

EXCERPT FROM THE CROSSING OF THE MANGROVE

The text you are about to read is an excerpt from The Crossing of the Mangrove (1989), a novel by Maryse Condé. It is taken from the twelfth chapter of the novel and gives voice to Léocadie Timothée, a former teacher in Rivière-au-Sel where the novel takes place.

The character of Léocadie opens the novel by discovering the body of Francis Sanchez who had been missing for three days. From that discovery on, the small community of Rivière-au-Sel gets together for the wake of the deceased. Each chapter reveals the thoughts of each of the twenty characters who pretend to be praying the person laying in front of them.

Francis Sanchez had as many friends as he had enemies but they all gathered for the wake. They are still intrigued by this man who died before they could figure out his origins and purpose in Guadeloupe: was he an immigrant or a true Guadeloupean back from a long journey? Was he a writer or a worthless playboy?

The following excerpt briefly evokes one interesting aspect of Guadeloupean society as Léocadie reveals her attitude towards the different immigrant communities that now shape her island:

Léocadie Timothée

That corpse is mine. It's no coincidence that I was the one to find him, already bloated, on the forest path at the time of day when the sky bleeds behind the mountain. I have become his mistress and his accomplice. I won't leave him until the first shovelfuls of earth fall on his wooden coffin.

And yet while he was alive there was no love lost between that man and me, and I was of the same opinion as those who were about to send a registered letter to the mayor asking for him to be expelled like the Haitians and the Dominicans who turn the soccer fields in Petit-Bourg into cricket pitches. Really, this country is going to the dogs. It belongs to anybody now. French from France, all types of white folks from Canada or Italy, Vietnamese, and then this one comes and settles down in our midst, regurgitated by I don't know what bird of ill omen. I'm telling you, our country has changed. In times gone by, we knew nothing about the world and the world knew nothing about us. The fortunate few braved the

sea to Martinique. Fort de France was on the other side of the world and everyone dreamed about gold in Guyana. Nowadays, there's not a single family who doesn' t have one branch living in French France. People go off to visit Africa and America. The Indians go back to bathe in their river and the earth is as microscopic as a pinhead."

Maryse Condé, Crossing the Mangrove, trans. Richard Philcox, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1995 (111-112)