

The Creole and Female Identity in Maryse Condé's Work

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I. The Creole and Female Identity in Maryse Condé's Work

Maryse Condé was born in the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe . She writes in French and is extensively translated into English by her British husband, Richard Philcox She has received numerous prizes both in Europe and the US . After teaching Caribbean francophone literature at Columbia University , she is now retired and lives between New York and Guadeloupe .

Condé's life and work:

 [Short version](#)

 [Longer version](#)

 [Map of the Carriibbean](#)

 [Map of Guadeloupe](#)

 [Map Quiz](#)

II. The Meaning of Creole Identity

One of Maryse Condé's major themes is the enigma of Caribbean or Creole identity. The Caribbean identity is very difficult to define because of the complex history and geography of the Caribbean islands. The Caribbean islands' population is mainly made up of Blacks who are the descendants of enslaved Africans. For that reason, many Caribbeans feel that their true roots are not in the Caribbean but in Africa where their ancestors came from. Yet they don't speak any African language, have never seen the African land and don't have any present connection whatsoever with Africa . They speak Creole, their religion is a mix between Catholicism and voodoo and they have always lived among Indians and Whites who also claim to be Caribbeans. Some Caribbean islands speak English, some Spanish, some French and each island has created a different Creole. How can one feel a sense of unity, a sense of identity in the Caribbean ?

CULTURAL LINK:  [Creole expressions](#)

ARTICLE LINK:  Richardson, "[Caribbean Migrations, 1838-1985](#)"

 Brereton, "[Society and Culture in the Caribbean: The British and French West Indies, 1870-1980](#)"

III. The African Myth.

This quest to find one's identity is the driving force that leads Condé's stories. In Condé's early novels (*Heremakhonon* 1976, *Segu* 1984), her characters often go to Africa to discover their roots, thus stepping in a famous Caribbean writer's footsteps, Aimé Césaire, who advised his fellow countrymen to return to Africa in the fifties and sixties. Nevertheless, having lived in Africa herself, Condé, just like her characters, realizes quickly that Africa is not her motherland in spite of her ancestors' African origins.

In a later novel, *The Last of the African Kings* (1992), Condé goes as far as mocking the quest for African ancestors and the myth that surrounds it; the myth being that some in the Caribbean believe their ancestors to be African Kings and Queens . Condé understands that this desire to find noble African origins has to stop in order to re-build and understand the true Caribbean or Creole identity. This quest is also the focus of many works by Caribbean writers whether from English, Spanish or French islands.

LINK:  [Césaire](#)

LINK:  [Evolution of Condé's relationship with Africa](#)


IV. The Black Diaspora in the Americas

After a first period-in the seventies and early eighties-during which her characters retrace the steps of their ancestors back to Africa, Condé turns to writing about the Black Diaspora in the Americas and forgets about Africa, Césaire and the Négritude. Her characters give life to the multiple facets of the Black Diaspora present on both North and South, insular and continental America . Acknowledging the existence of the Black Diaspora is a first step towards understanding the existence of a Creole identity as it gives a sense of unity to Blacks scattered throughout the Americas . Without such a sense of unity, a community has no identity.

 [Négritude](#)

V. Lesson from New-York.

In her 1985 collection of short stories titled *Land of Many Colors* , her characters often found themselves in the US as well as in Black or Northern Arabic Africa. The city of New-York which serves as a backdrop for one short story, "Three Women in Manhattan ," is the cosmopolitan place *par excellence* where unity is born out of diversity. The three women's story unites New Yorkers and foreigners, Spanish and Caribbean immigrants from Guadeloupe and Haiti . Claude, a newly arrived immigrant from Guadeloupe and protagonist of the story, shares strong similarities with both Elinor, a successful African-American professor and writer, and Véra, a nostalgic Haitian immigrant and unpublished writer. What bonds the three women in spite of their diverse background underlines what unites members of the Black Diaspora in the Americas : each woman has experienced misery, and each wants to surpass it.




ARTICLE LINK:  Geggus, "[The Haitian Revolution](#)"

VI. Yet another lesson from Guadeloupe ?

Condé's writing about the diversity in the US led her to investigate the diversity of her own island to further her understanding of the Caribbean identity. Her 1989 novel, *Crossing the Mangrove*, takes place in Guadeloupe. *Crossing the Mangrove* is structured around the voices of Blacks, Indians, Békés (Caribbean White upper class), Dominicans, and Haitians who are all part of the social fabric of Guadeloupe. Each chapter of the book is told from a different cultural or racial point of view, twenty to be exact!! These twenty voices all talk about Francis Sanchez, the man that brings them together at his funeral and reveal something new about Francis' personality. Their attempt to establish his identity from different perspectives parallels, on a larger scale, the attempt to determine what Caribbean identity is.

VII. Identity: root or rhizome?

What unifies Caribbean culture is not easy to decipher. The diversity that shapes the Creole identity is often problematic. As the mangrove of the title suggests, (a mangrove is a bayou or a forest in a swamp) diversity seems to be a mess, a swamp where roots and branches show no beginning nor end. The mangrove is a very well chosen metaphor expressing the difficulty to disentangle the true Creole identity from the lies, the myths, the made-up past and the confusing present. It is also an interesting metaphor because it defines a new type of identity. Whereas identity is usually symbolized by a single root (like a carrot) which refers to one easily identified past as in the case of the European identity, the Caribbean identity relies on a web of roots (like those of a potato) that does not refer to one single culture inherited from the past, but refers instead to a multiplicity of cultures that the present still weaves together. A rhizome identity allows no single origin made up in a distant past but testifies of a new understanding of identity which allows for change in the present.

ARTICLE LINK:  Girvan, "[Reinterpreting the Caribbean](#)"
 Hall, "[Negotiating Caribbean Identities](#)"
 Garner, "[Search for Identity](#)"

Crossing the Mangrove is all about the rhizome identity. As the community of Rivière-au-Sel strives to understand Francis Sanchez's identity by trying to put the pieces of his past together, one realizes that Sanchez exists in spite of an uncertain past through the relationships he has woven with the community during his stay in Guadeloupe. On a larger scale, the Creole or Caribbean identity is not to be found in its past so much as in the relationships each Creole weaves in the present. Thanks to Condé's writing, the mangrove-like Caribbean identity becomes less confuse and, refusing to exist in the shadow of the root-identity that denies its existence, asserts itself as a rhizome-identity.

ACTIVITY LINK:  [Crossing the Mangrove](#) (excerpt)

VIII. The role of Art in Condé's writings

Art in Condé's writing helps express this rhizomatic aspect of the Creole identity. In spite of the apparent unsolvable tangle of the Creole identity, Condé really believes something can be done to ease its understanding. Acknowledging the Black Diaspora is a first step towards that goal but not the last. Indeed, Condé suggests that it is art, rather than racial ancestry, as her novels of the seventies suggested, that

could create the strongest bond between members of the Black Diaspora, thus giving a better sense of identity.

Condé uses art in two ways to express the Creole identity : Condé first uses her own art, her writing, to reunify members of the Black Diaspora across borders. The characters of her novels of the eighties and nineties often interact with people from Africa , France , the US , the Caribbean and even South America . In her 1985 collection of short stories titled *The Land of Many Colors* , her characters often find themselves in the US . In a later novel, *Desirada* (1997), the protagonist's quest for her identity makes her travel from Guadeloupe to France and then to the Boston , MA where she finally is able to find herself. It is thanks to the people she meets in the US that Marie-Noëlle manages to forget about her previous desire to find her past and her father. Though the art of writing, Condé crosses borders and weaves the destinies of characters from around the world without necessarily turning the Creole identity into a perfectly harmonious entity or a model to follow. The cosmopolitan friendships that come to life in Condé's novels underline the double meaning of "pays mêlé" (the original title of the collection *The Land of Many Colors*) which suggests both a country of mixtures and of problems ("mêlé" meaning problem in Creole). Condé's art creates a geography that ignores borders and where members of the Black Diaspora unite again, proving with every character that identities can no longer be limited to the place of origin nor to past ancestors but are built little by little as life goes on.

Condé's second way of using art in her writing is by referring to Black artists and personalities from the Americas without ever explaining who they are in footnotes or endnotes (as her publishers often suggest her to do). Her readers must make the effort to go and look up those artists by themselves if they do not know them. It is a subtle way to confront readers with the limits of the western canon, and to try to open the latter to a Black canon that could be as respected. A canon (and not necessarily an elitist one) being the best expression of the culture one belongs to. It can be a source of pride or a model to look up to, but it is mostly a testimony for one's identity.

With this in mind, Condé refers to writers such as Zora Neale Hurston in "Three women in Manhattan " short story from *The Land of Many Colors* (1985). Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* also appears in Condé's 1999 childhood tales. In one tale titled openly "The bluest eye," she recalls a young boyfriend telling her she had beautiful blue eyes. The boyfriend had read so many (western) stories with beautiful blond and blue-eyed heroines that he thought all beautiful women bore those features, so much so that his beautiful girlfriend Maryse Condé, no doubt had blue eyes as well. The young Maryse was shattered when she read the compliment addressed to her for it did appear to be for someone else. This true childhood tale seems to be the seed from which her second most important theme grew: the theme of the female identity.

ART LINK: [Haitian Art, Images and Exercises](#)

ART LINK: [Francophone Art](#) section of this website

IX. Female Creole Identity

By referring to artists such as Hurston and Morrison, Condé also reminds the reader of generations of black women who defeated the stereotypes cast onto them. Although Condé refuses the "feminist" label, she is not indifferent to the Caribbean woman's experience. Her reflection on the topic of the black female started in 1979 with her book entitled: *Women's Words* . This short book is a study of the many stereotypes that are ascribed to the black female. Condé carefully studied French Caribbean literature and interviewed several women authors on the topic. She found that the black female body was still very much idealized. Black women have been stereotyped by both westerners and by their own countrymen as well.



Whereas the western stereotype (the legacy of imperialism) depicts the Black woman as an hyper sexualized exotic woman, Caribbean men see her as the vessel and pillar of their society, someone who can bear any hardship and many children (this is the legacy of patriarchy). In order to unveil those stereotypes, Condé uses several tricks. While some of her heroines (such as Tituba) expose those stereotypes and ridicule them, others (as Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle in *Desirada*) destroy them and depart from them. In both cases, Condé gives voice to the Black woman previously deprived of the freedom and power of speech because mainly seen as a sexual object.

ART LINK: [Creole Art](#) (see section "Benoist and Anonymous paintings: stereotypes of the Black female")

In *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), Condé gives voice to Tituba, a Black woman accused of witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials. She played an important role yet was erased from historical books. In her book, Condé lets her tell us her life before, during and after the Salem Witch Trials, thus casting away the veil that silenced Black women in History. At the same time though, Condé paints Tituba's body exactly as seen through the eyes of the westerner. In fact, Tituba has internalized the stereotype so deeply that she not only plays the hyper sexual Black woman but also sees herself as one.

Displaying the veil that hides the Black woman's sexuality is only the first step towards freedom. Condé also destroys it and reconstructs the Black woman by depicting a new type of female heroine: the Black working or intellectual woman. In *Segu* or *Desirada* or in "Three Women in Manhattan" (*Land of Many Colors* 1985), we witness the making of a new woman: the Intellectual Black woman who rejects both the imperialistic and the patriarchal clichés. This new woman is often sterile instead of maternal, and skinny instead of voluptuous. Yet this new woman is not necessarily frigid: her sexuality simply becomes her own and not one for the pleasure of the westerner nor one for the use of her own countrymen.

If we go back to the artists than Condé mentioned in "Three women in Manhattan," we see women in a new light. In Bigaud's paintings, the black woman solely exists through her work and social role. Her body is clearly not hyper sexualized. In fact, it is even cut in half, her lower part disappearing behind her work. In Eliassaint's paintings, the woman represented here is Erzulie Dantor, who is the adaptation of the Virgin Mary to the Caribbean Island. Unlike the Virgin Mary though, Erzulie Dantor can be good and bad. She is indeed more human. Erzulie is an important symbol that frees women from the image of the too-perfect Virgin Mary and from the Western understanding of what a good woman is (that is white and virginal). Erzulie constructs a more human or realistic icon for Black women to look up to.

ARTICLE LINK:	 Women in the Caribbean section (4 articles by Springer, Simms, Galvan, Antrobus)
ARTICLE LINK:	 Espinal, "Migration, Racism and Women in the Caribbean"

X. Conclusion

Although the Creole identity finds its origin in a tragedy, the crossing of the Atlantic, also called "the Great Passage", this tragedy succeeded nevertheless in creating a new culture, a culture that ignores borders as it encompasses Anglophone, Francophone and Hispanic islands throughout the Caribbean sea. Against all odds, the black woman is rising from the various patriarchies (European and Caribbean) that oppressed her. Condé's intellectual women revive a long line of women who, like Tituba have been muted by History but who have all destroyed the stereotypes that oppressed them.

ARTICLE LINK:  Dupuy, ["The New World Order: Globalization and Caribbean Politics"](#)