people with for expressing divergent opinions. Veronica begins to think, "My ancestors, my ancestors via Ibrahima Sory are playing a dirty trick on me [,] a very dirty trick [,] by imprisoning Saliou they are trying to force me to hate them."⁴⁶ A powerful man whose ancestors ruled the Dahomey, Wolof, and Madingo empires would not simply murder his opposition? But then again, these ancestors did sell Africans from opposing empires into the slave trade—the very slave trade that planted Veronica's creole roots in Guadeloupe. If his ancestors could sell hers into the slave trade, Sory could certainly oversee the suspicious suicide of his subversive brother-in-law. Veronica is lost; she does not know where to go from here. Certainly she could continue her affair and reconstruct her blinders, but that is not why she came to Africa. Veronica came to connect with the descendants of her ancestors, and when she found them she could not ignore the crimes they committed in front of her eyes. Veronica feels guilty for dismissing Saliou's radicalism, guilty for not respecting the danger he was willing to put himself in to fight for the vision he and others had for their post-colonial Africa. Just as modern-day Africans cannot live on the glory of the past, Veronica cannot root her identity in a false sense of the past while the present unfolds before her.⁴⁷ Veronica decides to leave Africa after only three months. She says that "there is a level below which one must not go," and had she remained Sory's mistress while he continued abusing his power and betraying his people, she would have crossed that threshold.⁴⁸ In the end, Sory was right about Veronica's journey: reality would

never give her the Africa that she had dreamed of in the Latin Quarter.⁴⁹

Due to initial unfavorable reactions to *Heremakhonon* and its years spent out of print, comparative literary scholars have not given this particular text as much attention as Maryse Condé's subsequent novels. However, Françoise Lionnet is known for having written some of the most well-known and in-depth analytical pieces about Veronica's ill-fated quest for an Afrocentric identity. In her critique of Veronica in her text *Autobiographical Voices*, Lionnet describes this character as "paralyzed by a pathological desire for a Eurocentric African other."⁵⁰ She goes on to suggest that the tragedy of Veronica lies in that she ultimately cannot free herself of her upbringing, nor can she free her colonial mind from othering the people around her. She never allows herself to relate to her African peers on a human level because she is stuck in a cycle of objectification. Veronica relegates herself to the position of the insider/outsider and the familiar stranger in an effort to avoid emotionally connecting to the brutality around her. Nevertheless, she alienates herself from her emotions so deeply that she eventually finds it difficult to feel anything but bewilderment. She cannot truly feel pleasure or pain, just the ever-widening rift between who she is and who she thought Sory could transform her into being.⁵¹

A True *Prise de conscience*

It is of great interest to compare the story of Veronica to the life of Maryse Condé when considering the use of literature and autobiographies in the construction of micro intellectual historical narratives. Is it safe to assume that one can simply replace the name Veronica with Maryse and take *Heremakhonon* as an accurate, albeit primary, account of life and love in Sékou Touré's independent Guinea? To make any use of the historically informed message that Condé imbeds in *Heremakhonon* the reader must first accept the fact that Condé and Veronica are different people. Without the acceptance of this simple fact, the narrative in *Heremakhonon* loses all value. In a 1982 interview with her good friend Françoise Pfaff, Maryse Condé discussed in depth early criticism of her first novel and the parallel and divergent elements that exist between her life and the narrative

of Veronica. Condé states early on that literary critics believed that Veronica and Condé were versions of the same person. To her painful dismay, the press ripped her text apart and criticized Condé, the real person, for the thoughts and actions of the fictitious Veronica. She goes on to state that in West Africa and France her book was largely ignored, and her readership primarily hailed from the French Caribbean. Reflecting on her first novel's reception in French Caribbean newspapers, Condé has affirmed,

An article in 'Le Naif' signed by someone whose name I will not mention, called me 'a voyeur and a whore,' added that 'an odor of sperm could be smelled' in the book, and ended up comparing me to Mayotte Capecia. Instead of laughing about this, I cried.⁵²

As this was her first full-length novel, it was not believed that Condé could possess the critical depth to write about a Guadeloupean woman in Africa that was not in fact herself. In her own words, Condé says that the autobiographical elements begin and end with their shared origins, explaining:

The whole section on childhood and the family milieu is true to life. There are things you don't invent. Also autobiographical is the portrayal of West Indian society in terms of the important Blacks, the ones who see themselves as high-class Black bourgeoisie but who are, on the whole terribly alienated. These are the only people I saw during my childhood. They are proud to be black, but they don't even know what it is. In the final analysis, to be Black for them is to act like a White person, to become 'whitened.' This whole section is truly autobiographical, whereas the rest of the novel contains little autobiographical material.⁵³

Condé believes that rejecting one's blackness and mimicking hegemonic white culture is a battle that people of African descent fight across the world. Thus, merely sharing the experience of confronting one's internalized racism is not enough to equate Condé with her controversial protagonist.⁵⁴ Most importantly, in Condé's real life, there was no Ibrahima Sory, there was no man in her life who she felt could sexually root her to the African past. In Condé's opinion, Veronica was "terribly narcissistic. [Veronica] thought that people were going to take interest in her but realized they didn't have time for her because of the enormous political problems to solve and the concern about their own survival."⁵⁵ During her time in Africa, Condé was not so self-centered as to

assume that modern Africa was interested in settling her fractured relationship with her creolized past.

At this point, it is useful to look at the history of Maryse Condé's life in West Africa, both to liberate her from the accusation of being Veronica and to establish her rightful place as a historical figure. Rather than resorting to self-exile upon the realization that Marxism and socialism had failed in West Africa like Veronica, Condé felt inspired to continue exploring Africa. *Heremakhonon* was only the first product of her inspired spirit. It was also the first novel of her career that exposed her inexplicable power to soften the blows of Black diasporic history.⁵⁶ Condé once said, "The reality of the Black world is so sad that if you don't laugh a little, you can become completely desperate and negative."⁵⁷ The author who has dedicated her life to helping the black world laugh a little was born Maryse Boucolon in 1937 to a middle class Guadeloupean family. The youngest of eight children, she recalls that her childhood was fairly uneventful due to the self-imposed isolation that her family lived in. Belonging to a small social subset of financially secure black families in Guadeloupe in the 1940s, she and her siblings were not allowed to mingle with lower class black kids in the neighborhood.⁵⁸ In addition, they could not socialize with their mulatto peers because they were considered "the illegitimate children of whites."⁵⁹ In 1953, Maryse left her island home to study in Paris; it was there that her interest and love for Africa was born. Her transition from an all-black environment to an all-white environment was extremely difficult; she felt like a walking spectacle. It was in Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 1939) that a young Maryse discovered the notion of a spiritual return to Africa.⁶⁰ In Paris, her political and Pan-African consciousness was awakened by attending various black student organizations and informing herself about the history of slavery, colonization, and the emerging spirit of independence.⁶¹

Maryse Condé's life in Africa began in 1958 when she married her first husband Mamadou Condé, originally from Guinea. Admittedly, she initially viewed Mamadou Condé as her black myth, her metaphysical link to the new continent that she called home. On the topic of her first husband, Condé explained that, "When I married him, he embodied an African type of beauty and nobility in his ways. In fact, our marriage was based on a

misunderstanding. It was normal that all of this would end in divorce.”⁶² In their marriage Maryse Condé found herself far too militant for her husband’s taste. Côte d’Ivoire was the first place they lived together in Africa, and rather than mingling with the local people, Condé settled in with a small group of Caribbeans. However, when they moved to Guinea, Condé could not help but find herself enamored with the magical aura that surrounded Sékou Touré, the only African leader who said “no” to the French and demanded immediate independence for his people. Mr. Condé wanted his wife to remain the mild-mannered teacher and housewife that she had been in Côte d’Ivoire, but in Guinea she had a fully matured sense of Marxist militancy that she could no longer shelve.⁶³

Guinea in 1960 for a young Maryse Condé was the land of the great Empire of Mali. It was a place where black African people were attempting to build a postcolonial society based upon the majesty and pride of their past.⁶⁴ This euphoria only lasted during the first year of her four-year stay in the country; she discovered that Sékou Touré’s words were not the same as his actions. Socialism became just a word, a word that had no ideological connection to the policies that he and his political peers enacted.⁶⁵ In his own words, Sékou believed that:

L’équilibre de la société doit donc nécessairement reposer sur le peuple qui, seul, constitue le « tout » social, et non pas sur une seule couche, une seule classe ou un seul secteur national qui ne peuvent être qu’une partie du « tout » social.⁶⁶ [A society’s balance must lie in the hands of the people who comprise the “whole,” not in one single social layer, single social class, nor in one sector of government, they each alone cannot replace the “whole.”]⁶⁷

Sékou Touré led Guinea into independence in 1958 with the slogan, “We prefer poverty in liberty to riches in slavery.”⁶⁸ However, Touré did not caution his people about how severe this poverty could become due to both their strained relationship with France and his demand for unwavering allegiance. At the time of independence, Guinea had only a 5% literacy rate and an average annual income of \$40 USD amongst the lower classes. When 95% of the population rejected France’s referendum in 1958 and Touré demanded all colonial officers vacate in eight days or less, the French took

medical supplies, official documents, air conditioners, telephones, even electric wires from the country. Sékou Touré and his wife moved into a presidential manor that did not even have a telephone.⁶⁹ Declaring that “human energy is the principal capital” of a developing nation, Touré imposed obligatory work sanctions that were not unlike the brutal French colonial system of *corvée* that mandated the donation of unpaid physical labor to the state based upon social/political ranking.⁷⁰ These work sanctions were imposed in an attempt to develop a country that could not afford to pay for labor. Despite loans from countries such as Ghana and forced labor, many citizens of Guinea found their standard of living stagnating and even worsening after the end of French colonialism.⁷¹

Maryse Condé’s pessimistic view of Sékou Touré’s Guinea is contrary to the historical metanarrative of this country’s brave plunge into postcolonial freedom. Despite his failures, Touré has been remembered as a fearless Pan-African leader who was willing to surrender his country’s autonomy to Nkrumah’s United States of Africa.⁷² In Condé’s opinion, Sékou Touré began his presidency as the true man of the people that history likes to remember him as. Without the presence of guards, Touré would drive himself around Conakry with the top down on his convertible so that he could remain visible to the people. But as time went on and pressure mounted, his talk of socialism and economic equality became hollow rhetoric as he simultaneously became hidden from public view. At the end of her four-year stay, she found herself in a country ruined by the “exploitation of people, peasants, workers, and students.”⁷³ She saw many of her friends and acquaintances disappear or suffer prison time for speaking out against the government. Just as she depicted in *Heremakhonon*, Condé witnessed brutal political oppression in the form of soldiers driving to junior high schools and beating young people for organizing protests. Condé put her activism on pause while living in Guinea, as she feared being thrown in jail and separated from her children.⁷⁴

Although she lost respect for Sékou Touré, Condé’s love for other African leaders never wavered. Having had the pleasure of meeting countless freedom fighters and activists throughout her life, such as Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Stokely Carmichael, Condé affirmed in a 1991 interview that Kwame Nkrumah and Amílcar Cabral left indelible impressions on her. She cites Nkrumah and

Cabral as the revolutionaries who have most influenced her lasting dedication to the uplifting of the African continent.⁷⁵

It was in Ghana that she “started to grasp the interplay of power and conflicts in a newly independent country.”⁷⁶ After living in Africa for over a decade, Condé found herself emotionally invested in the success of post-colonial Africa. Like many of her peers, of the continent and the diaspora, she was disappointed with the paths that many independent African politicians lead their people down. In 1966, after the coup in Ghana that removed Nkrumah, a leader she trusted, Condé became tired of Africa and considered leaving for good.

In 1969, while teaching in Senegal, she met her current husband and translator, Richard Philcox. Philcox, a British English teacher, had a joyful disconnect with Africa that helped refresh her investment in the continent. As a white man, he did not carry the burden of seeing Africa as his fatherland; thus he was not struck to the core by its failure to provide its citizens with a healthy and functioning government. Nevertheless, he was the one who insisted that Condé write about her connection, disappointment, and exhaustion with her fatherland in her novels.⁷⁷ Thus, with the publication of *Heremakhonon* in 1976, Maryse Condé the *romancière* was introduced to the literary scene.⁷⁸ Condé has said the following about her relationship with Richard Philcox: “How could a militant woman involved in African nationalism fall in love and marry an English man and travel with him to the other side of the world? It’s strange, but that’s life, I think.”⁷⁹

Conclusions

During her three-month stay in Africa, Veronica found an Africa unable to account for the transgressions of its past and present. She left West Africa no closer to finding her identity. During the decade that Maryse Condé lived in Africa, she not only found her identity, but she discovered a visceral connection to Africa that inspired a forty-year writing and university teaching career. When she wrote *Heremakhonon*, Condé said,

There was an oversimplified militancy in the air, along with a devout faith in African socialism and the mythification of that ideal. These things exasperated me and seemed quite naïve. I wanted to write a novel that would counter what was said at

the time with too much superficiality. Basically, I wanted to express how much I had been wounded by everything I had seen in Africa and to point out how difficult it was to build a nation. *Heremakhonon* was a novel about disenchantment and pain. . .not [a] fictionalized autobiography at all. It was a novel of protest.⁸⁰

Heremakhonon is a novel that protests self-serving African governments as much as it protests narcissistic members of the diaspora demanding that Africa define them. The standpoint from which Condé writes this novel is her protest, as her writing is informed by her lived experience. The similarities between Veronica and Maryse Condé cannot be ignored, but importance should be placed in the differences between them for the message of *Heremakhonon* to be unearthed. Veronica found herself so caught in the web of *diversion* that she simply gave up; she decided that her true self could not be found. Instead of writing this text as an autobiography, Condé uses creative freedom to craft her fictional story to share lessons learned through real life experiences. She concludes that members of the diaspora are often too preoccupied with African origins. On the contrary, importance should be placed upon the exchanges that unfold between people in the present, and the past should only serve as an education, not dictate the way in which you experience your present. With *Heremakhonon*, Condé alerts her readers of the diaspora to the pitfalls of expecting the African continent to define you rather than you defining yourself. In choosing to define herself, Condé's life serves as a historical narrative marked by strength and integrity that far surpasses the confused fragility of Veronica. For this reason, Condé is what French Caribbeans call a *matador*, a woman who creates her own path and does not ask for help from anyone—she takes control.⁸¹

Notes

¹ Maryse Condé, *Heremakhonon*, trans Richard Philcox (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 22.

² “Maryse Condé: Une voix singulière,” YouTube video, 52:15. Posted by “Île en Île,” June 15, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAb8RyzR9uo>.

³ Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 143. The notion of a 21st century French

national identity that seeks to flatten historical, racial, and religious difference can be seen as cause for concern for contemporary French youth with ancestry that lies outside of Europe. It is a point of contention that recently has been re-evaluated following the tenth anniversary of the Clichy-sous-Bois unrest.

⁴ Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self- Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 169.

⁵ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 21-24.

⁶ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 23.

⁷ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 12.

⁸ Laurie Corbin, "The Voicing of Desire: The Quest for History in *Heremakhonon* and *The Women of Tijucoapapo*," *Callaloo* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 429

⁹ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 4-5.

¹⁰ Susan Andrade, *The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2011), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Corbin, "The Voicing of Desire," 428.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9-12.

¹⁴ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷ Rogers Asempasah and Moussa Traore, "The Fragile 'Absolute': *Heremakhonon* and the Crisis of Representation and Historical Consciousness," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 19, no.1 (Jan 2014): 43.

¹⁸ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 19.

¹⁹ Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 58.

²⁰ "Sékou Touré: Vive L'Independance!" *Time Magazine*, February 16, 1959, 16.

²¹ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 25.

²² Translation by Sanyu Mulira.

²³ Susan Andrade, "The Nigger of the Narcissist: History, Sexuality, and Intertextuality in Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*," *Callaloo* 16, no. 1 (1993): 219-220.

²⁴ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 22-24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁶ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 39.

²⁷ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 51

²⁸ Andrade, "The Nigger of the Narcissist," 218.

²⁹ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

³² *Ibid.*, 114.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90, 118.

³⁴ Adele King, "Two Caribbean Women Go to Africa: Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* and Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*." *College Literature* 18, no. 3 (October 1991): 99-101.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁰ In an interview with *Ile en Ile*, Maryse Condé quoted Sékou Touré as saying, "It is better to be poor and free than rich and enslaved," an ideology that kept his citizens supportive of him throughout the tougher economic moments of his rule.

⁴¹ Condé, *Heremakhonon*, 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 152-160.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 152-159

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁰ Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 171.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 171-179.

⁵² Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*. 46. Mayotte Capécia was an early 20th century Martinican writer who was famously criticized by Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) for her valorization of the black woman's sexual relationship with the white man in her books.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁶ *Ile en Île*, "Maryse Condé: une voix."

⁵⁷ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁰ *Ile en Île*, "Maryse Condé: une voix."

⁶¹ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 8-13. In this particular interview, Maryse Condé remarks that if she had been white she believes that her first husband and his family would have been much more accepting of her activism. As a black woman she was expected to adhere to a different social order, a more subservient social order.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁶⁵ *Ile en Île*, "Maryse Condé: une voix."

- ⁶⁶ Ahmed Sékou Touré, *L'Afrique et la Revolution* (Paris: Présence Africaine, ND), 287-288.
- ⁶⁷ Translation by Sanyu Mulira.
- ⁶⁸ *Time*, "Sékou Touré," 9.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-10.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 16
- ⁷³ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 10.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-16.
- ⁷⁵ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 14.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁷⁷ Ile en Île, "Maryse Condé: une voix."
- ⁷⁸ A French term for a writer who primarily is known for their novels rather than works of criticism.
- ⁷⁹ Ile en Île, "Maryse Condé: une voix."
- ⁸⁰ Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé*, 40.
- ⁸¹ Ile en Île, "Maryse Condé: une voix." In 2012 Condé published a second autobiography, *La Vie sans fards*, to accompany her first *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer: Souvenirs de mon enfance* which was published in 1999. The first chronicles her life from childhood until her move to Africa in 1958, and the second picks up in Africa. The title, *La Vie sans fards*, roughly translates to "A Life Without Makeup" and is an unabashedly blemished memoir that explores the place of Africa in her life and imagination. For those seeking an account of Condé's true lived experience in Africa, *La Vie sans fards* is the text to read.

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