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What Is Africa to Me ? *ou la relation amour/haine de Maryse Condé avec les « terres ancestrales » aux prises avec l'indépendance naissante*

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Augustine H. Asaah

What Is Africa to Me? or Maryse Condé's Love-Hate Relationship with "Ancestral Lands" Struggling with Budding Independence*

The involvement of French-speaking Caribbean intellectuals in the socio-political development of their ancestral continent, Africa, has taken diverse literary forms, key among which are René Maran's novel *Batouala* (1921), Frantz Fanon's political testimony *Les damnés de la terre* (2004 [1961]), Aimé Césaire's play *Une saison au Congo* (1966), Myriam Warner-Vieyra's novel *Juletane* (1982), and Raoul Peck's film *Sometimes in April* (2005). While dialoguing with these authors/works, Maryse Condé's autobiography, *La vie sans fards* (2012)/*What Is Africa to Me?* (2017), prolongs this affiliation with the account of her relocation to four West African postcolonies, namely the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal between 1959 and 1970, with a year's break in the UK.

What Is Africa to Me?, a deconstructive sequel to *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (1999)/*Tales from the Heart* (2001),[1] allows Condé to reflect on her life as a migrant in West Africa, chronicling a long season of anguish punctuated with quintessential moments of joy (birth of her three daughters, the kindness of strangers, meetings with revolutionary icons, fruits of her first creative efforts, etc.). The events recounted happened some 40-50 years earlier in her life. As an iconic figure of Caribbean literature, Condé, 2018 Winner of the New Academy Prize/"Alternative Nobel Prize," has deservedly attracted critical attention in intellectual circles. While it would be tempting to

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[1] In *What Is Africa to Me?,* Condé contests some of the facts captured in the earlier autobiography, *Tales from the Heart.*

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undertake a comparative analysis of the trajectories of Condé's fictional and non-fictional representations of migration as Sanyu Mulira's article (2016) has brilliantly done, the current paper will rather attempt to evaluate the autobiographer's love-hate relationship with Africa by adopting postcolonial and feminist perspectives on Othering. This is all the more important as Condé (Pfaff 2015: 184) stresses that one of the primary reasons for using this autobiography to discard her mask in the twilight of her life is to show the public her long ordeal as a victim, as an Othered individual, prior to her attainment of literary fame.

As a postcolonial analytical concept, Othering owes much to the theorization by the Indian critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985). Her conceptualization makes it possible to appreciate Othering, as a process fundamental to the construction of the "Otherness of Empire," by means of vilification, exclusionism, and worlding, i.e., "consolidating the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground" (*ibid.:* 253). Othering has been the root cause of similar deleterious phenomena and reflexes such as racism, ethnocentrism, misogyny, and, fanaticism. Feminist theoretician Hélène Cixous (2013: 202) therefore notes, "The other is there only to be re-appropriated, recaptured and destroyed as other."

In the liminal section of the narrative (Condé 2017: 1-2) and in her interview with Françoise Simasotochi-Bronès (2014: 190), Condé contends that the autobiography and the memoir, as edifices of fantasy, represent a hotchpotch of embellished half-truths. Her doubts about the veracity claims of the genre echo those articulated by Albert Thibaudet (1935: 82), "L'autobiographie qui paraît au premier abord le plus sincère de tous les genres en est peut-être le plus faux."[2] Nevertheless, Condé (2014: 190) strongly argues in the same interview that *What Is Africa to Me?* is the work in which she has lied the least. By this, she seeks to assure the public of the relative authenticity of the account of her life history. To give further expression to her sincerity, she took inspiration from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to entitle her confessional autobiography in French, *La vie sans fards*, meaning "A Life without Make-up." It was ostensibly chosen to confirm the author's declared intention of laying bare the intimate and hidden details of her life. Paraphrasing Rousseau, she affirms (Condé 2017: 2), "I propose to show my fellows a woman as Nature made her and this woman shall be me."[3]

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[2] "Autobiography, which at first sight appears to be the most sincere of all the genres, is perhaps the falsest of them all."

[3] This is almost a word-for-word rewriting of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's declaration (2004:4) at the beginning of *Les confessions:* "Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature ; et cet homme, ce sera moi."

However, the translator of the novel, Richard Philcox, who is also the spouse of the author, rather assigned the title, *What Is Africa to Me?: Fragments of a True-to-Life Story* to the translated work. This is striking for three main reasons. First, "What is Africa to me?" is the first verse of the famous 1925 Harlem Renaissance poem, "Heritage," by Countee Cullen, in which the author at the end of a painful introspection, appears to accept his African heritage not dissimilar to Condé's own love-hate attitude towards the same legacy in the autobiography. Second, it seems to suggest that Condé's divulgation of secrets is coterminous with the revelation of her anxiogenic and intimate relationship with Africa. Third, it confirms Philcox's appreciation of Condé's interest in the pantheon of African American writers that populate the autobiography and invest it with a "true-to-life" quality.

As a corollary, the translated title establishes intertextual and organic links with the large body of diasporic writing (travelogues, memoires, poetry, essays, fiction, and drama) not just by Francophone Antilleans but also by conflicted English-speaking diasporans on their often ambivalent relationship with the continent. Prominent works by African Americans, in this respect, include W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Strivings of the Negro People" (1897), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Langston Hughes' *The Big Sea* (1940), Richard Wright's *Black Power* (1954), and Marita Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* (1983). From the Anglophone Caribbean region, mention can also be made of Claude McKay's "Outcast" (1922), Vera Bell's "Ancestor on the Auction Block" (1958), E. R. Braithwaite's *A Kind of Homecoming* (1963), and George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (2005). Inherent in this conflicted love, with palpable psychological and political depth, are contradictions which make it possible for affection to coexist intimately with aversion, hilarity with acerbity, celebration with withdrawal, all driven by an awareness (alternately keen, intangible, or fleeting) of possessing or losing Africa. Such is the complexity of this love-hate dilemma. It bears emphasizing then that, from Du Bois to Condé through Cullen, Wright, and Bell, the searing accounts of the return (imaginary or physical) to Africa crucially shed light on the delicate relationship between diasporic wordsmiths and the ancestral continent. Behind the trope of "double consciousness" and uneasy return lurks the long and traumatic legacy of slavery, colonialism, and alienation, all byproducts of Othering.

Colonial Legacy and Prejudice

In effect, colonialism frames Condé's trajectory from her native Guadeloupe, through colonial France to postcolonial West Africa. Lucas Spiro (2020: 1) says of Guadeloupe: "French colonialism has classified Guadeloupe as a 'special' overseas French territory. This administrative designation simultaneously denies the country nationhood while claiming that the people of Guadeloupe are members of the French nation." Apparently inspired by Giorgio Agamben (1995), he situates the island within the "'in-between' condition of inclusive exclusion—a state of being in a non-state" (Spiro 2020: 1), whose "independence has been paralyzed between the desire for self-rule and the reality of being a small, poor nation adrift on the oceans of global capital" (*ibid.:* 2). Departmentalization and colonialism have a long history rooted in Othering. For as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989: 1) argues, the phenomenon of Othering dates back to the dawn of history when a group of powerful men arrogated to itself a central hegemonic in-group position vis-à-vis an out-group of those it thought did not belong. It then interpreted the out-group through the in-group/hegemonic mode of reasoning, claiming to speak for both the out-group and the in-group.

Having already fallen victim to racial discrimination in post-war conservative France, Condé becomes even more conscious of bigotry and the Otherness of Empire, thanks to her French friend who introduces her to her Socialist father and *Discours sur le colonialisme* in which Césaire (1950) trenchantly draws close parallels between colonialism, capitalism, racism, and dehumanization. Condé's very "Black Consciousness" is a function of her appreciation of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). Given its empowerment symbol and anti-colonial rallying cry, Condé's enthusiastic response to Negritude constitutes an expression of vital self-redemption and collective liberation. Never for once does she lose sight of colonialism as she chronicles the colonial legacy of impoverishment in Senegal, social asymmetry between Blacks/colonized and Whites/colonialists in Senegal and the Ivory Coast as well as colonial prejudices which ascribe emotions to Blacks. Following V. S. Naipaul (1967), Condé (2017: 253-254) diagnoses the "Grands Nègres" pride of some Antillean subjects and the alienation of post-independence westernized African elite as symptomatic of the morbid dependency of "mimic men."

In Guinea, Condé notes the assassination of Patrice Lumumba on June 17 1961 but admits not understanding its full imperialistic implications until after the publication of Césaire's *Une saison au Congo* in 1965. Neocolonial Western interference in Haiti does not, however, escape her attention.

While she decries neocolonialism in Ghana's post-Nkrumah, she reports, without commenting, the view held by some that Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Léopold Sédar Senghor are both colonial puppets. And when Sembène Ousmane virulently informs her in Senegal that African leaders, in general, are "the colonizer's best pupils [which is why] independence and colonization are so similar" (Condé 2017: 127), she wonders if that attack applies also to the enigmatic Senghor.

Beyond the denunciation of African leadership, there are plethoric references to freedom fighters and political/economic refugees (in Guinea and especially Ghana), struggling against Apartheid or Portuguese colonial domination in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Cape Verde. Commenting on the We/They or Self/Other binary inherent in imperial and racist grand narratives, postcolonial theoretician Abdul JanMohamed (1995: 84) remarks:

> Troubled by the nagging contradiction between the theoretical justification of exploitation and the barbarity of its actual practice, [colonial and racist discourse] also attempts to mask the contradiction by obsessively portraying the supposed inferiority and barbarity of the racial Other, thereby insisting on the profound moral difference between self and Other.

With a nod towards Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956), she satirizes Apartheid-like segregation between two factions of teachers, Caucasian French and Blacks, in Senghor's post-independence socialist Senegal and also, official racism at the French Embassy in Dakar. She not only lambasts slavery and colorism, she also supports Césaire and Fanon, fellow Antilleans, in their respective indictment of colonial infantilization, animalization, and reification of Blacks, the very stuff of Othering.

Colonial and racial discrimination of a different, but still sinister, hue is discernible in the erection in the Ivory Coast of Bingerville's Orphanage for Half-Castes, to cater for the children of French colonizers and local Ivorian women, abandoned by both sets of parents. The stigmatization of the Ivorian orphans is all the more baneful by reason of its proximity, in terms of its evocation, to the leper house, the object of abject prejudice from otherwise well-educated colonial functionaries. Both are perceived as anathema: the orphans as social lepers, the lepers as the ultimate outcasts.

Glossing Cixous (2013), one could contend that members of the hegemonic in-group (able-bodied folk, "legitimate" offspring, men, masters, lords, the free-born, Whites, husbands, adults, colonialists, rich, "believers," higher castes, etc.) perceive themselves to be superior to those in the out-group (lepers, people with disabilities, bastards, women, servants, serfs, slaves, non-Whites/Blacks, youth, colonized, poor, "infidels," lower caste, etc.) and associate themselves with the so-called positive qualities of light, reason, order, norm, standard, and civilization while attributing to the Others perceived negative traits such as horror, darkness, emotions, anomaly, deviation, and primitiveness.

Postcolonial and feminist perspectives on Othering, which evoke Montaigne's observation that "One calls 'barbarism' whatever one is not accustomed to," shed light on the numerous cases of commodification, barbarization, and stereotyping in Condé's autobiography. They equally explain the infantilization, essentialism, and transferred colonialism that sometimes mar the relations between Condé and West Africans in her autobiography.

Mystification and Othering

Overall, however, Condé's anguish at her first Ivorian duty post, Bingerville, seems to prefigure her general discomfort in the other West African towns and villages she lives in: "I was living in a state of mental malaise, seldom at peace with myself, and often miserable" (Condé 2017: 42). Her expectations and dreams about the country of destination hardly coincide with lived experiences for, as Everett S. Lee (1966: 51-52) explains:

> Knowledge of the area of destination is seldom exact, and indeed some of the advantages and disadvantages of an area can only be perceived by living there. Thus there is always an element of ignorance or even mystery about the area of destination, and there must always be some uncertainty with regard to the reception of a migrant in a new area.

Condé's status as a frustrated latter-day colonialist and cultural outsider, i.e. as an "other" in the eyes of the locals, is emphasized in this confession: "I felt so alone in Bingerville, ill-equipped to help Africa who needed it so much […]. I felt I wasn't making much progress in getting to know Africa. I was merely a spectator wherever I went" (Condé 2017: 39-40). To her credit, Condé admits at the end of a ruthless self-examination that she has been a hypocrite for most of her stay in the Ivory Coast (*ibid.:* 41).

In many respects, Condé's failures and disenchantment in *What Is Africa to Me?* can be explained by her mythologization of Africa long before her arrival on its shores. Condé (1977: 38) stresses the mythical place that Guinea (symbol of Africa) has, since the traumatizing days of slavery, occupied in Caribbean popular culture as the heaven to which the soul of the oppressed slave would return upon death, as a freed person. In the view of Sunday

Okpanachi (1984: 56), some West Indian subjects desirous of settling in Africa are imbued with the schematic mental pre-representation of Africa as a dreamlike and paradisiac abode. To this constructed primordial image of Africa as a mythical land of succor would later be added Negritude's idealization of Africa. For Condé (1977: 39), however, in spite of these glorifying and consolatory myths about Africa, the first generation of Caribbean/French Guyanese "returnees" to Africa, such as the colonial administrators Félix Éboué and René Maran, often adopted a paternalistic attitude towards Africa: "Bien qu'éprouvant la plus vive sympathie pour les peuples africains, (la première génération) s'attribuait en face d'eux un rôle d'aînés éclairés face à des cadets encore enténébrés".[4] Commenting on the myth-induced superiority complex and transferred domination reflexes of Antilleans towards Africans, Fanon (1952: 20) explains that this tendency feeds on the alienation and colonial conditioning of Caribbean subjects as well as on their closeness to the colonial master and their acquisition of Western education.

The two myth-triggered attitudes towards Africa (Edenization of Guinea and Negritude's glorification of Africa) forebodingly cast their shadow on Condé's ill-starred sojourn in West Africa. Her obsession with Africa, probably not without a certain sub-conscious desire of reconnecting with mythical Guinea, facilitates her friendship with two Fulani sisters from Guinea and, ultimately, her marriage of convenience with another Guinean, Mamadou Condé. As she repeatedly stresses in her autobiography (Condé 2017: 52, 80, 243-244), it is after her reading of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* that she conceives of the spiritual connection to the mythical ancestral continent. Condé's intimate hopes are as poetic in their formulation as they are Osirian and soteriological in their breadth: "I believed that if I could reach the continent sung by my favorite poet, I could be reborn. Restore my virginity. Regain my hopes. Erase the malicious memory of the man who had hurt me so much"[5] (*ibid.:* 22). In the late 1950s, this personal dream is also in tandem with the collective Pan-Africanist vision of rebirth and independence for the long-exploited Black race on the continent.

Nevertheless, even before Condé sets foot on African soil, she, in the manner of a colonialist, constructs Mamadou, her future husband, as the alluring and sensualist noble savage, of scant education. Although given to inebriation, he was still opportunistically useable to wash away her shame in the conservative France of the 1950s of having giving birth at age nineteen outside wedlock and to connect her to Africa. As Mulira (2016: 87) aptly puts it, Condé "initially viewed Mamadou Condé as her black myth, her metaphysical link to the new continent that she called home." Later, in keeping with the noble savage construction of Mamadou, Maryse Condé (2017: 203) refers to her husband as a child, akin to Kipling's conceptualization (1940: 321) of the native in "The White Man's Burden" as "half-devil and half-child". To the extent that Mamadou Condé is a metonymic symbol of Africa, Maryse Condé's problematic marriage with him presages the ambivalent and challenging relationship that she will have with the continent.

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[4] "Despite their very strong sympathy for Africans, the first generation of Antilleans arrogated to themselves the status of enlightened elder brothers, obliged to deal with their still benighted juniors."

[5] The high-profile Haitian agronomist, Jean Dominique.

Once on African soil for the first time during her Dakar stop-over, she demonstrates complete repulsion—at the sheer poverty of the crowd and the sight of hollow-cheeked beggars with multiple children—aggravated by nausea at the pestilential odor emanating from a market. Even though one could, with some justification, liken her aversion to Césaire's raging revulsion at the colonialism-induced squalor, degeneration, debilitation, and atrophy on the return to his native West Indies, especially given the overabundant hypotextual references to Césaire's classic in Condé's novel, her condescending evocation stands in sharp contrast to his empathetic and solidarity-driven tableau. In effect, if Césaire's gesture is energized by the anti-colonialist sentiments of a cultural insider, hers appears informed by the colonial conditioning of a cultural outsider.[6] Later, when Condé gets transfixed in a tourist-like enchantment at Senegalese oral performance involving *griots*, *koras,* and *balafons,* traces of a cultural stranger persist.

Additionally, her penetration into the forest of Bingerville evokes in the reader memories of Kurtz's probe of Africa's heartland in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2007) rather than a response to the Césairian call in *Cahier…* to Blacks to configure Congo as the heartbeat of Africa. Amidst the pervasive mysterious dark contours of the African social, floral, and faunal landscape, she sets herself the colonialist project of subjecting Jiman, her Niger-born houseboy (who appears to be of the same age as her father), and Koffi N'Guessan, the Ivorian director of the horticultural garden, to an ethnographic inquiry whose findings she does not share with readers. Instructively, in keeping with the Assimilation credo of Gallic ancestry and colonial conditioning, she portrays all French as blond as she paints the first group of pupils she meets during her stopover in Senegal as all blond ("rows of blond heads") and their French teacher ("also blond"), whose alterity/blondness is put in sharp relief by an adjoining blackboard.[7] Further, she portrays the Ivorian town Bingerville as a "godforsaken hole of Africa" (Condé 2017: 39).

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[6] One could submit, with some justification, that Condé and Césaire shared the same colonial conditioning; and Césaire's outcry when rediscovering the poverty in Fort-de-France is the result of his return after six years in chic Paris, suited and bow-tied like any bourgeois French candidate to Normale Sup'.

Induced by myths and Othering, Condé's colonialist reflexes extend to the often alienating and alienated West Indians in the Ivory Coast. The generally held belief is that Africans envy and hate French-speaking Antilleans because of the latter's involuntary francization, intimate involvement in French colonial administration, and their superior airs. With disarming sincerity, Condé (*ibid.:* 154-155) makes a confession on the shortcomings of visiting and relocated Antilleans and African Americans:

> Deep down, way down, in the minds of the long-colonized West Indians and African Americans, whatever they may say, wasn't there a good dose of arrogance with regard to Africa? An arrogance they never managed to get rid of? A feeling of superiority? [...] Our education is partly to blame… Didn't Richard Wright and I remain somewhat "alienated?"

Condé is also apprised of the disturbing stories of Caribbean settlers, migrants, and officials in Africa who have fallen victim to West African xenophobia, as is the case of the Guadeloupian Gabriel Lisette. His unalloyed commitment to the nationalist struggle of Chad notwithstanding, he is later falsely accused of conspiracy by the post-independence leaders of that country and forced into exile in France. Into these quotidian evocations of mutual misunderstanding and prejudice between West Indians and Africans are woven multiple references to the many Caribbean women, including Condé's childhood friends, elder sister, and even later her first daughter, who still marry West Africans and settle in various parts of the sub-region, with varying degrees of success. As the author admits, it is not all the Caribbean administrators, exiles, and sojourners who hold unfavorable views about their host communities. A noticeable example is the integration of the Antillean Olga—married to the Guinean Seyni. Not only does she fluently speak three indigenous languages, but also she dresses like a Guinean and has adopted a Guinean name. Another is Guy Tirolien, the poet, Negritudinist, and administrator of Guadeloupian stock, who, in the vein of Césaire and Senghor, relentlessly exhorts Condé to dutifully love Africa, the long-suffering mother of all Blacks (*ibid.:* 39).

Condé's gradual detachment from Césaire's idealization of Africa and intellectual influence (and by implication, dissociation from Tirolien's position) in preference for the more materialistic and constructivist stand of

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7. Although the word used in the French original is "tableau," in the 1950s, only blackboards were used in colonial schools, and tableau simply meant "blackboard."

Fanon does not translate into outright rejection of myth-prone reflexes and essentialism: “Africa was not content to reject me—it was stripping me” (*ibid.:* 221-222); “Africa had never considered me a daughter” (*ibid.:* 231); “once again, Africa had laid a trap for me” (*ibid.:* 240). Condé’s sweeping condemnation of the entirety of the African continent is all the more puzzling as Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 17) warns that “the peoples of Africa have a great deal less in common than is usually assumed.”

Condé takes issue with Negritude’s reductionist conceptualization of the black race: “I question the fact that Négritude perpetuates the notion that all blacks are the same…The issue of ‘likeness,’ of ‘similarity’ is erroneous even in the Antilles. Guadeloupe is very different from Martinique. We are sisters, but each island has an identity of its own” (Clark & Daheny 1989: 117). However, she resorts to the same over-simplification gesture in her dealings with the African continent as she, without any stay in Northern, Central, Eastern, or Southern African regions of the continent, uses her relocation to four West African countries to generalize about the entirety of the African continent and its peoples. Conscious of the differences and similarities between the two small Antillean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, she elects to be incognizant of the specificities of each African people, country, and sub-region, as she assigns herself the impossible task of exploring the place that the entire continent has held in her imagination and existence (Condé 2017: 6) after her migration to four West African countries. Fanon’s observation (2004: 150) corroborates the similarity between Condé’s gesture and colonial discourse:

> Colonialism, little troubled by nuances, has always claimed that the “nigger” was a savage, not an Angolan or a Nigerian, but a “nigger.” For colonialism, this vast continent was a den of savages, infested with superstitions and fanaticism, destined to be despised, cursed by God, a land of cannibals, a land of “niggers.”

Fanon (*ibid.:* 150) concludes: “Colonialism’s condemnation is continental in scale. Colonialism’s claim that the precolonial period was akin to a darkness of the human soul refers to the entire continent of Africa.”

Condé’s indiscriminate observations portend no good for Africa. At the end of her exploration, she makes two intriguing vengeance-laden statements placed at vantage points of her autobiography. In the first postulation strategically positioned in the coda of the prologue, she declares that Africa of which she has previously been blindly enamored is worth neither the efforts and sacrifices made nor the pain and sorrow suffered. Africa, as a lover, is not her type (Condé 2017: 6).

At the tail end of Condé's autobiography is situated the second vindictive statement, not devoid of colonial conditioning, in which she resorts to zoomorphization and reification to mystify Africa further as she configures the entirety of the continent as a tamed beast (animalization) consigned thenceforth to the hidden recesses of her imagination to serve as pliable material (proprietary objectification) for her many works of fiction: "Africa, finally subdued, would transform itself and slip, domesticated, into the folds of my imagination and be nothing more than the subject of numerous narratives" (*ibid.:* 290). This appears then to be her formal response to Cullen's question, "What is Africa to me?"

Anguish

Beyond her marital problems and mythification issues, Condé's unease in West Africa has, by and large, four primary sources: job dissatisfaction, (self-) marginalization, Africa's bad governance, and neo-colonial appropriation of her private space. Significantly, most of Condé's professional life in West Africa is dedicated to teaching, either preparing young ones in the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Senegal for the challenges of the future or teaching French to adults (translators and policy-makers from diverse African countries) in Ghana. If her conditions of service are generally more rewarding in Ghana, the paltry remuneration for her pedagogical services in the other West African countries puts her in dire straits, thus compromising her capacity to fend for her children and deepening her despair. A good salary, however, does not necessarily translate into fulfilment and job satisfaction. Her abhorrence for translation means that she hardly enjoys her teaching work at the Ghana Institute of Languages and still less, her otherwise well remunerated professional duties as a translator at the International Institute of Development in Dakar. In the latter case, since her three-month probationary appointment is not renewed on account of poor performance, she has to rely on the hardly fulfilling task of a high school teacher at Saint-Louis to eke out a living. For Everett S. Lee (1966: 51), "the difficulties associated with assimilation in a new environment may create in the newly arrived a contrary but equally erroneous evaluation of the positive and negative factors at destination."

Given the cycle of mutual Othering between Condé and her host communities, her stay in West Africa is often characterized by feelings of exclusion, dejection, and disquiet. In her interview with Françoise Pfaff (1993: 24), she explains that upon her arrival in Guinea, she is initially accepted by all until her hosts realize that she is different in terms of culinary skills and language. When asked by Pfaff whether she has made any special efforts at integrating into Guinean society, Condé replies that for such an effort to be initiated and to succeed, she needs assistance, especially given her own avowed non-malleability (*ibid.:* 24). Condé's ultimate reaction to what she calls "cultural terrorism" on the part of her hosts is the pertinacious refusal to integrate *(ibid.)*: refusal to learn any local language and cooking skills, rejection of adaptation to the new environment, impermeability to a hybrid ethos, and missed opportunity of negotiating for and living out an enriching in-between culture.

Reciprocal gestures of exclusion between Condé and her in-laws lead to needless friction. Non-integration inevitably implies further differentiation, exacerbated malaise, and her relegation to the insulting status of a *toubabesse*/"white woman" (Condé 2017: 89). Abdul R. JanMohamed's view (1985: 64-65) on Othering offers a way out of her exclusion: "Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture." Non-integration also means for Condé what Wilson (1990: 45) would describe as "withdrawal and isolation and/or flight and evasion, rather than confrontation."

Condé claims in her interview with Marie-Clotilde Jacquey and Monique Hugon (1984: 23) that she has never made the mistake of regarding Africa as her native/mother land. Nonetheless, she shows in her autobiography her profound pain at being rejected by her hosts in West Africa (Condé 2017: 221-222, 231, 240, 244). Further, she affirms that the mass deportation of African slaves and the Middle Passage have deprived her of her African culture: "*my* language and *my* traditions" (*ibid.:* 92).[8] Further, she compares her separation from Ghana to the visceral loss felt at her mother's death. She is also matricially nostalgic in her recall of Khombole, comparing the serenity experienced in this Senegalese town to that of her mother's womb. Her repeated valorization of fetal bliss (Pfaff 2015: 31) and of the prenatal "supreme comfort" in the mother's uterus (*ibid.:* 73) underscores the importance of the comparison she establishes between the unparalleled delight experienced at Khombole and her ecstasy in the mother's womb, hence, her extreme pain at separation from the ancestral land.

It is worth stressing that Condé's love-hate relationship with the continent pulses through her moments of bliss, angst, and torment and that her discomfort is not only due to her shortcomings or errors. The chasm between collective hope and betrayal is a matter of grave concern for her. The ever-increasing We/They gulf between the new ruling castes and the citizenry meant further entrenchment of the pre-colonial and colonial hierarchical cleavages, which independence sought to dismantle or at least, have their severity reduced. As Ayi Kwei Armah (1968) would say, the saviors and "beautiful ones" are yet to be born. Cixous (2013: 201) appositely remarks, "everything through the centuries depends on the distinction between the Selfsame, the ownself (—what is mine hence, what is good) and that which limits it… is the other. It is the other in a hierarchically organized relationship in which the same is what rules, names, defines and assigns its other."

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[8] Emphasis mine.

Condé's political disenchantment is in direct correlation with her disillusionment with Negritude and Pan-Africanism. Confronted with the historical challenge of constructing a Black commonwealth for Africans and diasporans, including herself, West African leaders instead opted for the creation of new castes, new cliques, new turfs, new barriers, one-party states (the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Ghana), personality cult (the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Ghana), Apartheid-like luxury (Guinea), pro-West governance, and Francophilia (Senegal) while the vast majority of the citizenry contended with debilitating poverty. Into this mix are thrown ethnocentric and xenophobic pogroms in the Ivory Coast and Guinea. While the architects of the Africanist-inspired socialist "revolution become its gravediggers" (Condé 2017: 104) in Sékou Touré's Guinea, Kwame Nkrumah, the supreme Pan-Africanist, is busy transforming Ghana *qua* Africa "into a mirror where, like Narcissus, he could gaze at his reflection" (*ibid.:* 254).

Equally disturbing is the absence of any public re-education and sensitization program to free the citizenry of prejudice towards returnee Africans. If Langston Hughes (1940) was to his ultimate consternation labelled a Whiteman in colonialized West Africa in the 1920s, it is hardly conceivable that city-dwellers in post-independence West Africa embarrassingly tag diasporans Whites.[9] Nor is there any sustained government effort to re-orientate and effectively re-integrate returning diasporans into their host communities. The result is the creation of cocooned diasporan communities with little or no contact with the locals:

> Ghana in those days belonged to the African Americans, just as numerous as Antilleans in French-speaking Africa but more active and militant. Fleeing the racism in the United States, they flocked to this land that they were convinced would become the homeland of the black man […]. The African-Americans, however, did not mix with the Ghanaians but, rather, formed a superior caste protected by their high-ranking jobs and high earnings (Condé 2017: 158-159).

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[9] While in Francophone West Africa, the tag is generally pejorative, in Anglophone West Africa, it is often used to show admiration.

Then it dawns upon Condé that the whole Pan-Africanist project is just a pipe dream: "The more it [the chasm between African Americans and Ghanaians] went, the more I realized that Negritude was nothing but a wonderful dream. That colour meant nothing" (*ibid.:* 159).

Voided of its substance by Fanon (*ibid.:* 104-105), Negritude (etymologically "the state of being black"; Blackness; Africanness) appears to only evoke in her empty rhetoric and Manichean compartmentalization. Configured henceforth as a vector of Othering, Negritude/Africanness becomes no more than a fundamentalist and bigoted disposition (Mabanckou 2017: 159) coextensive with what Amin Maalouf (2000: 29) calls the "'tribal' concept of identity."

In the wake of Nkrumah's overthrow, Condé is wrongfully accused of being a Guinean spy and incarcerated for four days under extremely sordid conditions. Subsequently declared a *persona non grata,* she is obliged to leave Ghana after a twenty-four notice, a castoff. It is as if Pan-Africanism had lured her into West Africa in order to give her a false sense of identity and belonging, the better to render her a perpetual outsider/outcast, an abject, subject to denudation, "exposed to death," and the "bare life," as Giorgio Agamben (1995) would say. She has been excluded through inclusion. Thus it is that in the interview with VèVè Clark and Cécile Daheny (1989: 117), Condé fiercely attacks Negritude for having deceived Antilleans and African Americans that they share a common destiny with Africans.

Condé's grim depiction of West Africa's postcolonial malaise resonates with the endless tableaux of failure noticeable in the sub-region's works of disillusionment: Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1968), Alioum Fantouré's *Le cercle des Tropiques* (1972), Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010), and Sefi Atta's *The Bead Collector* (2019). Her condemnation of Africa's political leadership is also perceptible in her second interview with Pfaff (2015: 55-56).

In an earlier study, Condé (1977: 40) submits that Africa's contradictions, socio-political conflicts, and attachment to age-old norms make it impossible for Antilleans to understand the continent, thereby creating in them feelings of angst and despair. These feelings of frustration that sometimes culminate in the temporary repudiation of Africa are not peculiar to Condé as they pulsate the very rhythm of diasporic works of Countee Cullen (1925), Richard Wright (1954), and Marita Golden (1983), all African Americans. Outright rejection of Africa is discernible in "Ancestor on the Auction Block" by Vera Bell (1958), Jamaican, the persona's confusion in *The Pleasures of Exile* (2005) by George Lamming, Barbadian, and the protagonist's mental breakdown in *Juletane*

(1982) by Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Guadeloupian like Condé. Nevertheless, beyond all these depictions of distress and the hedgehog's dilemma is often a solid or subtle bond of affection with the ancestral continent.

Despite Condé's constant repudiation of Africa, her admission of frustration in the afore-mentioned interviews and her autobiography betrays an unquestionable loyalty to Africa. In her perceptive article on Condé, Anne W. Gulick (2010: 68) observes that earlier germane remarks by Condé (1994) attest to the writer's "deep connection and commitment to Africa." Similarly, Nick Nesbitt (2003: 402) is persuaded that such admissions of frustration by Condé articulate the "hidden idealism of a 1960s radical utopianist, a faith that lies hidden behind the corrosive force, and even cynicism, of her unrelenting critique." He adds that such confessions show "the foundation of Condé's critical project to reveal the magical belief structure of Antillean and Pan-African ideology: she was herself once a subject of its magical incantations, she has known their spells most intimately. Her critical writing feeds upon the pain of such shattered hopes*" (ibid.).* Seen in this context, the recurrence of the theme of blighted migration to West Africa in her fiction and her denunciation of the continent's socio-political direction bespeak Condé's attachment to the cause of Africa, her public recantations notwithstanding.

Anne Adams (2003: 138), after positing "Africa's genealogically significant other [as] the African Diaspora," brilliantly articulates Condé's unique place in literary Pan-Africanism in these terms: "Condé's works problematize the notion of African Diaspora […]. No other writer's *œuvre* sets and populates its fiction with more historically specific references to the trajectories of peoples of African descent than does Condé" (*ibid.:* 144). The consistency of Condé's African-focused fiction from *Heremakhonon* (1982) to *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana* (2020) supports this assertion, Condé's abiding affection for and commitment to the ancestral continent.

Othering and Sexual Predation

In *What Is Africa to Me?,* Condé's personal frustrations often presage, parallel, or aggravate her political disillusionment. The humiliation inflicted on her by her lover, Kwame Aidoo, her rape by many nationals in Ghana (the Beninese El Duce, the Nigerian Bankole Akpata, and the Ghanaian Kodwo Addison) as well as her mortification by the Moroccan lover in Senegal all worsen her socio-political malaise, self-pity, and loss of self-esteem. As an estranged spouse with four children to rear and nurture and as a stranger often engaged in ill-paid work, she has to dig deep into her reserve of strength and resilience to survive as a relocated Frenchwoman/Guinean in West Africa. Significantly, Ghana's economic prosperity under Nkrumah, relative to the abandoned perverted paradise of Guinea, facilitates in a very negative way the sexual exploitation of Condé. While she suddenly becomes the general prey of men in Ghana, she falls victim to the predatory aggression of three powerful men all connected to Nkrumah: El Duce, a high-profile Beninese journalist working with the government official propaganda organ, *The Spark,* her guide; Bankole Akpata, the Nigerian political refugee and a personal friend of Nkrumah, who offers her accommodation following her ejection from a government bungalow; the Ghanaian administrator, Kodwo Addison, one of Nkrumah's three acclaimed dauphins and the director of Nkrumah's pet project, the Winneba Ideological Institute.

The web of sexual exploitation and oppression into which these powerful men trap Condé illustrates not only the instrumentalization of political power but also the invasion and conquest of her private space by men in authority. It also convinces her to borrow the title of John Lennon's song, "Woman Is the Nigger of the World" (Condé 2017: 145), to convey the reality of the global sexual oppression of women, solidarize with women in a consciousness-raising gesture, and establish a postcolonial rapport between the sufferings of two Othered socio-political groups: women and Blacks.

Beauvoir's illuminating postulation (1988: 16) sheds further light on Condé's Othering and sexual objectification:

> She [the woman] is simply what man decrees: thus she is called the "sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual thing. For him, she is sex—absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential opposed to the essential, the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.

Not only is Condé denied agency, autonomy, boundary integrity, and subjectivity by her objectifiers as Martha Nussbaum (1995: 257) would say, she is also treated as a tool owned by her tormentors. So deep are her reification and alienation that she begins to show scant interest in her dressing, self-worth, and maternal functions. As Dawn M. Szymanski, Lauren B. Moffitt and Erika R. Carr (2011: 13) explain, objectification can trigger "broader psychosocial constructs, including poorer self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, lower levels of global well-being, risk-taking, self-harm."

If West Africans have consistently crafted rape narratives associated with migration and dislocation—Yambo Ouologuem's *Le devoir de violence* (1968), Gustave Akakpo's *La mère trop tôt* (2004), and Benjamin Kwakye's *The Three*

Books of Shama (2016)—, writers of autobiographies, memoirs, and autofiction from the sub-region hardly thematize rape. While Ken Bugul, in her autofiction, *Cendres et braises* (1994), explores her systematic sexual exploitation by a Frenchman, she makes no mention of rape. It is, therefore, to the credit of other African autobiographers such as Waris Dirie (2001, 2002) and Michelle Hattingh (2016), as Condé does, to have courageously woven experiences of rape into their personal life stories in a taboo-breaking and therapeutic act. In each case, the auctorial voice gives poignancy to the recounted trauma, strengthens the resolve of victims (authors and readers) to survive, and shakes readers out of their complacency. Further, it attempts to extricate life from a death-threatening experience and ward off future pain through the salutary act of sharing. In the particular case of Condé, her sexual oppression by political figures exemplifies the second-wave feminist dictum, "the personal is political," whose popularization in the late 1960s and early 1970s coincides with the latter part of her stay in Ghana and Senegal.

The patriarchal occupation of her private space by the three men of power appears to be an extension of the regal and orgiastic feasts, involving women and victuals, which the new West African elite indulged in, either on the blind side of Nkrumah or with his tacit approval.

Even if the three rapists resort to different opportunistic strategies to capture their prey, they all are united in their fundamental belief that the political power they wield gives them proprietary rights over Condé's body and mind vis-à-vis her object position as a defenseless target. Lured into Ghana from Guinea by the enigmatic French Socialist, Édouard Helman, she is subsequently deserted by the Frenchman and given a twenty-four notice to vacate her Simon-Bolivar Residence, reserved for hosts of the Government. Homeless, jobless, and companionless in a foreign land, and with four children to cater for, Condé faces one of her most vulnerable moments in West Africa.

A cross between the suave Malraux-like conqueror and a leopard, El Duce, finds her accommodation (in the home of the holidaying Bankole Akpata) but not before initiating her into a cycle of rape, intimidation, and sexual exploitation. Even after his sexual violence has attracted the attention and ire of the writer's eldest child, Denis, and the political functionary has introduced her to some of his conquests at soirées and complained to them about her ingratitude, he still subjects the hapless Condé to daily nocturnal attacks, thereby reducing her worth and moral standing in the eyes of her children and society at large. Condé's confusion in her recollection of the sexual violence suffered and the subsequent incidence of traumatic bonding recall Dominick LaCapra's (2001: 41) apt remark on trauma as: "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered." LaCapra (*ibid.:* 42) further observes: "Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel."

Commenting on the gap between the experience and recollection of torture, Cathy Caruth (1996: 4) argues that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was previously not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later." Hardly does Condé free herself from the claws of El Duce than she falls into the snares of Bankole Akpata, now back from his vacation. Quieter and more elderly than El Duce, he is no less aggressive and predatory. Since El Duce and Bankole Akpata are just not political bedfellows but also very close friends, her sexual oppression by the two could well be a case of planned serial rape, remarkably occurring near the Flagstaff House, the seat of Government.

Condé's woes assume a different predatory dimension altogether when she is posted to teach French to international and local Socialists at the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute, located at Winneba, some forty miles away from the capital. Cast in the mold of a bear, the institute's director, Kodwo Addison, rapes Condé the very first time she enters his office to present her syllabus to him. Thereafter, he promotes himself to the status of the seigniorial lover, visiting his wife at the weekends and exerting sexual dominance over Condé's body during weekdays. When she finally musters enough courage to refuse the sexual torture, the wounded power-drunk dauphin, on a *fait du prince* impulse, summarily terminates her appointment and evicts her from her apartment. The arbitrariness of this act runs counter to the ideological call of an institute, considered the hub of Nkrumah's socialist revolution, egalitarian conscientization, and Pan-African project. Beyond this irony, the opportunistic predation exhibited by these socialist functionaries contrasts sharply with the disinterested assistance extended to Condé by both African and non-African males in Ghana and other countries in the sub-region.

No less predatory is Condé's exploitation by an avowed Conservative, lawyer Kwame Aidoo, her live-in partner. Her cyclical abuse by the three feudal lords masquerading as members of the *Internationale* appears to have prepared the ground for her sexual bondage and victimization, over four years, by the manipulative lawyer of capitalist persuasion. In recounting these hallucinating tribulations at the hands of members of the political divide, Condé appears to blur the ideological dichotomy between the two sets of perpetrators. Still, a nuance can be established. Whereas the internationalization of the patriarchal colonization of her body and psyche by the three West African comrades, namely El Duce, Bankole Akpata, and Kodwo Addison, lends a certain horizontal spread to sexual objectification, the domestication of sexual oppression in Condé's own apartment by an agent of the Right, lawyer Kwame Aidoo, who is steeped as well in traditional lore and mores, tends instead to create the impression of localized malignancy festered by the victim's reduced self-worth, overdependence syndrome, and sadomasochist impulse. It is to the ultimate credit of Condé to have demonstrated not just courage but also the desire to use the autobiography as a "political therapy" (Hanisch 1970: 77) to strengthen other victims, as later, another female professor, Karyn L. Freedman (2014), would do with her rape memoir.

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Despite her initial high hopes, Condé presents a distressing picture of her ten-year stay in four West African countries as a teacher, translator, broadcaster, creative writer, and unemployed woman. A confessional and quest narrative, *What Is Africa to Me?* sketches, in an uncensored manner, the series of initiation-like tribulations which culminate in Condé's life-changing encounter with her future husband, admitting blame for some of her failures as a woman, a mother, a wife, a lover, and a human being. If readers appreciate that factors such as ethnocentrism, political disenchantment, "sexually objectifying environments" (Szymanski, Moffit & Carr 2011: 21), and unfulfilling professional life are out of her control, there are other determinants of her blighted ambiguous adventure to West Africa for which she is partially or wholly blamable: stressful marital life, mythification of Africa, non-integration, and Othering reflexes. Her true-to-life autobiography confirms that multilayered Othering has been accountable for the infantilization, castration, colonization, and enslavement of humans throughout human history.

Its intensity notwithstanding, Condé's love-hate relationship with West African host communities in *What Is Africa to Me?* does not obscure her commitment, from *Heremakhonon* (1982) to *The Wondrous and Tragic Life of Ivan and Ivana* (2020), to the development of ancestral lands. By his choice of the title, *What Is Africa to Me?,* for Condé's translated autobiography at the expense of a caption like "Life without Make-up," Richard Philcox, consciously or unwittingly, situates the narrative textually within the rich tradition of delicate relationships between conflicted diasporic intellectuals and Africa, not least Countee Cullen's equivocal hypotextual poem with the same inscription. It is also worth emphasizing that the complexity of this pessoptimism, transatlantic ambivalent relationship, and Schopenhauerian hedgehog dilemma has not escaped the scrutiny of critics such as O. R. Dathorne (1965), Anne Adams (2003), Céline Labrune-Badiane (2012), and William Ghosh (2019).

For Sunday Opkanachi (1984:60), since Antilleans are consummate sojourners, their migration to Africa is nothing but a phase in their ceaseless but courageous peregrination across ideas, space, and time. Having been created by displacement and migration (forced or voluntary), Caribbean nationals would appear to be inclined to creatively configure life as an odyssey, not as a linear trajectory, but as a series of *rites de passage* from which existential lessons are learnt for the new life of inclusiveness, relativism, and cosmopolitanism to whose promise Condé's (1998) article, "O Brave New World", invites all her readers. Some twenty-eight years after her harrowing departure from West Africa, it is the Negritude movement founded in Paris by Black diasporic intellectuals from Europe, Africa, and the Americas that Condé fondly cites in this article as heraldic of this new wave of internationalism. Again, as late as 2015, she prides herself on the fact that her seven-year granddaughter, Serina, living in France, calls herself Malian and not French (Pfaff 2015: 98).

By and large, Condé's intellectual and socio-political evolution in this narrative follows three dialectical phases, all dictated by books. The first stage is where Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and *Discours sur le colonialisme,* functioning as stimuli, drive her to embrace Pan-Africanism and Negritude with the zeal of an adolescent. The second phase is when, as a young woman, Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* triggers her disillusionment with Black racial romanticism and African leadership. And yet a third milestone is marked, when at the end of a crucible and in mid-life, she comes of age as a woman and a writer, asserting herself as free from the clutches of Africa and sharing her creativity with the world. Nonetheless, to the extent that her writing is driven by the hopes and agony associated with the two earlier stages, this third path can be read as a synthesis, a fusion of love and hate.

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ABSTRACT

In *What Is Africa to Me?,* Maryse Condé reflects on her troubled ten-year sojourn in West Africa against the backdrop of a love-hate relationship with Africa, the failures of the African nation-state, and disillusionment with the Pan-Africanist ideal. The paper examines the protagonist's tribulations and the patriarchal colonization of her body by applying the conceptual tool of Othering from both postcolonial and feminist perspectives. It establishes that Condé and her host communities engage in reciprocal exclusion, which culminates in her sexual objectification at the hands of the new West African elite of both leftist and rightist persuasions. The paper concludes that her unresolved ambivalent relationship with Africa confirms her attachment to the continent.

Keywords: Maryse Condé, Caribbean, colonial conditioning, love-hate relationship, mythification, Othering, problematic independence, (self-)victimization, West African migration.

RÉSUMÉ

What Is Africa to Me? *ou la relation amour/haine de Maryse Condé avec les « terres ancestrales » aux prises avec l'indépendance naissante*. — Dans *La vie sans fards* (traduit en anglais sous le titre *What Is Africa to Me?*), Maryse Condé revient sur son séjour anxiogène de dix ans en Afrique occidentale sur fond de rapport amour/haine avec l'Afrique, d'échecs de l'État-nation africain et de désenchantement vis-à-vis du rêve panafricaniste. Le présent article examine les tribulations de la protagoniste et l'appropriation patriarcale de son corps en y appliquant le concept d'altérisation sous des perspectives postcoloniale et féministe. Il montre que Condé et ses communautés d'accueil se livrent à une exclusion réciproque qui aboutit à son exploitation sexuelle par des représentants de la nouvelle élite ouest-africaine, de gauche comme de droite. L'article conclut que sa relation ambiguë jamais résolue avec l'Afrique confirme son attachement pour le continent.

Mots-clés : Maryse Condé, Antilles, altérisation, amour/haine, (auto-)victimisation, conditionnement colonial, indépendance difficile, migration ouest-africaine, mystification.