

**Concepts of Identity in four novels  
by Maryse Condé**

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Masters of Arts is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Concepts of identity in four novels by Maryse Condé

### Ruth Manning

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine concepts of identity in four novels by the Guadeloupean writer, Maryse Condé. These novels, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...Noire de Salem*, *Une saison à Rihata*, *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *Desirada*, are set against the legacies of slavery, colonialism and exile, and explore the profound lack of identity experienced on a personal and collective level by the peoples of the Caribbean.

Maryse Condé is a most suitable author to study in relation to issues of identity, as much of her work encompasses the notion of a quest, and her protagonists find themselves journeying towards a discovery of self. I will examine closely the journeys, both physical and psychological, of these characters, in their individual searches.

Identity in the thesis is analysed from two differing perspectives, those of personal identity, and collective cultural identity. All four novels explore personal identity. Only *Traversée de la Mangrove* is set in its entirety in Guadeloupe, and examines collective cultural identity. I will analyse the notion that identity does not operate along a fixed or determined point, but instead constantly undergoes change and transformation. Identity as such can be considered as elusive, and the identity of characters can never be fully understood or defined. I will refer to theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva, whose work relates to the notion that language and identity are evolving dynamics, forever resistant to stable definition. I will also discuss the importance of Caribbean thinkers such as Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant.

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## Introduction

Though idyllic to the eyes of the casual tourist, the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, *départements français d'outre-mer*, are shadowed behind a brutal history of slavery, occupation and colonialism. Discovered by Columbus in 1493 and 1502 respectively, the islands' native Indians were exterminated, and for centuries, slaves from Africa worked on the sugar-cane, coffee and cotton plantations introduced by the occupying forces. The French colonised the islands initially in the seventeenth century. The British occupied Guadeloupe and Martinique for brief periods from the 1750s until the first decades of the nineteenth century. This was followed subsequently by the return of the French, and the restoration of French sovereignty. Modern-day Guadeloupe and Martinique, who have secured limited autonomy from France, are very weak economically, and rely heavily on aid from the French metropole.

The horrors of slavery and the intricate legacies of colonialism constantly find their way into much of the writing emanating from these islands. Recurring themes such as exile, dislocation and dispossession are coupled with a distinct and profound sense of loss, on both an individual and community level. Many French Caribbean writers and intellectuals have attempted to define this loss, and make sense of the resulting identity crises experienced by the peoples of the French Antilles. In the paragraphs ahead, this will be discussed in greater detail.

## Maryse Condé

This thesis is a one-author study exploring some of the work of the prolific writer Maryse Condé (née Boucolon). Condé was born in Guadeloupe in 1937 and has enjoyed a varied career in literature, journalism, criticism and as a lecturer. She left Guadeloupe in 1953, aged sixteen, to study initially at the Lycée Fénélon in Paris, and then at *Université de Paris III- Sorbonne Nouvelle*, where she received her doctorate in comparative literature in 1976. Her doctoral research explored black stereotypes in West Indian literature. She has spent many years teaching in different parts of Africa, first in the Ivory Coast, then Guinea, Ghana, and finally Senegal. Returning to Europe, she occupied academic positions in several universities in Paris. Since the 1970s, she has lectured in many American institutions including the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. In December 2002, she retired from her position as Professor of French and Francophone studies at Columbia University, New York City. I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing Condé in November 2002, in New York.

Condé is hugely prolific in several genres including critical essays, plays and novels. Two of her earliest novels *Ségou – Les murailles de terre* and *Ségou - La terre en miettes* were bestsellers, and she is the recipient of several literary awards including *Le Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme* and *Le Prix de l'Académie Française*.



## Research Objective

The principal aim of this thesis is to examine four of her novels, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem*, *Une saison à Rihata*, *Traversée de la Mangrove* and *Desirada*. I will analyse in these how notions of both personal and collective cultural identity are explored. Maryse Condé is, I believe, a most suitable author to study in relation to issues of identity. Many of her novels embrace the idea of searching, her protagonists are often on some type of quest, searching for an authentic homeland, trying to understand a relationship with a mother, or yearning to find the identity of a biological father. Much of her work revolves around the notion of asking questions, but not necessarily providing answers, and reflecting on the history of her people. In this thesis, I will examine some of the issues she raises in relation to a quest for identity.

On all levels, Condé does not allow her work to be limited by boundaries of any type. One example of this is her decision not to confine herself to writing solely in French or in Creole. Some of her earlier work is written in Creole, and she incorporates Creole into *Traversée de la Mangrove* which will be examined in one chapter. However, as she explained to me, Condé refuses to be bound to write in any one language, and dispels the notion that her work is any less “authentic” because it is now written primarily in French. This raises the issue of whether language is

inextricably bound with a notion of identity. For other French Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, writing in Creole is an assertion of being a writer from the French Caribbean, indeed it might be construed as being a political act. However, for Condé, she does not consider that language is a defining issue in terms of identity.

On the level of narrative location, Condé, unlike several other Caribbean writers, situates few of her novels in her home country. Her choice to centre the storyline not in Guadeloupe, but instead in America, Europe, or other Caribbean islands, mirrors her desire to illustrate the fact that many of her protagonists do not live in their native homeland, and, as a consequence, experience intense loneliness and alienation. As Suzanne Crosta explains, “the geographical wanderings permeating Condé’s novel give rise to a sense of exile that her characters feel in relation to their families, their race, their gender roles and themselves” (Crosta 1999 p171). Of the four novels which will be analysed in this study, only one of them, *Traversée de la Mangrove*, is situated, in its entirety, in Guadeloupe. In *Desirada*, Marie-Noëlle leaves Guadeloupe for France and America, *Une saison à Rihata* is set in Africa, and in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...Noire de Salem*, Tituba leaves Barbados for America. Journeying, both physically and metaphorically, is a major feature of Condé’s work, and I will analyse how her characters learn much about themselves and their relationship with others through this.

In one interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé acknowledges a great debt to the Martinican writer and intellectual, Aimé Césaire (Pfaff 1993 p112). However, she explores the idea that Africa should not perhaps be seen as the origin of Caribbean identity. Although her earliest novels, *Heremakhonon*, *Une saison à Rihata*, *Ségou* –

*Les murailles de terre* and *Ségou – La terre en miettes*, all explore the relationship between Africa and the Caribbean, subsequently, her novels tend to move away from African issues, and explore instead, the Caribbean relationship and quest for identity vis-à-vis Europe and America. In *Une saison à Rihata*, I will examine how she marries French Caribbean identity with Africa.

## Identity

This thesis is concerned primarily with an analysis of identity, and it is important at this stage to discuss the term. What is identity? There are numerous philosophical definitions as to its meaning, but the notion of identity often begins with questions such as “Who am I?”, “What am I?”, “What is it that renders me unique or different from others?”, or “What is it that I have in common with others?” For Anthony D. Smith, the answer to “Who am I?” is “by an assertion of continuity through genealogy and residence,” whereas “What am I?” can be seen as an assertion of distinctiveness through culture and community” (Smith 1995 p130). The notions of identity presented here by Smith give rise to the two levels of identity which will be analysed in my thesis, namely personal identity and collective cultural identity. The novels which I will explore in the next four chapters encompass aspects of both. It is important to state at this stage, however, that my work will focus primarily on the analysis of personal identity.

### Personal Identity

Smith contends that the “Who am I?” question can be answered through an examination of one’s “lineage, family status, and place of birth or residence”. These considerations represent the answers to questions asked about the very issues which dominate the writing I am about to analyse. Several characters live out their lives, weighed down by their own questioning of who they are. Many negotiate their identity vis-à-vis the milieu in which they find themselves. Some seek their personal identity via the biological route, whereupon they are compelled to ascertain their genealogy, while others play out their personal identity through interaction with those around them, and in their roles as mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, lovers, slaves, beloved, unloved, *inter alia*. For some, birthplace is of defining relevance in the composition of their personal identity. Indeed, the very act of interrogation about how these issues pertain to the individual may lead to a deeper and more enriched understanding of self. For the purposes of this thesis, the notion of personal identity may be construed as the determination of an individual to engage with, and interrogate one or more of the following, genealogy, status, residence.

Henceforth, the term “identity” shall be used to denote the concept of personal identity.

### Collective Cultural Identity

Collective identity denotes the idea that an individual may gravitate towards a shared “sameness” or unity with others. Collective cultural identity incorporates into this “sameness” certain cultural aspects, such as traditions, values, superstitions, myths,

etc. In relation to this thesis, the term may be taken to indicate a shared identity grounded in “a sense of difference, of distinctiveness” (Smith 1995 p131), and also in “a sense of continuity with previous generations of the cultural unit, through memories, myths, and traditions” (idem). Only *Traversée de la Mangrove* will explore collective cultural identity in this thesis. The novel, set solely in Guadeloupe, paints a vivid and captivating portrait of Guadeloupeans, and explores, how they, as a collectivity, behave and react.

### Identity – operating in a state of flux

A modern concept of identity is the notion that identity is not a fixed or determined point, but rather, something which constantly undergoes change and alteration. As will be seen in the analysis of Condé’s four novels, the identity of many of her characters is elusive, and they represent different things to different people. No one character can ever be fully understood or defined. Characters display varying aspects of their identities as they interact with others. However, one never solves the puzzle which is the make-up of any one individual.

To examine this notion of identity from a theoretical viewpoint, I will turn to the work of Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-born theorist. Kristeva has been strongly influenced by the work of the Russian critic, Mikhail Bahktin, who critiqued “structural linguistics, and its assumption that the system of language (called by Ferdinand de Saussure, *la langue*) operates as a fixed structure which can be defined and analysed” (Robbins 2000 p 119). Bahktin suggested that language is a infinite process, where meaning is constantly being made. For him, the notion of meaning is not set in stone, as the listener or reader derives individual meaning from language,

based on his/her personal circumstances, history, culture etc. To express this in an alternative way, the meaning one derives from a text, a painting, a piece of music, *inter alia*, is contingent upon one's own differences vis-à-vis all others.

Kristeva draws upon Bahktin's theories and further develops them. Like him, she sees language as a process, rather than a *fait accompli*. Also, as with Bahktin, she considers that meaning is wholly dependent upon the individuality of the person who is reading a text or listening to the spoken word. In the area of textual analysis, she considers the speaking subject to be a kind of text. "But the meaning of any individual person, like the meaning of any text, is not a fixed point" (Robbins 2000 p124). Therefore, the meaning of an individual, or to phrase it differently, an individual's identity, is an infinite search, where no finite conclusions may be drawn. As aforesaid, it is impossible to pin down fixed identities in the characters which will be analysed in the coming chapters. For the purposes of this thesis, interwoven into this analysis is the notion that identity is a constantly evolving dynamic, forever resistant to stable definition.

### Identity and motherhood in Condé's writing

Being a mother, and the relationship between mothers and offspring, particularly daughters, surface as recurring leitmotifs in Condé's novels. These relationships are very suitable to explore in terms of identity. Much is learnt about mothers' identities in each of the four novels in this thesis, and the difficult relationships between women and their children will be analysed closely. It is very clear, following even the most cursory reading of these novels, that mothers and daughters relate to each other primarily through a web of tension and distrust. The absence of love between the two



generations is also very obvious in much of Condé's work. Women, as mothers, are depicted in terms of reluctance, and children are often born following rape or assault. *Une saison à Rihata* and *Desirada* are especially important in their negative portrayals of motherhood, and will be examined in detail in the coming chapters.

### Theories on identity in the (French) Caribbean

The debate concerning the challenges and difficulties in forging a Caribbean identity has been ongoing for several decades. It commenced with the founding of the Negritude movement in the 1930s, by Césaire and two others, the Senegalese writer, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the Guyanese writer, Léon-Gontras Damas. In Paris, these began to study African history and culture, and launched a journal, *L'Étudiant Noir*. Césaire first coined the term “négritude” in its March 1935 issue. Aimé Césaire was among the first intellectual to analyse the silences and voicelessness of Caribbean identity, and to incorporate this into his writing, especially in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. For Césaire, Caribbean identity was rooted in black pride, and inextricably linked with Africa as site of origin and motherland. Léopold Sédar Senghor defined Negritude as being “neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's being” (Sédar Senghor 1993 p27).

The Negritude movement was followed by Caribbeanness (or “antillanité”), the term coined by the Martinican writer and theorist Edouard Glissant, a former pupil of Césaire's, whose writing consists primarily of poetry and novels. Like Césaire, he was educated in Paris, and has written extensively for publications such as *Présence*

*Africaine* and *Les lettres modernes*. (Jack 1996 p113). Glissant's objective has been to focus positive attention on the multiplicity of cultures in the Caribbean. As Suzanne Crosta explains, Glissant offered "the Caribbean as a prodigious site for theoretical reflections on cultural contact in all its various forms and moments, forced migrations, slavery, colonialism" (Crosta 1993 p163).

Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, all prolific Martinican writers, have been greatly influenced by 'Caribbeanness' and have furthered the debate on what it means to be Caribbean by advocating a revitalisation of all things Créole: language, culture and identity. Their work, *Eloge de la Créolité*, published in 1989, "challenges past and present discourses on Caribbean identity and calls for new paradigms to reflect inclusivity and accept diversity" (Crosta1999 p164). However, the manifesto reveals the paradoxical element in Caribbean writing and identity. Although these writers and theorists now have a voice, and a mammoth literary effort to reengage with history, culture and identity is underway, Caribbean discourse is, nonetheless, still voiceless in the island communities from which it emanates. The following quote from *Eloge de la Créolité* underlines the fact that Caribbean identity is still in its formative stages:

La littérature antillaise n'existe pas encore. Nous sommes dans un état de pré littérature: celui d'une production écrite sans audience chez elle, méconnaissant l'interaction auteurs/lecteurs où s'élabore une littérature. Cet état n'est pas imputable à la seule domination politique, il s'explique par le fait que notre vérité s'est trouvé mise sous verrous, à l'en-bas du plus profond de nous-mêmes, étrangère à notre conscience et à la lecture librement artistique



du monde dans lequel nous vivons. Nous sommes fondamentalement frappés d'extériorité. (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant 1989 p14)

To find one's identity in the movement of "créolité", as advocated by Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant is, in reality, very different from Condé's personal notion of identity. For her, identity appears to be a more individual aspiration, rather than a cultural one, such as "créolité". In a recent interview, she outlines the problems attached to the question "Where are you from?": she is black, but does not emphasise her African-ness as a principal constituent of her identity; she is West Indian, but does not speak Créole accurately, not does she live permanently in Guadeloupe (McCormick 2000 p 519). Hence, the notion of identity for Condé appears to be a personal construct, something one must define for oneself. This, as aforesaid, contradicts somewhat the more global advocations of identity as proposed by theorists such as Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant.

### Critical writing on notions of identity

In our ever-increasingly globalised world, national boundaries, nation states, tradition and culture, *inter alia*, are undergoing unprecedented levels of change. Homi Bhabha, discussing culture, states that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities *as the grounds of cultural comparativism* are in a profound process of redefinition" (Bhabha 1998 p936). The very notion of identity, whether individual, collective or cultural is in a state of flux. It is interesting to note perhaps that, although this study concerns itself solely with Caribbean identity, the questioning of identity is

by no means limited to colonial or post-colonial territories. Indeed social and political discourses on identity have never been more relevant than now during the early years of this new millennia.

Much research into notions of identity has been done in recent years in the hope of answering questions regarding self and origin, and in the hope of obtaining some closure or finality regarding the past. In the case of former slave societies, where the individual was dispossessed, not only of motherland, family and religious beliefs, but also of any notion of selfhood, the questioning of identity has been most traumatic. Differing methods have been employed to examine identity in the case of the Caribbean. Stuart Hall has theorised two different kinds of identity, identity as “being”, (offering a continuity with the past), and identity as “becoming” (Hall 1993 p394). This second form views identity as undergoing constant transformation and being “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (idem). Hall traces Caribbean identity back to three *Présences*: *Présence Africaine*, *Présence Européenne* and *Présence Americaine*, which he says represent the three principal types of cultural identity in the modern Caribbean. *Présence Africaine* represents the repression of slavery, whose legacy still dominates the Caribbean psyche. *Présence Européenne* denotes the domination of the European powers over the Caribbean people, while *Présence Americaine* is the territory “where strangers from every other part of the globe collided” (Hall 1993 p400). The combination of these *Présences* render the Caribbean a site of multiple histories, cultures and identities.

## Introduction to the novels

The rewriting of history is one way in which Caribbean writers seek their identity through the telling of *their* history from *their own* perspective. Daniel Maximin's *L'Isolé Soleil* is but one example where French Caribbean history is re-examined and retold through the eyes of a contemporary Guadeloupean woman (Maximin 1989). *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...Noire de Salem*, which will be analysed in Chapter 1, exemplifies this re-examination and retelling of history, in this case, that of Tituba's, a black slave accused of witchcraft in 17<sup>th</sup> century America. Tituba, we are told, cannot read nor write, and Condé appears to be a ghostwriter in the novel, transcribing Tituba's story. Much has been written on the lack of identity experienced by slaves, and in this novel Condé attempts to reinstate an identity for Tituba, who, because she is black, has been forgotten by dominant historical discourse. For Haigh, "to say 'I', is to claim an identity beyond that which has been marked upon the body by the master, to assert one's identity as a human subject" (Haigh 2000 p169). Tituba is offered this chance to say "I" and the narrative plays out the assertion of her identity. I will examine how her identity is negotiated in relation to her homeland, Barbados, and also in her interactions with men and women in the novel.

*Une saison à Rihata*, analysed in Chapter 2, is Condé's second novel, and as aforesaid, is set against the backdrop of Africa. On the level of plot, it tracks the journey of a Guadeloupean woman in Africa on a search for self, and explores the deep disillusionment which may be found in this continent, for French Caribbeans who seek an origin here. The novel's heroine, Marie-Hélène, is a deeply unhappy, complex, multi-faceted woman, and I will analyse in detail, the elements which constitute her personal identity.

*Traversée de la Mangrove*, is set in its entirety in a small fictional town in Guadeloupe, against the background of a wake. Certain aspects of Francis Sancher's (the dead man) identity are presented through the multiple testimonies of the *habitants*, who, in reliving their knowledge of Sancher, awaken and rediscover elements of their own personal identities. Collective cultural identity is also present in this novel, and I will explore Condé's presentation of both types of identity in this third chapter.

Finally, I will analyse personal identity in *Desirada*, a novel set in Guadeloupe, France and America. The heroine, Marie-Noëlle, spends much time trying in vain to discover the identity of her father, which she believes will unlock the secrets of her own identity. From a narrative viewpoint, *Desirada* is a highly complex novel, and the heroine's quest to decipher her true origins is never fulfilled. I will explore in detail Marie-Noëlle's need to discover the identity of her biological father, and also analyse the strained relationship she has with her own mother and grandmother.

#### Identity for the Caribbeans – a possible dream?

The four novels analysed in this thesis are interwoven with the concept of identity, and the notion that seeking and finding identity are vital for happiness and self-awareness. As will be seen in the following chapters, many questions are asked in Condé's work, but few answers are provided. Several characters suffer a malaise which may be symbolic of the broader unease in the Caribbeans. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "What am I?" are difficult, if not impossible to answer, because the past, for this colonised people, is an dark space where certainty does not exist. For the

Caribbean, perhaps the only way forward, is to look towards the future with hope, and not ask: “Where am I from?”. A fractured past, littered with unstable truths, is filled with uncertainty and with unanswered questions. In the coming chapters, I will investigate the notion that the unknowable past may be best left behind.

## Slavery and self perception: the proclamation of identity in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem*.

Whilst living in Boston during 2001-02, I visited the Salem Witch Museum, and in so doing, was able to grasp, albeit in some small way, the incredible injustices done by the Puritans, to so many women during this remarkable period in American history. I knew Maryse Condé had written a fictional novel based on the witch trials, and I was interested in reading her exploration of this historical moment.

*Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...noire de Salem*, first published in France in 1986, is an historical novel set against the background of the Salem witch trials of 1692-93.

Tituba was a black slave from Barbados accused by the Puritans of practising witchcraft while living in 17<sup>th</sup> century America. Unlike her co-accused, Tituba confessed her crime and in doing so saved her life. However, as an historical figure in one of the world's most infamous trials, little is known or documented about her.

Maryse Condé discovered Tituba while conducting research at UCLA in California during the 1980s. She had been unaware of the black slave's existence until then, but upon approaching historians at the university found they were not interested in Tituba's life (Pfaff 1993 p58). Condé explains her interest in recreating an existence and a story for Tituba: "I was mainly interested in the racism affecting this black woman, who had been completely forgotten, crossed out of history" (Pfaff 1993 p60).

I will examine identity in the following ways in this chapter: Tituba's relationship with her homeland Barbados and her relationships with men. I will then examine her realisation of slavery through life with John Indien, her husband. Subsequently, I will



explore her relationship with her mother, Abena, and her surrogate mother, Mama Yaya. Finally, I will analyse how Tituba may be seen as both a maternal figure, and also as a witch.

As Robert J. McCormick suggests, Condé's title is both clever and significant (McCormick 1996 p153). *Moi* is the affirmation that Tituba exists and henceforth possesses an identity. It illustrates the fact that she has a voice, and more importantly, that she knows this. It is a proclamation of assertiveness and self-awareness, routinely denied to slaves. The fact that Tituba is capable of proclaiming herself as existing, goes to prove she is able to transcend, in some ways, the narrow boundaries of slavery. Though she will be dispossessed of her physical freedom, as will be examined in this chapter, she is nonetheless capable of retaining a strong sense of self. Being able to say *Moi* is also very modern and exposes a strong feminist angle to Tituba.

However, the second part of the title, *sorcière...Noire de Salem*, is perhaps more problematic. Is Tituba simply labelling herself as she has been perceived by others, as a black witch from Salem, or is she proudly affirming her profession, inscribing it with value? As with many aspects of Condé's work this is perhaps not easily answered. However, I will address this question later in the chapter.

As a young child Tituba enjoys, albeit briefly, the innocence of early days with Abena, and Abena's lover, Yao. However, this happiness is tainted somewhat by the discovery that Abena does not love her (a theme common to several of Condé's works), as Tituba serves as a constant reminder of the sailor who raped her mother aboard the slave ship, *Christ the King*:

Abena, ma mère, un marin anglais la viola sur le pont du Christ the King, un jour de 16\*\* alors que le navire *faisait* voile vers la Barbade. C'est de cette agression que je suis née. De cet acte de haine et de mépris. (p13)

Born from an act of violence, to a father whom she will never know, Tituba is initiated into an immediate lack of identity and lack of origin, perhaps the most recurring theme in French Caribbean literature. However, her life is interspersed with short periods of stability. Yao takes the place of a father and in some way helps reinstate a family life and an identity for the young Tituba. It is he who gives her her name, TI-TU-BA, which she believes he invented. As Jeannie Suk suggests, “this act is the first assertion of imaginary parentage and lineage, made necessary by the trauma of rape” (Suk 2001 p122).

The name ‘Tituba’ is highly evocative of meaning. Mary Gallagher suggests a connection between the eponyms Soliba, a Creole word for a fall or tumble and Tituba, which, she notes, echoes the French word ‘tituber’ to stumble or fall (Gallagher 2002 p132). Tituba can most definitely be seen as a stumbling figure, taking somewhat uncertain steps throughout the novel. However, perhaps her name stands instead for something quite different, as a stumbling figure, but not a falling one, and as a symbol of endurance and survival, despite the many obstacles she will encounter. During life she will withstand so much: the loss of Abena, Yao and Mama Yaya, exile from Barbados, desertion by John Indien and betrayal by Christopher, her maroon lover. Following her death, however, she will continue to survive in the spirit world, watching over her island and her people.



The word “tituba” may be analysed differently. On a grammatical level, ‘tituba’ is the third person singular of the verb ‘tituber’ in the *passé simple* tense. This would normally be used with the he/she subject, however the novel’s title juxtaposes the ‘I’ “Moi” with this third person conjugation of the verb ‘tituber’. This title is though-provoking: perhaps Tituba is asserting, in no uncertain terms, her existence and identity through “Moi”. However, she is possibly distancing herself immediately with the third person “tituba”. She is saying “I”, but does not consider that she can fall.

Twice in the novel Tituba is asked where her name has originated. Condé contrasts the coldness with which John Indien’s mistress, Susanna Endicott asks this question, with the delight expressed by Hester, a female prisoner Tituba meets in jail. Naming is an issue very central to Caribbean identity. As Suzanne Crosta suggests, “naming was never a personal issue but a political and cultural one”, and in many cases slaves were named by their masters (Crosta 1999 p166). The concept of naming in the Caribbean context will be addressed in more detail in a subsequent chapter.

The brutalities of slavery are omnipresent in the novel, and Condé does not attempt to minimise the misery, suffering and oppression experienced by slaves. Abena, determined not to be raped a second time, strikes her white master and for this she is hanged. Her hanging illustrates the powerlessness of slaves and their status as mere objects. Tituba, later, while working for Susanna Endicott, describes her lack of identity and feelings of inferiority:

On aurait dit que je n’étais pas là, debout, au seuil de la pièce. Elles parlaient de moi, mais en même temps, elles m’ignoraient. Elles me rayaient de la carte

des humains. J'étais un non-être. Un invisible. Plus invisible que les invisibles, car eux au moins détiennent un pouvoir que chacun redoute. Tituba, Tituba n'avait plus de réalité que celle que voulaient bien lui concéder ces femmes.

(p44)

Most striking here is the change from first to third person narrative. Tituba's "I" in describing the attitudes of Susanna Endicott and her friends to her is dramatically transformed to "she". It is as if they have the power to make her see herself through their eyes. In this sentence her identity has been transcended and she is no longer subject but object. This is reminiscent of the novel's title, where the word "Tituba" is distanced from the subject "Moi".

Susanna Endicott typifies the colonial mistress, surveying and commenting on her slave. She is in some ways similar to Sapphira, the slave mistress of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (Cather 1940) who, for Toni Morrison, is "a white woman gathering identity unto herself from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others" (Morrison 1998 p933). Indeed, Endicott's identity and character are in part constituted by her dealings with John Indien and Tituba. In some way, Endicott seems to steal the identities of her slaves, and she might not be able to exist without them. Her identity is that of a slave mistress, and slaves are therefore necessary to sustain this identity.

### Identity and Homeland

Barbados, as an island, and country of birth to Tituba, maintains a strong centrality throughout the novel. Metaphorically, an island may conjure up ideas as contrasting

as an idyllic paradise, or a place of extreme loneliness and exile. An island may be a retreat, where one can journey down the paths of self-discovery and self-realisation. For Tituba, Barbados is her Mother Earth, and, in some ways, a surrogate mother for her. She is horrified upon learning that John Indien must leave for America, though her love for him will ensure she breaks with her home. Exile is very difficult for Tituba, and on several occasions she refers possessively to “ma Barbade”. In Salem, when troubled, she (re)gains possession of her island thus:

Je remplissais un bol d’eau que je plaçais près de la fenêtre de façon à pouvoir le regarder tout en tournant et virant dans ma cuisine et j’y enfermais ma Barbade. Je parvenais à l’y faire tenir tout entière avec la houle de champs de canne à sucre prolongeant celle des vagues de la mer, les cocotiers penchés du bord de mer et les amandiers-pays tout chargés de fruits rouges ou vert sombre. (p101)

She describes her yearning for Barbados and compares it with the yearning experienced by her master’s wife, Elizabeth Parris, and her daughter Betsey, who yearn for a happier life. For Tituba, her own desire is to be once more in Barbados, her birthplace, and the island of her origins. Tituba realises, despite a close friendship with Elizabeth and Betsey, that she cannot identify herself with them. Tituba empathises much with Elizabeth, but she is realistic, and recognises that her status in life is that of a slave:

Nous n'appartenions pas au même monde, maîtresse Parris, Betsey et moi, et toute l'affection que j'éprouvais pour elles, ne pouvait changer ce fait-là.  
(p102)

A poignant instance of exile and despair occurs in the period prior to the accusations. Tituba describes her habit of roaming through the forest, and one day becomes claustrophobic and feels she will die. Frantically she wonders if her soul will find its way back to Barbados. However, suddenly, she is reassured:

J'aborde à la terre que j'ai perdue. Je reviens vers la hideur désertée de ses plaies. Je la reconnais à son odeur. Odeur de sueur, de souffrance et de labeur. Mais paradoxalement odeur forte et chaude qui me réconforte. (p107)

The above citation refers to the role of the natural world in the novel. The earth can be seen as a womb, and, in this case a lost womb, as Tituba is far away from her beloved Barbados. In her distress there is some measure of hope and she does not fear death if her soul can go back to Barbados. This bittersweet depiction of Barbados, as a land populated and worked by slaves, is where Tituba seeks to return. She makes it clear that she is experiencing comfort and reassurance in this imaginary return, in this recuperation of lost or suspended identity. Her identity has been suspended because of her love of, and marriage to John Indien. She has left Barbados because of him, and is now living a life in exile, an exile indirectly of her choosing. In this way, she is not living out her own life and identity, but that of a dutiful wife. Barbados may be Heaven and Hell to her, but America is Limbo.

During a conversation in prison with Hester, Tituba significantly identifies herself as originating in Africa, but this continent no longer having any meaning for “us”.

Africa, although the point of origin, is clearly not the point of signification for her and for “us” (presumably, she is referring to other blacks forced to live outside of Africa due to the displacement of slavery). Tituba is making a strong statement here:

Barbados is her homeland, wherein lies her identity. Africa, although the original place of reference is now devoid of signification for her. If we look chronologically at Condé’s writing, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...noire de Salem* is Condé’s fourth novel. The first three, *Heremakhonon*, *Ségou* and *Une saison à Rihata*, are set in Africa and explore the Caribbean’s relationship with Africa as motherland and site of original identity. The geographic locations in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...noire de Salem* are Barbados and America, and indeed references at all to Africa are sparse in this novel. It is possible Tituba’s statement to Hester regarding Africa’s loss of meaning for Blacks is also a message from Condé. Could it be an advocacy for black Caribbeans to look no longer to Africa for answers about identity? These questions will be examined at length in my chapter on *Une saison à Rihata*.

Following several imagined returns, Tituba finally arrives back in Barbados once Benjamin, her Jewish master and lover, has restored her freedom. As Sam Haigh suggests, “Tituba not only returns to her mother(s’) land in a manner which [will not be] possible for Marie-Hélène [protagonist in *Une saison à Rihata*], but, importantly, she never needs to make what might be termed a ‘spiritual’ reconnection”, as she has never become disconnected from her island (Haigh 2001 p180). It is most interesting that Tituba has not severed her ties emotionally with Barbados. She, unlike other slaves, knows where she belongs, and suffers when she is living in exile. This reveals

a superiority on her part: she has found roots in her island home and, although she is a slave, she has not been dispossessed of *this part of her identity*. Her initial depiction of Barbados is, however, surprisingly negative. Although she has pined constantly for her homeland while in exile, first impressions of it again are unhappy and remind her that the oppressions of slavery continue to manifest themselves:

Les rues charroyaient une eau boueuse dans laquelle pataugeaient bêtes et gens. Sans doute un négrier venait-il de jeter l'ancre, car sous l'auvent de paille d'un marché, des Anglais, hommes et femmes, examinaient les dents, la langue et le sexe des bossales tremblant d'humiliation.

Qu'elle était laide, ma ville! Petite. Mesquine. Un poste colonial envergure, tout empuanti de l'odeur du lucre et de la souffrance. (p218)

There is a tone of dismay and utter dejection in these words. Throughout her loneliness in America, Tituba has always aligned herself with Barbados. It is a constituent of her identity, and yet, upon this much-yearned physical return, she becomes almost detached from the island she loves. It is as if she now sees it through a different lens and cannot reconcile herself to or identify with it any longer. Is there perhaps a subtle underlying message to this? Is Condé showing the potential disappointment and letdown that results when yearning and nostalgia become too great? Is identity too precious an item to entrust to one country, one homeland, one island? In my introduction, I have drawn attention to Condé's refusal to allow her work be restricted by boundaries of any type. Many of her novels involve the journeying of characters from one country to another, never content to settle completely in one place. Condé, discussing her work, explains that she wants to show



that West Indians travel and move about, and that these islands are places of generation and dispersion, not confinement. (Pfaff 1993 p68). I believe Condé wants to portray Caribbean identity in terms of opacity, and not as a reductive or limiting agent. I will deal further with these issues in subsequent chapters.

In the novel's epilogue, Tituba speaks to us from the grave and, here, she seems to have made peace with all and with her island. In death, she can now enjoy its pleasures, pleasures forsaken her when in exile:

Et puis, il y a mon île. Je me confonds avec elle. Pas un de ses sentiers que je n'aie parcouru. Pas un de ses ruisseaux dans lequel je ne me sois baignée. Pas un de ses mapoux sur les branches duquel je ne me sois balancée. Cette constante et extraordinaire symbiose me venge de ma longue solitude dans les déserts d'Amérique. (p271)

In death, Tituba and Barbados are one, they have fused and are interconnected forever. There is a sentiment of permanence in these lines, and Tituba seems to be reconciled with her motherland.

#### Tituba's identity as realised by her relationships with men

Maryse Condé, in one interview with Pfaff, explains she is not a writer who creates exemplary characters (Pfaff 1993 p60). In *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ...noire de Salem*, she decided to "destroy what might appear exemplary in the story by rendering Tituba rather naïve and sometimes ridiculous" (Pfaff 1993 p60). This is none more obvious

than in Tituba's relationship with men, particularly with John Indien, and the maroon Christopher.

According to Condé's research, John Indien did exist as a husband to the historical figure Tituba, but abandoned her for another woman, similar to the narrative in Condé's novel (Pfaff 1993 p61). Tituba's first meeting with Indien occurs early in the novel following the death of Maya Yaya. She is living alone in her cabin and has become a recluse and fear-inspiring character. She neglects her personal appearance and is probably considered "witch-like".

John Indien is brazen, appears confident and has an infectious laugh. His gaiety and laughter appeal strongly to Tituba, and she declares herself surprised some people can be happy on this "terre de misère"(p28). His impact on Tituba is immediate: she is driven to ask him if she will see him again, and summons Maya Yaya to ask what the future holds, and if he will be part of it.

Life and John Indien present Tituba with a dilemma. Her recent past has been one of peace and tranquillity, living alone with her spirit friends for companionship. It may be argued she has had a lucky escape from a lifetime of slavery. Due to her mother's hanging, she has been driven off the plantation at a tender age, and her life both with Mama Yaya and prior to meeting John Indien has been lived out on the fringes of society, in a never-never land where she has known neither the hardships of slavery nor the fears of maroon life. Now, she is faced with a cruel but direct choice, continued existence as is, or the trade-off, a life shared with Indien, but a return to the oppressions of slavery and the white man. The decision torments her :



Ma mère avait été violée par un Blanc. Elle avait été pendue à cause d'un Blanc... Mon père adoptif s'était suicidé à cause d'un Blanc. En dépit de tout cela, j'envisageais de recommencer à vivre parmi eux, dans leur sein, sous leur coupe. Tout cela par goût effréné d'un mortal. Est-ce que ce n'était pas folie ? Folie et trahison ? (p37)

The words "un Blanc" is reiterated four times in these lines. Tituba is openly naming this collective offender, illustrating the deep hurt she has experienced because of "un Blanc". Condé portrays her as extremely weak in these lines: she, who has suffered so much at the hands of the white man, will consider returning to his world.

Tituba's decision to follow John Indien back into the white man's world will cost her dearly. The reader is witness to an immediate change in Tituba's character, a forced change, and she now becomes uncharacteristically docile and subservient. This new facet of her identity is really her first journey into self-awareness. She is about to sacrifice much, as she has fallen in love. Because of John Indien, she has now become a woman, and, like all other women, she will now mature in a way which is expected of her. She will become submissive and obedient, because that is what is required of her, and indeed, of all women, black or white. Her newly-found submission is also evidence of her emerging sexual identity, which I will discuss at the end of this section.

Tituba's path to love demands that she will become a victim, similarly to many of the other women portrayed in the novel. Her first meeting with Susanna Endicott is evidence of this. Endicott does not disguise her disgust for Tituba, and insists she lower her eyes when speaking to her new mistress. Tituba obeys because of her love for John Indien. Her identity and personality are now in a complete state of flux, and

she must learn to conform with the rules of her new slave mistress. Abena, making a spiritual appearance before Tituba leaves to live with John Indien laments: “Pourquoi les femmes ne peuvent-elles se passer des hommes?” (p31). She will repeat this at various junctures throughout the novel. This is a criticism on Condé’s part, a criticism of women and the sacrifices they will make for men who will not necessarily merit them.

I will look briefly now at religion and the role it plays in this novel in relation to Tituba’s identity. Slaves on the plantations had traditionally tried to continue in their practice of religions and customs in an attempt to preserve a unique part of their identity. We are unaware of Tituba’s religion in the novel, her main preoccupation being with witchcraft and its use to obtain positive outcomes. Tituba must now, similar to all other slaves, become a Christian, irrespective of any personal beliefs she may hold. This is another example of the continuing sacrifices she must make for John Indien, and is evidence of the further erosion of her self and her identity. We see this clearly in the following citation:

Je crois en Dieu, le Père Tout-Puissant, Créateur du ciel et de la terre et en Jésus-Christ, son Fils unique, Notre Seigneur ...

Je secouai frénétiquement la tête : John Indien, je ne peux répéter cela ! Répète, mon amour ! Ce qui compte pour l’esclave, c’est de survivre ! Répète, ma reine. Tu t’imagines peut-être que j’y crois, moi à leur histoire de Sainte Trinité. Un seul Dieu en trois personnes distinctes ? Mais cela n’a pas d’importance. Il suffit de faire semblant. Répète ! (pp45-46)

Although Tituba may be portrayed as ridiculous (Pfaff 1993 p60) and self-sacrificing, we are witnesses to occasional moments of lucidity and self-realisation. She understands, even in her early days with John Indien that she has made a choice, and while she may be free to leave him, she realises she will be unable to do this. It is a moment of heightened self-awareness and complete comprehension of her acts and their consequences and yet, paradoxically, it is also a most depressing moment in the novel as it plays out her intrinsic weakness:

Je n'avais que quelques gestes à faire. Me lever, prendre mon mince ballot de linge, tirer la porte derrière moi et reprendre le chemin de la rivière Ormonde. Hélas ! J'en étais empêchée.

Les esclaves qui descendaient par fournées entières des négriers et que toute la bonne société de Bridgetown s'assemblaient pour regarder, afin d'en railler en chœur la démarche, les traits et la posture, étaient plus libres que moi. Car ils n'avaient pas choisi leurs chaînes. Ils n'avaient pas marché, de leur plein gré, vers la mer somptueuse et démontée, pour se livrer aux trafiquants et offrir leurs dos à l'étampage.

Moi, c'était là ce que j'avais fait. (p45)

Tituba's weakness and lack of control over her own life and destiny is manifested once again when Susanna Endicott sells John Indien to Samuel Parris. Although Endicott has no legal hold over Tituba, she knows that the latter will not leave Indien and, therefore, will travel with him to America. Tituba agonises over her predicament but, in the end, her weakness for John Indien wins out:

Oui, je pouvais m'exclamer :

Non, Susanna Endicott ! Je suis la compagne de John Indien, mais vous ne m'avez pas achetée. Vous ne possédez aucun titre de propriété m'énumérant avec vos chaises, vos commodes, votre lit et vos édredons. Aussi donc, vous ne pouvez me vendre et le gentleman de Boston ne fera pas main basse sur mes trésors.

Oui, mais si je parlais ainsi, je serais séparée de John Indien ! (p61)

Later in the novel when Tituba is in prison, Indien will visit her rarely, and then these visits will cease entirely. She will have sacrificed much of her life for him.

Tituba finally returns to Barbados and meets Christopher, the maroon leader. His interest in her is primarily because he hopes she will make him invincible and all powerful among the maroons. Tituba, in her dealings with him is portrayed as ridiculously naïve, simply an object to fulfil his desires, both sexual and egotistic. Although she explains to him that she will be unable to make him immortal, she takes a revolutionary stance by offering to fight the white folk with him. We see her in a new light here, identifying herself with a noble cause and showing her new-found desire for resistance and revolt. This is clearly evidence of her selflessness and courage. In her wish to fight, she positions herself outside the boundaries of normal traditional womanhood, almost as a "Joan of Arc" figure. Tituba shows no fear, only a desire for justice for her people. Christopher, however, clearly distinguishes between what a woman may or may not do:

Te battre ? Comme tu y vas. Le devoir des femmes, Tituba, ce n'est pas de se battre, faire la guerre, mais l'amour ! (p233)

Tituba is repositioned by Christopher, who categorises her as a woman, whom he sees as a sexual object. He does not envisage her as a combatant or fighter, and reduces her to the narrow boundaries of womanhood. Tituba is confused, not only by her own ideas of what a woman might achieve, but also, by the preconceived ideas of femininity of characters such as Christopher. As a woman, she shows herself to be extremely unique, as she challenges the taken-for-granted roles of men and women versus her own ideas. Living amongst the maroons, where patriarchal values are uncontested, Tituba will question the role of women. All other women at the maroon camp appear happy and complacent with their positioning. Tituba thus sets herself apart by being the only woman to question the dominant discourse on womanhood.

Christopher is egotistic and believes that, although he may not achieve immortality, his deeds will not be forgotten. He sees himself as living on in the hearts and minds of the slaves, as an epic hero and a revolutionary figure:

De toute manière, je serai immortel. J'entends déjà les chansons des nègres des plantations. (p236)

He has composed a song which boasts of his greatness. However, when pressed by Tituba, he does not envisage the existence of any song for her. In his opinion, she will not live on in the memories of the slaves. Christopher almost "sees through" her, he

does not imagine her in terms of greatness and for him she has no identity. Although a maroon, his image of her is similar to that of Susanna Endicott, who also failed to consider her in real terms.

It may, of course, be argued in the case of Christopher, that it is indeed Tituba's own fault, and as a direct result of her behaviour and comportment that she is invisible to him. Her realisation that her presence is no longer required by him comes with a brisk: "Tu n'es donc rien qu'une négresse très ordinaire et tu voudrais que l'on te traite comme si tu étais précieuse ?" (p238)

Towards the end of the novel, Tituba's identity, as a woman and as a lover, undergoes a marked change, as is evident in her relationship with an injured boy, Iphigene. Tituba's relationship with Iphigene centres initially on her acting almost as a foster mother and nurse to him. Although only 30 years old, she is already seen as old and has been called "Mère" by the maroon women. We see her as a more mature figure and realise that most chapters in her life have already been lived out. As Iphigene relates his story to her, she understands how like her own it has been, losing his mother at an early age because she was beautiful and desired by the master. She feels a strong affinity to him because of this similarity in their pasts.

Tituba, pregnant with Christopher's child, dreams of bringing her daughter into a different world, untainted by slavery and its oppressions. This new-found spirit in her has been evident since her *séjour* with the maroons, and one mention of it to Iphigene is enough to inspire him to initiate a revolt:

Mère, je connais plantation par plantation le nom de tous ceux qui nous suivront. Nous n'avons qu'un mot à dire. (p247)



Despite the fact that his affection for her appears sincere, he too, like Christopher, will consult no more with her on the idea of revolt once they have decided to act. He is clearly grateful for her special gifts of healing, but these cannot bring about revolutionary change:

Je respecte tes talents de guérisseuse. N'est-ce pas grâce à toi que je suis en vie à respirer l'odeur du soleil ? Mais fais-moi grâce du reste. L'avenir appartient à ceux qui savent le façonner et crois-moi, ils n'y parviennent pas par des incantations et des sacrifices d'animaux. Ils y parviennent par des actes. (p251)

Condé illustrates here how Tituba is very much an object for men, fulfilling their needs sexually, and when possible using her powers of witchcraft. She is not, however, a woman who is held in respect or esteem by men, and in this way, despite the pity she may evoke, she remains nevertheless quite naïve (Pfaff 1993 p60). As we have seen, only in rare instances does she seem to realise her actions and their consequences. What is also striking about her is her identity as "*l'amoureuse*". Unlike many other women in the novel, and of the time, Tituba is very sexual, and does not seem to regret her liaisons with John Indien, Christopher, Benjamin and Iphigene. Her sexual identity is probably the only area of her life in which she experiences immense freedom. She is not repressed sexually, and as "*l'amoureuse*", she can transcend other boundaries by which she is constrained.

### Tituba's realisation of slavery through life with John Indien:

Tituba's husband is presented as a multi-faceted character in the novel. In the company of Tituba and other slaves, he is portrayed as being cheerful, brazen, confident and laughs easily, and these are the qualities which Tituba finds so attractive. In this way he may appear to escape the psychological tortures of slavery and transcend its miseries and suffering.

However, such appearances mask the fact that he too suffers oppression and is fundamentally influenced by the life he must lead. Tituba's first meeting with Susanna Endicott plays out the duality in his life. Gone is Indien's confidence, his brash manner, and when Endicott inquires if Tituba is a Christian, he interjects quickly:

*Je vais lui apprendre les prières, maîtresse ! Et je vais parler au curé de la paroisse de Bridgetown pour qu'elle reçoive le baptême dès que cela sera possible. (p39)*

When requesting a holiday as Tituba has come to live with him as his wife:

*John se mit à sautiller d'un pied sur l'autre et fit d'un ton geignard, câlin et humble à la fois, comme celui d'un enfant qui demande une faveur :  
Maîtresse, quand un nègre se décide à prendre une femme, est-ce qu'il ne mérite pas deux jours de repos ? Hein, maîtresse ? (p40)*



Tituba is ashamed of his comportment and sees this new side to Indien of which she has previously been unaware. She, who has not until now lived as a slave, has not had to withstand the disdain and contempt with which slaves must live. Indien repeatedly insists that the duty of the slave is to survive, and this, in his opinion, is at any price. He will do anything and say anything if this will ensure his continued survival.

John Indien is very capable of playing the role of subservient slave. However, in an instance, he can be transformed into a carefree man, unchained by the bitter ties of slavery. He throws a party once Endicott becomes ill, and acts no longer as slave but entertainer and host. Tituba, unused to such festivities finds them frightening, loud and in poor taste. Indien takes her by the arm and says:

Ne fais pas cette tête-là, sinon mes amis diront que tu fais la fière. Ils diront que ta peau est noire, mais que par-dessus tu portes masque blanc [...] (p56)

Although Condé denies any influence that Fanon may have had on her in the writing of this novel (Pfaff 1993 p62), the black skin/white mask reference cannot fail to remind the reader of his work. John Indien is criticising Tituba in these lines, asking her not to be disdainful. He clearly believes she does not identify with them, and, in doing so, she is acting “white”.

John Indien is untroubled over Susanna Endicott’s illness and is enjoying his party. He is not worried that people will come and investigate the noise they are making. He encourages Tituba to play at being a perfect nigger because that is what is expected of them by the white folk:

On s'attend à ce que les nègres se soûlent et dansent et fassent ripaille dès que leurs maîtres ont tourné le dos. Jouons à la perfection notre rôle de nègres.  
(p56)

Condé also denies any influence that Genet has had on her work even though this passage is very reminiscent of his play *Les Nègres* (Pfaff 1993 p62). John Indien appears to internalise what it is their masters expect of them. He is playing into the hands of their expectations, doing what they believe he would do. Condé criticises the behaviour of blacks here, being stereotypical, displaying a lack of identity and individuality, and behaving in a manner which the whites have come to expect of them.

It is interesting to examine briefly the contrast between John Indien's and Tituba's sense of identities. John Indien is male, and has been a slave all his life. His behaviour towards Endicott and Samuel Parris is subservient, and, though outwardly brash on occasion, he typifies the dispossession, both physically and psychologically, of being a slave. He is not capable of saying "Moi". Tituba, though suffering from the double persecution of being both black and female, has a sense of self far greater than that of her husband. She has entered the life of slavery because of her love for Indien, and does not see herself as a slave in the same way he does. She accepts the physical restrictions on her life because she is a slave. However, as discussed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, psychologically, she is free.

John Indien will continue to “act” in any way which will ensure his survival. But his natural optimism also allows him to be happy: in Boston and Salem we are told he is certainly the happiest of all in the Parris household.

Tituba’s arrest and subsequent imprisonment will be the end of her relationship with Indien. He becomes less attentive and caring of his wife, and his visits become less frequent. Tituba is horrified when he tells her that he too has joined the group of accusers and is pretending to be tormented. This will ensure he cannot be accused of being a witch and, therefore, he will survive. In this way John Indien can be seen as very cunning and conniving. Tituba realises that her feelings for him have changed, and she believes he too is capable of betraying her. She recalls Hester’s remark that life is too kind to men, whatever their colour. John Indien manages to survive through all the traumas of life in a way which Tituba, as a black woman, cannot do.

#### Tituba’s relationship with Abena and Mama Yaya, the mother figures

The themes of motherhood, and the relationships between mothers and daughters, are among the most recurring leitmotifs in Condé’s writing. Indeed, all four novels analysed in this thesis will explore the intricate complexities of motherhood, and mother/daughter relations. The absence, or apparent absence of parental love is a major feature of Condé’s work, and in particular, the absence of maternal love, as experienced, or perceived by the offspring. However, the lack of maternal love does not occur in a vacuum, and some rationale are presented in the narratives, to justify, or perhaps simply to explain the difficulties in loving one’s child. Among these are

the birth of a child following rape or assault, or a child born into a loveless, arranged marriage.

As we have already seen, Tituba's birth is the result of her mother's rape. Tituba acknowledges early in the novel that she is not loved by her mother, but informs us of this in a non-sentimental, very matter-of-fact way. However, Yao's deep devotion to her compensates for this lack of affection. It is ironically after her death, that Abena becomes more loving and relevant in Tituba's life. She is highly critical of her daughter's liaison with John Indien and, with Mama Yaya, foresees Tituba's future: "Ce nègre-là t'en fera voir de toutes les couleurs"(p52). In death Abena has become more protective of her daughter and is emotional when reflecting upon Tituba's future fate:

Ma mère fondit en larmes. Surprenant! Cette femme qui, de son vivant, m'avait traitée avec si peu de tendresse, devenait dans l'au-delà, protectrice et presque abusive. (p52)

However, Abena is never of any practical help to Tituba, and, although the love between them seems to increase after death, Abena is not capable of offering advice to her daughter. It seems that the lack of love for Tituba from her mother, forces her to steer a somewhat unguided course through life.

Tituba will never give birth to a child. When living in America, she aborts her first pregnancy, which will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter. Her second child will not be born, as she is hanged for her deeds of insurrection. The fact that Tituba will never become a mother is deeply significant. It is as if the tenuous

relationship with her own mother gives way to a form of sterility in the daughter. Although desiring a child of her own towards the end of the novel, fate will not allow Tituba experience biological motherhood. For Chodorow “an orientation towards nurturance and care becomes part of women’s personality because the process of identity formation in girls takes place through continuous attachment to and identification with the mother” (Chodorow 1978 cited in Glenn 1994 p4). Despite the fact that Tituba’s relationship with her mother is not a very close one, and that Abena dies while Tituba is still a small child, she shows herself capable, nevertheless, of developing nurturing qualities. Tituba is a caring mother figure to characters such as Elizabeth Parris and Betsey, and is, for a time, a sustaining presence in their lives.

Tituba’s relationship with Mama Yaya is more maternal and is reminiscent of the friendship and affection between child and grandmother found elsewhere in Caribbean literature (for example in Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et Vent sur Têlumée Miracle* (Schwarz-Bart 1972). Mama Yaya is her surrogate mother and cares for Tituba following Abena’s death. Mama Yaya will introduce her to sorcery, the knowledge of which will impact Tituba throughout her life. Indeed, her association with Mama Yaya has many consequences for Tituba and, shortly after the death of her adoptive mother, Tituba is seen as an object of fear and terror. She is confused at the feelings expressed by slaves:

A un carrefour, je rencontrai des esclaves menant un cabrouet de cannes au moulin [...] A ma vue, tout ce monde sauta prestement dans l’herbe et s’agenouilla tandis qu’une demi-douzaine de paires d’yeux respectueuses et terrifiées se levaient vers moi. Je restai abasourdie. Quelles légendes s’étaient tissées autour de moi ? On semblait me craindre. Pourquoi ? Fille d’une

pendue, recluse au bord d'une mare, n'aurait-on pas dû plutôt me plaindre ? Je compris qu'on pensait surtout à mon association avec Man Yaya et qu'on la redoutait. (pp25-26)

Tituba is dismayed at this reception. She inspires fear and respect when all she craves is love. Her association with Mama Yaya is already being woven into her identity. As Jeannie Suk suggests, sorcery is presented in the novel "as a process of rereading and transformation. Mama Yaya teaches Tituba a systematic reinterpretation and reordering of the world around her" (Suk 2001 p123-124). This reordering of the world will allow Tituba see the hidden benefits of plants and herbs and her knowledge of these will set her apart from all others. Witchcraft is an occupation which positions Tituba on the fringes of society both in Barbados, as an orphan living outside the plantation system, and also in Puritan America, leading a double life as slave and healer.

#### Tituba: maternal figure and witch

As aforementioned, Tituba will never physically give birth to a child despite two pregnancies during her life. She discovers she is pregnant with John Indien's child when living in the Parris household in Boston and decides to abort this child. The precursor to this act is her witnessing the hanging of Goody Glover, an old woman accused of being a witch. Tituba recalls most vividly the death of her own mother. She does not even see Glover, but imagines it is Abena once more hanging there:



C'était comme si j'avais été condamnée à revivre l'exécution de ma mère !

Non, ce n'était pas une vieille femme qui se balançait là ! C'était Abena dans la fleur de son âge et la beauté de ses formes ! Oui, c'était elle et j'avais à nouveau six ans ! Et la vie était à recommencer depuis ce moment-là ! (p81)

For Suk, "this juxtaposition of her mother's hanging and the abortion of her unborn child presents the abortion as a necessary and voluntary repetition of her mother's murder" (Suk 2001 p132). In her mind's eye, Tituba relives Abena's death, which she was forced to witness, at the age of six. Somehow, she is now compelled to abort her own child. It may be that the destruction of her unborn child might atone for the death of her own mother. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's account of forms of slave resistance offer insight into drastic actions taken by slaves. For her, murder, self-mutilation and infanticide were considered to be the principal ways in which slaves resisted their unhappy lives (Fox-Genovese 1988). In her view, "these extreme forms captured the essence of the slave woman's self-definition" (Fox-Genovese 1988 p329). She continues to say that "by killing an infant they loved [female slaves] would in some way be reclaiming it as their own" (Fox-Genovese 1988 p324). For a slave, who has no identity, the act of abortion is clearly a form of resistance, a way to reclaim an identity which is not permitted to surface. For Tituba, however, her decision to abort is not an effort to reclaim her lost identity, nor is it a way of reaffirming the fact that she, as a slave, has some limited autonomy over her own body. The abortion is necessary because Abena's death has returned to haunt her many years later, and this murder must now be repeated. At the same time, it is possible that Tituba is sparing her unborn child the life of slavery and submission



which is her own, and in this way, Tituba may be seen as selfless, courageous and giving.

At the news of her second pregnancy, Tituba proclaims delight because she believes the child is a daughter and she wants more for her child. She now thinks she can spare her a life of slavery and oppression. It is this new-found hope that she has for this baby that encourages her to motivate Iphigene to plan the revolt.

Despite her failure to become a mother, Tituba may be considered as a maternal figure in the novel. Interestingly, the qualities associated with being a mother figure are also those which may be allied to witchcraft, which, for Tituba, promote curative, protecting values. The skills of witchcraft have been passed down from Mama Yaya to Tituba, like an old family recipe. For Tituba, the definition of witchcraft is of a positive, benevolent force, used to aid and assist. For others, though, witchcraft is seen in contrasting and diverging terms. For Suk, “the repeated misdefinitions of the word ‘sorcière’ by men [in the novel] suggest that Tituba’s own threatening uncontainability and transgression [...] are manifested in the very indeterminacy of signification itself”(Suk 2001 p127). Each character has a different definition of what it is to be a witch, thus illustrating the fact that Tituba’s identity cannot be seen as singular or stable. And Tituba is herself much influenced by varying reactions to her being a witch, and will question her own identity on these grounds. When Tituba scratches John Indien’s finger he at once, albeit jokingly asks: “Aïe ! Qu’est-ce que tu fais là, sorcière ? (p33). Tituba remarks that *sorcière* for him has negative connotations. She is surprised, as she will be several times in the novel, that witchcraft is viewed negatively. Mama Yaya has strongly emphasised the positives of

using her powers to heal and protect. For Tituba, her identity is bound irretrievably to her knowledge of witchcraft and this will be the source of much of her suffering in life.

Christopher, as aforesaid, sees witchcraft solely in terms of how it may make him invincible and for him, Tituba's identity lies within this frame of reference. When he learns that her powers cannot help him, he is no longer interested in her. Iphigene acknowledges that his recovery is due entirely to Tituba's healing powers. However, his reluctance to involve her in the preparation for the revolt show that for him, her gifts cannot solve practical problems. Benjamin, the Jew, is the sole man in the novel who treats her with respect and kindness. Yet, for him also, her identity is constituted by the fact that she makes it possible for him to communicate with his deceased wife. Tituba and witchcraft are irrevocably linked for many characters in the novel. Her identity is split between what she perceives herself to be and what others perceive her to be.

## Conclusion

I wish to return here to a question posed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter: is Tituba labelling herself as she has been perceived by others, as a black witch from Salem, or is she proudly affirming her profession? I believe she is very proud of her knowledge and powers, and that despite the hardships she has encountered in life, all due to her profession of *sorcière*, she has no regrets of the knowledge she possesses. In the epilogue, there is almost a triumphant note in her voice, as if she has won out against all who challenged her. After death, Tituba speaks to us from the spiritual world where she is now at peace, and seems to have reclaimed her identity.

Christopher has refused the existence of a song for her, but now she happily acknowledges it:

Je l’entends d’un bout à l’autre de l’île, de North Point à Silver Sands, de Bridgetown à Bottom Bay. Elle court la crête des mornes. Elle se balance au bout de la fleur de baliser. L’autre jour, j’ai entendu un garçon de quatre ou cinq ans la fredonner. De joie, j’ai laissé tomber à ses pieds trois mangots bien mûrs et il est resté planté là, à fixer l’arbre qui hors de sa saison, lui avait offert pareil présent. (p267)

Tituba’s song shows that she too, like Christopher and Ti-Noel, is immortal. She has an identity that has transcended her mortal life and now she lives on in the memories of her people. Her new-found immortality is reminiscent of Nanna-ya, the Jamaican spiritual maroon leader, whose essence continues to dwell in the minds of her native countrymen. Condé has written a short novel called *Nanna-ya*, and the name means “Long live Nanna”, which “is the beginning of a song celebrating Nanny of the Maroons”(Pfaff 1993 p57). The fact that Tituba, like Nanna-ya, has her own song, ensures that the memory of her will span generations to come. The novel’s epilogue shows a complete transformation in Tituba: she is now a heroine and an activist in her people’s cause:

Aguerrir le cœur des hommes. L’alimenter de rêves de liberté. De victoire. Pas une révolte que je n’aie fait naître. Pas une insurrection. Pas une désobéissance. (p268)

In death, her identity which had been almost suspended in life is now recuperated, revived. Although not destined to give birth to a child while alive, she has now chosen a female descendant, Samantha “une petite fille aux yeux curieux, à la bouche résolue” (p269). Tituba has singled out this child whose mind she will fill with knowledge and powers. There is an underline tone here of great hope, as if this child signals a newness, a rebirth, and Tituba will live on through, and in her.

The epilogue closes the door on some chapters of her life, resolving many painful issues, and there is a sense of peace and calm, of acceptance, understanding and hope:

Oui, à présent je suis heureuse. Je comprends le passé. Je lis le présent. Je connais l’avenir. A présent, je sais pourquoi il y a tant de souffrances, pourquoi les yeux de nos nègres et négresses sont brillants d’eau et de sel. Mais je sais aussi que tout cela aura une fin. Quand ? Qu’importe ? (p271)

Above all, there is a sense that Tituba has reclaimed her complete identity, not simply as healer and witch, but also as a mother, and politically as an activist for the cause of freeing her people from slavery and oppression. The final paragraphs of the epigraph portray her as strong, resilient, wilful. She is no longer merely “une esclave de la Barbade et pratiquant vraisemblablement le hodo” (p230), the charge brought against her in the records of the Salem Witch Trials.

## Downward Spiral: malaise and identity in *Une saison à Rihata*.

*Une saison à Rihata* was first published in 1981, and is Condé's second novel, following *Heremakhonon*, which had been published in 1976. It has been honoured with the prize of *Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme*. In spite of this, the novel is not among Condé's most famous. The novel's title is significant: Condé has explained that the failure of *Heremakhonon* was blamed partly on its title, and therefore, when deciding upon a title for this new novel, her publishers wanted to allude to Aimé Césaire, who wrote *Une saison au Congo*, and also to Rimbaud, who wrote *Une saison en enfer* (Pfaff 1993 p43). Césaire's play traced the traumatic decolonisation of the Belgian Congo, the martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba, and the evaporation of the dream of a unified, decolonized Africa (Suk 2001 p103). *Une saison à Rihata* is, in some ways, reminiscent of some of the issues dealt with in Césaire's play. Condé explains in an interview that the country in which the novel takes place resembles Zaire, which formerly was the Belgian Congo (Pfaff 1993 p44). Also, important in the novel, though not the prime focus of this chapter, is the portrait Condé paints of Africa through the eyes of the main characters, an idea of Africa as a place of deep disillusionment, run by a corrupt leader, for whom money and power mean everything.

Upon first reading *Une saison à Rihata*, I was very much struck by the way in which Condé portrays the depth and complexity of human nature, and by the way in which her characters interact with each other, all in the quest for self-knowledge, and perhaps self-worth. I believe Condé deals very admirably with this exploration of the

human self, a self plagued by guilt for sins of the past, and regret for hopes which have been dashed, dreams which have been lost forever.

The novel's plot centres around the life of Marie-Hélène, a Sorbonne-educated Guadeloupean woman, married to Zek, an African bank manager. The couple live in the dismal mediocrity of a fictional African town, Rihata, in an unspecified African country. They live with their six daughters and Marie-Hélène's nephew, Christophe. Zek's mother, Sokambi, lives separately from the family, although nearby. The family is condemned to live in self-imposed exile in Rihata due to the fact that Marie-Hélène has had an affair with Zek's younger brother, Madou, some years previously. Marie-Hélène is pregnant, and towards the end of the novel will give birth to a son, Elikia, a name which means "hope" in Lingala, a language of Democratic Republic of Congo.

The novel's narrative structure centres around the arrival of Madou in Rihata in order to commemorate the country's *coup d'état*, the event which preceded independence. Madou's visit stirs up old wounds and memories, and the narrative resorts to a series of flashbacks to the past on the part of the main characters. Unlike novels such as *Heremakhonon*, where we are privy only to the point of view of the principal character, *Une saison à Rihata*, privileges many differing points of view. This is indeed a recurring feature of Condé's work, and I will explore it further in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. For Miller, consciousness within the novel is "disseminated, fragmented, and shared within a community, and the narrator's point of view becomes relative, and open to critique" (Miller 1996 p180). This is useful as the reader gains great understanding into the innermost thoughts of many individuals, and not solely those of Marie-Hélène.



Two principal themes dominate the novel: the love triangle of Marie-Hélène, Zek and Madou, and also the charged political atmosphere and activities against which the love theme is set. In one interview, Condé explains how the novel is innovative. She says that, theoretically, in Africa, sentiments do not exist, and books do not focus on love and adultery (Pfaff 1993 p44). For her, to write such a book in an African context was a marked departure from traditional African literature. *Une saison à Rihata*, however, due to its subversive context was not well received in Africa, and Condé reveals she “was labelled as a person who detests and says bad things about Africa” (Pfaff 1993 p46).

In this chapter, I intend to analyse Marie-Hélène’s character. In many ways, she appears to be losing her own sense of identity, and I will explore this in her relationship with Zek, with Madou, with Christophe, with her eldest daughter Sia, and through the birth of Elikia. Subsequently, I will examine how Marie-Hélène’s feelings for Africa and Guadeloupe constitute part of her identity. This latter point will lead me to discuss her relationship with her own parents.

#### Marie-Hélène’s identity as examined through her relationship with Zek

Even the most cursory reading of *Une saison à Rihata* provides a fascinating insight into the identity of Condé’s anti-heroine, Marie-Hélène. Several words could describe her instantly: discontented, disgruntled and imprisoned in a cage of low self-esteem, even self-loathing. She is presented to the reader as a deeply unhappy, pitiful woman, and her relationship with Zek bears much evidence of this. Zek, for his part, is almost too good to be true. Despite his many mistresses, he has only ever truly loved Marie-Hélène, and has forgiven her all her indiscretions, even her incestuous affair with her



sister's lover Olnel, and her liaison with Madou. From the moment they had met in Paris, Marie-Hélène, then a bright and ambitious political science student, has had absolute power over Zek:

Elle l'avait aussitôt percé à jour, décelant sous le bagou, la jovialité et les fanfaronnades, la bonté, certains diraient la faiblesse, et surtout la vulnérabilité. Très vite son pouvoir sur lui l'avait grisée. Si elle lui avait cédé, ce n'était pas par simple entraînement des sens, comme l'affirmait Olnel avec mépris. C'était pour se voir en lui. Jamais elle n'aurait autant de prix aux yeux d'un être. (p25)

The novel portrays the question of love between Marie-Hélène and Zek in varying terms of ambiguity. She certainly does not love Zek in the way she has passionately loved Madou. For Zek, his wife has been the source of much fascination for him, she is a confident political animal, determined to question the position of Africa in the world, so unlike him, who is content to live without the need to query the black man's place in a white world:

Zek s'était vu dans ce regard, petit, dérisoire, un nain. Cela n'expliquait pas seulement la fascination qu'elle avait exercée sur lui. C'était son goût pour des idées abstraites qui, lui, ne l'avaient pas effleuré un instant: le devenir du continent africain, le progrès de l'homme noir, sa place dans le monde. Ebahi, il la suivait à d'interminables meetings dans ses salles glaciales ou surchauffées, à des marches à travers Paris, signait des pétitions, versait des souscriptions. (p21)

However, Zek's fascination for his wife has never been reciprocated, and Marie-Hélène's sexual liaisons have shown how easily her interest in Zek has been surpassed by that of other men. In the early part of the novel, Marie-Hélène is in the final stages of pregnancy, her seventh, having already given birth to six daughters. She is tired, depressed and struck down by feelings of guilt, which will be discussed later in the chapter. Her need for Zek at this moment is, however, quite evident. Although in many ways she possibly despises him, she is nonetheless now wholly dependent on him:

Elle n'avait que lui. Il était à la fois sa victime et son bourreau. Il la sauvait, la guérissait pour l'exposer à des souffrances et des dangers plus grands. Comme s'il ne recherchait pas son bonheur et ne pouvait l'aimer que partagée, angoissée, à la dérive. (p34)

There is much ambiguity in these lines. The novel has revealed that she is almost in a state of madness, in the self-imposed exile of her room, and of her pregnancy. She is ruminating and reasoning irrationally with herself, and we see a marked departure from the bright ambitious student of days gone by. Marie-Hélène is portrayed as a recluse, walking a thin line between reason and insanity. She believes the husband who loves her deeply does so only when she has been plunged into the depths of despair. She forgets his fascination for her back in the days of Paris, where she led the way, and he followed. However, her relationship with Zek is also characterised by something more. She allows herself to tolerate him because of an instinct for survival, for self-preservation:

Il n'était jamais totalement, honteusement soûl ce qui lui aurait permis de le mépriser davantage. Il oscillait toujours dans une demi-conscience qui lui permettait de répondre avec douceur à ses questions irritées, de la prendre dans ses bras et de lui faire habilement l'amour. Ce plaisir qu'elle ne savait pas refuser lui était une torture. C'était son seul refuge contre la solitude extrême, la vieillesse, toute proche, la folie peut-être. (p109)

As one critic suggests, "Marie-Hélène did not have to marry Zek, but she lacked the courage to be self-independent in Paris after her sister's suicide" (Berrian 1991 p9). Her decision to stay with Zek, and indeed to live with him in Africa, marks a distinct turning point in her life: her newly-acquired lack of confidence and self-esteem, and the absence of determination in her to live out her life independently. Alix, her mother, had always encouraged her to be independent, and be capable of earning her own living. However, Marie-Hélène casts aside this advice when making decisions. She shows herself here as a cowardly figure. Condé has often stated that she is not the kind of writer who creates model characters (Pfaff 1993 p60).

It is useful to examine briefly, the portrayal of Africa in the novel. Marie-Hélène has turned her back on Europe following her personal failures in France, and has first seen Africa as a nurturing, protecting place where she would not be haunted by the ghosts of her past life. However, Africa did not welcome her with open arms, and she has never felt at home in her ancestors' continent. Her life has not moved forward in any progressive way since leaving Europe. On the contrary, her happiness and sense of self have been diminished and, in this way, Africa may be seen as a form of regression, or even as a form of suppression in her life. On a symbolic level, Africa

is not portrayed as a protecting motherland, giving new life to its lost descendants. In Africa, Marie-Hélène is fragmented and disconnected.

Marie-Hélène's relationship with Zek is perhaps best played out the night Zek hosts dinner for Madou and some friends, and serves a sacrificial sheep. Marie-Hélène, characteristically, remains in her room, sleepy and dreaming, lost in her melancholic thoughts. Later, during their lovemaking, Zek interrogates her ceaselessly, asking if she loves him. However, Marie-Hélène will never confirm this to Zek, it is her way of playing with him, and denying him this truth. Zek tries not to be upset about the fact that he will never know for sure how his wife feels about him:

Après dix-sept ans, Marie-Hélène ne l'aimait-elle pas ? Ne s'était-elle pas mise à l'aimer sans s'en apercevoir ? A quoi bon se torturer ? Elle n'appartenait plus qu'à lui. Il s'étendit tout contre elle, enserrant l'obus de son ventre. Peut-être qu'un de ses cauchemars auxquels elle était tellement sujette l'agiterait. Alors il resserrerait son étreinte et la calmerait comme une enfant. En lui-même, il prononcerait ces paroles qu'il n'osait jamais dire à voix haute, car il les croyait indignes de sa qualité d'homme; et après tout, n'était-ce pas elle, la coupable ? "Mon amour, nous cheminons ensemble depuis tant d'années et jamais nous ne nous sommes rencontrés. Tu es enfermée dans tes remords et tes rêves. Moi, dans ma lourdeur et mon égoïsme". (p153)

These lines capture the essence of the relationship between Marie-Hélène and Zek, a relationship hinged on mutual dependency – Zek so desperate for her love, and she, so needful of his comfort when confronted with the sins of her youth in the form of nightmares. Both of them, therefore, are forced to share their lives and their family,

prisoners of the past, and of their personal failings. There is something almost childlike about Zek and Marie-Hélène. Although they are parents, they do not exhibit characteristics of leadership and influence, either with their children or with each other. They do not seem to be in control of their own destinies, and drift through life, very much influenced by external events. Neither of them has had a healthy relationship with their own fathers. We shall see Marie-Hélène's relationship with her parents discussed later. As for Zek, unlike Madou, he has never found favour in his father's eyes. It may be this lack of parental love between father and child, in both their cases, which renders Zek and Marie-Hélène childlike, incapable of leading, steering, guiding.

The image of Marie-Hélène as constantly either pregnant or cradling a newborn infant, might normally serve to demonstrate the love and affection between a man and wife, a child being the physical affirmation of their love. In Marie-Hélène's case, however, the continuing pregnancies serve to reinforce a very different perspective, a sense of the endless continuum of her life with Zek, of the lack of possibility for newness, for regeneration. The cyclical re-enactments of the pregnancies show life for Marie-Hélène and Zek as caught in some type of time warp, devoid of the potential for change.

To summarise, Marie-Hélène is portrayed as unhappy, lacking in self-esteem and direction and deeply dissatisfied with every facet of her life, her husband, her children, her place of residence and her past.

### Marie-Hélène's identity as examined through her relationship with Madou

The love affair between Marie-Hélène and Madou could not be more different from that with Zek. In Madou, she has perhaps found an equal, and at least she has found someone she can respect. She remembers her surprise upon seeing Madou for the first time, so unlike his older brother:

Zek lui avait beaucoup parlé de son jeune frère pour lequel il éprouvait d'étranges sentiments d'affection, de rancune et d'admiration. Mais elle ne se l'était jamais nettement représenté. Et elle se rappelait sa surprise quand Madou était descendu de l'Illyouchine 18 qui le ramenait de Moscou. Si différent de son aîné! Réservé, froid, hautain, presque méprisant! (p27)

Marie-Hélène recalls her first impression of Zek's younger brother. His manners and aristocratic background impress her in ways Zek failed to do so. For Madou, although married to the youngest sister of Toumany, the President, the only woman he has ever loved is Marie-Hélène. As Berrian suggests, Marie-Hélène's initial attraction to Madou was motivated by revenge, because Zek is unable to heal the unhappiness, loneliness and terrible alienation within her (Berrian 1991 p12). Madou had arrived back in the capital city, N'Daru, following completion of his studies in Russia. He is bright and highly ambitious, so unlike his older brother who wishes simply for a loving wife and sincere friends. Marie-Hélène had no preconceived ideas of what she wanted with Madou, nor had she thought out the consequences of where an affair with him would lead:



Au début, elle n'avait pas de plan bien défini, seulement l'intention de les provoquer tous les deux. Puis elle avait complètement perdu le contrôle de la situation et s'était retrouvée amoureuse. Eperdument amoureuse de Madou.

(p33)

We see here Marie-Hélène's lack of self-control and self-discipline. She shows herself to be an unscrupulous and irresponsible woman, fully capable of pursuing her own desires without thought or consideration for others. She is almost childlike in this manner, allowing her own impulsive actions to override any other concerns.

Her feelings for Madou do not dissipate during the novel, and his death will see her grieve inconsolably. Marie-Hélène's crying over Madou is the last scene in which she appears in the novel, and we are left with the impression that her anguish will continue for much longer. Although she has just given birth to her first son, he seems forgotten in her grief. She has reasoned illogically about the morality of her illicit love affair with Madou, saying had Zek died, she, as his widow, would have gone to his young brother. Marie-Hélène neglects to consider the fact that Zek did not die, and hence her affair with Madou was completely wrong and immoral:

Comme c'était illogique! Des deux frères, Zek serait mort le premier que sa veuve serait revenue à son cadet. Alors ce qui avait été crime serait approuvé de tous et béni ! (p208)

In this light, we see Marie-Hélène as a desperate woman, refusing blame for her act of adultery, for the hurt she has caused Zek, and for the shame she has brought upon the family. She does not seem to accept that she is at fault, and again we may think of her



as childlike and immature, not accepting responsibility for her acts and their consequences. Her refusal to accept blame for the affair shows her lack of objectivity and fairness. Her non-acceptance of any guilt is, in reality, symbolic of the overriding problem in her life, her refusal and inability to define herself. By refusing to see the objective truth in her actions, she is drawing a veil over parts of her identity. What is striking here, though, is the fact that she is hiding not only from others, but most importantly from herself. It is impossible for anyone to truly know her, as she does not know herself. She refuses this possibility.

Apart from the sexual attraction between them, Marie-Hélène and Madou, both share a deep interest in politics. Madou's interest has seen him elevated to *ministre du Développement rural*, and he has his sights on being *premier ministre*. Marie-Hélène, although vegetating in the claustrophobia of the house, has not lost her interest in politics, and in the fate of Africa. This shared interest is highlighted during the first conversation between them in the novel. Madou reveals to her the real reason for his visit to Rihata: the attempted reconciliation between Toumany and Lopez de Arias, President of a neighbouring country, which had formerly been a Portuguese colony. Marie-Hélène cannot ignore the fact that Madou has joined this corrupt government, and Madou attempts to justify his involvement with Toumany. He explains that the regime must be changed from the inside. Marie-Hélène treats his comments cynically. It is very interesting to note the dynamics at play between both characters in this conversation. She is heavily pregnant, and surrounded by children, yet her continued interest in the politics of the country, and Madou's involvement in them, is evident. She laughs, once or twice, and for Madou, her laughter has not changed. It is still "léger, un peu moqueur" (p52). Discussing politics with her former lover is reminiscent of a younger, ambitious and idealistic Marie-Hélène, living in

Paris, and passionately involved in the cause of Africa and its peoples. In some ways, this conversation with Madou recaptures part of her identity now suppressed and latent. Madou, whose education and rank in government afford him high status, feels a tremendous need to justify himself to his former lover. For him, her opinion is most important, and he wholeheartedly desires her approval for his actions. It seems likely that Madou still considers her as an intellectual partner, which is how deep down she probably wishes to be seen. Interestingly, it is only Madou, and not Zek, who can inspire her, and raise her up, albeit for a few moments, from her dull existence.

She tries to consider the possibilities of a reconciliation between the two leaders, and wonders if it is at all likely given Toumany's corrupt reputation:

Cette réconciliation avec Lopez de Arias, si jamais elle avait lieu, durerait-elle? Comment ce leader intègre accepterait-il les caprices et les crimes de Toumany ? Et puis, son pays avait-il à gagner à une alliance avec cette terre exsangue, en pleine faillite économique ? Marie-Hélène renonça à comprendre. (p55)

The word “renonça” is poignant in this last line. Marie-Hélène has now, in so many ways, renounced her life and everything in it. The verb conjures up notions of failure, of lack of perseverance and determination, in short, everything that she has now become. In France, Marie-Hélène did not give up. *Life*, then, was a battleground where her political beliefs kept her alive. In France, she was a central figure, but in Africa she is positioned on the periphery.

Unlike Zek, for whom she has much contempt, Madou awakens dreams and possibilities within her, both political and personal. Her alienation from Africa,

discussed in another section of this chapter, is lessened by her love for him. Unlike Zek, and all other Africans, when Marie-Hélène was with Madou, she felt able to put down roots in this continent, even to grow to love it:

Oui, à Prahima, elle avait retrouvé la saveur de son enfance. Quand Madou la prenait par la main, elle était capable d'aimer cette terre, de s'y enraciner.  
(p188)

Her short time with Madou is one of extreme happiness. There is a strong sense of innocence in these lines, and almost the idea of two childhood sweethearts, shielded from life's difficulties. When he is shot by a young man resistant to Toumany's government, Madou is in a coma in hospital. At this stage, Marie-Hélène relives memories of him, and the happy time they spent together. She regrets the fact that nothing was resolved between them:

Le regret la prenait de leurs dernières rencontres tronquées au cours desquelles ils n'avaient rien échangé. Des paroles incomplètes. Des regards embarrassés. Des souvenirs tenus en laisse. Elle se refusait à penser qu'il pouvait mourir. Pourtant elle se surprenait déjà à faire le tri dans ses souvenirs comme une avare dénombrant ses biens. Des images qu'elle avait résolument écartées resurgissaient. (p187)

In these lines we see Marie-Hélène as incomplete and unfulfilled. The part Madou has played in her life is unfinished, and she will not have the opportunity to resolve her feelings for him. The language in this quote is very symbolic of Marie-Hélène's

difficulties in her own life, and her refusal to look at herself closely. She refuses to believe Madou could die, in the same way she has refused to blame herself for the tragic events in her life. She displays a remarkable ability to banish thoughts which are unpleasant to her. It is indeed this preference of hers, not to dwell for any length on herself, which allows her go through life, skimming the surface, and not journeying towards a greater realisation of self-knowledge or identity.

Madou's death will have its consequences for Marie-Hélène. His death will signal her farewell kiss to her own youth and past, and the little game she played with both brothers can no longer be. Madou had promised to try and secure an interesting job for Zek abroad, so that Marie-Hélène might be able to leave Rihata, and not live in such poverty. Madou's death, however, means Zek will not be whisked out of the Rihata backwater, and so life will continue, without hope of change. At the end of the novel, we are left with the idea that Marie-Hélène will not alter her life, now that Madou is dead. One feels she will remain isolated, removed from life, from her husband and children, and from Africa. It would appear that the meaningless void which is her life will remain just so.

Marie-Hélène's relationship with Madou is fuelled by passion and politics, and he awakens in her dreams and desires which she has thought hidden forever. His death, at the end of the novel, signals a death for her also, the death of innocence, and perhaps the final death of her ambitions, her drive. It is the death of any hope still remaining in her life. How ironic, therefore, that Madou's death is juxtaposed with the birth of Elikia, a name symbolising hope.

Marie-Hélène's relationship with Christophe and Sia, and the importance of Elikia's birth in the novel

Christophe is Marie-Hélène's nephew whose mother, Delphine, committed suicide in Paris upon learning of the love affair between Marie-Hélène and her own lover, Olnel, a Haitian. While the reader is privileged to know the circumstances of his birth, Christophe himself, does not know them. He loves his aunt very much, maybe because like her, he experiences alienation. He knows he "venait d'ailleurs" (p13). Marie-Hélène, overcome by guilt, as she feels she is to blame for her sister's death, cannot reveal to Christophe what happened in Paris and the part she played in Delphine's demise. She knows he might hate her for betraying his mother, and she is not courageous enough to tell him the truth. She is afraid he will be unstable after learning the fact his mother preferred to die, rather than live:

Ah, comment aurait-elle (Delphine) pu survivre à cette défaite ? Elle avait préféré se coucher et mourir. Pouvait-on raconter cette histoire à Christophe ? Ce serait peut-être porter un coup fatal à l'équilibre, à la paix de son esprit ? Il deviendrait amer. Il s'éloignerait d'elle. Il la haïrait peut-être. Cela, Marie-Hélène ne pourrait le supporter. (pp80-81)

Christophe's sense of insecurity and lack of identity stem not only from the fact that his mother is dead. He has also never known his father because Olnel fled back to Haiti once Delphine had died. Throughout the novel, Christophe is constantly seen as a victim, denied the truth of his birth by those who can tell him. Marie-Hélène, although loving him dearly, will not reveal the truth to him about either parent and, in

this way, denies him his identity and his sense of origin. Although she has willingly turned her own back on Guadeloupe as constituting part of her identity, by refusing Christophe the truth, she cuts off his access to his past and his sense of identity. In this way she appears most cowardly, knowing how deeply he wishes to know of his parents and their history. For Suk, Christophe, although innocent, and ignorant of the past wrong-doings of his aunt, and other adults in the novel, seems all the more to carry the burden of past sins on his shoulder (Suk 2001 p105). He tortures himself without understanding what really happened and wonders if his mother hated him enough to desert him. Marie-Hélène's part in all this demonstrates her cowardice, and lack of sensitivity towards her nephew. She does not wish to redeem his mother in his eyes. All that is important to her is to preserve her own image in Christophe's eyes. The truth is exploited by Marie-Hélène, and Christophe will never be able to decipher his true identity and belonging because of this. This exploitation of the truth can be compared to the corrupt government of Toumany, where truth is shadowed behind a veil of lies and deceit. In some way, Marie-Hélène's behaviour towards her nephew can be seen as emblematic of the problems in Africa, where untruths and falsities reign over this troubled continent, and prevent it from finding its true identity. Christophe is, in some ways, representative of the Caribbean past, a past of forced migration from Africa, a past where African traditions and cultures were suppressed and rejected, a past where African identity could exist no longer. He is an orphan figure and, like the Caribbean people, he searches in vain for an ancestry which will be forever denied, an ancestry ruthlessly buried on the plantations. He is seen as a blameless character, destined to live his life in the shadow of the sins of others, and in this way, he is emblematic of the malaise of formerly colonised peoples.



Marie-Hélène, as a mother figure is presented in most negative terms. Condé reveals her to be uncaring, and unconcerned about her daughters. The image we have of her is of an aloof woman, too preoccupied with her personal misery and self-destruction to care about anyone else, least of all her children. References to her daughters are very rare in the novel, with the exception of her eldest one, Sia,. We know they treat her with respect and with a certain amount of fear, and do not react spontaneously to her at any time, as the following quote demonstrates:

Les enfants qui jouaient plus loin la dévisagèrent, cherchant à deviner si elles pouvaient s'approcher sans dommage et, ayant décidé du contraire, se bornèrent à la saluer:

- Bonjour, maman!

Marie-Hélène aimait ses enfants, bien sûr. Mais elle n'avait pas de temps à leur consacrer. Si elle n'y prenait pas garde, elles l'obligeraient à se détourner du seul souci qui comptait à ses yeux: la débandade de sa vie. (pp24-25)

These lines reveal what might easily be seen as an example of complete selfishness and self-absorption, to the detriment of her children's welfare and happiness. It is understandable though, that Marie-Hélène, once a strong and intellectual woman, should wish to analyse how she has become what she now is, a continually pregnant and dissatisfied person. The word "débandade" is extremely poignant, revealing how her life has unravelled, how she has lost her grip and positioning, how she has become undone. She inspires fear, not love in her daughters. I will examine later in the chapter how the failings in her past now mitigate upon any potential happiness in her life and in the lives of her children. Their relationship with Zek is very different: they love



him dearly, and are openly affectionate with him. For Zek, this relationship could not be more different from the one he has had with Malan, his father, where fear and respect constituted the principal elements in his strict Ngurka upbringing:

Le boy ouvrait les fenêtres des chambres des enfants qui s'accrochaient à la balustrade, sciant l'air de leurs jolies voix perçantes.

- Papa! Papa! Voilà papa!

Il releva la tête et leur sourit. Pourtant cette familiarité affectueuse le blessait. Ses filles l'aimaient alors qu'il aurait souhaité être craint. Elles se bousculaient pour grimper sur ses genoux, froissaient ses boubous, tripotaient son visage et il se revoyait devant son père, yeux baissés, paralysé par la peur. (p22)

Marie-Hélène's relationship with Sia is the only relationship with one of her children which is explored in the novel. Sia, at fifteen, suspects that blame for the family's circumstances and living conditions lie at her mother's feet. She is portrayed from the outset as sullen and detached, and believes her feelings towards her mother are those of hatred. Indeed, she has developed a close relationship with Sokambi, her paternal grandmother, because they both share negative feelings towards Marie-Hélène. Sia knows Marie-Hélène has experienced a very different type of life in Paris and cannot understand why the family must now live in the sleepy backwater of Rihata:

C'est tout naturellement d'instinct, qu'elle rendait Marie-Hélène responsable de leur condition présente. Alors que tous autour d'elle accusaient le régime politique, Toumany et sa dictature, elle n'accusait que sa mère. C'était à cause

d'elle et d'elle seule que lui étaient refusées les joies, les richesses auxquelles sa jeunesse avait droit. Elle devinait dans son passé des fautes, voire des crimes dont tous aujourd'hui payaient le prix. (pp81-82)

Sam Haigh suggests that it is Marie-Hélène's own negative experiences with motherhood which, in turn, damage her relationship with her children, and especially that with Sia (Haigh 2001 pp76-77). Haigh believes the physical confinement which pregnancy and numerous children have conferred on Marie-Hélène have limited her ambitions and confounded her plans for the future. She goes on to say that Marie-Hélène's alienation from Sia "has everything to do with her own (non)status as object within the patriarchal structures which surround them both" (Haigh 2001 p76). Here, Haigh is suggesting Marie-Hélène lacks control over her life, and that her destiny is in the hands of the males of the family. Indeed, the elders of the family made the crucial decisions following detection of the affair between Marie-Hélène and Madou. But for Zek's compassion, Marie-Hélène would have been banished from the household. Marie-Hélène admits feeling very bitter as she was excluded from this decision-making process which was to influence the rest of her life. She was powerless against this male-orientated African society.

As she is about to give birth this seventh time, she remembers Sia's birth, something she has never discussed with her daughter. She freely acknowledges the absence of communication between them, "Si l'on ne tient pas compte des regards, des expressions du visage, des gestes des mains" (p167). However, she also acknowledges the fact that, although she knows Sia has needed help, she herself has not been able to provide this:

Mais comment aider quand vous voguez vous-même à la dérive sans cadran ni boussole ? Quand votre propre vie est une femme folle qui déchire ses vêtements ? (p167)

While there is no sense of shame or self-reproach in these lines, one can nonetheless discern a total lack of direction or guidance. Marie-Hélène does not seem apologetic for her admission, she is simply rationalising her feelings internally. This above quote also hints at the notion that Marie-Hélène sees herself as two separate beings, as a schizophrenic. There is a tone of hysteria here, and it is as if she was able to look at herself externally. She enacts an imaginary conversation with Sia, as if attempting to explain to her daughter why their relationship has been doomed from birth:

Mon enfant, je t'ai portée dans la colère. Je t'en voulais de ne pas être née de celui que j'aimais, de celui que je ne me consolais pas d'avoir perdu. Je t'en voulais d'être la fille de Zek. Jamais je n'ai pensé à toi avec douceur et quand, enfin, nous nous sommes séparées j'ai accueilli ma délivrance avec joie. C'est presque dans la haine que je t'ai expulsée. (p167)

In these lines, Marie-Hélène is very honest, admitting that her pregnancy with Sia was one of pain and regret. She is honest, but she is nonetheless unrepentant for her feelings. The words in this above quote are most powerful, and effectively describe Marie-Hélène's feelings. Sia's birth was "ma délivrance", and one can sense how relieved she felt, not to be carrying her daughter any longer. Marie-Hélène is free now, delivered of a baby whose father she does not love. Sia has been "expulsée" from her mother's womb, and this mirrors Marie-Hélène's rejection of Zek. There is a

strong sense of pain in these lines, and also sentiments of resentment and anger.

Biologically, Marie-Hélène is a mother, but in all other ways she is not. She is too consumed within herself to be a good mother. Once the umbilical cord is cut, she is relieved to sever emotional ties with her children. Had they been Madou's children, though, Marie-Hélène would not have given up as easily on her offspring. There is a direct correlation between her lack of love for Zek, and the resulting lack of love she feels for her children.

Sia, through no fault of her own, is destined not to have a close relationship with her mother. She is Zek's daughter (although Madou has always wondered if indeed she was his), and as such will not be loved or cherished because of this. For Haigh, Sia will perceive her mother in almost exactly the same way that Marie-Hélène has perceived hers, as a silent solitary woman (Haigh 2001 p77). However, towards the end of the novel, when Marie-Hélène learns of Madou's death, it is Sia who rushes to her side. We witness here a dramatic turnaround in Sia's feelings towards her mother, a realisation that she does indeed love her mother very deeply. Marie-Hélène is lying in bed, crying bitterly over Madou's murder. Despite Zek's protests, Sia runs to her bedside, she, the only daughter to realise what this loss will mean for Marie-Hélène. The affair which Sia has guessed has become the basis for new-found intimacy between mother and daughter. As Marie-Hélène cries, Sia notes the silver streaks in her mother's hair, and the start of wrinkles on her forehead. It is an important moment of realisation for Sia, as she realises her mother is becoming older and, for the first time, senses Marie-Hélène's vulnerability and sensitivity:

Pendant que sa mère pleurait sans vergogne dans sa chemise de nuit froissée, ornée au col et aux poignets de deux rangs de dentelle, ce qui lui donnait l'air

d'une pensionnaire trop grandie, elle détaillait ces fils d'argent dans ses cheveux, ces premières rides sur son front, la chair un peu lâche de ses épaules et de son cou et ce léger affaissement de ses seins gonflés d'un lait qu'Elikia allait bientôt têter goulûment et elle comprenait que Marie-Hélène disait irrévocablement adieu à sa jeunesse, à la possibilité d'être séduite et de commettre des fautes, voire des crimes, de blesser les autres et soi-même.  
(pp208-209)

In this quote, Marie-Hélène's identity is defined through the eyes of Sia. For Haigh, this scene creates the impression of a mother-daughter relationship which has begun to heal, in a way which had been impossible for Marie-Hélène's relationship with her own mother (Haigh 2001 p82). There is certainly some sense of hope here that a new level of communication and empathy has opened up between Sia and her mother. Sam Haigh suggests that we are left with the impression of a daughter who is 'mothering' her mother, who is undertaking the responsibility of alleviating Marie-Hélène's sense of exile, of attempting to create a 'home' for her (Haigh 2001 p82). In this scene, one has the strong impression that Sia is at this moment, becoming a woman in her own right, capable of loving and comforting in a way which has proved very difficult for her mother. Although newly aware of her love and sympathy for her mother, she does not wish her own life to be a repeat of Marie-Hélène's, and it is as though she senses her mother lives in some kind of purgatory:

Les larmes vinrent aux yeux de Sia cependant qu'une prière qu'elle ne pouvait pas réprimer l'obsédait:

- Mon Dieu, je vous en prie, faites que ma vie ne ressemble pas à la sienne...  
(p209)

Madou's death will certainly impact Sia's life in the short-term. He had promised her a holiday in N'Daru to take her away, albeit briefly, from the mediocrity of Rihata, where she could consider future horizons for her life. This will not now be possible. However, Sia appears to be self-assured and in control, and these qualities will aid her as she makes decisions for her future. It may be hoped, that she will not bear her ancestors' guilt.

Moments of light and hope are rare in this novel, and Madou's death sees some of Sia's hope evaporate. This conjures up the notion that redemption from despair is something elusive, something which may appear to be in reach, but in reality, is unattainable. Elikia's birth is also evidence that redemption is unobtainable, and exists only for fleeting moments in an otherwise dark world. For a very brief moment in the novel, one might be led to believe that the arrival of Elikia, seventh child and firstborn son of Marie-Hélène and Zek, may pave the way for psychological rebirth and regeneration for this unhappy, discontented couple. For a few short hours, Zek is overcome with joy at the birth of the son for whom he has always secretly hoped, and resolves to change all ailing aspects of his life. In the maternity hospital, Marie-Hélène smiles at Zek in a way she has probably not smiled since coming to Africa, reminding him of his wife many years earlier, before her spiralling descent into unhappiness. "Un sourire qu'il ne lui avait pas connu depuis des années retroussa ses lèvres et d'un coup elle fut rajeunie de vingt ans" (p176). Zek names his child Elikia, realising only now how much he has desired a son: "Je t'appellerai Elikia, qui signifie Espérance, car je t'ai beaucoup attendu" (p177). The juxtaposition, however, of Madou's death with this moment of joy, is cleverly executed by Condé. The immense happiness experienced by Marie-Hélène and Zek at the birth of their son is cruelly



crushed by the shooting, and subsequent death of Madou. Moments of rapture are shortlived, and Africa, becomes once more, a place of darkness for Marie-Hélène. Elikia's name, is deeply ironic: for a short time, the notion of hope is resurrected, before being buried again, all too soon.

#### Alienation in Africa and in Guadeloupe: Constituents of Marie-Hélène's identity

Maryse Condé is but one of many Caribbean writers who has centred much of her writing on Africa. Many of the characters in her novels ponder the question whether or not Africa is the ultimate source of Caribbean origin, and whether or not a Caribbean individual will find self-knowledge and identity in a return to the original motherland. Mary Gallagher suggests *Une saison à Rihata* negates the notion that Africa is 'Home', or that it can provide a rehabilitating route to the ancestral past (Gallagher 2002 p229). Indeed, Condé does not paint a happy picture of Africa as a place where Marie-Hélène has found peace or self-knowledge. It is clear that she is deeply unhappy living in Rihata, and has never attempted to settle down among its inhabitants. The market woman and traders call her "Semela", Ngurka for 'the woman from over there'. Born in Guadeloupe, then a student in Paris, she left France following Delphine's suicide and agreed reluctantly to come to live in Africa with Zek, in search of some happiness or perhaps to forget the sins committed in Paris. At the time of this novel, she has already spent seventeen years in Africa, which has still failed to integrate her in any way. She stands out and is different from everyone else, is apart from all the other foreigners now living in Rihata:



Mais il s'inscrivait dans ses gestes, ses attitudes, ses réactions, toute une manière d'être qui déconcertait, intimidait, attirait selon les cas, et la singularisait aussi sûrement qu'une tache de naissance au milieu du front, un pied bot ou un membre estropié. (pp12-13)

She senses that people look at her as though she were handicapped. In their eyes, she feels grotesque, ugly, a monster. Only at night, when asleep, can she escape Rihata, her feelings of alienation, and her dull existence:

Marie-Hélène ouvrit ses yeux et ne sut pas où elle se trouvait. Chaque matin, cette chambre à la fois prétentieuse et minable avec ses commodes et ses coffres au vernis écaillé, ses tentures râpées et cette odeur de moisi que jamais le soleil ne chassait, lui paraissait étrangère. Heureusement, la nuit, ses rêves l'emportaient. Loin de Rihata. Loin de son existence bornée. (p23)

Marie-Hélène remembers arriving for the first time in Rihata, during the rainy season, and describes how all her hopes and energies had been washed away. Pregnant, this time with another daughter Adizua, she had questioned if this sleepy place would be her life from now on. She also recalls meeting neighbours who, greeting her politely, would keep their distance from her, excluding her from their life, from Africa. She wonders if these people realised how much she, and her generation had dreamed of Africa demanding independence. Here, she aligns herself completely with the natives of Rihata, as a black person sharing the same aspirations for Africa as those who live on the African continent. But she realises she is not the same as these people, they do not see her as African, and this increases her sense of alienation and loneliness:

Exclue ? Pourquoi ? Savaient-elles comme elle avait rêvé de l'Afrique quand toute sa génération réclamait l'indépendance comme un merveilleux gâteau d'anniversaire ? (p33)

There is a sense of bitter disappointment in the above quote, disappointment that Africa is not how she has perceived it to be. It is interesting to speculate on why exactly it is she feels excluded. In her younger, more militant days, Africa was a passionate project for her, and she finds it deeply distressing that Africa does not now welcome her with open arms. It is worth noting, though, that we have only Marie-Hélène's own perceptions of Africa, and indeed it is possible that Africa, and Africans, have been more welcoming than she has realised.

Marie-Hélène also recalls the reaction of Malan to his new daughter-in-law. Although she is black and West Indian, Malan considers her to be a white woman, unworthy of his son, and Zek, in his eyes, has betrayed the values with which he was raised. For Malan, there is no connection between Africa and Guadeloupe, and he refuses to acknowledge a shared identity or history. For Marie-Hélène, Malan's non-acceptance of her serves simply to increase her sense of non-belonging in Africa.

In reality, she is like a ship without a navigator, wandering aimlessly through life. Guadeloupe, her birthplace has not been a place of anchorage either for her. Marie-Hélène harbours deep regret at not being with her mother in Guadeloupe when she died, and since then, she has had no desire to return there:

Retourner à la Guadeloupe ne signifiait guère pour Marie-Hélène que retourner vers sa mère. L'île et la mère étaient la même chose, utérus clos dans

lequel blottir sa souffrance, yeux fermés, poings fermés, apaisée par la pulsation du sang. Mais la mère était morte. Alors la douleur de l'avoir perdue à jamais, de n'avoir même pas assisté à ses derniers moments, se changeait en haine de l'île, à présent stérile, matrice désertée qui n'envelopperait plus de fœtus. Restait l'Afrique, mère aussi, proche par l'espoir et l'imaginaire. (p77)

In these lines she draws a direct comparison between her mother and the island of Guadeloupe. Guadeloupe had meant one thing only for Marie-Hélène, she describes it as a womb into which she can retreat from the sufferings of life, a place of refuge and solace. However, her mother's death has made her sever all links with her birthplace. For her now, the island is meaningless since her mother is dead. She did not share Alix's final moments with her, and this causes her to hate her birthplace. It is entirely possible she will not revisit Guadeloupe during her own lifetime. It is interesting to note the direct comparison made by Marie-Hélène with her island birthplace vis-à-vis her mother. Unlike Tituba, for whom her motherland Barbados meant everything, Marie-Hélène clearly disassociates herself entirely from Guadeloupe. Her mother's presence in Guadeloupe is the only reason she aligns herself with her birthplace. Despite living there during childhood, she clearly does not seem to need to retain any links with it, and she does not allow the island constitute part of her complex identity.

Guadeloupe, which has been her own birthplace, and her mother's residence, has been a motherland, and mother figure to Marie-Hélène. However, her mother's death renders Guadeloupe a sterile place, and Africa takes the place of her new motherland, or surrogate mother. She expels all sentiments of her homeland once her mother is

dead, in the same way she had expelled her firstborn, Sia. It is ironic that she refers to Guadeloupe as sterile when at the same moment, she was pregnant with Sia.

For Morrison, “the hatred of the island is a danger sign, prefiguring Marie-Hélène’s malaise in Africa, whose womb will not embrace her” (Morrison 2001 p3). Morrison suggests that despite her longing for a new womb, Marie-Hélène takes to Africa a sense of difference and superiority which is translated, *inter alia*, in her uneasy relationship with her mother-in-law, Sokambi. She despises African customs and traditions, and refuses to allow them be meaningful in her life:

A ses yeux, toutes les manifestations de la vie communautaire africaine étaient privées de sens, vestiges mécaniques d’un passé dont rien ne subsistait. Elle s’y ennuyait à périr. On y récitait à chaque fois les mêmes salutations. On y poussait les mêmes exclamations. On y répétait les mêmes plaisanteries. On y faisait les mêmes gestes. Elle savait que son comportement ne choquait plus. Depuis tant d’années, on s’était habitué aux bizarreries de ‘l’étrangère’. (p192)

Whatever perceptions she has had about Africa, Marie-Hélène is vastly disappointed with the reality of this continent. She has followed Zek to Africa, to escape her own past. However, Africa has not provided any solutions for Marie-Hélène. For Ngate, what is immediately striking in *Une saison à Rihata*, is Marie-Hélène’s utter contempt for virtually all Africans, with the possible exception of Madou (Ngate 1986-1987 p12). It is possible, though, that it is their rejection of her, which makes her bitter. It is also likely that Africans feel rejected by Marie-Hélène, and sense her refusal to allow Africa become important in her life.

### Marie-Hélène's relationship with her parents

Though the novel does not focus much on Marie-Hélène's relationship with her parents, we know that she loved Alix, her mother, very much, and despised Siméon, her lawyer father. Alix came from an old family who had endowed Guadeloupe with a poet, and also with a senior ranking government official. Alix was a mulatto, and had been brought up to respect being a mulatto. Her marriage to Siméon, who never knew his father, was very black and coarse in manner, was frowned upon by all. Marie-Hélène, as a child, came to realise that no love existed between her father and this "femme silencieuse, solitaire" (p26). She certainly seems to look disdainfully at her father, who, although well-educated, was loud and vulgar, and sometimes spoke Creole instead of French when in court:

Non, c'était un nègre mal équilibré, un nègre à voix tonitruante, un nègre solidement planté sur ses pieds énormes, un nègre nègre quoi! Avocat de son métier, il alimentait le folklore local en histoires. On se racontait comment il coupait ses plaidoiries de digressions savoureuses, comment il lui arrivait d'apostropher les jurés en créole, en plein tribunal. (p26)

He preferred the company of his mistresses and friends to that of his family, and Marie-Hélène clearly despises him. She loves her mother all the more perhaps, because of her hatred for Siméon. Marie-Hélène is troubled because her father does not pretend to be anything other than who he is: a true black Guadeloupean, representative of the legacies of slavery and racial domination. For Morrison, it is

interesting that Marie-Hélène is on difficult terms with her father, and that she “becomes involved with an African male who might be seen as a projection of a need for a lineage unmarred by the humiliations of slavery and its aftermath of alienation” (Morrison 2001 p2). Her relationships with both Zek and Madou are possibly ways for her to attempt to construct an identity for herself which bypasses all reference to her black father, a descendant from slavery. Forming an alliance with an African male, untarnished by the legacy of slavery which touches all Caribbean males, may unconsciously allow her cut all ties with Siméon. Roots, and family ancestry are clearly very important to Marie-Hélène. She juxtaposes the strong family ancestors from which her mother descends, with those of her father, who never knew his own father, and whose mother sold black pudding in the market:

Sa mère à elle s'appelait Alix des Ruisseaux. Elle appartenait à une vieille famille qui avait donné à la Guadeloupe un poète dont les sonnets figuraient dans toutes les anthologies et un administrateur des colonies, reconverti préfet de l'Ardèche après les indépendances africaines [...]. Malheureusement, dans sa dix-huitième année, elle avait rencontré Siméon Montlouis, nègre bon teint dont la mère vendait du boudin au marché et qui, chose surprenante, parvenait à élever trois enfants grâce à ce commerce. Siméon qui ne savait pas qui était son père, n'était pas un de ces nègres à traits fins et belles manières qui, avec leurs origines, font oublier la couleur de leur peau. (pp25-26)

It is not difficult to sense the derision with which she describes her father, in comparison with the high level of esteem in which she holds her mother. It is possible Marie-Hélène carries her low opinion of her father into her marriage with Zek, whom



she, in some ways, despises. It is Madou, with his manners and active interest in politics, who impresses Marie-Hélène.

Alix has encouraged both her daughters to be capable of earning their own living. Years later, Marie-Hélène realises that she has failed her mother in this, as she does not complete her studies in Paris, and all hopes for her bright future are dashed. We see Marie-Hélène here in a depressed state of mind, and understand that she is still concerned with Alix's wishes, and that her mother had been of much influence to her:

Voilà pourquoi elle répétait qu'une femme doit être capable de gagner sa vie !  
Comme elle, Marie-Hélène, avait mal suivi cette leçon ! Deux années de  
Sciences-Po, un avenir brillant! Ensuite, plus rien ..." (p78)

There is a cyclical re-enactment of failure here passed down from mother to daughter. Alix, in marriage has not been content, and becomes a silent and solitary woman. Marie-Hélène, although strongly encouraged by her mother to study, and be financially independent, has not realised this goal of Alix's. Her hopes and ambitions are gone, and now vegetating in the house, she has become like her own mother, silent and solitary. It is quite possible that Marie-Hélène's failures in life could be attributed to deep-seated guilt at her sister's death. As much as she despises Zek, she may despise herself even more for the hurt she has brought upon her family. It will remain to be seen if Sia's fate will follow that of her mother and grandmother, although she has already wished, on her own account, that it should not be so.



## Conclusion

As we have seen, *Une saison à Rihata* is a complex novel, and highlights in particular the many facets to the character of Marie-Hélène. I believe Condé explores very well the varying levels of Marie-Hélène's identity as a Caribbean woman, deeply unhappy, and out of her depth in Africa. *Une saison à Rihata* is the story of a woman unable to cope well with life and its demands, and which paints a dreary picture of marriage, of motherhood and of homeland. Condé really seems to question the potential of a Caribbean woman finding happiness in a continent from which history has wrenched her. We are not left with a happy heroine, content with Africa, and all Africa has to offer. We are confronted instead, with a woman who has left the Caribbeans, and has left Europe, hoping to find peace and serenity in the continent of her ancestors.

Towards the end of the novel, Marie-Hélène has not found any sense of peace of mind or any enduring hope for happiness. Her grief for Madou is deeply felt. As we have seen, the final images of her are those of an inconsolable and deeply distressed woman, leaning now on Sia for love and support. Although she has a new baby to tend, her thoughts rest only on the man who might have helped her put down roots in Africa. Madou now dead, one realises Marie-Hélène will never feel at home here.

It does not seem likely that Marie-Hélène and Zek will ever find true happiness together. It seems more plausible that their relationship of mutual dependency will continue into the future together. And, although the obstacle of Madou has now been removed, there is no sense of hope that their lives will improve.

Marie-Hélène's identity is one bound with numerous complexities: sadness, regret, resentment, dependency, lack of fulfilment. Perhaps the most striking facet of her identity is characterised by the notion of pain, pain she seems to endure always, in response to the sad trajectories of her life. *Une saison à Rihata* is essentially a novel about failure, the failure of a troubled woman to find true happiness and to understand her identity. As the novel draws to a close, one is left with the enduring notion that contentment and self-fulfilment will always elude Marie-Hélène. Davis, in his commentary of Césaire's "*Nocturne d'une nostalgie*," suggests this poem "charts the dream course of a nostalgia for an African past" (Davis 1984 p128). Any hope of nostalgia that Marie-Hélène has harboured for Africa is cruelly dashed, however, and instead, we are confronted with the notion that Africa, surrogate mother to her Guadeloupean children, will never hold the key to happiness and identity.

## Community versus personal identity in *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

*Traversée de la Mangrove*, first published in 1989, is Condé's seventh novel, and, of the four novels explored in this thesis, is the only one set in its entirety in Guadeloupe.

Condé wrote the novel after returning to Guadeloupe following many years abroad.

Unlike much of her other writing, *Traversée de la Mangrove* devotes many passages to nature and the novel incorporates some striking descriptions of the Guadeloupean terrain. For Condé, this return to her native island renewed her appreciation for the natural landscape. She wanted to depict nature in the novel, and disputes criticism accusing her of practising exoticism (Pfaff 1996 p74).

What is most interesting about this novel, is that the concept of identity is explored in two very distinct ways. Condé presents us with an intriguing insight into communal identity in a small town in Guadeloupe. However, she also explores several individual characters' identities, and it is this juxtaposition of concepts of identity which make *Traversée de la Mangrove* a memorable novel.

The narrative, set in a town named Rivière au Sel, concerns itself with the discovery of a corpse, that of a man named Francis Sancher. Upon learning of Sancher's demise, the *habitants* organise a wake and all members of Rivière au Sel attend. The narrative structure of the novel is circular, with Condé devoting a chapter to each of the *habitants*, in which each reviews his/her relationship with the dead man. In all, nineteen differing narratives touch upon aspects of Francis Sancher's identity. For

Suk, “these pieces in aggregate do not form a fully coherent explanation of his death, but rather reveal a multiplicity of competing perspectives and meanings that contribute to an incomplete, contradictory, and fragmented story engendered from Sancher’s relation to each narrator” (Suk 2001 p156). Sancher, though not liked by many of the *habitants*, is nonetheless a catalyst in the novel, in that his death causes many of them to reflect upon themselves, and in some cases, to take steps to reform their lives. Through their interactions with the dead man, many of them learn much about themselves and about their individual identities.

The characters in *Rivière au Sel* are not presented as a homogeneous unit. Vast differences exist on the level of wealth, education, skin colour. Some of the *habitants* have travelled widely, others have never left the island. Some have been born in other countries and now live in this village. Some are ambitious, while others are content with the status quo, and live out their lives without harbouring any desire for change or difference. Many have had unhappy childhoods, others have been rejected by parents, and some have not found love in adulthood. For de Souza, “en refusant de situer son roman parmi des personnages uniquement guadeloupéens, parmi des personnages descendant en majorité d’esclaves, parmi les plus pauvres, Condé refuse de se conformer à une norme qui s’imposerait à tout écrivain désirant un label d’authenticité antillais” (de Souza 2000 p827). In this novel, Condé illustrates the rich diversity of Caribbean life in present-day Guadeloupe, and the numerous divisions which exist within this society.

In this chapter, I will ponder Francis Sancher’s complex identity, which is seen in contradictory terms through the eyes of differing individuals. I will then examine his

relationship with seven of the novel's characters and analyse what change, if any, he affects in their lives. The seven whom I have chosen, are those whom I believe best illustrate Sancher's character and identity. I will examine issues such as the justification for writing, and the significance of African heritage, in my analysis of some characters. Lastly, I will consider how a communal sense of identity is explored in the narrative. It is useful here to reiterate my definitions of identity, as discussed in the introduction. Personal identity, for the purposes of my thesis, denotes an examination of one's "lineage, family status and place of birth or residence"(Smith 1995 p130). As we will see in this chapter, Francis Sancher is compelled to interrogate his lineage, which he blames for much of the unhappiness in his own life. Collective cultural identity denotes the idea that an individual may gravitate towards a shared "sameness" or unity with others, where this "sameness" incorporates cultural aspects such as traditions, values or superstitions. The very fact that the novel centres around a wake, is important, as one experiences firsthand, the cultural rituals and ceremonies which take place in a small Guadeloupean village following a death. And as will be examined, Condé paints a very clear and poignant picture of her fellow Guadeloupeans, through a collective exploration of them. Before beginning, however, I will look at the essence of the title Condé has chosen for this novel.

#### "Traversée de la Mangrove"

The word "traversée" is significant, it denotes a crossing, or traversing, but it is a 'work-in-progress', it is unfinished and incomplete. Metaphorically, a mangrove signals entanglement, the entanglement of roots. It may be impossible to find "which roots belong to which tree" and hence the notion of origin is called into question

(Hayes 1998 p459). Francis Sancher has wandered all over the world, yet it has proved impossible for him to put down roots anywhere. He is as rootless in Guadeloupe, as anywhere else he has been. The novel's title signals something which is impossible, one cannot cross a mangrove. As Vilma, Sancher's lover, declares:

On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s'empale sur les racines des palétuviers.

On s'enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre (p192).

If crossing a mangrove is symbolic of finding one's identity, then the novel's title would seem to suggest that this is indeed an impossible task. In relation to this novel, the task of searching for and finding one's identity is specifically in regard to Guadeloupe. As I have already stated, this novel takes place entirely in Guadeloupe, and is a study about a small collective of individuals attempting to make sense of their selves. Francis Sancher is the meeting point upon which they all converge, and the catalyst for change in their lives.

#### Francis Sancher – an exploration of identity

If we operate on the hypothesis that identity is never fixed, never static, then Francis Sancher is an excellent example of such a model. From a narrative viewpoint, Sancher is already dead when the novel begins, and therefore cannot speak for himself. During the course of the narrative, we will hear many things expressed about him by others, but he himself is now silenced. Also, Condé does not privilege any one character with a complete analysis of his identity, but entrusts instead, small facets of his character, positive or negative, to individual *habitants*. In so doing, the reader grapples with



many contrasting and conflicting elements of Sancher's identity, all recounted from the biased perspective of a particular character. At the end of the novel, we have not found all the jigsaw pieces which constitute his identity. For some, he has represented great hope or has been a source of compassion and kindness, for others, he is evil and merciless. For others again, he is a compound of both good and bad, of both strength and vulnerability. What alone is certain, is that Sancher's identity is enigmatic, a combination of possibilities and probabilities. However, the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the novel's narratives ensures we will never understand the entirety of Sancher's identity.

From the outset, Francis Sancher is shrouded in mystery and obscurity, and in this small town, rumours abound about every aspect of his life. As he is not immediately forthcoming about his past, speculation is rife about this outsider, in a place where, being from elsewhere, is treated with suspicion and distrust:

Les histoires les plus folles se mirent à circuler. En réalité, Francis Sancher aurait tué un homme dans son pays et aurait empoché son magot. Ce serait un trafiquant de drogue dure, un de ceux que la police, postée à Marie-Galante, recherchait en vain. Un trafiquant d'armes ravitaillant les guérillas de l'Amérique latine. Personne n'apportant la moindre preuve à ces accusations, les esprits s'enfiévrèrent. (pp38-39)

Sancher's position as outsider to the community of Rivière au Sel is important in terms of a self/other theory. As he does not appear unduly concerned about what others may think or know of him, he demonstrates that he has a strong sense of his



own self, and his own identity. For Mischel, “my sense of myself as an individual who can take a personal stand – who can engage in ‘strong evaluation’ and decide, in opposition to the social surround, what is really significant for me – is thus a developmental achievement” (Mischel 1977 p22). As we will see in this chapter, Sancher is a character who is not afraid of others’ opinions, “who can engage in ‘strong evaluation’ ”(idem), and goes about his own life without undue regard for how others may see him.

His name is a source of intrigue. He wishes to be called Francis Sancher in Guadeloupe, but also accepts letters addressed to Francisco Alvarez Sanchez. Much has been documented on the possible deconstructions of the surname Sancher. Larrier provides several interpretations of play on “Sancher”, among the most interesting “sans chair” depicting him as a ghostly character, or “cent chairs”, as though he is a derivative of countless bloodlines and cultures (Larrier 1998 p91). Larrier also suggests the division of the name “Sancher” “into two syllables, /sā/ produces “sang,” “sans” and “cent.” “Cher” /ʎeR/ is a homonym of “chair” and “chaire” (ibid). Therefore, if we combine both syllables, there are numerous possible interpretations of Sancher’s name, indicating how his identity is indeterminable, and resistant to being fixed. His alternative hispanic surname, “Sanchez”, may denote his “sans chez” status, and the fact that he is nomadic, and has travelled widely. One name is French-sounding, the other Spanish, but both position him in relation to the American colonial past. Possibly, for the *habitants* of Rivière au Sel, most intriguing about Sancher is the fact that he is wealthy, possesses a trunk filled with American dollars, and does not work. On an island where manual labour is the norm, Sancher produces a typewriter and declares he is a writer.

Sancher tells several characters in the novel that he is haunted by a curse, which befalls all men in his family. His direct patriarchal ancestors have all died mysteriously around the age of fifty, and Sancher is convinced his death is but a short time away. During the narrative, he relays varying details of his life to several characters, *inter alia*, his descent from the *Béké* class, and his unflinching belief that he will be held accountable for the sins of his exploiter ancestors. He has travelled all over the world in an attempt to rid himself of his “original sin”, of his white, colonial background, and has engaged in revolutions of every kind in a bid to be purified, forgiven and, perhaps, reborn. However, he acknowledges that rebirth is unattainable and that, once born, one can never retrace one’s steps to the womb:

C’est impossible. On ne re-naît jamais. On ne sort jamais deux fois du ventre de sa mère. On ne peut pas lui dire: “Ça n’a pas marché, reprends-moi, fœtus!” Une fois qu’on est debout sur ses deux pieds, on doit marcher jusqu’au bout, jusqu’à la tombe. (p155)

Resigned to a fate similar to his male forefathers, Sancher has come to Guadeloupe, which is where he believes his family’s history begins. He has come full circle, therefore, back to the origin of unspeakable crimes committed in his family’s name. He believes his approaching death will eradicate the curse which has befallen his family.

Sancher’s death is perhaps a necessary evil in the course of the narrative. Although he dies, the indelible impressions he leaves on some of the characters,

propel them towards new life, and potential rebirth. For Suk, “the familiar Christian themes of original sin, martyrdom, and redemption render Sancher a Christlike figure” (Suk 2001 p168). Redemption is the element of hope in this novel, and Sancher, will figuratively, open doors for some of the *habitants* of Rivière au Sel.

### Sancher’s relationship with Moïse

I have chosen to analyse Sancher’s friendship with Moïse, the village postman, because we probably learn more about Sancher in the chapter with Moïse, than in any other chapter in the novel. As I will examine later on, there are several characters in the narrative who decide consciously to change their lives following Sancher’s death. Moïse, who arguably knew Sancher better than most, is not, however, among these. Moïse’s recollection of his knowledge of the deceased begins with “Je suis le premier qui ait connu son vrai nom” (p29). Sancher, upon first meeting the postman, explains impatiently that letters bearing his other name, Francisco Alvarez-Sanchez, may arrive, and are intended for him. Moïse clearly feels privileged that he has learnt Sancher’s other name before anyone else. The issue of naming is an important concept in all post-colonial narratives, as a signifier of identity, something stripped from slaves centuries ago, and will be revisited later in the chapter.

As a character, Moïse is depicted in pitiful terms. Half black, he is also half Chinese due to his Chinese mother, Shawn. From an early age he has been considered ugly, was unpopular at school, and this unpopularity and dislike have followed him into adulthood. His meeting and subsequent friendship with the worldly Sancher is, from his perspective, an enormous opportunity to bring some happiness and self-

fulfilment into his empty life. The friendship is, however, one of unequals, that of a wealthy, much travelled man who cares little for others' opinions of him, pitted against Moïse, who is weak, eager to be liked, and feels inferior to others. It is Moïse who, craving company and kindness, offers to help Sancher rebuild his reputedly haunted house. For a while, these two unlikely friends spend much time in each other's company, and Moïse, temporarily, finds some happiness in his until-now lonely life.

Moïse's initial meeting with Sancher is significant. Upon his postal route, he encounters this strong, well-built man, walking down the road trailing a heavy trunk. Normally shy and lacking in confidence, Moïse is brave enough to stop and ask this stranger where he is going, thanks to a few glasses of rum earlier. Alcohol plays a role therefore in this initial meeting, and, for Moïse, masks the reality of his own self-perception. He becomes bolder and braver, whereas sober, Moïse would probably have driven on. When asked in Creole where he is going, Sancher's incomprehension sets the scene for the mystery he embodies. He is not from Guadeloupe, and therefore Moïse's initial perceptions of him are as a foreigner, an outsider, and not belonging to this close-knit community. When Sancher informs him that he is moving into the Alexis property where no one else will dare live, Moïse decides he has met a fearless man, who has encountered worse spirits than those in the Alexis house. However, Moïse soon discovers that Sancher is not the fearless man he thought he was. The first night they sleep in the same house, Moïse is awakened by shrieks and screams, and seeing Sancher, realises the mental anguish experienced by his new friend. Sancher is plagued by a curse, a sin of such immense proportions he cannot sleep soundly at night. Moïse finds him shouting, terrified, demented:

Toi, tu crois que nous naissons le jour où nous naissons ? Où nous atterrissons, gluants, les yeux bandés, entre les mains d'une sage-femme ? Moi, je te dis que nous naissons bien avant cela. A peine la première gorgée d'air avalée, nous sommes déjà comptables de tous les péchés originels, de tous les péchés par action et par omission, de tous les péchés véniels et mortels, commis par des hommes et des femmes retournés depuis longtemps en poussière, mais qui laissent leurs crimes intacts en nous. J'ai cru que je pouvais échapper à la punition ! Je n'y suis pas arrivé ! (pp41-42)

We begin to glimpse the complexities of Francis Sancher, and the fact that despite outward appearances, he is deeply troubled and guilt-ridden. For him, birth is clearly not a new beginning, but a realisation that one is burdened by the sins of others, long since dead. *Sancher's torment brings to light an important aspect of the novel, namely, the significance of ancestors and of one's roots. Sancher is troubled by the crimes of his ancestors, and believes he is tainted by them. I will examine this important issue later in the chapter.*

For Moïse, as aforesaid, Sancher is not what he seems, and Moïse's initial perceptions of him are changed. He attempts to help Sancher, asking if they can discuss the latter's nightmares, but Sancher refutes his kindness, and dismisses him roughly. Though Moïse will attempt to assume some worldliness, and discusses his own trip to America, Sancher is hurtful and dismisses him completely. Although on one hand he freely accepts help from Moïse to repair his house, he will not accept

psychological help from the postman and, in this way, excludes him from any intellectual involvement in his life.

At the wake, Moïse ponders his future. His many conversations with Sancher, before the end of their friendship, have left an impression on him, yet he is undecided as to what he should do. Clearly, Sancher's death has made him question what direction his life should now take, but if he believes Sancher, nowhere on earth is free from unhappiness or disillusion. He is afraid to leave Rivière au Sel, but, equally, he is terrified to stay. His narrative ends with the impression that nothing will change for him and, that he will "finir ses jours, solitaire comme un mâle crabe dans son trou" (p48).

#### Sancher's relationship with Mira

In the novel, Francis Sancher has three lovers, Mira and Vilma, both of whom he unwillingly impregnates, and Mira's mother, Dinah. Mira Lameaulnes is the daughter of Loulou, a rich nursery owner in Rivière au Sel. Mira is his illegitimate daughter, whose eighteen- year old mother, Rosalie, died while giving birth to her. She has spent her twenty-five years mourning the loss of a mother she never knew, and spends much of her time alone. Mira despises her father and, in an attempt to injure him, has had a love affair with her half-brother Aristide.

While Condé has devoted one chapter per character to each of the other individuals in the novel, she allows Mira to tell her story over two separate chapters, one coming at



the beginning of the novel, and the other towards the end. Condé obviously considers Mira to be more significant in Sancher's life than all others in the novel. At the end of the first section devoted to her, Mira has not reached any conclusions about what direction her life might take. It is only in the second chapter that Mira realises what steps she must take in her future life.

The first encounter between Mira and Sancher is significant because we learn much about both characters. Mira habitually swims alone in the gully near her home each evening. It is a place of complete quiet and solitude, and it is her secret refuge from a life she hates. She is most surprised, therefore, to come across Sancher in this place one evening, and supposes he has purposely sought her out:

C'est mon domaine à moi, à moi seule. Les gens ordinaires les redoutent, croyant que c'est le repaire des esprits. Aussi, on n'y rencontre jamais personne. C'est pourquoi quand j'ai buté sur son corps, invisible dans la noirceur comme un cheval à diable, j'ai cru que pareil à moi, il était bien venu pour moi. (p50)

The words "pareil à moi" are most significant, as they demonstrate how Mira sees Sancher, as perhaps her male equivalent. In the above quote, there is a sense of equality, of uniformity, and it is as if two lost people have suddenly found each other. But Sancher is not looking for Mira, nor for any woman. He believes death is waiting for him at any moment and, for him, Mira is possibly a personification of death. Like Moïse, whose initial impression of Sancher changes after witnessing his nightly

torments, Mira's first encounter with Sancher exemplifies, for both her and the reader, his extreme weakness and vulnerability:

J'ai déboutonné sa chemise de gros bleu, défait sa dure ceinture de cuir. Il n'a pas soufflé un mot. On aurait dit un enfant devant une grande personne. Nous avons fait l'amour sur le terreau au pied des fougères arborescentes. Il s'est laissé faire, non pas rétif, mais à l'affût de chacun de mes gestes, comme s'il croyait qu'ils cachaient des coups mortels. (pp55-56)

Once more, outward appearances are not necessarily true, and Mira, like Moïse, occupies, albeit briefly, the dominant position vis-à-vis Sancher. Sancher, however, cannot allow himself become entangled in any love affair, even with someone as beautiful and sought-after as Mira. Convinced he has a date with death, he does not encourage an affair with her. It is she who will initiate it later, subverting the traditional model of male pursuit and female submission.

In the second, shorter chapter devoted to her, Mira discusses Quentin, her son, of whom Sancher is the father. She acknowledges that while she will never know the identity of Francis Sancher, her son will however demand to find out about him. She imagines differing and biased answers which Quentin will receive when querying the identity of his father:

Les uns lui diront:

Aïe, c'était un vagabond qui est venu enterrer sa pourriture chez nous ! On ne sait même pas si c'était un Blanc, un Nègre, un Zindien. Il avait tous les sangs dans son corps !

Les autres:

C'était un fou qui déparlait, déparlait !

D'autres encore:

C'était un maléficier qui a kimbwazé deux de nos plus belles jeunesses ! Un rien-du-tout, je te dis ! (p229)

So Sancher, according to Mira, is enigmatic, an eternal mystery man. There can be no consensus as to his identity, only conflicting viewpoints, grounded in personal bias. However, unlike Moïse, who does not seem likely to change any aspect of his life, Mira emerges as a strong and determined young woman. She proclaims that she must discover the truth behind the image of a man she loved deeply:

Et, au jour d'aujourd'hui, je ne sais rien. Alors, moi, je dois découvrir la vérité. Désormais ma vie ne sera qu'une quête. Je retracerai les chemins du monde. (pp230-231)

She reflects that her father and Aristide will expect her to be submissive, and believe her life will resume its former banality. However:

Il n'en sera rien. Ils se trompent les uns et les autres. Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort. (p231)

Mira is firm in her resolve to discover Francis Sancher's true identity. What is not revealed or even hinted at, is whether she will succeed in her quest. Nonetheless, what is significant here, is not success or failure, but her determination that what she is embarking on is life-changing for her. In searching for her former lover's identity, she has discovered a purpose in her own life.

### Sancher's relationship with Dinah

Dinah, second wife of Loulou, the nursery owner, and stepmother to his four children, opens her narrative with a song sung by Lina, her late mother, a song about the futility of loving a man. Lina's story, like that of many women in Condé's writing, is the story of hopes dashed, of a bright young woman sent abroad to study, only to become pregnant, return home and marry a man "qui la fit beaucoup souffrir" (p102). As Vidal remarks, "the theme of the propagation of female suffering [...] is established" (Vidal 2001 p233). Dinah is indeed a woman who has suffered. Ignoring Lina's advice and marrying Loulou, she has soon learned to regret her actions as she slowly withers in a loveless marriage with stepchildren who reject her efforts of kindness. Loulou ignores her, and for years now does not sleep in her bed, preferring instead to take sexual pleasure with one of his maids or with other women. In his eyes, she is invisible. Arriving initially in Rivière au Sel, Dinah had wanted fervently to work in the nurseries. Loulou's refusal of her request, propels her into an existence of loneliness, boredom and lack of direction. Dinah was born in Saint-Martin, and the

fact that she is from elsewhere encourages the *habitants* to perceive her in terms of being a foreigner, similar to the way they view Sancher. This lack of trust in the foreign, the unknown, will be discussed further in my section on collective cultural identity. The lack of welcome she receives in Rivière au Sel is reminiscent of Marie-Hélène's feelings of being an outsider in *Une saison à Rihata*. Even Dinah's house is not a source of comfort or shelter. She describes it instead, in terms of being suffocated, of its having drained her of her youth:

Je suis donc restée chez moi, avec mes servantes, mes enfants et, peu à peu, cette maison de bois à la lisière de la forêt dense, sans lumière, sans soleil, paradis pluvieux des lianes à chasseur et des siguines, est devenue ma prison, mon tombeau. Ma jeunesse s'enfuyait. Par moments, il me semblait que j'étais déjà morte, que mon sang ne coulait plus chaud dans mes veines, qu'il était déjà caillé. (pp103-104)

It is against this background of unhappiness and lack of self-fulfilment that Dinah meets Sancher. In contrast with many of the other characters who meet him accidentally while going about their normal activities, Dinah's first encounter with Sancher is the result of her own curiosity: "À la fin, la curiosité m'a prise et je suis allée voir à quoi il ressemblait, celui qui mettait Rivière au Sel en ébullition" (p105). Dinah's description of Sancher is significant. Unlike her stepdaughter Mira, and Vilma, a young girl of Indian origin, she describes Sancher in strong sexual terms, possibly releasing her own pent-up emotions:

Malgré la fraîcheur du serein, il était torse nu et on voyait le dessin dur de ses pectoraux au-dessus de la forêt de ses poils noirs comme l'encre qui contrastaient avec ses cheveux gris. Ses bras étaient de deux couleurs. Presque noirs à partir du coude. Dorés au-dessus. Malgré moi, j'ai pensé : Bon Dieu ! Avoir ce morceau d'homme nuit après nuit dans son lit ! (p105)

Dinah tells us that it is Sancher who comes to her night after night, allowing her to forget Loulou and the misery of her daily life. However, her conscience troubles her, as she reveals she considers she is to blame for the unhappiness now present in Mira's life. Dinah is presented in opposing terms of good and bad here. Aware of Mira's incestuous relationship with Aristide, she has prayed her stepdaughter would find another man "pour la délivrer de sa geôle" (p107). However, she is not prepared for her prayers to be answered by Mira's taking Sancher from her:

Pourquoi fallait-il qu'elle me prenne Francis Sancher ? Qu'elle me prenne justement l'homme qui arrosait mon désert ? (p107)

It is interesting to note that Dinah blames Mira, and not Sancher, for the termination of their affair. She does not stop to consider that Sancher might have exercised free will and chosen her over her step-daughter. Praying that the affair between Sancher and Mira will end, she is overcome with guilt when it actually does, and believes she is directly to blame.

In his affair with Dinah, Sancher displays a different side to his identity. If we are to believe Dinah's narrative, he is loving and affectionate towards her, is a



confidante, and wishes to empower her. She confides in him, asking his opinion of why her marriage has not been successful. Here, Sancher identifies himself with all other men, denouncing their treatment of women, acknowledging the fact that the destiny of all women is the same, and encouraging her to leave Loulou and make a new life for herself:

Petite enfant du Bon Dieu, c'est ainsi que nous sommes, nous autres hommes !  
Ni la peau, ni les cheveux n'y font quoi que ce soit. Les Blanches en  
métropole souffrent pareillement. C'est le lot des femmes tout simplement.  
Nous sommes nés bourreaux. Mais tu es encore jeune et belle. Pourquoi  
restes-tu à l'attache ? Pourquoi ne t'en vas-tu pas ? (p106)

Sancher encourages her to leave, but importantly, he does not offer her a place in his life. Dinah's admiration of Sancher ceases when she learns how he attempts to abort Mira's child. However, it makes her realise more than ever that men are all similar, and she once again questions why women accept this destiny. Upon learning that Vilma is now living with Sancher, Dinah decides to renew her own life. Like Mira, who is resolute in her quest in life, we see Dinah, determined to start afresh, although the future is unclear:

Moi, ma résolution est prise. Je quitterai Loulou et Rivière au Sel. Je prendrai  
mes garçons avec moi. Je chercherai le soleil et l'air et la lumière pour ce qui  
me reste d'années à vivre.  
Où les trouverai-je ? Je n'en sais encore rien. Ce que je sais, c'est que je les  
chercherai ! (p109)

The imagery of sun, air and light in this above quote is the antithesis of Dinah's former suffocating life. Although she is not sure how she will go about effecting change, her mind is made up. We see her here as a strong woman. Although she now despises Sancher, her initial feelings for him have served her well. Like Mira, whose life will change because of her lover, Dinah embraces a new life, and a new vision for her and her sons. Sancher can be seen as a catalyst for both of these women. His interactions with them, and their strong feelings for him, see their lives transformed in ways which may never have been, had he not arrived in Rivière au Sel.

#### Sancher's relationship with Rosa and Vilma

Rosa is Vilma's mother and she is presented in very similar terms to Dinah. Both have been married to men of their families' choice, rather than marrying for love. Each is married to a wealthy man, and each feels unloved by her husband and left out of her childrens' lives. Rosa has born her husband Sylvestre three sons and delights when her fourth born child, Shireen, is a daughter. This new-born baby redeems her mother, and Rosa, for the first time since her marriage, feels great joy and happiness.

Shireen's untimely death, however, at three months leaves Rosa inconsolable, and following the conception of her fifth child, Vilma, she is overcome with hate for this new life. In a passage reminiscent of Marie-Hélène's description of her pregnancy with Sia in *Une saison à Rihata*, Rosa describes her baby as a parasite, and expresses her need to expel this being within her:

Au bout de quelques semaines, j'ai senti un autre enfant qui remuait dans l'ombre de mon ventre. Mais je n'en voulais pas de sa fille. J'aurais voulu l'expulser avant son temps. Or, je la sentais accrochée à mes parois, parasite, vorace, se nourrissant malgré moi de ma chair et de mon sang. J'ai dû porter ma croix jusqu'au bout, pendant neuf interminables mois au bout desquels elle est apparue, pareille à son père et à ses frères, tellement différente de ma Shireen. (p166)

Rosa deeply begrudges the fact that her beloved Shireen died, while Vilma lived. She is honest in her narrative, and similarly to Dinah, blames herself for the fact that her daughter left to live with Sanher. The theme of ancestry is highlighted again here. For Dinah, "car, il ne faut pas chercher, le malheur des enfants est toujours causé pas les parents" (p166). In this sentence, she acknowledges the fact that parents bring about the unhappiness of their children. She sees Vilma's desertion from the family home as a direct consequence of the lack of love she has experienced from her. In her one conversation with Francis Sanher, Rosa is amazed by the topic which he introduces, his mother's lack of love for him:

Ma mère, j'imagine, a les cheveux tout blancs alors que je les lui ai connus noirs et brillants comme les vôtres. Elle ne m'a jamais beaucoup aimé.  
Qu'importe, c'est ma mère, la seule que j'aurai jamais ! (p169)

Sanher acknowledges the absence of maternal love in his life, but then excuses it, explaining, almost cynically, how his mother could never have loved him:

Vous voyez, mon père n'a épousé ma mère que parce qu'elle était la fille d'un des plus riches cafeiteros. Je suis sûr, sans vouloir vous dérespecter, loin de là, qu'il lui faisait l'amour sans lui parler. Difficile d'aimer les enfants nés dans ces conditions-là. Pour donner, pour rendre l'amour, il faut en avoir reçu beaucoup, beaucoup ! (p169)

As with Dinah, Rosa perceives a deep level of understanding between herself and Sancher. She identifies completely with what he is saying, as if her own problems with Vilma stem from the fact that she considers herself unloved by her family, by a father who married her off without consideration for her feelings, or by a husband who does not love or care for her, only for their sons. As with the other characters whose stories we have examined so far, Sancher touches on an issue close to Rosa's heart, this absence of love in her life. In a striking description, she compares life's difficulties to trees, and the metaphor of the entanglement of roots recaps the idea of the impenetrability of the mangrove, where one can never discover the original roots, where truth, perhaps, is hidden forever:

Les problèmes de la vie, c'est comme les arbres. On voit le tronc, on voit les branches et les feuilles. Mais on ne voit pas les racines, cachées dans le fin fond de la terre. Or ce qu'il faudrait connaître, c'est leur forme, leur nature, jusqu'où elles s'enfoncent pour chercher l'eau, le terreau gras. Alors peut-être, on comprendrait. (p170)

Rosa's description of trees may be likened to the human self, what part of oneself is exposed for all to see, and what part one keeps hidden, concealed from public view. It

is ironic, perhaps, that it is Sancher, a virtual stranger to Rosa, who manages to perceive roots in her, which she manages to hide from all others. At the end of her narrative, she decides to try and repair her relationship with the daughter she has never loved. Her conversation with Sancher clarifies her own feelings, and makes her aware of this important duty in her life.

In her narrative, Vilma's description of her mother, is striking. She refers to her mother solely employing the pronoun "elle", as if Rosa is not worthy of being called "ma mère". The first lines, which detail aspects of Vilma's childhood, leave the reader in no doubt as to the absence of maternal love in her life:

Elle ne m'a jamais tenu la main. Quand elle me savonnait, nue sous le soleil, sa paume était sans douceur. Du temps où elle me conduisait à l'école, elle marchait à trois pas devant moi et je fixais sa tresse noire roulée en un chignon transpercé par une longue épingle d'écaille, son dos aveugle sous l'indienne de ces robes noires qu'elle portait chaque jour que le Bon Dieu fait, dans le deuil de ma sœur Shireen. Shireen, morte à trois mois, étouffée par les vers qui avaient remonté jusqu'à sa bouche. Je n'ai jamais eu de place dans son cœur.

(p186)

Rosa's earlier admission that Vilma is no substitute for her beloved Shireen, is reinforced by Vilma's own description of her childhood. The feelings of extreme loneliness and isolation experienced by the young Vilma are most evident in the above citation. Vilma has one refuge, however, reading, and she signals its importance in her life: "Moi, je n'avais personne. Je n'avais rien. Que mes livres."

(p186). The theme of the significance of education, and in this case, education for women, is highlighted here. Vilma is intelligent and is very happy at school. However, this one solace is taken away brusquely when Sylvestre, displaying patriarchal authority, announces suddenly that she will not be returning to school. She despises her mother who lies unconvincingly in her eyes, in her attempt to persuade Vilma to follow her father's wishes:

Ecoute! Ton papa sait ce qu'il fait. Une femme, c'est comme un oranger ou un pied de letchis. C'est fait pour porter ! Tu verras comme tu seras contente quand ton ventre poussera lourd devant toi et que ton enfant remuera pressé de venir se chauffer au soleil de la terre. Ses yeux démentaient ses paroles. On sentait qu'elle n'y croyait pas, qu'elle récitait une leçon ! (p188)

Condé demonstrates here the deep irony in Rosa's empty words. She wishes her daughter to enter into an arranged marriage, as she herself has so unhappily done. However, what is much more poignant is her description of the fulfilment of pregnancy, something which, with the exception of her gestation with Shireen, has not filled her with deep contentment. Although Rosa does not love Sylvestre, and readily acknowledges how little she means in his eyes, she is nonetheless completely capable of sacrificing her only daughter to a life destined to be as unhappy as her own has been. There is an emphasis on the importance of tradition coupled with ancestry here, and Rosa draws on the family's Indian background to convince her daughter of her duties:



Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire: "Je ne l'aime pas" ? Est-ce que tu crois que j'aimais ton papa quand je me suis mariée avec lui ? Et en Inde, dans notre pays, est-ce que tu ne sais pas que mari et femme ne se connaissaient pas jusqu'au moment où ils se couchaient dans le même lit, sous le même drap ? (pp188-189)

Although Vilma's family, the Ramarsans, have all been born in Guadeloupe, their culture ties them inextricably to their Indian heritage. Gallagher points to the "deliberate or strategic displacements that can block or disrupt the transmission of memory, filiation, and identity" (Gallagher 2002 p101-102). Vilma and her family have been displaced from India and suffer the consequences of living in another place, where access to an original identity and culture is henceforth denied them. The mangrove is a metaphor here for the entanglement of hidden perceptions and obvious traditions, all of which contradict each other. Tradition is ultimately more important than personal desire, and Vilma, though living all her life in this French *département*, cannot escape what is expected of her. Rosa is a traditionalist and will do all in her power to convince her daughter to heed tradition. Vilma, however, resists her cultural and ancestral entrapments and shows herself to be a modern woman, not swayed by others' expectancies of her: "Des enfants ! Cela ne m'intéresse pas, je n'ai pas envie de me marier" ! (p188). Though the text does not indicate it, I believe it is possible that, as in other Condé characters, Vilma's deep interest in education and books have enlightened her, and make her aware of other possibilities for her future, not necessarily aligned with traditional patriarchy. For Patrick Ffrench, Francis Sancher's death "is the death of the past", and "the death of a community whose roots are in the past, a revelation of these roots and a severing of them" (Ffrench 1997 p101). It is

significant that Vilma acknowledges how she might sever roots with what is expected of her before Sanher actually dies. She personally, has not needed his death to bring about her realisation of what broader possibilities might lie in store for her. It is perhaps all the more ironic that she will become pregnant in the novel and will follow along traditional matriarchal lines.

Vilma explains that she leaves home and goes to Sanher's house as she is very upset at how Rosa allows herself be treated by Sylvestre:

Je sentais quelque chose qui bouillonnait en moi: la colère, la révolte. A quoi ça sert une mère, si ce n'est à faire rempart contre l'égoïsme et la cruauté des pères ? Mais pour celle-là, il n'y avait que Shireen, Shireen. Moi, on pouvait me vendre comme un dernier lot d'icahques au marché, cela lui était bien égal. Il fallait que je lui fasse honte, que je lui fasse mal, que je me venge. Mais comment ? Alors, le vent m'a soufflé cette idée-là avec son grand rire dément. C'est lui ! C'est lui, le coupable ! (p191)

The extreme lack of maternal love in her life wells up before her. She is consumed with one thing only, to avenge the absence of such love, and hurt the mother who has caused her so much pain. It is in such a mindset that Vilma leaves home and offers herself to Sanher. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that this lonely and rejected young woman will run to a man who has also suffered much, due to the absence in his life also of maternal love.

Her pregnancy, with his child, causes Sancher much sorrow. Vilma loves this man, but he will never return her love and is consumed only with his impending death. Upon Sancher's demise, Vilma is still pregnant, and Sancher will never see their child. Unlike Mira, who sees new possibilities in her future, Vilma wishes that she could be buried with this man. She does not foresee changes in her life ahead. Hope for her is possible only, perhaps, through a new relationship with her mother. The fact, though, that Vilma may find new meaning in her future relationship with Rosa is evidence of some form of progression in her life. One may presume that all is not lost for her.

#### Sancher, Lucien, and the justification for writing

Lucien Evariste, who had been raised in a religious family with strong patriotic sympathies for France, upsets his parents deeply by becoming both an atheist and a revolutionary, while a student in Paris. He is known in the novel as "L'Ecrivain" although to date he has not written anything. Lucien, having returned to Guadeloupe after his studies in France, is impatient with his island which has not progressed in terms of gaining independence. He is idealistic, following his *séjour* in the metropolis:

Lucien était heureux d'être revenu au pays, sitôt terminée sa maîtrise. Plus souvent qu'à son tour, c'est vrai, un poignant regret le prenait de la torpeur de cette terre stérile qui ne parvenait pas à accoucher de sa Révolution. Ah, être né ailleurs ! Au Chili ! En Argentine ! Ou tout simplement à un jet de pierre, à Cuba ! Vaincre ou mourir pour la liberté ! (p217)

Upon learning that Sancher is reportedly Cuban, and moreover a writer, Lucien hastens to make his acquaintance. He has had ambitions to be a writer himself. The thought that he might be able to discuss style or narrative technique with a writer living in Rivière au Sel, fills him with intense excitement. Particularly, because “en temps normal, pareilles discussions étaient impossibles, les quelques écrivains guadeloupéens passant le plus clair de leur temps à pérorer sur la culture antillaise à Los Angeles ou à Berkeley” (p219). Lucien makes the interesting, and perhaps valid, point here that any successful writers from Guadeloupe are not to be found there but, instead, lecture in America. It is possible to infer criticism on Condé’s part here, about a “brain drain”, or intellectual desertion by the island’s writing elite, to leave Guadeloupe for countries offering superior career advancement. It is writers who, through their work, provide analysis and theories on collective identity in Guadeloupe. If they leave the island, perhaps their contribution to the debate on collective identity becomes less meaningful.

Lucien’s first meeting with Sancher is significant. Lucien arrives, nervously, to meet this man in whom he is very interested. Sancher, very quickly, dispels the illusions Lucien has had of him. However, he is very kind and open to the younger man:

Tu as frappé à la mauvaise porte, petit. Permets que je t’appelle comme ça. Moi que tu vois devant toi, je ne saurais te parler que d’hommes et de femmes mis en terre avec la même envie de vivre interrompue. Net. Pas de combats glorieux ! Et puis, ceux-là dont tu me parles, je n’ai jamais entendu leur nom.

Car je ne suis pas ce que tu crois. Moi presque zombie, j'essaie de fixer la vie que je vais perdre avec des mots. Pour moi écrire, c'est le contraire de vivre. C'est mon aveu de sénilité. (p221)

Sancher is portrayed here as an older, fatherly and benevolent man, honest enough to admit he is not what Lucien has imagined him to be. The words "presque zombie" are reminiscent of the possible deconstructions of Sancher's name. As a zombie, he is perhaps "sans chair". I find Sancher's analysis of writing here most interesting. Unlike traditional aims of writing as something which inspires, gives hope to or empowers a reader, or, alternatively, gives life to an author after his/her death, writing for Sancher is something which he cannot do, and which signifies death. In different sections of the novel, we see him typing on the veranda. However, he is never satisfied with what he writes, and consistently tears up the pages he has typed. Words fail him, in his desire to cross the haunting histories of his past.

It might be anticipated, though, that words will not fail Lucien, when he decides to write something after all, the story of Francis Sancher, the story Sancher is unable to tell. Up until now, he has been undecided about what course his writing should take. He has not known whether to write a historical novel about the heroism of maroons, or about a nineteenth-century slave revolt:

Au lieu, enfant d'aujourd'hui et de la ville, de traquer des nèg mawon ou des paysans du XIXe siècle, pourquoi ne pas mettre bout à bout souvenirs et bribes de confidences, écarter les mensonges, reconstituer la trajectoire et la personnalité du défunt ? Oh certes, cet idéaliste sans plus d'idéal ne lui ferait

pas la partie belle ! Il lui faudrait refuser le vertige des idées reçues. Regarder dans les yeux de dangereuses vérités. Déplaire. Choquer.

Et pour écrire ce livre-là, ne lui faudrait-il pas suivre son héros à la trace ? Relever les empreintes qu'il avait laissées dans les chemins ? Mettre ses pas dans les siens ?

Europe. Amérique. Afrique. Francis Sancher avait parcouru tous ces pays. Alors ne devrait-il pas en faire autant ? (p227)

At the wake, all is suddenly clear for Lucien, and the frustrations which have built in him since his return to Guadeloupe, begin to disappear. He will write Sancher's story. However, in order to do so, he will have to travel, and journey, as Sancher himself did. He must refuse the influence of accepted ideas, and forge his own path, even though he may shock or displease. These ideas very much parody the path Condé has taken in her literary career, her refusal to remain exclusively in Guadeloupe, but to live in other countries, and to travel extensively. Shock and displeasure are hallmarks of Condé's work. As a writer, her work is characterised by telling it as it is, and by not glazing over what might annoy or offend (Manning 2003 p112). It is likely Condé justifies her own writing, in this chapter devoted to Lucien. Lucien realises that he may have to shock or displease in order to tell the real story, to reach the ultimate truth. It is something, though, that he is not afraid to do.

#### Xantippe, symbol of African heritage

Xantippe is the novel's recluse, a man whose wife and children were burned alive in their hut one Christmas Day, possibly the result of an arson attack. He is represented



in parts of the narrative as someone to be feared, and may have supernatural powers which he uses for ill-yeild, similarly to the way we saw Tituba was feared, in the first chapter of this thesis:

Dans les débuts, les enfants en avaient peur, de Xantippe. En le croisant, les femmes enceintes protégeaient leur fœtus d'une prière à la Vierge. Des poules ayant disparu des basses-cours et un veau tacheté s'étant écarté loin de l'abri du ventre de sa mère, on avait voulu l'en tenir pour responsable. (p77)

Condé devotes the final chapter of the novel to Xantippe's story. However, unlike all other characters, Xantippe is represented in mythical terms, and in fact, it is difficult to think of him as a real character at all. The first lines of his narrative are deeply reminiscent of the afterword in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...noire de Salem*. In the same way that Tituba evokes deep emotions of pride and possession, when talking about her island, Barbados, Xantippe here, positions himself as the proud father of Guadeloupe. He has baptised all living things on the island, has given them identity, has named them:

J'ai nommé tous les arbres de ce pays. Je suis monté à la tête du morne, j'ai crié leur nom et ils ont répondu à mon appel. Gommier blanc. Acomat-boucan. Bois pilori. Bois rada. Bois trompette. Bois guépois. Bois d'encens. Bois pin. Bois la soie. Bois bandé. Résolu. Kaïmitier. Mahot cochon. Prune café. Mapou lélé. Arbre à lait. Malimbé. (p241)

The act of naming here is deeply significant. The former slaves of this island had no identity, and were stripped of their own names. But Xantippe has the power to name, and he names all the trees of Guadeloupe, one after another. With a sense of pride, he lists them, and in so doing, illustrates their uniqueness, one from another. For

Xantippe, the trees “sont nos seuls amis” (p241). It is they who have looked after the slaves, “depuis l’Afrique” (p241). The imagery is sexually explosive as Xantippe describes how he named the gullies, the rocks, the fish:

J’ai nommé les ravines, sexes grands ouverts, dans le fin fond de la terre. J’ai nommé les rochers au fond de l’eau et les poissons, gris comme les rochers. En un mot, j’ai nommé ce pays. Il est sorti de mes reins dans une giclée de foutre. (pp241-242)

He perceives himself as creator, progenitor and forebear of this island, as if he is its origin, and possessor of all its secrets. Like Sancher, Xantippe is possibly the sum of all his predecessors. He is the Alpha and the Omega of life. It is as if he is both the beginning, and the end, and holds the power both to create and destroy. He evokes much fear in the minds of the *habitants* of Rivière au Sel, as he is seen in mythical and superstitious terms. Xantippe seems to be empowered with the knowledge of the entire history of Guadeloupe, and of the horrors of its past. He seems to represent the importance of a continuation with the past, as if, while leaning towards the future, Guadeloupe should not forget the abhorrent tragedies to which its history bears witness. For Higginson, Xantippe is a mobile character, and capable of transcending past and present Guadeloupe (Higginson 2002 p102). His perspective “nous offre des pans entiers de l’histoire de l’île, s’arrêtant à des moments stratégiques tout en racontant l’histoire du narrateur” (ibid).

Francis Sancher is much troubled on the occasions he encounters Xantippe, throughout the novel. Although a conversation never takes place between them, Sancher knows instinctively that Xantippe sees him as burdened by unspeakable crimes. However, Xantippe will not exact revenge upon him:

Personne n'a percé ce secret, enseveli dans l'oubli. Même pas lui qui court comme un cheval fou, flairant le vent, humant l'air. A chaque fois que je le rencontre, le regard de mes yeux brûle les siens et il baisse la tête, car ce crime est le sien. Le sien. Il peut dormir tranquille cependant, engrosser ses femmes, planter des fils, je ne lui ferai rien, le temps de la vengeance est passé. (p245)

Xantippe, alone, seems to know the terrible secrets which cause Sancher so much distress. He has warmly embraced his island, full of nature's wonders, but now here, he spurns the crime attributed to Sancher. This is Sancher's crime, and he is fully accountable for it. Such is its magnitude, Xantippe insists, a second time, on Sancher's ownership of it. "Le sien" (p245). Also, he does not refer to Sancher by name, but only by pronoun: "lui qui court comme un cheval fou" (ibid). The trees have been called by name, Xantippe has bestowed identity on them. Sancher's identity, however, is inextricably linked with his status as descendant of the Béké class, and from this, there is no escape.

Thus Condé chooses to end this nineteenth narrative with the juxtaposition of two opposing, yet ultimately inter-linked constituents of Antillean identity, the inescapable African heritage as symbolised by Xantippe, and the equally inescapable colonising history which Sancher represents. For Higginson, "Sancher persiste à lire le monde selon des paramètres passés, et en meurt" (Higginson 2002 p103). Sancher is not capable of casting aside the sins of his ancestors. The curse which plagues his family will fall now upon him. He is not able to forgive himself for the wrongdoings of his ancestors, and his encounters with Xantippe serve to reinforce his opinion that he, descendant of the colonisers, will pay the ultimate price for his lineage. There is a notion here, that the abhorrencies of slavery cannot simply be erased from memory,

and that the legacies of past centuries continue to dwell in the present. For Xantippe, though, Sancher's death leaves him with a sense of calm. "Il fonctionne sur deux registres distincts" (Higginson 2002 p103), and abides in both the present and the past. He appears not to hold an eternal grudge against the dead man. For Xantippe, Sancher "peut dormir tranquillement" (p245). What may we infer from this final story in the narrative? Perhaps, the acknowledgement that retribution will not solve the horrors of the past. As a narrative device, the fact that Sancher unwillingly becomes a father, demonstrates that the colonial past cannot be silenced, or suppressed, and that the modern world continues to inherit the legacies of the oppressions of the past.

#### Communal identity in the novel

Of the four novels analysed in this thesis, none captures community-centric identity in the French Caribbean better than *Traversée de la Mangrove*. Condé does not, however, paint a pretty picture of Guadeloupean identity in the narrative. In my interview with her, in November 2002, she explained that her writing embodied the truth about Caribbean identity, and that one could not "paint the Caribbean pink". (Manning 2003 p112). The community of Rivière au Sel is represented in very negative terms, and can be perceived as hypocritical and racist, narrow-minded and begrudging. Rumour and gossip play a large part in community life, and those who emanate from outside this small community are treated with distrust and suspicion. Condé's use of narrative technique is most effective in bringing about a merge of the collective voice. Also, the incorporation into the plot of a traditional Caribbean wake, with its prayers and rituals, is an excellent example of how, despite enormous

differences among the individual *habitants* of Rivière au Sel, nevertheless, all come together as one, to pay their respects to the late Francis Sancher. The habitants have congregated to bury Sancher, but in doing so, they are also possibly burying some of the negativity which constrains their own lives. Ffrench suggests that Sancher's death is sacrificial, but necessary, in order for the *habitants* to realise "that the community has in some way imprisoned them, and that the death of the stranger forces an opening of this prison, a liberation" (Ffrench 1997 pp98-99). Perhaps, what the community of Rivière au Sel mostly shares, is the fact that many members are suffocating within the narrow constraints of a small village. The roots of the mangrove incarcerate and confine them, and they are blinded to anything outside their small realm. Sancher, as a stranger, provides a new vision for their future, a vision and hope which may allow some of them to transcend the constraints of the mangrove and find a better life elsewhere. Let us look now at ways in which the communal sense of self is manifested throughout the novel.

Désinor, the Haitian worker, who works illegally in Guadeloupe, doing jobs most natives will not do, illustrates the hypocritical and racist nature of this community, most of whom did not like Sancher, yet, attend his wake. He does not hide the fact that he did not like his former employer, but at least acknowledges his personal reason for being present, for refreshments he seldom receives:

Je ne sais pas pourquoi tout le monde fait semblant d'avoir gros cœur. Sûrement, cela l'aurait bien fait rire, après la manière dont on l'a traité par ici. Mais les gens de Rivière au Sel sont comme cela. Ils n'ont pas de sentiments et, par-dessus le marché, ils sont hypocrites. Moi, à quoi sert de mentir, Francis Sancher, je m'en foutais royalement. C'est pas par rapport aux deux



cent francs la semaine qu'il me donnait pour retourner la terre de son jardin que je vais prendre le deuil ! Si je suis là, c'est parce que je n'ai pas senti une bonne odeur de manger, que je n'ai pas arrosé mon gosier avec un bon coup de rhum depuis belle lurette. (p197)

Désinor shows up the *habitants* for what they really are. He, himself, as a foreign worker, has not been treated well by them, and here, Condé depicts a reality of current-day Guadeloupe, namely, the fact, that racism against other Caribbean peoples exist there, and that natives from Haiti, and indeed Dominica, are considered to be an underclass. For Condé, Haitians living in Guadeloupe are "poor, live in isolated villages, cut sugarcane and do the jobs that nobody else wants. Sometimes Guadeloupeans regard the darker Haitians with a certain amount of contempt" (Pfaff 1996 p74).

In his narrative, Désinor draws a divide between himself and the others at the wake. He sees himself through their eyes, the eyes of this community who despises his uncouth manners and ways:

Il mangeait voracement, y allant de la main, et sentit sur lui le regard de mépris de ses voisins qui eux s'étaient servis avec habileté de leurs cuillers après avoir déposé un rectangle de papier sur leurs genoux. (pp197-198)

Thus communal identity is represented as proper and gentile, and Condé juxtaposes the *habitants'* self-perception vis-à-vis their views of this immigrant worker. It is ironic, perhaps, that those who have themselves suffered racism, and colonial oppression, will in turn perpetuate it, with fellow Caribbeans. Désinor has no illusions as to the opinions of this community about him. He plays into their hands,



however, demonstrating bad manners, perhaps, because he feels it is what they expect of him, and he delights in it:

Il s'en réjouit, car il le faisait exprès, d'être si sale. Pour une fois qu'il était de plain-pied avec les gens de Rivière au Sel, il aurait aimé les insulter, les choquer, leur faire savoir qui était réellement ce Désinor Décimus qu'ils confondaient avec un misérable jardinier haïtien. (p198)

This citation is reminiscent of John Indien's belief, in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem*, that "niggers" might as well behave in a manner whites have come to expect: "Jouons à la perfection notre rôle de nègres" (*Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem* (p56). With Désinor, however, Condé exposes opposing polarities of identity. Clearly, in Désinor's view, the *habitants* do not really see him, they merely see through him. He is seen in terms of his use, as a gardener, but not as a person. It is as if colonial history is being re-staged, the community of Rivière au Sel is the new coloniser, and Désinor, the new slave. For Fanon, analysed by Bhabha, "The Black presence ruins the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism and degeneracy will not produce a history of civil progress" (Bhabha 1994 p115). Désinor is the new "Black presence" of Guadeloupe, whose mere existence is seen in terms of degeneracy by fellow Caribbeans, whose self-superiority is so poignant. As "The White man's eyes break up the Black man's body", so do the Guadeloupeans' break up the Haitian's, and the cyclical re-enactement of master versus slave endures (Bhabha 1994 p115). Though the colonisers are gone, and the colonised are free, the relations of power are wholly evident in a modern Guadeloupe.

As Xantippe names the trees and gullies of Guadeloupe, Désinor must name himself. He supplies us with his full name, Désinor Décimus, and hence, bestows an identity on himself. His treatment in the novel confirms the racist and hypocritical nature of the community of Rivière au Sel.

The *habitants* are represented also as narrow-minded, and begrudging. They resent ambition or achievement of any type, and throughout the narrative, the collective voice is speckled with criticism and detraction. Vilma's brother, Carmélien, goes to Bordeaux to study medicine, and people are only satisfied when he returns home following an illness. One must know one's place, and not attempt to improve upon one's situation:

Néanmoins les envieux et les malcontents n'allaient pas tarder à piquer de vraies colères quand Carmélien, le petit-fils de Rodrigue et le fils de Sylvestre, était parti étudier la médecine en France. Quoi ! Un Ramarsan médecin ! Les gens ne savent pas rester à leur place ! La place des Ramsaran était dans la terre, canne ou pas ! Heureusement, Dieu est grand ! Carmélien était revenu en quatrième vitesse de Bordeaux où une maladie l'avait frappé. Ce n'était que justice. Il ne faut pas pêter plus haut que ses fesses. En pareil cas, la vie fait son devoir et ramène l'ambitieux à la raison. (p21-22)

In the above citation, Condé reveals the inner thought processes of this small-minded community. Most striking about it is, perhaps, the communal sense of inertia, and the fact that these people do not embrace change or progress. Because Carmélien's family have worked on the land, Carmélien must do likewise. There are several other examples of begrudery in the text, and I think these point a critical finger perhaps at current Guadeloupean *mentalité*. As stated in the introduction of this

chapter, Condé wrote this novel following many years living away from her island. It is possible her negative portrayal of her own people reflects an impatience with an island grounded in its past.

The narrow-minded nature of this community is reflected much in the recurring images of suffocation throughout the narrative. Several characters describe Rivière au Sel as a place of imprisonment. Rosa's first impressions of the village are "une masse d'un vert sombre d'arbres, de lianes, de parasites emmêlés avec ça et là les trouées plus claires des bananeraies" (p161). Dinah's home is a prison for her, and Emile, the historian, realises he has been suffocating while living in this place: "Il lui sembla soudain qu'il étouffait sous les grands arbres" (p239). For Désinor, there is no possible escape, the planes only go to metropolitan France: "Les avions n'effectuaient que des aller-retour La Pointe-Paris! Les gens ne voyageaient qu'en métropole!" (p210). Perhaps the solution for this claustrophobia is to journey, away from this village or island, as many of the *habitants* resolve to do.

Outsiders, as aforesaid, are treated with distrust, and Rivière au Sel, as a collectivity, make no effort to embrace difference. Sancher, Dinah, and Désinor, among others, are defined essentially, in terms of their otherness, and are seen as strangers among this closed community, and I think the narrative advocates a call for open-mindedness among the *habitants*. For Bozon-Scalzitti, "la mangrove que Francis Sancher ne parvient pas à traverser est d'abord celle de la méchanceté et malignité des gens de Rivière au Sel." (Bozon-Scalzitti 1998 p69). I would suggest it is these negatives also, which challenge change and progress in this community.

## Conclusion

*Traversée de la Mangrove* was a departure for Condé in terms of narrative technique. Until then, her novels were linear and chronological. However, with this one, she choose a circular structure, “a narrative with no true beginning or end” (Pfaff 1996 p72). Condé was interested “in the character of the stranger”, in the village, and “how people react to him, how they define themselves in relation to him” (Pfaff 1996 p71). It is indeed this notion of the foreign, and the unknown, which is central to the meaning of the novel. Sancher is an outsider, and reveals only small pieces of himself to different characters. We will never truly know the real Sancher. However, we will never truly know the identity of any of the novel’s characters, simply the parts they choose to reveal in their narratives. Thus identity is construed in terms of the mystique, one has an outward face, but one conceals much. In the words of Rosa: “On voit le tronc, on voit les branches et les feuilles. Mais on ne voit pas les racines” (p170).

The novel abounds with biblical metaphors and references. As we have seen, Sancher is portrayed as a saviour to some of the characters, whose lives will change because of him. The name of the town, Rivière au Sel, means a salty river, a further biblical reference, denoting water which is dying, which cannot sustain life. In some ways, the town is similar to the Dead Sea, which for Kappil, “subsists as a symbol of death and a memorial of destruction” because “no living creature can exist in its waters” (Kappil no date provided). Rivière au Sel is a stagnant place, where happiness is in short supply. The reference to salt may denote something which stings, which brings pain and discontent. Journeying away from this town is a way out, a way through the stagnancy of this small place which resists new horizons, new frontiers. Sancher, as

redeemer, helps some character see new lights and renewed possibilities, away from the stagnant waters of Rivière au Sel.

*Traversée de la Mangrove* is an excellent study of the concepts of personal and cultural collective identity. As in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... Noire de Salem* and *Une saison à Rihata*, identity continues to operate in a state of flux. The identities of Tituba, Marie-Hélène and Francis Sancher do not manoeuvre along any predetermined course, and the multi-faceted character of their respective identities is forever clear.

## Patrimony and heritage: the quest for roots in *Desirada*.

First published in 1997, *Desirada* is Condé's tenth novel and is the most recent of the four novels explored in this thesis. As with the three other novels already examined, *Desirada* concerns itself with an exploration of identity. Indeed, the concept of identity through finding one's own parental heritage, is a life-defining quest in this novel.

The narrative of *Desirada* is briefly as follows: Condé presents three women, Marie-Noëlle, her mother Reynalda, and her grandmother, Nina. Nina has left La Désirade, one of Guadeloupe's neighbouring islands, to become a servant in the home of Gian Carlo Coppini, an Italian jeweller. Reynalda accompanies her mother to Guadeloupe, and attends school there. Sometime later, Reynalda becomes pregnant, deserts the Italian household, and tries to commit suicide by drowning. Her attempt is foiled, and she is rescued by Ranélise, a kindly local woman. Ranélise looks after Reynalda until Marie-Noëlle is born, whereupon Reynalda leaves her daughter in Ranélise's care and departs for a better life in Paris. She maintains no contact with Marie-Noëlle until ten years later, suddenly, she demands Marie-Noëlle come live with her in Paris. Marie-Noëlle is deeply unhappy in Paris, save for the affection of Ludovic, her stepfather, and her half-brother, Garvey. In her late teens she marries Stanley, a musician, and moves with him to Boston. Years later, her marriage over, and subsequently widowed, she returns briefly to Guadeloupe following Ranélise's death. At this time, she travels to La Désirade and meets Nina for the first time. The relationship between Nina and Marie-Noëlle is important. It establishes some sense of lineage for Marie-Noëlle, and she experiences a closeness with her grandmother



which has not existed between herself and Reynalda. As the novel draws to a close, Marie-Noëlle has succeeded in obtaining a doctorate, and establishes herself as an academic in America.

The central focus of this novel is an identity quest. Marie-Noëlle does not know the identity of her father, and this lack of knowledge haunts and preoccupies her. Suspense is omnipresent in *Desirada*, and on many occasions the reader believes that the truth will triumph. It is difficult not to share with Marie-Noëlle the tension she experiences in trying to piece together the past, and so discover who she really is. Several characters relay information to Marie-Noëlle about her mother's life in Guadeloupe before leaving for Paris. However, one character's version of events conflicts strongly with those of another. The deeper Marie-Noëlle probes in her quest to find the truth, the more elusive the truth becomes. In fact, truth itself is portrayed as highly subjective in the novel. In one interview, Condé explains why truth is elusive in *Desirada*: "I wanted to show that there is no Truth. Everyone recounts his/her life, life history, differently. It is not possible to find an objective reality basing one's judgements solely on the words of others" (McCormick 2000 p520). The idea of truth being forever elusive and highly subjective, is reminiscent of Sancher's identity in the previous chapter. One's identity is necessarily fragmented and disseminated, and it is impossible to locate every piece of the puzzle which constitute identity. In relation to *Desirada*, Condé does not shed light on the issue of the identity of Marie-Noëlle's father. She must continue to live her life without this knowledge, although she believes it is vital to her future happiness.

In this chapter, I will examine several aspects of how identity is portrayed in the novel. In particular, I will explore the highly complex characters of Marie-Noëlle and Reynalda, and analyse the difficult relationship between them. I will also analyse

the characters of Ludovic and Nina, and finally, I will discuss the importance of education in the novel.

### Marie-Noëlle

In some ways, *Desirada* serves Marie-Noëlle as a way to reconstruct parts of her life she cannot possibly remember. The opening lines of the novel portray her as trying to visualise her own birth, something which is clearly important to her:

Ranélise lui avait tant de fois raconté sa naissance qu'elle croyait y avoir tenu un rôle; non pas celui d'un bébé terrorisé et passif que Mme Fleurette, la sage-femme, extirpait difficilement d'entre les cuisses ensanglantées de sa mère; mais celui d'un témoin lucide; d'un acteur essentiel. (p13)

What immediate image of this woman comes to mind? That, perhaps, of someone convinced she had entered the world as a determining factor, not as a mere passive newborn, but as a woman capable of steering her own course through life. As we will see subsequently, however, Marie-Noëlle will find self-determination in her life a difficult, and at times, almost impossible goal.

Living with Ranélise, Marie-Noëlle's early childhood is filled with happiness. Ranélise never stops giving thanks for this child she now has, and Marie-Noëlle experiences first-hand, the love and complete devotion of this woman. It is interesting to note that it is Ranélise, and not Reynalda, who names Marie-Noëlle, thus pointing to the contrasting feelings of both women towards this child, the love and possessive

devotion of the surrogate mother versus the cold indifference of the biological one. Growing older, and no longer having a mother who loves her, Marie-Noëlle becomes increasingly curious about the identity of her father, and pays a visit once to Gian Carlo's jewellery shop, sensing this individual has had some relationship with her biological mother. At the age of ten, and before leaving for Paris to rejoin her mother, Ranélise shows her a photo of Reynalda taken when the latter was nine months pregnant with Marie-Noëlle. Seeing, for the first time, an image of her mother, a sullen, weary fifteen-year-old Reynalda, Marie-Noëlle is consumed by the need to know who her papa is. She is afraid of the truth, though, as her light skin suggests that her father is not black, but white:

En vérité, elle avait peur de la réponse qu'elle pouvait entendre. C'est que sa couleur tranchait sur le noir bon teint de ceux qui étaient à l'entour d'elle ainsi que sa tignasse jaune paille et ses yeux que la lumière tigrerait selon les moments en vert ou en jaune. Son papa, c'était sans doute possible un homme à peau claire. Un mulâtre ? Un saintois ? Un mauvais chabin rouge comme un crabe cyrique ? Peut-être même un Blanc ? Blanc-pays ou blanc métro, gendarme, C.R.S. ? Comment tolérer pareille paternité ? (p34)

The above quote insists upon the importance, in Marie-Noëlle's eyes, of being a true Caribbean, and highlights an important facet of the identity, the existence of a racial aspect. She sees herself as black, which, from her perspective, is a form of purity. She does not like to think that her father may not be black, in which case she would be racially impure. Even at a young age, Marie-Noëlle views inter-racial relationships as intolerable, as this blurs original identity.

She is afraid of finding out his real identity, but equally, she desperately needs to know who he is. Ranélise insists that a father is not important in the scheme of life, but her words fall on deaf ears. At the age of ten, Marie-Noëlle has already embarked on her identity quest, and “elle se jurait d’y mettre les années qu’il faudrait, mais un jour de déchiffrer l’indéchiffrable” (p34). It is interesting to note the contrast between Ranélise and Marie-Noëlle’s viewpoints here. Ranélise does not experience the same need or urgency to discover Marie-Noëlle’s father. She is content to let the dust settle, and leave what is done alone. It is indeed this idea of life continuing, and of forging an identity for oneself regardless of whether or not one knows the past, which is, I believe central to this novel. It is also, of course, inherent to Caribbean identity. As has been discussed in the introduction, theories such as *antillanité* and *créolité*, are now attempting to embrace everything that is Caribbean and Créole, and in doing so, are trying to concentrate on a living culture, rather than on a dying past.

#### Marie-Noëlle and Reynalda

For ten happy childhood years, Marie-Noëlle has known no mother except for Ranélise. Reynalda’s letter, stating she is now able to provide for her daughter in Paris, is a cruel rupture in both Marie-Noëlle and Ranélise’s lives, and will affect both of them hereafter. This rupture between surrogate mother and daughter is reminiscent of the legacy of slavery in the Caribbean, where the family is split because of the desires of another. In this case, Reynalda symbolises the master, whose desire (that Marie-Noëlle will now live in France) must be satisfied. This desire supercedes any other desires on the parts of Marie-Noëlle or Ranélise, and they have no choice but to carry out Reynalda’s wishes. In ten years, Reynalda has maintained no contact with

Ranélise, and has been happy to leave Guadeloupe without consideration for her daughter. In fact, Marie-Noëlle's forced exodus to France is the second rupture in her short life. She has been deserted by Reynalda at birth and has not known her biological mother until arriving in France. However, the fact that she must now leave Guadeloupe and live in Paris means she will never again see Ranélise.

Reynalda's letter to Ranélise underlines the cold exactitude of the former. While thanking the latter for her help in bringing up her daughter, Reynalda does not prepare Ranélise for the loss she will now experience. A plane ticket is enclosed, and she asks Ranélise to send her Marie-Noëlle's school and medical reports. It seems likely she has not even considered the effect this letter will have on either Marie-Noëlle or Ranélise. She is simply exercising her biological right to have her daughter by her side, regardless of abandoning her without consideration years earlier. As we find out later, reuniting Marie-Noëlle with her mother has not been Reynalda's idea, but instead Ludovic's suggestion. The description of Marie-Noëlle's arrival in Paris and first meeting with her mother is significant. She has left behind her the loving warmth of her native island, and Paris is portrayed as a cold, hostile, unwelcoming place:

Dehors, le ciel tremblait gris et lourd au ras des toitures. Il neigeait. Est-ce qu'il neigeait ? Il neige rarement à Paris. Et pas le 1er novembre. En tous les cas, il tombait dans le souvenir de Marie-Noëlle de gros flocons qui voltigeaient comme des insectes de nuit autour de la flamme d'une lampe à pétrole. Les bâtiments, les pavés, les autobus, les voitures en stationnement étaient recouverts de poudre blanche. Ça et là, des arbres dressaient leurs moignons emmaillottés de blanc, eux aussi. (p35)

Reynalda greets her with a small smile, but does not attempt to kiss her. For Marie-Noëlle, “Sa figure ne trahissait rien. Comme si elle portait par-devant un masque, un loup qui cachait ses vraies émotions” (p35). This early image of Reynalda is the one which will endure the most in the novel. We will see her presented constantly as someone who cannot let down her guard, as a woman always hiding behind something, possibly her past. The extent to which Reynalda has alienated Marie-Noëlle from her life in Paris becomes very obvious when the latter arrives at her new home. Reynalda has never told her that she has a partner, Ludovic, or that she has a baby son, Garvey, and Marie-Noëlle meets both of these with immense surprise. In terms of identity, Marie-Noëlle’s new-found family necessitate an immediate re-negotiation of her “family status” (Smith 1995 p130). Instead of arriving in a strange city to live solely with the mother who abandoned her at birth, Marie-Noëlle must learn to steer a new course within the boundaries of a family which has existed without her. All at once, she has become a daughter with two parents, and is also an older sister. While it is ironic, that the limited happiness she finds in Paris is derived from her new father and brother, and not from her mother, Marie-Noëlle manages to negotiate her new status well. For the first time, she is part of a family unit, and this is something which she appreciates. She enjoys very much playing with Garvey, and is conscious that Ludovic is now a father figure in her life.

The atmospheric descriptions of her new home life in France are significant. If Marie-Noëlle has harboured hope that she might now come to know her mother, she is sadly mistaken. Reynalda, though biological mother to her and Garvey, is the antithesis of a caring mother figure in their lives. Very soon, Marie-Noëlle realises that it is Ludovic who provides all care in the family, while Reynalda works as a



welfare officer by day and writes a thesis by night. She displays no love whatsoever for her daughter, and seems only capable of brief moments of affection for Garvey:

Même Garvey et ses petits caprices ne retenaient pas son attention. Elle le prenait contre elle un moment puis, vite, le déposait par terre, lassée, à nouveau happée par son indifférence”. (p40)

Holding Garvey, albeit for a few short minutes, does not give Reynalda any pleasure. She realises that, as a mother, she should take her son in her arms, but is incapable of giving him any real love. She is an reluctant mother, who clearly, is unfulfilled by the joys and demands of motherhood.

To return to the definition of identity as an examination of one’s “lineage, family status, and place of birth or residence” (Smith 1995 p130), we can see that Reynalda’s identity is not wholly concerned with her lineage or her family status. Her place of birth is important to her, and I will examine this issue shortly. In relation to lineage, though, her only family member is Nina, whom she despises, and with whom she has severed all contact. The dominant and defining facet of her identity is her work and studies, and this takes precedence over every other aspect of her life. Much of the time, Reynalda inhabits her own private space. She retains no interest in her milieu, or in the lives of Ludovic, Marie-Noëlle or Garvey:

D’autres jours, de retour de la mairie, elle tirait sur elle comme une dalle de tombeau la porte de sa chambre. Quand elle cédait aux appels insistants de Ludovic, c’était pour s’asseoir à la table du dîner sans toucher à son assiette et pour fixer muette, comme boudeuse, l’écran aux mille couleurs de la

télévision, absorbée qu'elle était par une obsession qu'elle ne partageait avec personne. Elle n'avait pas de conversation. Elle écoutait sans mot dire Ludovic qui faisait demandes et réponses. En un mot, elle ne paraissait s'intéresser à rien. Ni à la culture, ni à la politique, aux hauts et bas de l'Afrique noire qui passionnaient Ludovic. Des fois, un livre passait entre ses mains. Chaque fois, Marie-Noëlle avait l'impression que seuls ses yeux parcouraient les signes imprimés sur la page, tandis que son esprit restait prisonnier d'images qu'elle ne pouvait pas oublier. (pp39-40)

One senses that Reynalda is being held prisoner by something in her past which she cannot forget, something which haunts her and holds her captive. On a symbolic level, this is reminiscent of the Caribbean past, a past filled with unspeakable horrors, which the Caribbeans find difficult to lay to rest. It is through her work, that Reynalda seems capable of transcending the apparent horrors in her own life. However, her daily family life is one of listlessness and indifference, not dissimilar to Marie-Hélène in *Une saison à Rihata*. As mothers, both Reynalda and Marie-Hélène are weighed down by motherhood. They do not appear capable of loving their families, and instead spend their time brooding over a past they would rather forget. Indeed they are both rooted to their pasts. Marie-Hélène, as we have seen, has cast aside any ambitions she once held, and this secures her stagnant relationship with the past. Reynalda, at least, attempts to break with hers through a dedication to her work. This may be Reynalda's way of achieving a new identity. Professional recognition is an important concept in this novel, and will be explored later.

Although she does not seem to love her daughter, Reynalda, nonetheless, exercises her autonomy over Marie-Noëlle at one significant part in the novel. A cousin of Ludovic's, whose family spend time with them in Paris, wishes, upon their return to Guinea, to bring Marie-Noëlle back with them. Reynalda's indifference to her daughter has been most evident to them, and they reckon they could make her life much better. However, Reynalda will not part with Marie-Noëlle. Smith argues "that an implicit model of property relations underlies certain views about parenting" (Smith 1984 p199), and regardless of whether or not parents love their children, offspring may be seen as objects over which they, the parents, exercise complete sovereignty. For Smith, "elements of the property model increasingly pervade [...] parenting, especially as women take on the full practical and intellectual activities of political participation, and as gender roles break down" (ibid). Reynalda is certainly a modern woman, who does not have difficulty with the subversion of traditional parenting roles. She is the primary breadwinner, and her true motivation in life is not, to be a mother, but instead "de devenir quelqu'un" (p19). Ownership is an important concept to her. Through her studies, she has acquired intellectual property, and as her career advances, she will be able to afford a more luxurious apartment in Paris. When Ludovic's family offer to take Marie-Noëlle away with them, Reynalda sees this as an encroachment upon part of her property, the daughter she possesses, but does not really love. Reynalda appears in a particularly negative light here. She cannot display any affection for her daughter, but equally, will not allow anyone else take her place as mother. For Marie-Noëlle, this moment marks her realisation that she and her mother are inextricably linked, and that her mother exercises power over her which she will never be able to shake off:

Elle comprit que Reynalda, qui l'avait expulsée, l'avait abandonnée pendant dix ans, pour des raisons secrètes, connues d'elle seule, et qui n'avaient que peu de traits communs avec l'amour, n'entendait plus se séparer d'elle. Elle-même, quoi qu'elle fasse, quoi que d'autres fassent, ne s'en libérerait jamais. Elle passerait son existence à s'imaginer la douceur inimaginable du temps d'antan où elles avaient été confondues dans une même chair, à la regretter, à tenter de la retrouver. Mais ce serait peine perdue. Elle n'y arriverait pas et elle cheminerait à jamais seule dans son désert. (p56)

The word "expulsée" is notable, and highly symbolic. Marie-Hélène also used this term in relation to the birth of Sia. Alternatives to the concept of expulsion are: exile, eviction, ejection, exclusion, with the following as antitheses: acceptance, welcome, inclusion. (Random House Thesaurus 1989 p255). In *Desirada*, the concepts of birth and motherhood are not seen in terms of welcome or acceptance. Rather, the child is "expulsée" from the safe haven of its mother's womb, and must learn to fend for itself, without the loving guidance of the mother who bore it.

Marie-Noëlle realises that her mother forms much of whom she herself is, and although when older, she will be able to free herself physically from Reynalda, on a psychological level, she believes she will always be imprisoned by her. Although chief in the novel's considerations is the relationship between Marie-Noëlle and Reynalda, there are just two episodes in *Desirada* where Reynalda speaks directly to her daughter. The first of these takes place in Paris when Marie-Noëlle, indifferent to her life, and completely lacking in personal goals or objectives, is threatened with expulsion from school. Interestingly, the notion of being "expulsée", this time from the academic realm, continues into Marie-Noëlle's adolescence. Reynalda, who has

never bothered with Marie-Noëlle's life, speaks to her in an effort to make her take stock of her life. She does not look directly into her daughter's eyes during her monologue, which is usual for her, as if looking at Marie-Noëlle squarely conjures up deeply unpleasant memories. Also, this first conversation with her daughter seems to be undertaken in terms of a personal remembrance of her own life, rather than perhaps to assist Marie-Noëlle in hers:

Elle posait à hauteur de la figure de Marie-Noëlle un regard qui, comme d'habitude, la traversait pour prendre appui sur une place vague, située quelque part, derrière elle, à droite ou à gauche, un peu plus haut, peut-être sur une étrange reproduction que Ludovic avait accrochée au mur. Elle parlait comme si ce qu'elle disait ne concernait pas vraiment Marie-Noëlle, comme si elle ne lui adressait pas la parole, mais se concentrait sur des divagations personnelles. (p61)

Reynalda's tone is firm, dogmatic, and she imparts advice in an almost impersonal fashion, as if Marie-Noëlle is one of her clients in the welfare centre:

C'est le travail qui m'a mise là où je suis là. Dans un bureau au premier étage de la mairie, avec une secrétaire à ma dictée. C'est le travail et pas autre chose. Aujourd'hui, je ne connais ni maître ni maîtresse. Je fais ce que je veux, comme je veux, quand je veux. Pendant des années, les gens m'ont traitée comme un chien. Il me jetaient leurs paroles comme des os à ronger et me commandaient: "Reynalda, fais ceci, Reynalda, fais cela." C'est bien fini. Il faut savoir ce qu'on veut. Il faut décider soi-même parce que personne ne vit

votre vie à votre place. On ne peut pas prendre son temps à pleurnicher et à ruminer sur ce qui s'est produit. J'ai fini par le comprendre. (p62)

Reynalda shows herself here as capable of throwing off the shackles of her past. She has succeeded in pursuing her ambitions, and lives a very different life from the one Nina has led. She is now autonomous, and her rise to success is due to her own hard work, her focus and her self-determination. Marie-Noëlle's earlier life can be seen in sharp contrast with that of her mother's. Marie-Noëlle is not clear about what she really wants in life and, hence, her young adulthood years are directionless. Reynalda recounts her early childhood to her daughter. She was born on La Désirade, and although for many, it was a desolate island, for her it was a beautiful place. Her description of her birthplace is very striking. She talks of it in terms of intimacy and possession, very similarly to the pride and detailed knowledge relayed by Tituba, when talking of Barbados, or Xantippe, of Guadeloupe:

Mais pour moi, petite fille, c'était vraiment "Désirada", l'île désirée surgie sur la mer devant les yeux des marins de Christophe Colomb après des jours et des jours. Je possédais tous ses recoins. Je respirais son odeur quand le soleil qui l'a chauffée toute la journée repose enfin sa tête au fond de l'eau. Je pouvais soulever une roche et nommer avec certitude le nom de l'insecte caché en dessous. Je connaissais ses razyé. (p62)

The island of La Désirade is clearly significant in Reynalda's life. If we return to the definition of identity as suggested in the introduction, identity can be interrogated through an examination of one's "lineage, family status, and place of birth or



residence” (Smith 1995 p130). For Reynalda, much of her identity is interlinked with La Désirade, her place of birth and, although she has never returned there, her former island home remains an important constituent of her identity. Bosshardt suggests that the novel’s title, and the name of the island are ironic. Discovered in 1493 by Colombus, the island “est devenue dépotoir pour toutes sortes de « sujets indésirables»” (Bosshardt 2002 p152), and a leper colony was subsequently founded on the island. For Bosshardt, the novel’s title is ironic as Marie-Noëlle is herself “non-désirée”. If we continue this idea, one can also say that Reynalda is “non-désirée”, both women being born out of the violence of rape, a prevalent theme in Condé’s work. Of course, it is important to note in this novel, that we are not entirely sure if Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle are the children of rape. We have only the word of Nina and Reynalda who claim that this is the case. They of course discredit the veracity of each other’s stories: Nina does not believe Reynalda was raped by Gian Carlo, and Reynalda believes her mother has never rejected any man’s sexual advances, and has not been raped. Reynalda does not know the identity of her own father, and though she has often asked Nina who he was, Nina’s answer is always different. However, Nina, at least, provided some answer to her child’s questions:

Des fois, elle me disait que c’était un pêcheur à la traîne parti pêcher le thon vers Petite-Terre et qui n’était jamais revenu. À d’autres moments, elle soutenait qu’il élevait des coqs de combat à Baie-Mahault. À d’autres encore, elle racontait que c’était un repasseur de couteaux de Saint-François sur la grande île. Dans la réalité, je crois qu’elle-même ne savait pas exactement qui lui avait donné un ventre parce que beaucoup d’hommes étaient montés sur elle pour prendre leur plaisir. (p63)

Nina's "récit", later on, will contradict Reynalda's opinion that her mother did not know the identity of her father. However, here again, objective truth is not to be found, as both women can offer only their personal versions of what is. Important, though, is the notion that, although Reynalda wishes to know who her father is, this lack of knowledge does not become a tortuous and life-defining quest as it will become for Marie-Noëlle: "Comme la plupart des autres enfants, je n'avais pas de papa" (p63). Reynalda's words here bear witness to family composition in the French Caribbean, many families headed by a matriarch.

Reynalda draws upon the importance of education in her conversation with Marie-Noëlle. She exposes the unjust biases of the teachers in school, where as a black child, her superior grades are unwelcome:

Pourtant la plus grande chance c'était celle-là: pauvre malheureuse que j'étais, sans souliers, ni bonnes robes, ni livres neufs, ni cahiers avec des protégé-cahiers, j'étais la première à l'école. Les maîtresses étaient offusquées. Elles trouvaient cela déplacé en quelque sorte. Elles auraient préféré remettre les bulletins roses à leurs chouchoux à peau claire. Rien à faire. C'est moi, Reynalda Titane, qui les raflais tous. On aurait dit que je les collectionnais. Je les rangeais dans une boîte à biscuits Lu. Je les numérotais. (pp63-64)

At a young age, Reynalda is portrayed as defiant, willing to challenge the inequalities of the system, and able to withstand the racial prejudices of her childhood. It is this defiance of, and resistance to racial inequalities, which will drive her towards academic and literary success in later years. The insistence upon citing her full name

is interesting in the above quote. Reynalda gives her full name, thus placing an emphasis on her patrimony.

Reynalda recounts the events which led to Nina and her moving to Guadeloupe, her beautiful voice being heard by the bishop, followed by the offer of a servant's position for Nina in Gian Carlo's house, and the pledge of school for Reynalda until the age of sixteen. She relays her hatred for Gian Carlo who reigned over a house of women, over his fragile wife Arcania, his five daughters and his two sisters, all of whom he treated with derision. Reynalda's description of the affair between her mother and Gian Carlo is portrayed in terms of loathing and repugnance. She despises both of them, but expresses more disgust for her mother, whom she sees as a salacious, subservient woman, incapable of knowing her own mind:

Je n'entendais jamais ma maman et c'était plus hideux encore. Elle aurait crié, protesté, se serait battue que je l'aurais plainte comme une victime. Elle aurait pris son plaisir que je l'aurais considérée comme une bête en chaleur. Mais ce silence faisait d'elle un objet passif, une bonne à tout faire. (p70)

Reynalda sees her mother only in terms of a servant who is being used by Gian Carlo for sexual fulfillment. She chooses to ignore the fact that her mother has left La Désirade to work for Gian Carlo because of her. Nina has come to work in Guadeloupe so that Reynalda will receive an education. In this way, she can be seen as a mother who, when offered the chance, does what she believes is necessary to afford her daughter the opportunities she has not had herself. As she grows older, Reynalda will become self-determined, cold and exacting, the very antithesis of how it is she perceives her mother to be. Also, as we will later see in exploring her

relationship with Ludovic, she will never allow any man to exercise control or authority over her. The intensity of her feelings is evident in the power of her syntax:

Je le haïssais. Je haïssais ma maman. Je ne savais pas lequel je haïssais le plus.  
Je rêvais de les tuer. De la manière la plus atroce et la plus sanguinaire.  
J'imaginai mille manières de les torturer. Il fallait qu'ils souffrent, ces monstres. (p70)

Reynalda is overcome with horror at the fact that her mother succumbs nightly to the advances of Gian Carlo. Nina might be perceived though, as "*l'amoureuse*", a woman unafraid of her sexuality, similarly to the way Tituba was perceived. Reynalda is everything her mother is not: sexually repressed and wary of men. The idea that she imagines killing Nina, brings to mind the notion of Freud's Electra Complex, where a young girl, who is jealous of her mother sexually, desires to kill her. For Freud, the Electra Complex also entailed feelings of intense love by a daughter for her father. Reynalda, though, does not know her own father, and her emotions towards Gian Carlo are simply those of hatred, and not jealousy. It is interesting, that later in the novel Marie-Noëlle will harbour ambiguous feelings for Ludovic, seeing him as both a father figure and also as a potential lover.

At this point Reynalda stops suddenly, as if dramatically awoken from a trance. It is as if she has been completely unaware until now, that she has been speaking to her daughter, but now reason and realisation have been restored to her. For Salvadon, citing Judith Lewis Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Reynalda's telling of her story seems to conjure up traumatic memories (Salvadon 1999). "Traumatic memory, [...]"

is wordless and static. The survivor's initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped and emotionless" (Salvador 1999 p251). It is indeed in this frame of mind that Reynalda's narrative is retold. She is clearly capable of recounting her tale without recourse to emotion, almost in a clipped and staccato fashion. She is capable of depersonalising her own personal tragedy. Waking from her semi-conscious state, however, she is not able to continue her narrative:

Elle regarda d'un air étonné Marie-Noëlle qui, terrifiée, buvait ses paroles, et elle se mit debout. Elle eut un curieux mouvement de tout le corps comme si elle s'ébrouait, puis retourna dans son bureau. (pp70-71)

Marie-Noëlle must wait several years before her mother completes the story of her past. Married recently to Stanley, and about to leave for Boston, Marie-Noëlle visits her mother, Ludovic and Garvey in their new apartment in Paris. Reynalda is pregnant and very tired. Left alone together in the afternoon, Reynalda speaks directly and candidly to Marie-Noëlle. She acknowledges that she is not a good mother, that Marie-Noëlle and Garvey are not happy because of this. She excuses herself somewhat, stating she cannot give what she has not received herself, as if directly criticising her own mother and upbringing:

Je n'ai pas voulu cet enfant. C'est Ludovic. Je ne suis pas bonne pour la maternité, tu en sais quelque chose. Et à cause de cela, tu n'es pas heureuse. Garvey non plus n'est pas heureux. Vous croyez que je n'ai pas souci de vous? Vous vous trompez, mais je ne peux pas vous donner ce que je n'ai jamais reçu moi-même. (p101)

The theme of love not being transmitted from mother to child appears often in Condé's writing. In *Une saison à Rihata*, Marie-Hélène has difficulty loving Sia, and in *Traversée de la Mangrove*, Rosa finds it hard to love Vilma. In *Desirada*, Condé takes this idea a step further and introduces a further generation of women incapable of loving their offspring: Nina has not loved Reynalda, and hence Reynalda cannot love Marie-Noëlle. The absence of love is portrayed as something almost infectious, that transcends matriarchal lines and is perpetuated in the lives of future generations.

Reynalda recommences the story of her past life. She informs Marie-Noëlle that she can only tell her the truth, and hope that her daughter might then take up her own life:

C'est tout ce que je peux te donner. La vérité. Dans l'espoir que tu comprendras et, que de cette manière, tu commenceras à vivre ta vie. (p102)

The image of Reynalda until now, is of a woman whom Marie-Noëlle does not, and cannot know, who lives in a private world and who hides herself behind her studies. At this point in the novel, Reynalda indicates that she is aware of her daughter's unhappiness, and, hence, she has not been oblivious to Marie-Noëlle's needs. She is simply incapable of responding to them.

Reynalda's story stuns Marie-Noëlle, the tale of her rape, night after night by Gian Carlo, in the condoning presence of Nina. The precision and exactitude with which she describes the nocturnal events of her childhood, leave Marie-Noëlle in little doubt as to the veracity of her mother's account of events. If Reynalda is telling the truth,



then there can be no question but that Gian Carlo is her father. As has already been seen, Marie-Noëlle cannot bear to accept the fact that her father might be white. In the novel, Gian Carlo has never been portrayed as an exemplary figure. On the contrary, he is unfaithful to his wife, and mistreats his sisters and children. It is clear that Reynalda hates him. If Gian Carlo is indeed her father, Marie-Noëlle will not be able to look back upon her patriarchal lineage with any sense of pride or happiness. The idea that Gian Carlo, a white man, is examined from the point of view of being a potential rapist, is reminiscent of the notion of rape by white masters, which has always been a common link in Caribbean lineage. The rape of slaves was a common occurrence in plantation life, and many Caribbeans are the distant ancestors of white colonisers.

### Ludovic

As a father figure, and positive role model in Marie-Noëlle's life, Ludovic is the antithesis of the negativity which surrounds Gian Carlo. A caring, responsible and attentive man, he is not typical of masculine representation in Condé's work. As Marie-Noëlle soon learns, it is he, and not Reynalda, who provides much-needed stability for her in Paris. He is an interesting character, in that, although born in Haiti, he is in some ways "identity-less", and not anchored to any particular country:

"Ludovic marquait toujours un temps d'hésitation lorsqu'on lui demandait d'où il était" (p38). The narrative is advocating here the notion that identity need not be static, or a given, and that journeying is in itself a way of seeking and perhaps finding one's identity. Though we do not learn of his mother at all in the novel, Ludovic's father had travelled widely, and Ludovic, following him, had visited many countries

and worked in many differing jobs. His life has been one of both change and diversity and, although not formally educated beyond primary school, he is nonetheless educated in the ways of the world:

Dès ses dix-huit ans, Ludovic avait marché sur ces traces et commencé ses pégérations. Il avait laissé loin derrière le malheur sans fond d'Haïti, tâté des États-Unis d'Amérique, du Canada, de l'Allemagne, de l'Afrique avant d'atterrir en Belgique et d'enjamber la frontière jusqu'à Paris. Il avait été docker dans le port de New York, instituteur à Koulikoro, au Mali, journaliste à Maputo en Mozambique et musicien sur la place de l'Horloge à Bruxelles.

(p38)

His earlier life, one of travel and lack of formal education, contrasts deeply with Reynalda's life, and it is questionable whether, despite his love for her, he can really understand her. Above all, he believes in the sanctity of the family unit, and makes every effort to welcome his new daughter into their home. Ludovic and Marie-Noëlle forge a close bond in Paris, a bond which will not be broken, in spite of separations and departures. As Marie-Noëlle will subsequently learn, it is Ludovic who has persuaded Reynalda to send for her to come and live with them in France, and he will become in many ways, the father she has never had. He is a family man, and believes that a child should be with its mother. He overlooks the fact, though, that Reynalda is really a mother in biological terms only, and does not require or desire that her daughter lives with her. Although well-meaning, as a parent, he may not always make the right decisions for his children.

His love and tireless devotion for Reynalda is almost surprising. As aforesaid, he does not typify what is sometimes the representation of the Caribbean male, as lazy, irresponsible, regularly absent in family life. Ludovic is the antithesis of such traits, and is really a model “house husband”. He is truly caring of Reynalda, despite her long silences and moodiness, and endeavours to look after her regardless:

De la même manière, il avait la charge entière de Reynalda. Il ne lui adressait la parole qu’en espagnol, la langue de sa petite enfance, comme si, à travers elle, il voulait retourner vers le temps où il n’avait pas connaissance des orages de la vie. Il supportait sa constante lassitude, interprétait des silences, et sans servilité, comme un aîné qui comprend tout, prévenait ses moindres désirs. Un jour qu’elle passait devant la porte de leur chambre, Marie-Noëlle le vit assis à côté de Reynalda endormie avec la mine d’une maman qui veille le sommeil d’un nourrisson mal portant. (p39)

The above quote demonstrates the maternal aspect of Ludovic. Not only does he care for Marie-Noëlle and Garvey, but he is also very much a mother figure to Reynalda. In reality he is both mother and father to the family. This is in stark contrast with Reynalda, who seems incapable of embracing any aspect of parenthood.

Ludovic speaks to Reynalda in Spanish, “la langue de sa petite enfance” (p39). One can often express oneself more deeply in the language of one’s childhood. As was examined in the introduction, some Caribbean writers and theorists such as Patrick Chamoiseau, view language as a defining constituent in one’s identity. Spanish is the language of Ludovic’s childhood, and is inextricably bound with a notion of innocence, reminiscent of happier time in his life. When he speaks to

Reynalda in Spanish, he is able to recapture part of his earlier identity, part of a bygone time, when life was perhaps simpler, and when, “il n’avait pas connaissance des orages de la vie” (p39). It is possible, that he, unlike Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle, is not capable of facing reality.

Ludovic is reminiscent of Zek in *Une saison à Rihata*. Both are extremely patient men, both hold their wives in high esteem. Ludovic is very proud of Reynalda’s achievements and studies, while Zek had admired his wife’s earlier ambitions and political ideals, and both are able to withstand the moodiness and indifference present in their wives’ lives. In fact, it is questionable whether Ludovic and Zek are actually loved by Reynalda and Marie-Hélène. Ludovic and Zek are excellent fathers while their female counterparts are almost incapable of loving their children. It is Ludovic, who endeavours to hold together his family, and who tries to maintain a semblance of normality in their home. It is he also, who facilitates Reynalda in the pursuit of her studies, though for this he will not receive any gratitude. He is a loyal and loving partner and father, and has a stabilising effect on the lives of those around him. It is an interesting fact, that unlike many other female characters in French Caribbean writing who are portrayed in terms of their feminine resilience in the face of hardship, many of Condé’s female characters are anti-heroines, women who endure much, but do not necessarily rise above their difficulties. Marie-Hélène and Reynalda are good examples of such women, whose identities are defined by a daily inward struggle towards an elusive happiness and identity.

## Nina

Marie-Noëlle has never harboured a desire to seek out her grandmother. Reynalda's version of events, her rape by Gian Carlo, night after night, watched over and condoned by Nina, has sufficed. However, now, back in Guadeloupe for the first time in years to attend Ranélise's funeral, Marie-Noëlle desperately needs confirmation that her mother's version of events is true. The narrative bounces back and forth, recapping her efforts to discover definitively what happenings led to her mother's pregnancy. Differing and conflicting opinions surface, and Marie-Noëlle believes her only chance to arrive at the truth is to meet her grandmother.

Nina is very different from how Marie-Noëlle has imagined her to be. Not small or thin like Reynalda, she has the appearance of a strong woman, who must have been good-looking in her younger days:

Or Nina qui se tenait bien droite malgré sa sciatique et ses douleurs était haute, très haute. Plantureuse. On distinguait la forme affaissée de ses seins, lourds, atteignant presque son ventre. Ses bras, ses épaules étaient bien en chair. Sa figure frappante malgré l'âge et le dénuement gardait ses contours arrogants. Pas de doute, dans son temps, Nina avait dû être une belle négresse. Une vraie femme matador. (p179)

Marie-Noëlle, for the first time in her life, decides to state her parentage, and names her father as Gian Carlo. The importance of this should not be underestimated. At this very moment, two important pieces of her identity are being constructed, or so she believes. She meets her grandmother for the first time, and she openly reveals the

identity of Gian Carlo as her father. For a split second in time, Marie-Noëlle feels she has found the missing jigsaw piece, and that her search is over. Her short-lived happiness does not last, as Nina's mocking laughter dispels any notions she has that the past can be laid to rest:

La réaction de Nina ne fut pas celle qu'elle attendait. Embarras, contrition, colère. Nina commença par la fixer, comme si elle n'était pas certaine de ce que ses oreilles entendaient. Puis, elle rejeta la tête en arrière et éclata de rire. Un rire sans fin. Un rire qui lui distendait les lèvres, découvrait le fin fond de sa gorge et la vipère violacée de sa langue. Un rire qui d'un seul coup anéantissait les certitudes de Marie-Noëlle et la rejetait vers ce territoire du doute et de l'angoisse qu'elle avait cru quitter pour toujours. (p180)

Nina's laugh is both mocking and shocking. Regardless of the reason behind it, the description of her lips, her throat and her tongue are reminiscent of how Reynalda described her mother, as a "monstre". Nina appears quite grotesque and ugly, and first impressions are of an insensitive and thoughtless woman. The opening lines of her "récit" are defensive and unwavering. Reynalda's story, in her eyes, is false, untrue, unfounded, and Reynalda is nothing but a clever liar:

Je ne sais pas ce qu'elle t'a raconté. Les bêtises qu'elle a inventées avec Fiorella, j'en suis sûre. Que je l'ai forcée. Que la première fois, j'ai même tenu ses mains. Elle a dû raconter qu'elle a fait cela parce qu'elle avait peur et que je l'avais menacée. Et puis, quoi encore ? Elle a toujours été comme cela: menteuse, tellement menteuse, personnelle, surnoise. C'est un grand malheur



d'avoir mis sur la terre une fille pareille. Et pour toi, c'est un grand malheur de l'avoir comme maman. (p183)

Nina appears hard and deeply embittered. For Moudelino, however, “la désacralisation de la mère par la grand-mère nie les qualités de pondération, sagesse et solidarité féminine qu'on lui accorde traditionnellement” (Moudelino 2003 p1156). Nina is not portrayed as a kindly, benevolent matriarchal figure, presiding over, and binding together generations of women. She lives reclusively, in her wooden cabin on La Désirade. Until now, she has not been aware of Reynalda's life in France, nor has known anything of Marie-Noëlle. Most important though, is that she now imparts her version of the truth to her granddaughter, a version completely in conflict with what Reynalda has told her. For Condé, “it is not possible to find an objective reality basing one's judgements solely on the words of others” (McCormick 2000 p520). Nina's account of the past differs extensively from that relayed by Reynalda. For Marie-Noëlle, the history of her past is simply a collective of differing accounts, each necessarily conflicting with one another.

From a narrative viewpoint, Nina recounts her story in the form of a “récit”, whereas Reynalda's tale is derived from two disjointed conversations she has had with Marie-Noëlle. We might possibly be led to believe that Nina's story is more accurate, as a “récit” is supposed to relive actualities. For Condé, however, “dès qu'on commence à parler de nous, nous sommes dans un domaine de fiction” (Anagnostopoulou-Hielscher 1999 p78). Therefore, we might assume that anyone's tale is a departure from the realm of objectivity, and that what one relates in relation to oneself is perhaps partially or wholly fictional. Nina's “récit” conflicts greatly with Reynalda's account of how she became pregnant. However, there is one striking

similarity between both accounts, the gnawing absence of love between mother and daughter. Reynalda, as aforesaid, has described her mother as a “monstre”, and her feelings for Nina are of revulsion and loathing. Nina, for her part, does not love her daughter at all. Reynalda is the result of Nina’s own rape by her cousin Gabin, and though she has tried to reason with herself, and believe she will love her child, she is not able to do so:

On ne porte pas un fœtus, neuf mois à l’étroit dans son ventre, sans s’attacher à lui, sans causer avec lui pour lui promettre une existence meilleure que celle qu’on vit, sans imaginer la figure qu’il aura. Mais quand la sœur a mis Reynalda dans mes bras après mon accouchement, elle était tellement laide, déjà le portrait craché de Gabin, noire-noire comme lui, avec ses yeux globuleux, que tous mes bons sentiments se sont envolés aussitôt. Elle couinait comme un rat et ne pesait pas plus lourd. Née à terme, on aurait dit une prématurée. On ne commande pas à son cœur. À quoi sert de mentir ? Je n’ai jamais aimé cette enfant-là, la seule jamais sortie de mon ventre. (p190)

Nancy Chodorow suggests that, for a mother, a daughter is an extension or double of herself (Chodorow 1978 p109). Reynalda, though, in Nina’s eyes, is not seen in terms of extension or duality. Rather, Nina considers her a separate being, an ugly duckling. Motherhood does not bring with it adoration or deep love for this newborn infant. Instead, the new mother is repulsed at the sight of her daughter. Nina’s admission that she has been incapable of loving her daughter is deeply poignant. Rape, and resultant pregnancy is a recurring theme in Condé’s writing, and perhaps in Nina’s case, Condé excuses, in some way, this lack of love for a child born of sexual violence. Nina

admits that Reynalda did not love her either, and that she could sense the hostility felt for her by her daughter:

Je ne l'aimais pas et, disons la vérité, elle ne m'aimait pas non plus. Jamais un de ces mouvements de grâce, de gentillesse comme en ont les petits enfants. Une caresse. Un sourire. Un mot doux. [...] Moi, elle me regardait comme un cheval qui a jeté son maître et ses yeux, sans fond, fixes comme ceux d'une grande personne prenaient ma photo. Je sentais qu'elle me voyait dans mes hardes rapiécées, mes pieds nus à terre, laide à faire peur à force de pauvreté, tellement laide et tellement pauvre que c'en était une honte. (pp190-191)

At a young age, Reynalda is aware of her mother's inferiority, and, according to Nina, allows Nina internalise these feelings of inadequacy. If we are to believe Nina, Reynalda shows herself to be intensely cruel towards her mother, and views her as an object of disgust and abhorrence. Reynalda and Nina together bring to mind aspects of the old colonial master/slave relationship, with Reynalda, playing the dominant (master) role, who looks disdainfully on her (slave) mother. Nina cannot shed any light on the identity of Marie-Noëlle's father. Like Reynalda, who has given her daughter "la vérité", Nina also promises the truth, but it is a truth in conflict with Reynalda's. According to Nina, Gian Carlo is not Marie-Noëlle's father, and she denies knowing who he actually is:

Je ne peux t'offrir que la vérité. Je ne peux te raconter que ce qui est arrivé. Gian Carlo n'a jamais été ton papa. Qui c'est ? Seule Reynalda le connaît et peut te dire. Gian Carlo n'a jamais mis la main sur elle. (p202)

Reynalda's version of her rape has been compelling, and believable: "Une pareille histoire ne s'invente pas. Pareils détails ne s'imaginent pas" (p209). However, as the veracity of the rape will not be established during the novel, it is possible to consider that Reynalda is suffering from a delusion or psychosis, and might be unaware that she is not telling the truth. Is she perhaps a victim of a mental disorder such as Munchausen Syndrome? George defines Munchausen Syndrome as "predominately a female disorder" involving "an emotionally immature person with narcissistic tendencies, low self-esteem and a fragile ego" (George 2003). A sufferer believes she is a victim and "can then blame another person as a victimizer or persecutor, and portray herself as the victim." (George 2003). It is possible that Reynalda sees herself as a victim, and may convince herself that her accusations are true. Condé will not enlighten us, though, and the novel will end without an accurate depiction of what happened.

Nina's account of the past is equally believable, equally plausible. Following her story, Nina can be seen as a humble, pitiful woman, not likely to have lied cunningly. And, in stark contrast with the relationship between Marie-Noëlle and her mother, she feels a curious empathy, even closeness, to the grandmother she has not known until now:

Marie-Noëlle n'aurait jamais pensé que Nina pourrait lui sembler sympathique, proche d'elle-même, comme si deux exclues, deux en manque d'amour, soudain s'étaient retrouvées. Or, c'est cela qui se produisit. À bien la considérer, Nina n'avait rien de redoutable. Derrière son masque de sauvagerie, on sentait bien la vulnérabilité et on avait presque envie de s'apitoyer sur elle. Le dos au mur, tassée sur elle-même, elle parlait avec lenteur, sans regarder personne, comme si ceux qui l'entendaient ne la

concernaient pas. Comme si elle ne prenait la peine ni de convaincre ni de se défendre. Comme si elle se vidait de ce passé, remonté depuis les grandes profondeurs de son être pour son seul agrément. (p206)

The fact that Nina does not feel the need to convince her granddaughter that she is hearing the truth, serves only to increase Marie-Noëlle's pain and confusion.

However, Nina might also be suffering from a delusion, but the novel refuses to shed light on what really happened. Nina's "récit", narratively juxtaposed with Reynalda's version of the truth reinforces the notion that Marie-Noëlle's identity quest is indeed impossible, and that she will never be capable of "déchiffrer l'indéchiffrable" (p34).

What is incredibly poignant, is the reality that she cannot trust either of these women who, biologically, are closest of all to her. The following quote illustrates the fact that both women are in question where the truth is at stake:

Une pareille histoire ne s'invente pas. Pareils détails ne s'imaginent pas. Et pourtant l'une des deux femmes lui mentait avec aplomb. Laquelle? Est-ce que c'était Reynalda? Est-ce que c'était Nina? Elle ne saurait le dire et ainsi, elle n'aurait jamais la réponse à sa question. (p209)

Condé does not reveal the identity of Marie-Noëlle's father, and hence she must learn to live, and construct her own identity without ever knowing who he is. For Condé, "quand nous aurons accepté que le présent commence au moment où nous vivons, que l'identité commence avec nous, nous allons peut-être résoudre une grande partie de la difficulté de vivre" (Anagnostopoulou-Hielscher 1999 pp74-75). This is the central message of *Desirada*, the notion that one must look no more to the past for answers, and that the notion of identity "commence avec nous" (Anagnostopoulou-Hielscher 1999 p74).

### The role of education in *Desirada*

The importance of education, primarily for women, surfaces regularly as a leitmotif in Condé's writing. In *Une saison à Rihata*, Marie-Hélène's mother strongly encourages her daughter to study and be capable of earning her own living, while Vilma, in *Traversée de la Mangrove*, wishes to reject the traditional feminine role of marriage and motherhood in preference for study and self-amelioration. In *Desirada*, the significance of education is a dominant theme in the novel, with Condé charting the rise to intellectual achievement and honour of a black mother and daughter. Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle's success in the academic realm contrasts strongly with the matriarchial generations before them. Nina cannot read nor write, and her own mother and grandmother were rural women, not destined to furtherance through education. There is a striking difference between the academic success of Reynalda and that of Marie-Noëlle. Reynalda, though clearly suffering from the past, initiates her own rise to success, and leaves Guadeloupe of her own will "d'étudier et de devenir quelqu'un" (p19). As we have already seen, she is capable of abandoning her daughter whilst in pursuit of her own goals, something which seemingly renders her cold and ruthless. In Paris, she becomes a social worker, and does not allow the birth of Garvey or Angela deter her from her ambitions. Reynalda's choice of profession is ironic, though. She cares deeply for people to whom she owes nothing, while, at the same time, she ignores the needs of her closest family. It is as though she is incapable of reaching out to her blood relations, but satisfies her need to help others through her work. Marie-Noëlle has not had her mother's drive. Her early days in America have seen her wander aimlessly from one lowly position to the next. It is only while



working for Anthea, a black academic, that she is empowered to study, and finally, to write a doctoral thesis. In some ways, Anthea can be seen as a mother figure for Marie-Noëlle, in that she is a source of strength and encouragement for the latter. However, as will be examined shortly, Anthea sees Marie-Noëlle in terms of a personal project, rather than simply as a surrogate daughter whom she must guide. Reynalda has not actively encouraged Marie-Noëlle to educate herself. However, as we have seen earlier, she has used herself as an example of how hard work can transform one's life. Importantly, she has also insisted on the necessity of knowing what one wants out of life, something which Marie-Noëlle does not know, and indeed it is questionable if she has discovered this at the end of the novel. Nina, at the end of her "récit", advises her granddaughter to abandon her quest and to embark on a journey of education, something she herself, has been denied: "Ce qu'il faut, ce que je n'ai jamais eu, c'est l'instruction" (p202). For Nina, Marie-Noëlle does not require anything more from her mother. She sees her granddaughter as autonomous, as capable of directing her life without recourse to any help from Reynalda. Education is all she requires:

Ne demande plus rien à ta maman, cette menteuse de première. Laisse-la avec ses contes à dormir debout. D'ailleurs, ne demande plus rien à personne. Tu as l'instruction. Tu as l'éducation. Tu as belle santé. Vis ta vie. Qu'est-ce qui te manque ? (pp202-203)

Nina, though not educated herself, sees education as the force which will render Marie-Noëlle's life meaningful. Though incredibly different in most aspects of their lives, Nina and Reynalda share their opinion on this one issue, that education overrides family bonds. Nina believes Marie-Noëlle does not need Reynalda, and

Reynalda has also recommended work as a means of success, rather than family ties. As we have seen earlier, she does not encourage closeness between herself and her children.

It is the friendship between Marie-Noëlle and Anthea, an African-American, which is the catalyst to Marie-Noëlle's return to university and eventual academic success. At last, therefore, she will take the advice of her mother and grandmother and live her life. However, the depiction of Marie-Noëlle as a rising academic is filled with pessimism and negativity. Firstly, it is Anthea, and not Marie-Noëlle, who is the driving force behind the latter's progression. For Anthea, an ambitious, tenacious black woman, and a specialist in slave narratives, the transformation of Marie-Noëlle from humble immigrant to respected academic, has been a project realised, and an example of how hard work and perseverance can transcend the life of a black person:

Elle [Anthea] seule et personne d'autre avait métamorphosé une petite émigrante craintive, mariée à un musicien sans le sou en un respectable professeur d'université. La Race lui en saurait gré et, quant à ceux qui se hâtaient de conjuguer le rêve américain au passé, ils auraient la preuve qu'ils déparlaient. (p223)

Marie-Noëlle is portrayed as a puppet in her own life. Though she manages to achieve high academic honour, it is clear that her heart is not in this, and that she is not deeply fulfilled by her studies or research:

Pourtant, elle ne connaissait guère plus de bien-être que dans le temps de sa première jeunesse à Nice. Elle s'était donc remise à la rédaction de sa thèse.

Mais sans cœur à l'ouvrage. Elle n'arrivait pas à ressusciter les flambées d'enthousiasme des années précédentes et toute l'œuvre de Jean Genet lui paraissait subitement insipide. Elle s'obstinait quand même et restait des heures enfermée dans les cimetières sans air ni joie que sont les bibliothèques d'université. (pp219-220)

Although she now feels apathetic towards her studies, it is significant that the focus of Marie-Noëlle's work has been on Jean Genet. Although her research on Genet does not fulfil her, perhaps she has nonetheless felt some level of empathy with him. Like her, Genet was abandoned by his parents at a young age, and lived his life as an orphan. Marie-Noëlle was also abandoned by Reynalda, and has never felt part of any family, except for those early happy years with Ranélise.

There is a startling feeling of lack of control in the above citation. Marie-Noëlle is not enthusiastic about her research, yet she condemns herself to pursue it, as if she has no choice in the matter. She is propelling herself into an academic realm without due consideration of her own true goals or objectives. It seems entirely possible, that she has yet to discover what they may be, and that she has not pursued the right topic for her research. On her graduation day, her confusion is felt even more deeply. She can smile at her mentor, Anthea. However, the reality is that academic acclaim has not brought her immense happiness or self-fulfillment:

Quand même, en ce grand jour, elle n'éprouvait pas les mêmes sentiments qu'Anthea. Pas de contentement devant ce qui pouvait passer pour une ascension sociale. Pas de fierté intellectuelle. Elle se sentait tout au plus

soulagée, comme si elle venait de se débarrasser d'une formalité ennuyeuse.

(p223)

Malena suggests that Anthea has only ever seen Marie-Noëlle as “a black woman and has never made it possible for Marie-Noëlle to speak either of her Caribbeanness or her inner self” (Malena 2000 p94). For Anthea, race is all that is important. She has but two objectives in life, to raise her daughter, and to rehabilitate her race: “Elle avait donné deux buts à ce qui lui restait de vie à vivre: élever sa fille, sa petite Molar et, par son travail, revaloriser sa Race” (p110). She sees Marie-Noëlle solely in terms of her being a black woman, not a Guadeloupean. However, Condé has argued that race is not important, but culture: “It is becoming more and more evident that what matters is culture. Everybody understands that race is nothing” (Manning 2003 p115). This is perhaps why Marie-Noëlle is unfulfilled: race is not something with which she can identify easily, and as an immigrant, living in America, she is not attached to any one culture.

The last chapter of the novel sees Marie-Noëlle in her office overlooking the Charles River in Boston. She is now established as a respected academic, and spends her time teaching and advising students. The vacuum, though, that is her life, is overwhelming:

Jusqu'à midi, je dois recevoir des étudiants. C'est la pratique. Je dois leur prêter attention, échanger, communiquer, et ironie des ironies, moi qui ne peux pas me conduire, j'ai la tâche de les aider à trouver une solution à leurs difficultés. (p279)

Marie-Noëlle finds it ironic that she is positioned in an advisory role for her students, as she acknowledges that in her own life all is not well. The respect she commands as an academic does not seem to make her happy or fulfil her. There is a sense that she finds her work mechanical and wearisome, and that her heart is simply not in it, or perhaps in anything at all:

Qu'est-ce que ce garçon-là me raconte ? .... Il entend faire sa thèse sur Rachid Boudjedra. *La Répudiation*. Pourquoi pas ? Je l'encourage. Passons au suivant.  
(p280)

Boudjedra's 1959 novel documents the repudiation of his mother by his father. As we have seen, the notion of repudiation is hugely important in *Desirada*. In many cases, love is sacrificed. In its place we find rejection, dismissal and denial. For Marie-Noëlle, repudiation has resulted in indifference to her life, her work and her surroundings.

To conclude, education and the social furtherance it brings, has changed in some way, Marie-Noëlle's life. However, it has not brought an infusion of meaning into her life, nor does she understand who she is any more because of her academic achievements. And unlike Reynalda, for whom education seems to have brought happiness and self-fulfillment, Marie-Noëlle needs something else to fulfil and sustain her.

## Conclusion

The prime focus of this novel has been Marie-Noëlle's search for her father, a search which if successful, will teach her much about herself. However, she has also, perhaps unknowingly, searched deeply for her mother, a mother, whose true identity will never be revealed. In relation to her father, it is significant that Condé chooses not to reveal his name, and that Marie-Noëlle cannot satisfy herself behind doubt as to his identity. She believes that she cannot be a whole person until she knows who he is. However, as she will never know, she must learn to live without the past, and construct an identity for herself grounded in the future. It is significant, that, in the last chapter of the novel, Marie-Noëlle refers to herself in the first person "Je". She is about to embark upon the tentative beginnings of a new life, a new identity. Saying "I" is reminiscent of Tituba's proud proclamation of her existence and identity. And like Tituba, Marie-Noëlle is quite possibly finding the courage now to set out on a new journey, her new journey, which will be undertaken without the vital knowledge of her past. She must forge a new path without looking back, because looking back has not provided answers or happiness.

The novel's epigraph is a quote from a Martiniquan song: "À part le bonheur, il n'est rien d'essentiel". Marie-Noëlle echoes this sentiment in the final chapter of the novel: "Moi, j'ai toujours cru que le bonheur, c'est le seul but dans la vie" (p280). However, happiness is something which eludes her, but also is something which she equates with the fact that she does not know her father's identity:



Il [Ludovic] ne comprenait pas qu'en fin de compte, réelle ou imaginaire, cette identité-là avait fini par me plaire. D'une certaine manière, ma monstruosité me rend unique. Grâce à elle, je ne possède ni nationalité ni pays ni langue. Je peux rejeter ces tracasseries qui tracassent tellement les humains. Elle donne aussi une explication à ce qui entourne ma vie. Je comprends et j'accepte qu'autour de moi, il n'y ait jamais eu de place pour un certain bonheur. Mon chemin est tracé ailleurs. (p281)

Though Marie-Noëlle acknowledges that her happiness is limited by not knowing her father, and not having other normal defining traits in order to establish her identity, this is somewhat balanced by a sense of freedom, of liberation, by not been trapped by the confines of a given or static identity. She has "ni nationalité, ni pays ni langue" (p259) to tie and bind her to some sort of pre-destiny, and there is some vague hint in these lines that perhaps one should be free to assume one's own identity, to discover one's own self. As the novel draws to a close, Marie-Noëlle acknowledges that her lack of knowledge about her father has rendered her unique, different from all others. She has spent many years searching for something she will not find. However, as Malena suggests, perhaps "the only identity possible resides in the very process of searching for it" (Malena 1999 p67).

For Reynalda, the novel's end sees her savouring literary success and acclaim. She has published a book, "*Les jours étrangers*", detailing the social conditions of migrant families in France. She spends her time giving speeches, attending conferences and enjoying the success for which she has worked so hard. She is about to write an autobiography, which in Ludovic's opinion will be a fiction:

Ainsi, elle se libérera une fois pour toutes de la vérité. Pourtant, la connaissant comme je la connais, je sais que cette vérité-là sera une fiction. D'ailleurs, qu'est-ce que nous pouvons *construire quand nous parlons de nous-mêmes* ? (p278).

This also echoes Condé's own feelings that we enter a fictional realm, when speaking subjectively. It is probable, though, that Reynalda is capable only of writing and using theory to transmit her ideas. She has never been able to speak personally, and hence, must use the medium of the spoken word to express herself. Against the odds Reynalda has risen, like a phoenix from the ashes, from the depths of insignificance, to transform her life, and show others what she truly is, a persevering and enduring woman. The striking difference between her and Marie-Noëlle is this: Reynalda is haunted by the past, but transcends its horrors through hard work. Marie-Noëlle, in contrast, is haunted by not having a past, a father, and it is this cruel absence in her life which threatens her progress and diminishes her happiness. As the novel draws to a close, it seems conceivable that Reynalda and Marie-Noëlle are both beginning to find peace in their lives, one through the rejection of an original identity, the other through the realisation that she must now begin to construct her own.

## **Conclusion**

I come now to the conclusion of this thesis, and the summation of four contrasting novels, whose narratives intrigue and captivate many who have read them. Condé's work is extremely innovative, and each novel penned illustrates her wide-ranging capacity to re-invent, every time, the wheel of Caribbean literature. In terms of publication, the novels analysed in this thesis span some sixteen years, and mark a clear development in Condé's work. In some ways, her writing mirrors her life autobiographically. Having spent several years in Africa, her earlier work focuses primarily on the Caribbean people, and their complex relationship with the continent of their ancestors. Later, as she returned to work in Europe and in America, her more recent writing explores the Caribbean diaspora living in Europe and in the United States, while still analysing the inherent challenges of finding one's identity in a place where one is perceived as a stranger. As a writer, Condé is not afraid to write as she chooses. As a woman, she is not afraid to portray women in terms of negativity. As an author, she embraces change, and experiments with narrative locale, structure, language, and ideas. It has been my privilege to examine and explore the work of this exciting and prolific woman.

The concepts of identity, both personal and collective cultural, have been the central concern of this thesis. Condé's narrative style has been most helpful in my analysis of identity, in that she privileges the reader to the inward thoughts of many characters and, in so doing, reveals several facets of their identities. To recapitulate on the definitions of identity offered in the introduction, the notion of personal identity is answerable by an examination of one's "lineage, family status and place of birth and

residence” (Smith 1995 p130). Collective cultural identity indicates a shared “sameness” or unity with others, and incorporates into this certain cultural aspects such as values, traditions, superstitions, etc. The prime focus of my work has been grounded in an analysis of the notion of personal identity, and the protagonists in the four novels have been explored on this basis.

On the subject of lineage, several characters are consumed by a need to know and understand their lineage, in the broader attempt to comprehend their own identities. Tituba, who as a slave struggles to proclaim her identity, is clearly defined by her lineage and ancestry. In death, she listens to her mother’s advice, and is proud of her name, which has been given to her by her stepfather. Tituba’s lineage is an important link to her past, and this helps her negotiate her identity in the face of the many struggles she encounters as a black female slave. Marie-Hélène’s lineage is also inextricably woven into her identity but, unlike Tituba, she wishes to sever all ties with her parentage, so deeply embedded are the miseries and wrong-doings of her past life. For her, lineage is akin to embittered memories and disgust: her mother and sister are dead, and she retains no contact with her father and his uncouth ways. Francis Sancher also wishes to reject his lineage, a lineage which strikes down the male members of his family around the age of fifty. As a descendant of the *Béké* class, his lineage is linked inextricably with white colonial rule. Sancher has the blood of his forefathers’ past on his hands, and is forever tainted by a sin which he has not committed directly. He is determined not to father any children who might continue to bear the curse of past generations. In his utter rejection of lineage, Sancher’s identity is completely and necessarily defined by it. Against his will, he becomes a father, illustrating the fact that lineage is an uncontrollable force, and that future generations will define their identities against the backdrop of their ancestors’. Marie-Noëlle is

consumed by the need to know her lineage, and this quest darkens her life considerably. Her desire to be able to name her father overwhelms her, and she believes she cannot attain happiness without access to this vital knowledge. Towards the end of *Desirada*, Marie-Noëlle realises that the identity of her father is something which will be forever denied her, and that she must pick up the pieces of her life and continue regardless. This notion of the denial of lineage is hugely symbolic of the plight of the Caribbean people, who will never have complete access to their ancestry. *Desirada* advocates the idea that identity may, of choice, be a personal construct, and that an individual may choose an identity which befits him/her, rather than being constrained by a dominant discourse on identity. Society categorises a person's identity according to a few limited paradigms such as where one lives, what language one speaks, what one's lineage is etc. *Desirada* suggests that an individual might refuse to be constrained by the ideas or ideals of others, in the quest for his/her own identity.

I have examined the notion of status in relation to the exploration of personal identity. Condé's characters are certainly defined by their status, or the role they negotiate in their surroundings. Tituba's status is a prime constituent of her identity: for those around her, she is seen as a slave and as a witch, although as has been examined, her status as slave is not something by which she defines herself. Rather, she is aware of her label, but resists its application, unlike other slaves in the novel, such as John Indien, who see their own identities in terms of being slaves. Tituba's status as witch constitutes part of her identity which is resistant to stable meaning: for her, and for some others, her powers of witchcraft are a benevolent force in her life. For others, though, Tituba's identity as witch is viewed as an evil and malevolent

power which must be eradicated. Marie-Hélène's status is that of unhappy wife, reluctant mother, disappointed lover, failed student. All aspects of her status rebound in disillusionment, and she vegetates in the dull mediocrity of a life constrained by failure, personal crisis, and forbidden love. Sancher's status, in the closed-knit community of Rivière au Sel, is that of the stranger and the outsider. All aspects of his status abound with mystery, and his identity is never complete. He is enigmatic and is viewed differently by each of the *habitants* of this small Guadeloupean village. Reynalda's status is that of mother and academic, though for her, her academic career is much more important than her role as mother. As has been seen, Marie-Noëlle's status as an academic does not satisfy her long-held need to find her biological father.

The thesis has also examined identity as constituted by the significance of birthplace, or place of residence. A recurring theme in Condé's writing is the importance of the Caribbean as a maternal link in the lives of several protagonists. For many characters, the island home or birthplace is a defining facet of their identity, and something which sustains them even though they may inhabit other parts of the globe. Although she will never live in the Caribbean again, Reynalda harbours fond childhood memories of La Désirade, while Barbados is eternalised by Tituba, while living in America. Marie-Hélène severs the umbilical cord with her island birthplace upon the death of her mother, so tenuous is the correlation for her, between mother and motherland. Sancher, although born in Cuba, comes to Guadeloupe to die, because his forefathers' sins were committed here. The island of Guadeloupe is a clear constituent of Sancher's identity: though it is not his birthplace, it will become his dying-place. In this way, he will atone for the atrocities committed in his family name.



*Traversée de la Mangrove*, which was written by Condé in Guadeloupe, following a long spell living in Europe and America, casts a pessimistic but honest shadow on the collective cultural identity of the inhabitants of her birthplace. As evidenced in the novel, Condé, as a Guadeloupean, is not afraid to portray her homeland and countrymen in a mixed light. The narrative captures the *mentalité* of the islanders as narrow-minded and begrudging. They openly resent success or achievement, but most of all, the novel depicts the community as rooted in stagnancy, in a communal sense of inertia. Change or progress is not embraced, and outsiders, like Sancher, are treated with distrust and suspicion. In its negative portrayal of collective cultural identity, *Traversée de la Mangrove* advocates a call for open-mindedness among the *habitants*. A change might be a step in the right direction, but if the Caribbean does not embrace what is new and different, the collective identity of these islanders will remain forever grounded in a past which harbours no hope for the future.

Condé's writing is preoccupied with an analysis of the identity of women, and women are portrayed in varying and contrasting roles in the four novels. Women may be seen as victims of slavery, injustice and abuse, as experienced by Tituba, or may be the victims of rape and violence, as explored with Abena, Tituba, Nina and Reynalda. Some women are portrayed as prisoners of their own culture and tradition, such as Vilma, whereas others are exploited for their uses, like Tituba. Some women do not appear to love their partners, as seen with Marie-Hélène and Reynalda, while others, like Tituba or Nina, are depicted as *l'amoureuse*, and may love too much. Some, like Marie-Hélène and Marie-Noëlle, lead meaningless lives, while others, such as Tituba, sacrifice much for the men they love. Some even inflict pain and suffering on their

own families, and must live with the consequences, as Marie-Hélène learns to her regret. Indeed, the overriding preoccupation for women in the four novels, is that of searching for themselves, which it is hoped, will help them attain an identity. As the epigraph in *Desirada* suggests: “À part le bonheur, il n’est rien d’essentiel”. Each quest is, however, an individual one, and the path to future happiness will be forged differently by each woman.

The exploration of motherhood, and its positive and negative portrayals, is a dominant issue in this thesis, and in Condé’s work in general. Returning to the definition of identity as examination of one’s “family status”, Condé’s mothers perpetually negotiate their status as mothers (Smith 1995 p130). Motherhood is often depicted in terms of discontentment and dissatisfaction, and children are peripheral to the wider needs of the mother. This has been clearly evident in the analysis of Marie-Hélène and Reynalda, both unhappy and unfulfilled mothers. However, negative portrayals of motherhood are open to the possibility of change and betterment. Abena, in death, becomes a loving and advising mother figure to Tituba, while Rosa determines to repair her damaged relationship with Vilma. Vulnerable, Marie-Hélène reaches out to Sia and, in so doing, initiates some hope that friendship and empathy will replace distance and distrust. Even Reynalda, by sharing her version of the past with her daughter, attempts to bridge the gap between herself and Marie-Noëlle. The concept of motherhood, though interwoven with intricate complexities in Condé’s work, retains elements of hope that these mothers may find new identity as they strive to renew their lives.

Condé’s writing embraces the notion of journeying towards an undefined objective, towards a point where the goal-posts may move or vanish into oblivion.

However, regardless of whether or not her protagonists find, or even know, what their quest is, her narratives rebound with the notion that searching is a necessary undertaking in life, vital for self-awareness. Searching is asking the questions which lead to a greater understanding of one's identity. In asking these questions, Condé's protagonists travel into the uncharted waters of the self and, in doing so, make open the way for a knowledge of self which may otherwise remain latent or unknown.

The level of analysis undertaken in this thesis, in relation both to theoretical framework and novels explored, is necessarily limited to the research requirements of a Master of Arts degree. However, the history and events of recent centuries now gives rise to a vast array of philosophical discourse available on the concepts of both identity theory and post-colonial theory and, notwithstanding Condé's ever-prolific output, it is clear that the research presented in this thesis is capable of an analysis which far exceeds its present scope. I hope to be able to continue along the path of this intellectual journey in the near future.

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