ABSTRACT

WONDERS OF THE WAKING WORLD: EXPLORING THE SUBJECT IN MARYSE CONDÉ’S TRAVERSÉE DE LA MANGROVE

By Jennifer Lynn Wahl

Maryse Condé’s novel Traversée de la Mangrove follows the people of a small, fictional town in Guadeloupe on a long night’s journey through the funeral wake of one of their most notorious, and enigmatic, citizens – a man known as Francis Sancher. The novel sets forth a dizzying topography, of individuals and islands, paths and blind alleys through the life of the deceased and the lives of those whom his influence forever changed. As at all wakes, however, the man at its center has no voice of his own. Rather, he is reconstructed and reanimated by the testimony of others. Through the optic of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “rhizomatic” theory of literature, I examine Condé’s re-membering of Sancher through the voices of those in his community. In the novel, subjectivity does not rely solely upon social class or racial identity but is constructed by each individual through a process of self-examination and envisioning the future.
WONDERS OF THE WAKING WORLD: EXPLORING THE SUBJECT IN MARYSE CONDÉ’S *TRAVERSÉE DE LA MANGROVE*

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of French and Italian
by
Jennifer Wahl
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2009

Advisor: ________________________________
Mark McKinney

Reader: ________________________________
Elisabeth Hodges

Reader: ________________________________
Anna Klosowska
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................ 1

CHAPTER ONE ......................................................................................................... 3

*THE MANGROVE*

*Tracings on a Map of the Mangrove* ..................................................................... 8

*Mapping and Tracing* ............................................................................................ 11

*Impasses on a Search for Freedom* ....................................................................... 14

CHAPTER TWO ........................................................................................................ 21

*THE INDIVIDUAL, HISTORY AND IDENTITY*

*Mapping the Subject* ............................................................................................. 21

*Tracing Bloodlines* ................................................................................................. 29

*Music and History* ................................................................................................. 41

CHAPTER THREE .................................................................................................... 43

*TRAVERSING THE SUBJECT*

*The Singular Subject* ............................................................................................. 47

*Towards Subjectivity* ............................................................................................. 56

*Transgression and Redemption* ............................................................................ 62

CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 65

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................................................................................................... 66
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the help and constant support of many colleagues, family members and friends, I would never have been able to finally complete this project. First and foremost among these important and beloved individuals is my dear husband Chris, who has always shown me unconditional love and support and is a wonderfully careful and critical reader. Without his infinite patience and encouragement I would never have found the courage to finally put these words to paper and feel confident with the result. Chris inspires me every day with his thoughtful intelligence, hard work, eloquence, compassion and generosity of spirit and love.

I would like to thank my parents, Tom and Mary, my wonderful siblings Brian and Karen and their families, Ako, Derek, and Sadie for their constant love, support and advice. I am grateful to the Palkovacs family for their infinite support. I have been blessed with the best family in the world.

A secret to any success I’ve had, academically or otherwise, has been a strong network of fabulous friends and colleagues. Thank you to my “gradies”, especially Jenny, Nicky, Erin, and Emilie; you are all incredibly inspiring. It has been such a great pleasure to work and play with you; you have always shown me such wonderful unwavering support, and I look forward to speaking more French, talking more theory and eating more raclette with you in future travels.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the esteemed Professors of French at Miami University; without you, this thesis and Master’s degree quite literally would not exist. Furthermore, I spent six incredible years in your midst, including the most rewarding and rigorous two years of my life: the graduate program in French. Jonathan Strauss and Jim Creech: you are amazing. Thank you so much for your help in supporting my efforts throughout my time at Miami. Special thanks to Nick Nesbitt for inspiring me to continue my French studies into graduate school and for his encouragement of my thesis project. He has been an invaluable influence on my choice to study postcolonial literature and theory, and his wonderful teaching and interest in Maryse Condé’s work directly inspired this thesis. I am also indebted to my wonderful thesis advisor, Mark McKinney, and his careful, thorough and extremely helpful reading of the various iterations of this paper: thank you so much for your patience and encouragement! Big thanks to Elisabeth Hodges and Anna Klosowska: I have so loved taking your classes and becoming friends with you both. You are inspiring beyond measure. Thank you for your help on my thesis committee. Paul Sandro, you have been a great friend in addition to one of the best professors I have met. I cannot thank you enough for your thoughtful and constant support.

I’d also like to thank all of my dear friends from Oxford, Minneapolis and beyond. Thank you to my friends and colleagues at Sofitel Minneapolis, especially Joseph Colina, who had encouraged me to finish this paper for years and gave me time off especially for that purpose. Thank you Dori Handy and Luda and Matthieu Lafaurie for your interest and encouragement and getting on my case about not working hard enough on my thesis.

Thank you to the various friends and coffee shops of Bemidji, Minnesota. It took living in a small but very northern town to finally find the time to write about a small town in the Caribbean.
INTRODUCTION

*Traversée de la Mangrove*, Maryse Condé’s 1989 novel, is set during a single evening in a small, backwater community named Rivière au Sel on the island of Guadeloupe. The mangrove of the book’s title refers to a type of brackish wetland found along coasts in the tropics. The mangrove evokes the topography of the Caribbean, as well as islands and continental coasts in tropical climates around the world. A coastal frontier in which salty and fresh waters mix, a mangrove is both a resilient, densely wooded boundary and an important habitat for diverse species of fish, birds and insects. The mangrove is an example of a rhizome, a botanical model employed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their seminal work, *Mille Plateaux*. By exploring the novel through the optic of Deleuze and Guattari’s “Rhizome”, I argue that the mangrove of *Traversée de la Mangrove* represents the rhizomatic form of the community of Rivière au Sel. Rivière au Sel, a place described as “fermé, retiré” in a lost corner of Basse-Terre, exists, like a mangrove, on the periphery of the insular Guadeloupean world. Like plants and trees of the mangrove, individuals in Rivière au Sel are connected; moreover, these connections lie beneath the murky surface of superficial (mis)understandings of their community. Individuals are not aware of their interconnectedness with one another, and instead understand their society in hierarchical terms. In order to go beyond the illusions of order and hierarchy that keep individuals rooted in place, they must discover and understand truths and map their escape from alienation, loneliness and dissatisfaction. Crossing a mangrove involves many risks; as one character envisions, it is impossible: “On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192). Therefore, a mangrove represents both a flourishing ecosystem, a rhizomatic web of connections and a confusing obstacle abundant with hidden perils that threaten to swallow a traveler whole.

Francis Sancher, the elusive, enigmatic stranger who mysteriously died in Rivière au Sel, was such a traveler. During his brief time there, he attempted to write an autobiography and family history, also named “Traversée de la Mangrove”, but instead fell over dead on a forgotten path. The novel, bearing the same name as the deceased’s project, is a collection of testimonies of community members who gather together at Sancher’s wake, memorializing him and reflecting on their own lives. The novel itself comprises a rhizome composed of individual testimonies connected to one another through memories, however contradictory or imperfect, of Francis Sancher. The rhizomatic structure of the novel reflects the complexity and multiplicity of a Caribbean community.

The novel also manifests another rhizomatic form, the map. The novel provides a map, in the Deleuzian sense, of the community and of Sancher. Mourners at the wake perform a collective act of mapping Sancher’s life in Rivière au Sel, and in so doing create maps of their community and their own strategies for self-liberation. In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s comparison of writing to mapping, one can see that *Traversée de la Mangrove* does not follow a traditional, linear narrative of subjectivity, and instead provides a fragmented, manifold portrait of unique individuals comprising a singular, yet multiple, community. Through this mapping, the novel resists any teleological master narrative or essentialist discourse. There is no central authority governing interpretation, nor is there a definite beginning or end. As Condé has warned against mythologizing history, the novel provides a rhizomatic model for understanding

---

history that would account for individual experiences and a multiplicity of perspectives. The novel does not focus on a glorified vision of the past, as in a myth, nor does it provide a definite vision of the future, as in a manifesto. *Traversée de la Mangrove* is not a traditional murder mystery, a “whodunit” beginning with a body and ending with the guilty party exposed. Although the body puts the story in motion, there is no resolution; there is only the mysterious death of a man inscrutable while he was alive, and a polyphonic testimony to the impact of this man’s life on those at his wake. Each individual testimony is an end in itself, a subjective and indispensible component of the whole.

*Traversée de la Mangrove* represents subjectivity as an individual process of self-examination. The subject must cross over from the confines of small-minded prejudice, loneliness and resentment, navigating through the mangrove of interconnectedness of the community, to the light and open horizon of truth and the possibility for happiness. Resembling Alain Badiou’s description of subjectivity as a consequence of an “event”, the novel comprises a map of coming-into-subjectivity, the event being Sancher’s life in Rivière au Sel. Sancher was a catalyst who inspired self-reflection, what Badiou calls an endless “truth procedure”\(^2\), among various acquaintances. This subject is mixed, not defined exclusively by identity politics and labels. Sancher was characterized by many different labels, and resolutely refused to live up to any one of them. He was both singular and multiple. The individuals at his wake also defy labels, and many make decisions that shape their futures while reflecting upon their interactions with Sancher.

As various individuals work to map Sancher’s life, they expose the multiple nature of his subjectivity. However, they too are becoming subjects while creating these subjective maps. Sancher exposed realities that were otherwise beneath the surface of understanding in Rivière au Sel. During his time there, he offered truths; after his death, his acquaintances must work to decipher and understand them. Many individuals, after years of alienation and discontentment, must come to terms with their past, reflect on the present and make decisions to improve their lives. In this way, crossing a mangrove – traveling across a difficult, confusing border zone of identity – provides a powerful image for coming into subjectivity.

---

CHAPTER ONE

THE MANGROVE

Mangrove swamps exist at the convergence of salty and fresh waters, a muddy, brackish zone at the periphery of an island or mainland. They are found in subtropical and tropical areas across the planet, providing habitat to thousands of species of birds, fish and insects. A mangrove flourishes primarily below the surface of the brackish waters, its strength embodied in the submarine rhizomatic network of tree roots and stems of its constituent flora. Peripherally located on an island’s coast, and yet fully central to a healthy island ecosystem, mangroves are exceedingly resilient, buffering lands against strong winds from the sea and sheltering coasts from such treacherous events as hurricanes and tsunamis. These wetland ecosystems are also increasingly endangered due to human overdevelopment on coasts across the world, as well as pollution, rising sea levels, and other consequences of global climate change.\(^3\)

Mangroves remain a familiar, though increasingly rare sight in the Caribbean, where island coasts were once surrounded by these wetlands. In the novel *Traversée de la Mangrove*, the reader is confronted with images of swamps and gullies as both peaceful, maternal spaces that provide Mira, a character who is a lonely outcast from her society, with a comforting solitude, and also as dangerous, inhuman zones, whose crossing is not only fraught with difficulty, but is likely impossible, and even fatal. Mangroves are sites of dynamic diversity as well as stagnation. The precarious and fragile nature of the mangrove provides an appropriate setting for a community that has been unsettled by the unexpected arrival and sudden death of a charismatic stranger.

The mangrove is a fitting metaphor for the backwater community of Rivière au Sel, whose very name suggests the half-salinity in which a mangrove might flourish, but would require adaptations and purification to sustain a human community. Ellen Munley argues that Rivière au Sel is “a name which symbolically reflects a social fabric composed in large part of prejudices, hatred, and misunderstandings. It needs purifying as much as the salt-laden water in order to support life.”\(^4\) Many individuals in Rivière au Sel express distrust and disillusionment in their relationships, and many pass judgment on one another based on social status and race. The members of this community converge, if only for one night, to share in profound, introspective silence and prayers surrounding a wake, or *veillée*. They are mourning the passing of a man who lived briefly among them but whose presence changed their community forever. The man is Francis Sancher, also known as Francisco Alvarez Sanchez. During the wake, residents of Rivière au Sel contemplate memories of his life in their community, telling, in silence, their own stories inspired by these memories. While the individuals’ reflections are private, recounted in an internal monologue, the individuals themselves are in the social context of a wake, surrounded by their peers who whisper to one another, pray out loud, sing and even recount ribald tales. Often the private, individual recollections about Francis Sancher contradict

---


one another. There are inconsistencies among accounts from one chapter to the next, as well as stories that corroborate one another or provide context or explanation for another individual’s experience. The third-person omniscient narrator, who speaks at various stages throughout the novel, reminds the reader throughout that individuals’ testimonies are not necessarily reliable, stating, “les gens racontent n’importe quoi”.

The result is a collection of puzzle pieces that do not quite fit together, but form a fractured and tenebrous portrait of a man who came to Rivière au Sel to recover a part of his personal history, attempt to atone for the sins of his ancestors, and bear witness to these sins through writing.

The framework of Traversée de la Mangrove is a series of chapters that bear the names of the individuals who are present at the veillée and who speak about Francis Sancher in their thoughts through a form of interior monologue. Each character’s experience at the wake is given a unique voice. Many characters, primarily women, speak in first person, testifying to their experiences and, in many cases, to decisions that they make in light of these reflections. These reflections, wishes and proclamations are all submerged in the silence of the individual immersed in his or her thoughts. Third person omniscient narration at the beginning and end of the novel frames the narrative, and provides the voice for certain testimonials.

The community of the wake, and the organization of the narrative itself, are akin to a mangrove, in that each character’s voice flourishes deep in the muddy waters of his or her thoughts; and in this ephemeral space of immediate collective memory, each character is interconnected, individual memories flowing into others’ recollections. Although the individuals reflecting on Sancher rarely interact with one another at the veillée, they are both in each other’s immediate physical presence and in the metaphysical space of subjective memories and thoughts. A community of individuals, the universalizing force of death places them on the same level, or plane. Gardeners, wealthy planters, writers, impoverished exiles, and teachers: all of these individuals are ultimately equal when it comes to their mortality. A gardener, Désinor, called l’Haïtien, reflects upon this fact, and his seething frustration at his social status, while at the veillée: “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.” Wealth, status, age and other social markings have no significance in the face of the equalizing nature of the universal: the banal reality of death.

Loulou Lameaulnes, a wealthy planter and prominent member of the community, is at the opposite end of the social spectrum from Désinor. He also recognizes the power of death to equalize individuals, asking, “Pourquoi la mort a-t-elle ce pouvoir? Pourquoi impose-t-elle silence aux haines, violences, rancœurs et nous force-t-elle à nous agenouiller à deux genoux

---

5 First found on page 34, this phrase is repeated by the narrator as “les gens disent n’importe quoi”, on page 44.

6 Most of the male characters are spoken for in third person, which brings to light questions of gender and testimony through differing narrative modes. A discussion of the differences between the narration for female characters and that of the male characters is forthcoming in Chapter Three.

7 Condé, Traversée, p. 208. My emphasis.

8 Sarah Kofman describes the equalizing nature of death in Paroles suffoquées in reference to Robert Antelme’s L’espèce humaine: “nous ne pouvons apercevoir aucune différence substantielle en face de la nature et en face de la mort, nous sommes obligés de dire qu’il n’y a qu’une espèce humaine” (76).
quand elle apparaît?" Loulou is powerful and respected in Rivière au Sel, but his family was dishonored when his daughter, Mira, fell in love with Francis Sancher, was rejected by him and gave birth to their illegitimate son. Loulou therefore has ample reasons to hate Sancher and seek revenge, but is now face to face with a more powerful adversary: the presence of death in the community. Loulou overhears the comments of two women walking to the wake, and their comments resonate with him, because they speak of the “justice” with which death and misfortune operate:

On dira ce qu’on voudra, le malheur a sa justice! Il ne s’occupe pas seulement de ceux qui n’ont pas un sou qui les appellent maîtres ou qui sont noirs comme toi et moi. Non! Il cogne à droite, il cogne à gauche. Les po chappé [Sang-mêlé], les mulâtres, les Zindiens et à ce que j’ai entendu, même les Blancs là-bas, en métropole! Voilà un homme qui marchait droit, tellement droit. On n’aurait jamais cru qu’il se couche un jour comme tout un chacun au fond d’un trou. Regarde-le à présent! (130)

Loulou, who identifies himself as a man “qui marchait droit”, imagines that he is the one “au fond d’un trou.” Although his material wealth and power place him at the apex of the social pyramid of Rivière au Sel, he finds himself an old, weary man, and recognizes himself in the women’s words: “Il ne lui manquait que les yeux rouges et la pipe maintenue par des chicots noirâtres pour ressembler à un vieux-corps” (130). Such is the equalizing power of mortality.

The novel provides each character, regardless of social standing, with a chapter (or, in Mira’s case, two chapters) in which he or she expresses a personal viewpoint. Thus, each character is on the same level, or plane, where no one perspective is granted total authority or supremacy. No individual is left out or rejected due to his or her social standing; as the narrator summarizes in the chapter “Le serein”: “on ne verrouille pas la porte d’une veillée. Elle reste grande ouverte pour que chacun s’y engouffre” (26). The singular plane upon which individuals are placed at a wake is akin to the idea of a “plane of immanence”, articulated in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. In the chapter, “Rhizome,” of Mille Plateaux, Deleuze and Guattari conceive of a non-hierarchical, non-dialectical model for philosophy and literary studies, the rhizome. A botanical rhizome is a plant type that does not root directly below into soil and sprout directly above the surface from the roots, as a tree does, but grows both horizontally below the ground and vertically from shoots along the subterranean horizontal stem. Seizing this image, Deleuze and Guattari evoke the weed as a metaphor for their decentralized philosophical construct. An equally salient example of a rhizomatic system is the mangrove. A mangrove is a brackish wetland rhizome that evokes the specificity of Caribbean island topography.

The rhizomatic mangrove creates a singular plane from which shoots rise above the water’s surface. To a casual observer who sees the shoots above ground, they appear to be separate plants; however, the shoots are connected to one another along laterally oriented, tightly connected and intertwined roots. This horizontal system provides a model for an anti-hierarchy, a level field from which each shoot rises, a space where movement also extends laterally. This is opposed to the terrestrial tree, whose roots extend vertically downward as the trunk grows vertically upward, movement being possible mainly up or down. Relationships on a terrestrial tree are located along a vertical axis, meaning that individuals along it are situated always above

---

9 Condé, Traversée, p. 124.
or below another. In the rhizome, each individual is connected, and no one is above or below another: “Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (MP 7). With their rhizomatic model, Deleuze and Guattari criticise the Cartesian “tree of knowledge”, a model for philosophy that posits metaphysics as the roots, physics as the trunk and the various sciences as the branches.¹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari directly criticize Noam Chomsky’s grammatical trees in linguistics¹¹ and Freudian psychoanalysis¹², which involve arborescent models in the Cartesian tradition. The rhizome is a direct affront to the hierarchical structure of the Cartesian tree. Although many rhizomatic systems feature trees and roots, these features do not comprise autonomous tree units but are interconnected with other trees in a larger system. The mangrove system features various trees and submarine roots that are not fixed in vertical order, like the Cartesian tree, but form a tight network with other mangrove trees and plants.

Whereas the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel are ostensibly fixed in a social order in their routine existence, the novel’s setting and structure provide space for individual testimony, often in first-person narration, regardless of social rank or standing. One of its most important characteristics, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is that the rhizome has “multiple entryways”, in that each constituent part is connected, and therefore access to the rhizome is provided at any point (MP 12). The chapters of Traversée de la Mangrove provide such access points or entryways into the story, in that each chapter represents an individual story or testimony unto itself. The narrative structure of the novel permits the reader to access the individual, unique viewpoints and stories of different community members without necessarily adhering to the preexisting order of chapters. It is true that there is a logical order of chapters, segues of narrative continuity from chapter to chapter; and an overarching chronological order. The chapter “Le serein” at the beginning of the novel designates the evening, when the veillée begins, and “Le devant-jour” at the end of the novel marks the end of the veillée at dawn. However, the chapters stand alone as individual stories as well, and the reader may read the chapters out of order and still make sense of the story. In this way the novel does not follow a traditional narrative style, with an easily traceable and chronological beginning, middle and end. In an interview, Maryse Condé characterizes Traversée de la Mangrove as a circular narrative: “In place of a linear story with a beginning and an end, the narrative is defined by the sunset and the sunrise. Within these contours, there is circularity.”¹³

The beginning of the novel, the chapter titled “Le serein”, marks the discovery of Francis Sancher’s body by a retired schoolteacher, Léocadie Timothée. The novel therefore begins at the end of a path, where a woman discovers what remains at the end of a life. The rhizome has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overspills” (MP 21). The time and space of the veillée are located in the middle of the night, in the section entitled “La nuit”, and in the middle of the forest, at Francis Sancher’s home. To

¹⁰ See the preface to René Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy for the author’s hierarchical concept of philosophy, with the image of the tree and its roots and branches.
¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, “Rhizome”, pp. 5-8.
describe the state of embeddedness and immersion in the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari also use the term “plane of immanence.” This designates a condition in which everything is inherent, as opposed to transcendent, to a space. The individuals of Rivière au Sel, including Francis Sancher, are inherent to their community. It is through the veillée, however, that Sancher becomes a transcendent element in the community. His existence persists only in memories and stories.\textsuperscript{14}

In \textit{Mille Plateaux}, Deleuze and Guattari conceive of the rhizome as “made of plateaus”, forming an “acentered, nonhierarchical” system “without an organizing memory or central automaton” (21). A plateau is “always in the middle”, “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end” (22). The individual chapters of “La nuit” comprise such plateaus. These testimonies take place during a single night, and are thus located in a unified present tense; however, the content of individual memories concern events evoked in the past tense, and often the speaker in a given chapter offers his or her hopes and decisions for the future. Therefore, these testimonies can be understood as located in the “middle”: a time of contemplation between the events and emotions the individual has already experienced and the future the individual can only imagine. Many individuals, particularly Mira, Dodose, Rosa, and Dinah, speak about the future at the end of their testimonies. However, this future remains unwritten, never accessible to the reader; in this way, the individual testimonies, and the novel itself, are not preoccupied with a “culmination point or external end”\textsuperscript{15}, but with the process by which individuals understand their past and imagine the future. There is no true ending or resolution to be found in the novel. The chapters are not organized hierarchically, and exist without reference to an absolute center. There are, however, \textit{fils conducteur}\textsuperscript{16} that connect testimonies to one another, the most significant connecting thread being individual memories about Sancher. Many characters share feelings of isolation, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with their home life. However, individuals are connected, whether knowingly or not, through common experiences, and the novel sheds light on the interconnectedness inherent in Rivière au Sel. The individuals at the wake form individual plateaus in their testimonies, and also share the same general plateau with one another.

The individuals’ knowledge of sharing the same plateau is inhibited by many factors, including a long-standing legacy of social hierarchy determined by racial “types” and socio-economic power dynamics. Colonial history, even though it is acknowledged as belonging to the distant past by many characters, frames the way in which individuals understand their community. The lightness or darkness of skin and the ability to command a workforce in the fields, for example, are inditia of status in the profoundly hierarchical society of Guadeloupe. These markings of social status are holdovers from an era that some, like the capitalist horticulturalist, Loulou, perceive as forever lost: “La Guadeloupe d’hier est morte de sa belle mort” (102). It is only when faced with death, whether the literal death of a peer or the death of a bygone era, that individuals acknowledge that they all inhabit the same plane. They all come together at a wake, which is itself is a disappearing tradition. According to anthropologist Marie-Céline Lafontaine, in her study “Le chant du peuple guadeloupéen”, the veillée is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] The tension between Sancher as an immanent force and the transcendent qualities of his effects on the community is explored further in Chapter Three.
\item[15] “Rhizome”, p. 22.
\item[16] “Connecting threads”, an image used for connections along the rhizome.
\end{footnotes}
performed with decreasing frequency. Through reading Lafontaine’s description of the veillée, one can understand a wake as a rhizomatic event, involving a network of individuals from various social strata. The veyé, or veillée, is an example of a “manifestation musicale,” with various “significations sociales” for Guadeloupean society. However, the wake, as well as another musical social event called a “léwoz”, is on the decline. Referring to both the veillée and the léwoz, Lafontaine argues that,

...[L]eur production et leur consommation s’inscrivaient [...] dans un système de relations sociales qui intéressaient parents, voisins et amis. Organisé d’un véritable réseau, ce système impliquait l’échange de prestations réciproques de biens symboliques... [...] Le déclin de ce système, commencé vers les années cinquante et aujourd’hui consommé, est celui de l’économie sucrière.

The veillée is a site of exchange, organized as a network of individuals; in this way, this event can be considered a kind of rhizome. It is noteworthy that the veillée has declined along with the sugarcane-based economy. Many characters bemoan the loss of the era when sugarcane dominated the fields, what Loulou considers a time “de liberté absolue pour les plus forts” (125). In “Le serein,” the narrator describes the incredulity of the older residents of Rivière au Sel at the decline of sugarcane cultivation: “Les vieux qui avaient vu la Première Guerre mondiale avaient alors hoché la tête: -- Qu’est que c’est, hein, la Guadeloupe à présent? S’il n’y a plus de canne, il n’y a plus de Guadeloupe!” (21). Whether preoccupied with a longed-for past or dreaming of the future, individuals at the veillée are involved in the rhizomatic exchange of “biens symboliques”, offering prayers and responsorial psalms in the Catholic tradition, receiving each other’s presence during the long evening.

Tracings on a Map of the Mangrove

Deleuze and Guattari make an important distinction between a “tracing”, which follows a preexisting pattern, and a “map”, which is “entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real”, “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (12). Whereas the tracing involves redundancies and produces impasses, mapping is creative and is produced by multiple sources. For Deleuze and Guattari, “writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping” (4-5). They point to different kinds of books, including the “root-book”, which is “the classical book”, a “dialectical” imitation of the world that perpetuates the “division between world and book, nature and art” (5). It thereby perpetuates binaries and never reaches “an understanding of

---

18 Ibid., p. 907.
19 Ibid., p. 909. My emphasis.
20 There will be further discussion of the heritage of the sugarcane-based economy and slavery in Chapter Two.
22 Ibid., p. 12.
Multiplicity is a necessary condition of a rhizome, which thrives from connections among diverse elements. Therefore, the binary logic of the “root-book” is inadequate to account for the reality of multiplicity. Responding to the dialectical nature of the “root-book”, Deleuze and Guattari state: “Nature doesn’t work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one” (5). The “radicle-system, or fascicular root” is the model for the second figure of the book, in which “…the principal root has [been] aborted [...]; [and] an immediate, indefinite multiplicity\(^\text{23}\) of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development” (5). Deleuze and Guattari point to fragmented, aphoristic writings, such as “William Burroughs’s cut-up method” and the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, as examples of “radicle” or rhizomatic works (6). Deleuze and Guattari then offer a program for writing a book that “forms a rhizome with the world”\(^\text{24}\):

Follow the plants: you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside your limits and in other directions. Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by deterritorialization, extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency. (11)

Writing then takes on the character of mapping territories, and even entails conquest through increasing “territory by deterritorialization.” Writing is expansive and accounts for multiplicities, the fragmented work being an example of forming a rhizome with the world. Traversée de la Mangrove follows this pattern, “following” the plants with descriptions of the natural world of Rivière au Sel; certain characters are associated with different species found in a mangrove ecosystem. The novel’s mapping of affects establishes the community as a microcosm, deterritorializing the content to allow for expansion into other contexts. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and resentment are experienced throughout the community. However, these feelings are also shared universally, establishing connections with the world outside of the novel. In this way, the book “forms a rhizome with the world.”\(^\text{25}\) Alienation is an example of a universally shared experience: each character experiences a form of alienation, whether from others in the community, or from a clear understanding of how to overcome his or her problems. The reader is also alienated, left without an easily traceable, linear narrative, and is therefore dependent on the often contradictory images presented by various narrators. The novel exposes “circles of convergence”, chronicling the convergence of mourners seated in circular form\(^\text{26}\) around the coffin of Francis Sancher. Within this setting, new circles of convergence are established, consisting of connections among characters. In this way, this writing is akin to the map. Traversée de la Mangrove maps Rivière au Sel, located in the Basse-Terre of Guadeloupe, with respect to many natural markings, including the thick forests surrounding the village, the many plants and flowers there, the swamps, ravines, mountains, or mornes, and the

\(^{23}\) My emphasis.
\(^{24}\) Deleuze, “Rhizome”, p. 11.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{26}\) See Lafontaine, “Chant du peuple guadeloupéen,” for further details regarding the circular seating form of mourners surrounding the deceased.
paths, or *traces*, on which many characters travel through these densely forested surrounds. Silently keeping watch over all of this is the imposing, active volcano of Basse-Terre, la Soufrière. “Le Serein”, the first chapter, introduces the reader to the various plant types and trees of Rivière au Sel, and many characters describe the flora surrounding their homes. Many characters, including Francis Sancher, bear nicknames that reflect the natural world of Rivière au Sel. Moïse, the postman, is called “le maringoin”, or mosquito, a fitting name for one who inhabits the swampy region. Dinah is compared to a flower, while Mira is compared to a plant bearing flowers and fruits.  

Sancher is nicknamed “pié-bwa” and “mahogany”, names for two types of tree, which no doubt inspire thoughts of a strong, sturdy man. The “pié-bwa”, the name of which is literally translated as “foot tree”, summons an image of a tree firmly rooted to earth at its feet. Mira evokes this when describing Sancher as “campé sur [s]es deux pieds comme un mapou” (230). But was Sancher truly firmly planted on his feet?

The mahogany tree is known for its durability as well as its beauty, and has been a highly valued choice for boat making and furniture construction. It is native to Central and South America and the Caribbean, and is a fitting symbol of a prized, although increasingly rare, feature of islands such as Guadeloupe. The attractive reddish-brown color of the wood recalls that of Sancher’s skin, which Dinah describes as a “chair riche, couleur de maïs bien rôti” (105). The sturdy wood and tall height of the mahogany also recall Sancher’s stature, which is described as “très fort, très grand” (105). These references to the natural world involve elements of the mangrove; according to Suzanne Crosta, “this association would imply that the characters personify the trees that define the mangrove.”

A map, like the rhizome, contains “multiple entryways” that allow access to different points. Mapping is not mere description, like tracing, but surveying the terrain, finding connections and experimenting “in contact with the real”, modifying and reworking, both by individuals and social groups (MP 12). A community of individuals can work together to map their terrain, and this map is constantly open to interpretation and modifications. A map is therefore never fixed or static; it “has to do with performance” (MP 12).

What does it mean to “perform” a map? While mourners perform the ancient ritual of seeing the dead through his or her first night of eternal rest, those who attend Francis Sancher’s *veillée* are also performing a collective act of mapping his life in their community. In this way, *Traversée de la Mangrove* maps diverse and conflicting portraits, entire unto themselves, each of a relatively brief fragment of Sancher’s life. However, the portraits are woven together to create a unitary map of the same terrain. The reader is given clues and puzzle pieces throughout the novel, and although its initial tone is that of a murder mystery, the reader discovers that it is the man himself who is the mystery. Suzanne Crosta explains that, “Condé’s manipulation of the

---

27 Dinah is compared to a “fleur de tubéreuse” on page 53, while Mira is a “plante interdite dont les branches, les feuilles et les fleurs distillaient un parfum vénéneux” (47). According to the narrator in Aristide’s chapter, she has “fruits” that have been caressed (68).

28 The mahogany tree is therefore an object of commerce. As such it is involved in a system of exchange, but this system functions in a market where the tree is assigned monetary value. At the wake, Sancher is also an object of exchange, albeit with social values assigned to him.


30 Crosta, Suzanne. “Narrative and Discursive Strategies in Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove*.” *Callaloo* 15.1: p. 152.
conventions of detective plots (the identity of the mystery man; the particulars of the crime) underscores the importance of the act of reading within and outside the parameters of the text. [...] Denied a concrete referential existence, Sancher’s story is mediated by the perception and images that others have of him.”  

Unlike the linear and hierarchical form of the murder mystery, which involves a chain of causes and effects, and the objective of identifying the culprit, the novel offers only puzzling clues to the identity of the deceased. The various characters and ultimately the reader must decipher these contradictory fragments of different individual memories of encounters with the deceased in order to reconstitute the subject of Sancher. In so doing, the novel functions as a sort of treasure map, appropriate to the colonial history of its Caribbean setting, with many paths leading nowhere and potential pitfalls littering the landscape.

**Mapping and Tracing**

Mirroring Deleuze and Guattari’s description of fragmented, rhizomatic writing as a kind of mapping, *Traversée de la Mangrove* explores the topography of Guadeloupe itself, as well as the contours of human emotions and experiences in Rivière au Sel. The novel exposes connections among individuals and defines possible routes for individuals to follow in order to find happiness and self-fulfillment. Although the novel provides a collectively produced treasure map, do characters create individual maps in their testimonies as well? Are individuals in Rivière au Sel blazing new trails and performing their own maps, or are they tracing and re-tracing familiar paths, unable to find routes to a better life? In one form or another, this question will reappear throughout this thesis. The question of mapping is related to the question of subjectivity. In *Traversée de la Mangrove*, the subject is fragmented and multiple, unlike the classic concept, represented by the “root-book”, of a synthesized subject brought about by a dialectical process. By examining the ways in which characters connect to one another in Rivière au Sel, one can understand how the rhizomatic structure of the community can constitute such a multiple subject. The novel provides a map of the community that is produced by its members. However, by utilizing the concepts of mapping and tracing while reading characters’ testimonies, one encounters the various ways in which individual subjectivity and authority are articulated.  

Xantippe, the mysterious, mythical presence who speaks last at the wake, claims to be the first to have mapped the land, and to have named the trees, vines, ravines, and rivers. Speaking in first-person, unlike the other men of Rivière au Sel, Xantippe begins his chapter with a solemn declaration: “J’ai nommé tous les arbres de ce pays” (241). When it comes to the community, he also claims authority: “Rivière au Sel, j’ai nommé ce lieu. Je connais toute son histoire” (244). However, this authority is Ironic, considering his status as an outcast and

---

31 Ibid., p. 154.  
32 There will be a more thorough discussion of individual subjectivity in Chapter Three.  
33 “Xantippe” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “The name of the wife of Socrates; an ill-tempered woman or wife, a shrew, a scold.” The Xantippe of the novel is a male character, and one of only two males to speak in first person during the section of *Traversée de la Mangrove* entitled “La nuit”. Further discussion regarding Xantippe’s first-person narration is forthcoming in Chapter Three.
vagabond who lives in a hut on the edge of a forest. He is reviled, and recounts a time before Rivière au Sel in which “les hommes prenaient des roches dans leurs mains pour me chasser et les femmes me criaient comme à un chien” (244). Even after finding solace in the forests and the Ravine of Rivière au Sel, he is looked upon with contempt and fear by those whose path he crosses. His social status in the community notwithstanding, Xantippe’s testimony is granted a degree of authority in the novel. Not only does he proclaim his authority in first-person, he has the last word. His chapter is at the end of “La nuit”, the final testimony before “Le devant-jour”. Therefore, as an original namer, he provides a mapping of Rivière au Sel, naming the trees, flowers and ravines in first-person. However, this authority is also subverted, because he is not vested with power in his community. He does not own land through any financial means, but possesses unparalleled knowledge about the land. When encountering others in Rivière au Sel, he does not command any respect, nor does he offer any meaningful interpersonal exchange, as he often mumbles incomprehensibly. In this way, Xantippe’s map, like the “map” described in “Rhizome”, is not inscribed in a master narrative. It does not offer a synthetic, authoritative understanding of the terrain. However, his map is a creation; it “has to do with performance.”

Xantippe performs the map and, as such, incites an exchange between himself and the land he names: “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” (241).

Aristide, the son of Loulou the horticulturalist and heir to the family business, also claims authority over the forests and trees of his island. He knows the landscape of Rivière au Sel by heart: “De la montagne, il connaissait chaque trace, chaque sentier” (66). He tells his half-sister, Mira, that he cannot live far from the mountain; as she describes it, “c’est son royaume à lui” (57). He claims that the forest is the only place where he can feel content, “parmi les grands arbres” (66). Aristide recalls a favorite book, *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l’Amérique*, a history of the Antilles written during the 18th Century. Even as he laments “la main brutale des hommes” that had “défloré” the forests of Guadeloupe, he fills a knapsack with captured birds (66-67). In effect, Aristide longs for an essentialized past beyond his reach, a virginal natural “Paradis” untouched by man. He resigns himself to take what he can, because “[i]l fallait se contenter de piètres prises” (67). He objectifies nature, appreciating the beauty but also capturing of it what he can. He is a collector, much like the naturalists of the era of his beloved *Nouveau Voyage*. In this way, Aristide is not mapping in the same way as Xantippe, who enjoys a profound relationship with nature. He retraces the landscape according to an objectifying, patriarchal discourse involving the binary opposition of virgin / whore. With his idyllic vision of a virginal, precolonial landscape, he is locked in a fetishistic view of the past, contenting himself with paltry takings of the deflowered forest. He claims to know the names of trees, but he, unlike Xantippe, can only appreciate them for a romanticized idea of what they once were.

Tree imagery persists throughout *Traversée de la Mangrove*. To Xantippe and Aristide, trees offer protection and fascination, respectively. Xantippe takes refuge in forests, and associates them with protection and solace for generations of ancestors: “Les arbres sont nos seuls amis. Depuis l’Afrique, ils soignent nos corps et nos âmes” (241). Aristide feels “amour des arbres, des oiseaux”, but laments that “à présent la forêt était une cathédrale saccagée” (67). He dreams of a distant past before colonization when the forests of Guadeloupe “regorgaient de toutes qualités d’oiseaux” (66). Rosa Ramsaran does not hold such an ideal view of trees.

---

34 Deleuze and Guattari, “Rhizome”, p. 12.
During a particularly poignant encounter with Sancher, in which he offers Rosa a sympathetic, understanding ear, she compares life’s problems to trees:

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. (170)

Rosa describes the difficulty of finding the source of problems, represented by roots, but more importantly the challenge of knowing the “nature” and “forme” of the problem itself. Many individuals in Rivière au Sel face problems, but do not seem to know their shape or nature, making it difficult to understand how to overcome them. This comparison of trees with problems recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s complaint: “We’re tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots [...] They’ve made us suffer too much” (MP 15). This visceral critique of “arborescent culture” is a statement of preference for a rhizomatic understanding of the world. However, could a rhizome not also represent life’s problems? In her article “Maryse Condé’s Mangroves”, Ruthmarie Mitsch describes positive and negative aspects of mangroves: “The mangrove forest is a mesh of both land and water, and in that sense it is fluid, borderless, open to influence and change – and might it not be called a métissage? Yet because of its rhizomatic lateral growth patterns, which prominently feature prop roots and pneumatophores, it can also contain, entangle, strangle, bind, thus acting much like a border.”35 This is exemplified by Rosa’s daughter, Vilma, when she states that it is impossible to cross a mangrove: “On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192). Without a map to guide the traveler, crossing a thick, interconnected mass of trees and tangled roots would be impossible. However, if one understands the nature and shape of the terrain, could there be a way to cross the mangrove? Is there a way to forge new paths, beyond the forest traces, to the open horizon of light and freedom?

The traces mentioned throughout the novel are paths that were, in many cases, forged by runaway and marooned slaves on Guadeloupe many decades before the stories of the novel take place.36 Pascale De Souza argues that these traces in the novel, like the tracings described in “Rhizome”, represent dead-ends.37 Deleuze and Guattari characterize tracings as “impasses, blockages” which “always come back ‘to the same’” (MP 13). The opening scene of Traversée de la Mangrove takes place on such a trace, where Léocadie Timothée discovers Sancher’s corpse. This journey on the trace leads to a literal dead-end.38 Many characters, including Man Sonson and Xantippe, use traces as shortcuts on journeys home, bringing them “back to the same.” Dodose Pélagie claims that the trace Saint-Charles, which she takes for a solitary walk, is populated by ghosts, “nos anciens, morts, ensevelis pendant l’esclavage” (212). In fact, all

38 Ibid., p. 371.
roads on an island are dead-ends, literally “sans issue”, precisely because they do not extend beyond the confines of the land.

However, the trace, even while producing an impasse of some kind, may not be such a dead-end after all. When Léocadie discovers Sancher’s corpse, for example, this journey on a forgotten trace sets in motion the communication of his death and the event of the veillée. Without this discovery, there would not have been the impetus to unify Rivière au Sel at the wake. The traces used by Man Sonson offer plants for her herbal remedies. She meets Sancher while walking along a trace, which leads to friendship. The traces provide the setting for encounters between individuals, some of which are life-changing. Vilma meets Sancher for the first time while travelling on the trace Saint-Charles to the Ravine. Sancher meets Dodose by chance on a trace, an encounter that prompts a crucial reevaluation of her life. Well before the unfortunate discovery of Sancher’s corpse, Léocadie frightened him during an evening walk along a trace, causing her to revisit painful memories and forcing her to reckon with her vulnerability. The ghosts of her past, such as the hopeless, unrequited love she felt for Déodat Timodent, and the regrets she carries to the present day, haunt her like the ghosts of the trace Saint-Charles. In this way, the trace represents a site of encounter, producing impasses for some while offering others possibilities for exchange, whether with other individuals, with the natural world of the forest, or with memories and visions of the past.

**Impasses on a Search for Freedom**

Mira discovers her beloved ravine by following a trace to its rocky end. When Mira was only five years old, she could not believe that her mother, Rosalie Sorane, was completely gone, lost to her at childbirth. Instead, Mira believed that her deceased mother continued to live on in the forest. Mira climbed a forest trace to find her and, after an exhausting trip, eventually discovered her favorite place to be alone: “…je remontais une trace. J’étais fatiguée de mettre un pied devant l’autre. Fatiguée à mourir. Alors j’ai buté sur une roche et j’ai déboulé jusqu’au fond d’une ravine, cachée sous l’amoncellement des plantes. Je n’ai jamais oublié cette première rencontre avec l’eau, ce chant délié, à peine audible, et l’odeur de l’humus en décomposition.” (52) The difficulty of this journey on the trace is ultimately a labor of love on the journey to find her lost mother. Mira names this place the Ravine, with a capital R, which suggests that it is a concept or idea in addition to a physical space. The capital R of Ravine evokes the first initial “R”, of Rosalie, Mira’s mother. Mira claims succinctly: “J’avais retrouvé le lit maternel” (52).

However comforting this maternal space may be, the odor of decomposing humus in the Ravine suggests a decay beyond that of the damp soil. Back in Rivière au Sel, Mira faces a decaying home life, in which her stepmother, described as a “fleur de tubéreuse”, is wilting away from lack of love. Mira describes with regret the effects of her father’s neglect of her stepmother Dinah: “nous l’avons vue sécher sur pied, se flétrir comme l’herbe, privée de la rosée du matin” (53-4). Much like her stepmother, Mira too is suffocating from lack of love, wilting away like a potted flower, from a lack of sunlight and water.

Mira’s collapse into the Ravine, an impasse at the end of a trace, symbolizes her inability to forge meaningful relationships with those around her in Rivière au Sel. Her solitude in the Ravine, which she describes as “mon royaume, mon refuge”39 is due in part to her desire to

---

escape the “méchanceté des gens de Rivière au Sel qui ne savent qu’affûter le couteau de leurs paroles de médisance” (52). The Ravine is “associated with both personal freedom and sexual license”\(^{40}\), a private kingdom that Mira claims as “mon domaine à moi.”\(^ {41}\) Mira roams around and bathes in the nude, taking pleasure in the waters that are “vivantes, violentes même” (50). Just as the decomposing humus evokes decay elsewhere in Mira’s life, the violent waters of the Ravine relate to the brutality of lost love. Mira has lost her mother, and will never know infinite, unconditional maternal love. Returning again and again to the Ravine, Mira finds pleasure in the violent waters, and ultimately encounters Sancher, the man who later brutally rejects her and their unborn child. Mira evokes the pleasure and pain of love when she describes swimming in the Ravine: “Je me glissais dans l’eau qui pénétrait, brûlante de la chaleur du soleil de la journée, jusque dans les profondeurs de mon corps. Je tressaillais sous cet attachement brutal” (49). At the Ravine, Mira seeks liberation, pleasure and a return to the cherished lost womb, but in so doing avoids confronting the problems in her family life and in her relationship with her community. She finds a temporary and ultimately unfulfilling escape into solitude.

After years of loneliness, Mira seeks refuge with Francis Sancher, an outsider who fits her description of the man of her dreams: “un inconnu, solide comme un pié-bwa et qui me délivrait.”\(^ {42}\) During their first encounter, a providential meeting at the Ravine, Sancher mistakes Mira for Death, and she recognizes him as the “pié-bwa” of her dreams, her rescuer. Mira leaves her father’s home, and an incestuous relationship with her half-brother, Aristide, in order to live with Sancher. Aristide describes with resentment his discovery of his sister’s new life with Sancher: a domestic scene in which “Francis Sancher était à table et Mira, pareille à une servante, s’affairait autour de lui.”\(^ {43}\) Mira, the independent, rebellious young woman who always escaped to the Ravine under cover of night, suddenly becomes subservient to Sancher. She follows a familiar path for many women, attempting to construct her identity in relation to her man, but becomes submissive, or as she describes it, “une poupée de chiffon qui pleure pour un homme.”\(^ {44}\) Reflecting on this fact, Mira laments “j’allais offrir la vie et l’amour à quelqu’un qui n’attendait que la mort” (63).

In offering herself to Francis, Mira follows a path that leads to an inevitable impasse. This is an experience that many women in Rivière au Sel share. Man Sonson, an elderly clairvoyant, also experienced an impasse when she fell in love with her husband and got married. While she enjoyed a happy marriage, she sacrificed her creative life. She describes a precocious youth full of inventing stories to which she could relate, a creative impulse that had to be stifled to meet the demands of marriage: “...j’inventais, j’imaginais mes histoires dans le creux de ma tête. C’est seulement quand j’ai fait la connaissance de Siméon, puis que nous nous sommes mariés à l’église [...] que j’ai fini avec tout cela. Mes enfants ont remplacé mes rêves” (84). Man Sonson does not admit to regretting the fact that she gave up a beloved activity when she got married and raised children. However, she and Mira and many other women throughout history have made sacrifices in order to conform to a traditionally subservient role as wife.


\(^{41}\) Condé, *Traversée*, p. 50.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 54.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 69.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 63.
Often the attempt to mold one’s identity with respect to another, to build one’s life around one’s family, leads to sacrifice and to feelings of disappointment and betrayal.

Dinah, Mira’s stepmother, is imprisoned by a loveless marriage. Moving from her parents’ home in Saint-Martin to Guadeloupe, Dinah learns quickly that her new life with Loulou Lameaulnes is not what she had imagined. Loulou stops speaking to her and takes multiple lovers soon after their marriage. Dinah likens her life in Rivière au Sel to being condemned to prison: “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” (103). Dinah seeks comfort in a love affair with Francis Sancher, unknowingly following the same path as her stepdaughter, Mira. This affair ends when Mira moves in with Sancher.

Family drama is everywhere in Rivière au Sel; as Maryse Condé observes, “[p]eople always describe family as a paradise, but it isn’t.”

Another woman who attempted to find love in an extramarital affair is Dodose Pélagie. Dodose was married at a young age to a man she did not love, and like Dinah feels suffocated from this lack of love. Dodose’s marriage foreclosed any possibility to build an identity apart from her husband, whose lifestyle demanded an adorned and lovely, but not necessarily intelligent or accomplished, wife in order to impress his colleagues and friends. This marriage of convenience forced Dodose into a subservient role at an age in which she could have learned to grow and begin to build a life of her own. She finds herself resentful of her husband, and consequently seeks love with another man. Much to her chagrin, this brief affair does not lead to any lasting fulfillment or satisfaction.

Rosa Ramsaran is another woman trapped in a desperately unhappy marriage, and who, like Dodose, was an unwilling bride in an arranged marriage. Rosa, like Dinah, also experiences the sensation of suffocating in her home, which she evokes when describing the first time she woke up in her new home of Rivière au Sel: “ce que j’ai vu m’a oppressée. Une masse d’un vert sombre d’arbres, de lianes, de parasites emmêlés avec çà et là les trouées plus claires que bananeraies. Veillant là-dessus, la montagne, terrible” (161). Dodose, Dinah, Rosa and Mira all share experiences of sacrifice, often involving loneliness and despair, and acute unhappiness in love, although they do not communicate this with one another. Through the novel these correspondences, or liens, become manifest, but implicit. These shared experiences of loneliness and feelings of suffocation are, like submerged roots of the rhizome, links among characters. Each of these women faces an impasse, whether it be the sacrifice of identity or loss of youth, along a familiar path of marriage and children. Each woman’s story is therefore both singular and commingled.

Mira will never share Sancher’s life in marriage, and as such she encounters an impasse, because she cannot build an identity in relation to him. Mira faces the impasse of incomprehension because Sancher refuses to tell her the truth. After Sancher drugged her and attempted an abortion of their child, she learns the pain of an irrevocable betrayal of trust. Mira can no longer follow the paths that she once trusted, nor can she escape into idle daydreams about handsome strangers who will rescue her from her life. For her, even the sacred Ravine is lost. She can no longer trust the place where she sought the comfort of her lost mother: “Je ne descendrai plus jamais à la Ravine. Elle aussi m’a trahie” (230). Instead of being confined to

---

the familiar paths of her community, walking in shame with her illegitimate child and continuing her life as pariah, or hiding at home in the suffocating forest like her stepmother Dinah had done, Mira seeks a different route. She decides to uncover the truth about Francis Sancher. Mira is undaunted by Sancher’s warning when she asks for the truth. He responded to her simply, “si je te racontais la vérité, tu t’enfuirais en quatrième vitesse” (230). Instead, Mira decides to create a mapping of her son’s father’s life through a journey: “Désormais ma vie ne sera qu’une quête. Je retracerai les chemins du monde” (231). Instead of relying on tracing the familiar paths of her life, Mira will perform a mapping, traveling on the “chemins du monde” in order to gain access to unrevealed truths. Although she would be re-tracing paths forged by Sancher, she would refuse an identity as Sancher’s widow, which would involve resigning herself to remain in the shadows mourning his loss. She had already failed to escape her dissatisfaction in the Ravine and cannot be content to remain in the insular, polluted environment of Rivière au Sel. Rather, Mira will leave her loneliness and resentment behind and will embark on a difficult journey to better know the man she loved, the father of her child. She will search tirelessly in order to discover the truth. Instead of playing the passive widow, Mira will map a new life for her and her son.

Mira, Dinah, Dodose and Rosa are connected through shared loneliness to one another and to many others in Rivière au Sel, individuals with whom they otherwise have little in common. It is ironic that alienation and resentment connect individuals in the novel. This shared situation is, in fact, an element of the human condition. Speaking of the alienation experienced by her parents, Maryse Condé writes about her first encounter with the word “aliéné.” In her autobiography Le cœur à rire et à pleurer, Condé explains that as a young child, her brother had informed her that their parents were “une paire d’aliénés.”46 This assessment was prompted by Maryse’s observation that her parents had been upset by a comment made by a server at a Parisian café. While on vacation in Paris, the Condé family sat down on the terrace of a café and ordered drinks. When their server offered the compliment, “Qu’est-ce que vous parlez bien le français!””, Maryse’s parents were offended, privately sighing that “nous sommes aussi français qu’eux” (13). Her mother insists that they are in fact “plus français”, reasoning that “[n]ous sommes plus instruits. Nous avons de meilleures manières. Nous lisons davantage…” (13). Little Maryse could not understand why her parents, whom she described as “orgueilleux, contents d’eux-mêmes, notables dans leur pays”, would feel challenged by café servers (14). Later in life, she reflects on this childhood encounter with identity questions, stating that the café servers “possédaient tout naturellement cette identité française qui, malgré leur bonne mine, était niée, refusée à mes parents” (14). Condé then offers a more general, universal definition of alienation that is derived from her childhood understanding of the word aliéné: “Une personne aliénée est une personne qui cherche à être ce qu’elle ne peut pas être parce qu’elle n’aime pas être ce qu’elle est” (16).

By this definition of alienation, most of those at the veillée, if not all, are alienated. Sylvestre and Rosa Ramsaran, for example, are alienated from a valorized, white French identity because they are East Indian, even though they are financially successful. Their son, Carmélien, recognizes that everyone in Rivière au Sel respects the Lameaulnes family not only because of their financial wealth, but primarily because they are “presque blancs” (176). In fact, it would seem that most people in the world have been alienated at one point or another. In order to

search out ways to not be oneself, many individuals seek another identity. They build this identity in relation to an ideal other. In Rivière au Sel, many individuals had built an ideal image of Sancher and attempt to create their own identity in relation to him. As I have shown above, this desire, as experienced by Mira and Dinah, is met with disillusionment and frustration. However, the shared experience of alienation is a reason why not all the characters who feel disappointment because of, and are rejected by, Sancher are women. The first person in the novel to describe his encounter with, and eventual rejection by, Francis Sancher is Moïse, the postman, nicknamed “le Maringoin”, a friendless, sexually frustrated loner and pariah of the community. His initial encounter with Sancher was tense after he revealed his other, perhaps “real” name, Francisco Alvarez-Sanchez. When Moïse asked Sancher / Sanchez where he is from, presumably to initiate conversation, he was immediately rebuffed: “Pose pas de questions! La vérité pourrait t’écorcher les oreilles” (33). The truth is to be feared and denied, according to Sancher, who wished to make the truth of his life and his past as inaccessible as possible to this stranger. He issued a harsh warning to protect his privacy, and possibly to protect the curious Moïse from a danger beyond his understanding.

However, Moïse is no stranger to the harsh realities of life. His existence in Rivière au Sel is full of rejection, frustrated desires, and reproach from his peers: “il n’avait connu que cela, la méchanceté du cœur des hommes!” (40). Both Moïse and Mira, as well as many others in Rivière au Sel, share the unfortunate experience of being outcast from their community. After years of rejection and loneliness, Moïse is accustomed to the abusive comments of his peers. He seems unfazed when Sancher, a physically intimidating man, “corpulent, massif, haut comme un mahogany” (30), issues his warning. In fact, he even seeks a friendship, in part because he desperately desires companionship. Although Moïse’s attraction to this charismatic stranger is different than Mira’s, fascination and eventual devotion to Sancher place Moïse and Mira on the same plane: both are lonely outcasts who seek solace with Sancher.

Moïse is fascinated by Sancher’s stories, described by the narrator as “fantaisies épicées”, which titillate Moïse’s imagination: “Après cette rencontre, il avait commencé par s’imaginer que la vie allait prendre un autre goût, que les feuilles allaient verdir à l’arbre de demain” (30). In spite of all of the rumors circulating about Francis Sancher – that he is a hardened criminal, a killer, a rapist, and a drug trafficker -- Moïse remains unflinchingly faithful, and ultimately discovers a similarity between himself and the mysterious new stranger. After spending an evening of drinking together, Moïse finds that they are both susceptible to nighttime torments of dreams. Moïse is tormented by dreams the very night of his first meeting with Sancher, and discovers that Sancher is rendered weak and child-like when overcome by nightmares:

... Il s’était rendu compte que Francis Sancher n’était pas du tout ce qu’il s’imaginait. Le pié-bwa à l’ombre duquel il pourrait éclorer! L’esprit n’était pas taillé à la mesure du corps. Francis Sancher était faible et gémissant, apeuré comme un dernier venu dans la cour tumultueuse de l’école, un nouveau-né débarquant dans le monde des vivants. Ses sommeils n’étaient pas des voyages

47 Condé, Traversée, p. 40.
48 Moïse is not apparently afflicted with nightmares like Sancher. He is haunted, instead, by dreams, described on page 34 as “ces rêves qui repoussaient racines”, presumably dreams of a better life that seems frustratingly out of reach. While Moïse is tortured by dreams of elusive desires, Sancher is overcome with fear during night terrors.
Moïse realizes that there is a weakness in this “pié-bwa”, or sturdy tree of a man, described by so many in Rivière au Sel as a force of nature: “Les gens prétendent que la première nuit que Francis Sancher passa à Rivière au Sel, le vent enrâgé descendit de la montagne, hurlant, piétinant les bananeraies et jetant par terre les tuteurs des jeunes ignames” (34). The weakness of this apparently powerful man, who in spite of his strength suffers at the hands of invisible tormentors, inspires Moïse to seek to learn more about his new friend. Moïse identifies with Sancher’s weakness and feels a genuine love and desire to help and protect him, because he considers Sancher “plus qu’un ami, un enfant!” (40). Moïse encourages Sancher to speak with him openly and tell the truth about what could be tormenting him. Moïse wishes to provide a helpful ear for his new friend, but Sancher persistently refuses to tell the truth. Unable to encourage Sancher to open up, Moïse goes too far in his desire to learn more about his mysterious friend, his curiosity getting the best of him. He is caught invading Sancher’s privacy by looking through his possessions. Sancher discovers Moïse with his money in hand, mistaking his curiosity for petty thievery. Moïse is then brutally rejected by the man he considers his only friend and is thrown out on the street.

In this way, Moïse and Mira unwittingly share an experience: the painful rejection by a man they admire, someone they both consider a deliverance from their painful existence. However, there is a deeper cause for their disappointment. Both Mira and Moïse had projected a desired image onto Sancher, building him in their minds as something he ultimately proved not to be. Moïse had built an image of Sancher as a troubled child who needed protection. Concerned for Sancher during a night of intense nightmares, Moïse took him into his arms “comme l’enfant qu’il n’aurait jamais” (42). He said to Sancher that, “C’est pour cela qu’ils sont faits, les amis! Pour partager les ennuis que cause cette garce de vie!” (42). However, Sancher refused to share and as such denied Moïse the opportunity to offer paternal guidance or friendly advice.

Mira recognizes that she had placed all her hopes in Sancher because he came from elsewhere, “il venait d’Ailleurs” (63). She understands his appeal, explaining, “Il n’était pas né dans notre île à ragots, livrée aux cyclones et aux ravages de la méchanceté du cœur des Nègres” (63). Mira also claims that her desire for Sancher was folly, stating, “Idée folle, idée déraisonnable puisque j’allais offrir la vie et l’amour à quelqu’un qui n’attendait que la mort” (63). She had built an ideal image of the outsider. She recognizes this, stating that “j’avais placé tous mes espoirs sur cet homme-là que je ne connaissais ni en blanc ni en noir” (63). The idealization of the stranger is evoked in a quote from *Les Frères Karamazov*, cited in Lucien’s chapter: “Il faut qu’un homme soit caché pour qu’on puisse l’aimer” (224). Mira had hoped to share Sancher’s shadowy life in love, but instead endured the cruel rejection of a man who, although not born in the “île à ragots”, was still capable of “méchanceté,” of unwillingness to share love.

Many characters idealize the “other”. Mira idealizes the man from “Ailleurs” because she views this otherness as untouched by the petty jealousies and hatreds of her island.

---

Aristide’s idyll is a precolonial past in which the forest teemed with bird life. Lucien, the writer, idealizes and envies the “authentic”, revolutionary identities forged in Cuba, Chile, Argentina, and of course, Africa. He had built up an image of Sancher as a revolutionary, politically engaged writer, a “barbudo” from Cuba, but Sancher refused to accommodate this illusion. There is no essential identity that can be attached to Sancher. In this way, the novel resists the type of essentializing that is evoked by Loulou when he imagines: “Bientôt, quelqu’un commencerait de broder une légende autour de Francis Sancher et ferait de lui un géant incompris” (124). Sancher was a misunderstood giant, but there is no single legendary narrative to account for this fact. Loulou warns against creating such a “légende”, a mythology surrounding an individual, because it distorts reality: “L’imagination populaire est ainsi faite. Elle vous change un homme, vous le blanchit, vous le noircit au point que sa propre mère, celle qui l’a enfanté, ne le reconnaît pas” (125). However, the absence of an authoritative history of Sancher also produces distortions. As in a rhizome, distortions and confusing entanglements are a reality in Rivière au Sel.
CHAPTER TWO

THE INDIVIDUAL, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY

Mapping the Subject

In addition to mapping the emotional landscape of Rivière au Sel, *Traversée de la Mangrove* maps the topography of the community and Basse-Terre as well as the *topos* of Caribbean geographical features. The contours of the land, the swamps, rivers, paths, forests and volcano all carry a heritage of symbolism in the Caribbean. Traditionally, in Caribbean folklore and literature alike, paths that lead toward the mountains are valorized as the means of masculine slave revolt and escape from slavery.\(^{50}\) In her article “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer”, Maryse Condé describes the inscription of ideology on Caribbean landscapes, particularly in the literature of Césaire and authors associated with Négritude. Speaking of the representations of nature in Marxist, anti-colonial literature, Condé writes, “[t]he hills were the refuge where the Maroons had escaped the sufferings of the plantation, the trees the silent witnesses of an external exploitation.”\(^{51}\) In her article “Crossing the Mangrove of Order and Prejudice”, Pascale De Souza reads *Traversée de la Mangrove* as offering a counter-discourse to this understanding of traditional island topography. She argues that, “while the layout of Rivière au Sel reflects the enduring heritage of slavery and indentured servitude, forest tracks no longer lead inhabitants to a permanent refuge in the *mornes* [hills] as they supposedly did for marooning slaves, nor do all roads down to the plains lead to alienation in the canefields.”\(^{52}\) De Souza analyzes in depth the many symbolic meanings of geographical features throughout the history of Caribbean literature, contrasting the *topos* of the *morne* and *trace* against the fields and *plaines* of the plantations. She analyzes the gendering of spaces in *Traversée de la Mangrove*. De Souza argues that the novel valorizes the traditionally feminized space of the open fields, where slaves labored on the plantations, while recasting the traditionally masculine, valorized space of paths leading to mountains, the *traces*, as hazardous and ultimately leading nowhere. Whereas *traces* are paths to liberation for the Maroon of popular Caribbean imagination, De Souza argues that in *Traversée de la Mangrove*, “*tracées* lead to nowhere but a mythical past, they provide no real opportunity to cross the mangrove of order and prejudice and to seek a future away from Rivière au Sel. Any *traversée* undergone in the novel must reject *tracées* into the *mornes* in favor of roads leading to the plains.”\(^{53}\)

\(^{50}\) C.f., *e.g.*, Pascale De Souza points to Césaire’s *Et les chiens se taisaient* and his biography of Toussaint-Louverture as seminal works in a tradition of the heroic Maroon, among other important West Indian works. De Souza, Pascale. “Crossing the Mangrove of Order and Prejudice.” *The Romanic Review* 94.3-4 (2003): p. 369.


\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 371.
Edouard Glissant, a fellow Caribbean author and contemporary of Maryse Condé, posits that “the only real popular hero in the Caribbean”\(^{54}\) is the Maroon, who bravely battles against the natural elements and slave masters in order to escape into a life of freedom. The *traces* into the dense mountain forests provide the means of this escape. However, the marooned slave of traditional Caribbean lore is not an unproblematic hero. In her lecture “The Stealers of Fire”, Condé casts them in a less flattering light. She states forcefully that “…the famous Maroons were nothing but opportunists. In Jamaica, for example, they turned themselves into servants and informers of the English to safeguard their freedom” (163). In “The Stealers of Fire”, Maryse Condé openly rejects mythologizing the heroic Maroon, calling myths “binding, confining, and paralyzing” (163). Whereas Edouard Glissant writes that “myth is the first state of a still-naïve historical consciousness, and the raw material for the project of a literature”\(^{55}\), Condé decries the problems with mythologizing history, of sanctifying what she considers the opportunistic and selfish behavior of certain marooned slaves in Jamaica, for example. In response to questions surrounding history, Condé has said: “I don’t want to fetishize the past. I don’t think that we need to mythify the past at all costs. But I’m convinced that we need to know the past, quite simply in order to master the present.”\(^{56}\) Condé acknowledges that the past has many lessons to offer, but emphasizes a resistance to simplifying and fetishizing the realities of history.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as: “A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.”\(^{57}\) Myths and other allegorical writings are examples of what Deleuze and Guattari call the “root-book”. They serve to provide linear explanations by referring to origins, creating a causal chain between a root-like source and its effects. This “dialectical” model, as explained above, does not account for multiplicity, but represents “the most classical and well reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought.”\(^{58}\) The “root-book” is associated with tracings, as opposed to maps. Myths trace a linear progression through time, offering representations of the world; whereas maps are part of the world, engaging performance and creating the world.\(^{59}\) As the “root-book” does not account for multiplicity, myths do not adequately account for the complex realities of lived experience in history. As myths offer only representations of the world, they are tracings and not maps. Deleuze and Guattari warn that the tracing is “so dangerous” because “it injects redundancies and propagates them”, reproducing only “impasses, blockages, incipient taproots, or points of structuration.”\(^{60}\) Myths do not adequately represent


\(^{55}\) Ibid., p. 71.


\(^{59}\) “The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. [...] It is itself part of the rhizome.” Ibid., p. 12.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 13.
the truth of the past; instead they only reproduce essentialistic, idealized versions of history, and as such do not offer realistic answers to problems. In an interview, Condé describes the demands of writing in the Antillean context:

...[P]eople believe that it is the writer’s duty to say certain things. [...] People imagine that literature is there to represent – or even photograph – life. Especially the past, because the present is troubling and distressing, whereas the past is a refuge, a time when Antilleans were very close to one another. There were storytellers, there were grandmothers, and so on. They want literature to idealize this past.  

Claiming that her Antillean readership places such demands, Condé recognizes that because she “attempts to offer a reading of Antillean reality that is neither committed, nor an idealization of the past”, her work is controversial. Condé proclaims her independence, stating that, “I never wanted to do what everyone was doing, to say what everyone was saying, to live as everyone else was living, to resemble others.” Instead, she wishes to “shine a harsh light on things”, representing reality in all of its complexity and writing about life’s problems. Condé succinctly summarizes her main preoccupation in writing: “It seems to me that all my books revolve around this problem: How does one manage to live? By what means? As Perec said, “Life: A User’s Manual” [La vie, mode d’emploi]. But I don’t have the manual.” Condé’s work focuses on the problems of knowing how to live. The absence of a manual, which Condé evokes through the title of one of Georges Perec’s books, implies the lack of an authoritative guide to help the individual understand how to live. Whereas a myth can offer an example for how to live, the historical basis upon which that example rests is dubious, as Condé points out regarding the realities of Maroons’ opportunistic behavior. In rejecting an uncomplicated heroic Maroon, Condé implies that instead of offering ways in which one can truly understand the world, myths succeed in binding, confining and paralyzing the truth.

However, there are many mythical elements in the novel, including references to the supernatural, such as psychic powers and zombies, and to superstition and folklore. Mira compares her stepmother Dinah to a zombie (57). Sancher was afflicted with fear caused by a superstitious belief in a family curse. He called himself a “zombie” on several occasions. For example, while describing his writing to Lucien Évariste, Sancher explained, “Moi presque zombie, j’essaie de fixer la vie que je vais perdre avec des mots” (221). On the other hand, Sancher also acknowledged that while he was a doctor, known as “Curandero”, he possessed superhuman healing abilities: “Avec ma loupe, mon petit pilon et mon mortier, je faisais des miracles” (86). In addition to possessing power to heal others as a witch doctor, Man Sonson is endowed with a supernatural ability to see the future. Xantippe, the mysterious presence throughout the novel who finally speaks in the last chapter, evokes mythology when describing

---

62 Ibid., p. 18.
63 Ibid., p. 16.
64 Ibid., p. 25.
65 Ibid., p. 11.
the origins of Rivière au Sel. He is an unsettling, shadowy figure who claims to have named Rivière au Sel and to know all of its history, including the crime, never revealed to the reader, which haunts Sancher until his mysterious death. Xantippe embodies the complicated, multiple history of Guadeloupe, evoking African and European “origins” and the many changes to the human and topographical landscape of the island. His own history is marked by profound love and irrevocable loss. He is at once Adam, an originator and namer; Joseph, a seer, endowed with both longevity and total knowledge; Abel, a victim of hatred and jealousy; and Cain, a vagabond whose presence disturbs the community.66 Xantippe has the last word in “La nuit”, speaking at the end of the novel before “Le devant-jour”. As the all-knowing namer of the island, he is a mythical figure. His presence pervades the novel, appearing in individuals’ testimonies and at the beginning and end of the novel. What does it mean that a mythical figure, who haunts those around him, has the final word, especially considering Condé’s professed distrust of myths?

Xantippe, while embodying certain mythical characteristics67, is ultimately a witness and not an active hero who transforms the world. He is profoundly connected to his natural surroundings and is inextricably linked with the history of his home. When he marries and builds a family with his beloved wife, Gracieuse, Xantippe plants roots and experiences a happy, satisfying life. However, all of this stability and contentment is brutally uprooted when his family is killed in a fire on Christmas Day, presumably at the hands of jealous enemies. Through this victimization he is exiled and becomes a kind of ghost, and a passive witness to life: “j’ai traîné mon corps sur les chemins défoncés de l’existence. J’ai vu ce pays changer.” (243) He recounts that in his exile, he became “cheval à diable pour écouter la chanson de l’eau” (244). He becomes a silent part of nature, a fly on the wall, so to speak. However, as a man who has seen everything, and who emerges as an apparition in the forest, he frightens and disturbs those who cross his path. The narrator in “Le serein” describes his effect on others at the wake: “La présence de Xantippe créait toujours un réel malaise. Immédiatement, les bruits s’éteignirent dans un lac glacé de silence et certains envisagèrent de le pousser aux épaules” (26). He terrified Sancher, who knew that Xantippe was a witness to the crime that haunted him. However, Xantippe does not exact revenge, whether against those who destroyed his family or against Sancher, whose unspeakable crime68 resembles the murder of Gracieuse and their children. Xantippe invokes an end to an interminable chain of violence, stating that, “le temps de la vengeance est passé” (245). In this way, he does not represent only a mythical past, but also offers a vision of the present and the future that would move beyond revenge. Revenge involves a reaction to a past injustice, and is thus preoccupied with the past, not with living in the present or creating a new future. Revenge enables a vicious cycle that is bound to the past, injustice responding to injustice, with little hope for a better future. Condé envisions “writing about the present” as an alternative to the preoccupation with a mythical, idealized past, emphasizing the

67 Xantippe says that he became a “nèg mawon” during his exile, referring to the maroons who had escaped slavery and become folk heroes in the Caribbean (Traversée, p. 241).
68 Xantippe describes on page 244 the hideous discovery of many skeletons, presumably of murder victims, who had died long ago. He associates these remains with Sancher, but it is unclear whether it is Sancher’s crime or the crime of slavery perpetrated by his ancestors.
importance of “getting rid of old myths, or else creating a new mythology based essentially on the lived reality of today.” Condé maintains a focus on present circumstances that may be difficult to confront, and as such must “shine a harsh light on things”, while upholding “the conviction that we must approach the future differently.”

In this way, the mythical past of the heroic Maroon is replaced by an introspective self-examination in the present, and an ultimate view towards the future. Many inhabitants of Rivière au Sel dream of escaping from the forest and mountains rather than escaping to them, as the Maroons were once forced to do. Émile Étienne, the historian, dreams of such a future at the veillée:

Partir. Respirer un air moins confiné. Il lui sembla soudain qu’il étouffait sous les grands arbres et il rêva d’une terre où l’œil ne se cogerait pas aux mornes, mais suivrait la courbe illimitée de l’horizon. Une terre où quoi qu’on dise la couleur de la peau n’importerait pas.

Une terre-terre fertile à labourer. (239)

Émile Étienne does not embark on a voyage like the heroes of fiction that he admires: he, fortunately, is not attempting to escape from slavery, and does not need to embark on a dangerous getaway through the traces to the safety of the forested mountains. Émile’s imagined journey is an expression of freedom: freedom of movement, to explore new lands where his eye can freely scan the horizon, and also the freedom to explore himself, a self-liberation through introspection, which would occur during his writing. Émile is in search of intellectual freedom in his cultivation of his field of study – history. Although Émile would write a history filled with literal non-freedom, the slavery that lasted for generations in Guadeloupe, he himself would be free and his opportunities as boundless as the expanse of cultivated fields upon which he would work, entirely of his own will.

In the case of Émile Étienne, the open space of the field is the locus of liberation. However, although Pascale De Souza argues that while “plains are perceived as opening the way to a viable future”, cultivated fields remain inscribed with a long history of slavery and alienation. De Souza asserts that “[t]he demise of the plantation economy at the end of the nineteenth century did not modify the power structure in Guadeloupe.” Even though the sugarcane plantation of the slavery era no longer exists, “[i]n Traversée de la Mangrove, the plantation economy is [...] alive and well, albeit with new products and new masters.” Loulou Lameaulnes and Sylvestre Ramsaran are both examples of the “new masters”, because they both operate plantations and employ migrant laborers.

---

70 Ibid., p. 25.
71 Ibid., p. 23.
72 My emphasis.
74 Ibid., p. 364.
75 Ibid., p. 364.
The cultivated field, while offering an expansive horizon to Émile Étienne, is not always a symbol of liberation in the novel. Although De Souza offers a positive reading of plains and of roads through fields, there are various ways in which cultivated fields are idealized in *Traversée de la Mangrove*. For example, Loulou Lameaulnes longs for the bygone era of his ancestor Dieudonné, a tyrant who “prênaît la tête de ses esclaves pour cible et y logeait les balles de son fusil, se tordant de rire devant leur dernier rictus” (124). Loulou wishes he had been born then, a time “de liberté absolue pour les plus forts” (125). He idealizes a past in which his domination over others would have been uninhibited; he would have enjoyed “liberté absolue.” According to Loulou, freedom is a zero-sum game. His freedom would require the non-freedom of his slaves.

Rosa Ramsaran, part of a family now much like the Lameaulnes, insofar as they occupy similar positions in the economy, also idealizes cultivated fields, dreaming of her birthplace of Grands Fonds: “chez nous, la terre est plate comme le dos de la main. Les cannes ondulent jusqu’à l’horizon. Les ailes du vent portent les voix” (162). The image of the sugarcane field recalls the slavery era. Its expansive thrust across the landscape to the horizon does not only bring forth an image of freedom, such as the childhood liberty of Rosa’s life in Grands Fonds, but also the colonial conquest that initiated sugarcane cultivation.

Aristide, Loulou’s son, idealizes a time before cultivation, lamenting the colonial era for its negative impact on plant and bird diversity. He longs for a bygone era that is quite different from that of his father’s dream. Aristide wistfully remembers his childhood, during which his father explained that, “autrefois, quand la main brute des hommes ne les avait pas déflorés, les bois de Guadeloupe regorgeaient de toutes qualités d’oiseaux” (66). Aristide romanticizes this distant past and only finds comfort in the forest, among the trees and birds. The narrator explains that “[c]e n’est que là qu’il se sentait bien, parmi les grands arbres...” (66). He imagines the precolonial past, comparing it to heaven: “À quoi ressemblait son île avant que l’avidité et le goût du lucre des colons ne la mettent à l’encan? Au Paradis que décrivait son livre de catéchisme” (66). As opposed to Rosa, Aristide idealizes the dense forest, teeming with life. Ultimately, his is an idyll before time, when human hands could not deflower the landscape. However, it is not until he is free from his incestuous, and therefore “unnatural”, love for Mira that he envisions a wide horizon. While contemplating the trees of his beloved mountain forest, Aristide is suddenly confronted with a vision: “soudain sa vie avait déboulé devant ses yeux, plate, sans relief, comme la terre de Marie-Galante” (79). He imagines leaving Rivière au Sel: “Oui, il quitterait cette île sans ampleur où, hormis les dimensions de son pénis, rien ne dit à l’homme qu’il est homme. Les fleurs n’ont pas de patrie. Elles embaument sur tous terrains” (79). Evoking the decentered, deterritorialized reality of nature, Aristide realizes that he can flourish anywhere, not only in the familiar landscapes of his home and the Pépinières Lameaulnes, his inheritance.

Others at the *veillée* also evoke wide, open horizons, often in contrast to the dense forest. Rosa reports experiencing claustrophobia when she arrives in Rivière au Sel, explaining that she feels “oppressée” by the thick canopy of trees surrounding her home (161). Dodose Pélagie complains that the forest does not allow any fresh air or sunlight into the community: “L’œil cherche le ciel et ne le voit pas, barré qu’il est par les pois-doux, les génipas ou les immortels géants protégeant les bois d’Inde, les gliricidias ou les poiriers-pays, protégeant à leur tour les merisiers-montagne ou les goyaviers bâtards” (210). For Rosa and Dodose, the forest paths do not allow escape into freedom and protection in the dense forest, but lead instead into a suffocating thicket, where neither eye nor mind may wander freely. Instead of embarking on a
vertical movement upward, as on the steep paths climbing the mountain, Émile, Aristide, and Dodose decide to move out, opting for lateral movement across the plaine and beyond the island’s confines. Aristide would not remain attached to the plantation, like his father Loulou, but would leave on a plane to search for another open space; Emile would also leave the island to find a place in which he can cultivate his own field of history. This desired journey transforms the image of a field, once associated with slavery, into a productive space where, as Émile imagines, the color of one’s skin bears no importance and where he can work the fertile soil at his will.

This rejection of the traces and myths is due in part to a need to move beyond the legacy of History presented as the long era of slavery and its aftermath in the Caribbean, and seek more immediately relevant means of freedom and happiness. When Man Sonson objects to her son’s choice of a white wife on the grounds that whites had enslaved blacks, her sons laughs and states matter-of-factly: “Maman, tout ça, l’esclavage, les fers au pieds, c’est de l’histoire ancienne. Il faut vivre avec son temps” (82). Even so, the contemporary Caribbean world, including postcolonial, yet-to-be independent Guadeloupe, still faces a longstanding heritage of social and economic inequality in everyday life, due in part to the legacy of slavery and colonialism. However, the social and economic problems faced in Guadeloupe today are very different from those during the time of slavery. The isolation and loneliness experienced by the characters in Traversée de la Mangrove are symptoms of a thoroughly contemporary alienation. The plantation economy has been replaced in part with a services-based economy. However, as historian Lucien-René Abenon describes it, “Le développement économique est toujours suspendu au remplacement de la production sucrière et bananière.” Pascale de Souza argues that, “[i]n Traversée de la Mangrove, the plantation economy is also alive and well, albeit with new products and new masters.” Although agriculture is still significant, migrant laborers from all over the Caribbean use modern machinery to farm where slaves once toiled. Immigration implies separation, sometimes permanent exile, from homes and families in one’s native land. Désinor l’Haïtien is a laborer who finds himself thoroughly alienated through exile and also through a refusal to live in a close-knit community of fellow Haitian immigrants in Rivière au Sel. He refuses to participate in the re-creation of the “pays perdu” at their shantytown, named Beaugendre, “la colonie des exilés”, because of his desire to make it on his own and become “son propre maître” (200-01). He does not wish to re-create his past. This refusal is met with mistrust and loathing among his fellow Haitian laborers, who begin telling fantastic stories about Désinor (200). His expression of individuality and desire to move beyond his past in Haiti further alienates him in Rivière au Sel. He finds solidarity with Xantippe, who like him is in permanent exile: they remain outsiders looked upon with contempt by everyone because of their “noircœur” and “odeur de misère et de dénuement” (198). Even those who are similarly alienated, such as the immigrants at Beaugendre, are repulsed by Désinor and Xantippe, whom they consider to be malevolent or cursed spirits (200). Désinor wonders whether anyone else is as miserable as he and Xantippe: “Y avait-il plus malheureux, plus solitaires qu’eux, sans femme, sans enfants, sans ami, sans père, sans mère, sans rien sous le soleil?” (203). Although many individuals in Rivière au Sel experience alienation and rejection by their peers, Désinor

and Xantippe are both materially poor exiles without families, occupying the lowest echelon of the social pyramid.

Many characters in Traversée de la Mangrove are métisse or are from various other parts of the world. Many are from mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds. In fact, métissage, or mixed racial heritage, is and has been the standard in Caribbean societies, not the exception. Rivière au Sel resident Emmanuel Pélagie, the “Directeur du Centre de Recherches Agronomiques et Fruitières de la Guadeloupe”, understands the Caribbean as being as diverse and mixed as the trees and plants of its islands: “Notre société est une société métisse” (207). Moïse, for example, is characterized as “mi-Chinois mi-Nègre” (39). His father, Sonson, was a ne’er do well vagrant who took up with Shawn, a meek Chinese woman. Mira, another lonely outcast, has light skin and hair, like her father, but her deceased mother, Rosalie, was described as a “négresse” (52). Loulou, Mira’s father, is of mixed-race ancestry, and characterizes his forefathers as part of the race of “Découvreurs” who have “sali leur sang avec des Négresses” (127). The Ramsaran family is East Indian, and many others are from all around the Caribbean, including Désinor and the Haitian laborers of Beaugendre. Dinah, the Dutch-Indonesian stepmother of Mira, describes Francis Sancher as a mixed palate of colors when she first meets him: “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. Presques noirs à partir du coude. Dorés au-dessus... Son visage était fait d’une chair riche, couleur de maïs bien rôti” (105). Francis Sancher explained to Lucien Évariste that he was born in Colombia and traveled to Africa, North America, and Europe before coming back, so to speak, to where his ancestors lived (221). He told Cyrille le Conteur and Lucien both that he had proof, based on his historical research, that his ancestors lived in Rivière au Sel, and that the family curse originated there.

Much contention surrounds the idea of “origins” in Traversée de la Mangrove. Sancher claimed that Rivière au Sel was the origin of his “malédiction”, but he could never find any physical evidence of his family’s life there. As Moïse describes him to Mira, “il cherche ses traces” (61). He relied on stories and hearsay, family myths that had been passed along. As discussed earlier, a myth traces a history, providing a linear narrative in order to explain or teach a certain event or truth. Traversée de la Mangrove, in contrast, does not follow such a linear narrative, and lacks an active hero. As Françoise Lionnet points out in “A New Antillean Humanism”, “we are far removed from the monolithic heroes of Césaire, the tragic figure of Christophe, or the epic life of Delgrès” (82). Instead, we are left with remnants of memories and fragments of stories, a polyphony of voices silently recounting the life of Sancher. These voices do not reconstitute Francis Sancher as a hero, but as a multitude of different stories, some heroic, some villainous. In her article “Reading Death”, Dawn Fulton observes that “rather than following a straight chronological line, the narrative winds through several tales, constantly reversing and diverting its direction.”78 The narrative behaves like the river for which its setting is named, meandering through the landscape, past peaks and valleys of memory. It winds past the high points, moments of empathy and love; and through dark valleys, exposing shameful acts and painful truths.

As Nick Nesbitt observes in his book Voicing Memory, “[t]he novel’s array of narratives work to locate these subjects within a confluence of elements, including the forces of history.

---

nature, and personality, that meet within a small island’s topography.”

The topographical features of Rivière au Sel are intimately linked with the mapping of the connections and relationships among those who live among the rivers, swamps, mountains and forests. As in the mangrove, or any other rhizome, many of these connections are beneath the surface. It is fitting, then, that in the silence of the veillée those connections are laid bare in individuals’ thoughts and memories. These testimonies map the topography of the island as well as part of its history. The island’s history, as well as the personal histories of the individuals who live in Rivière au Sel, is composed of a map of subjective experiences.

Tracing Bloodlines

I have analyzed how the distinction between mapping and tracing in Deleuze and Guattari’s “Rhizome” sheds light on the physical geography of Rivière au Sel and the ways in which this topography is inscribed with symbolism and the experiences of those who live there. The island’s traces, for example, do not lead to self-realization, fulfillment or freedom for the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel, as they had for a number of escaped slaves in Guadeloupe’s history and folklore. The Ravine, which provides a temporary escape into a dead mother’s embrace for Mira, cannot provide her any sustained comfort or shelter from the entanglements of a dysfunctional family. In spite of the comforts of her “royaume” and “refuge” in the Ravine, Mira still faces the damaging effects of her incestuous relationship with her half-brother, Aristide, and the unhappy relationship of her father and stepmother. Aristide also feels trapped by his love for Mira: they revisit the familiar landscapes of each other’s body, just as Aristide retraces the same forest paths everyday. The traces and ravine constitute impasses in a search for escape into freedom that many at the veillée long for.

In the same way, the tracing of bloodlines to reach a clear understanding of one’s ancestral or personal history leads to an impasse of incomprehensibility. Tracing his family history, Francis Sancher came to Rivière au Sel to discover the truth about his ancestors. However, his search for his family’s ancestral home, a manse named St-Calvaire, was fruitless. Despite his constant searching along the traces in the forests, there were no traces left anywhere of the once formidable mansion. Furthermore, Francis Sancher’s bloodlines, like those of most Caribbean people, are not linear or easily traceable. Sancher, also known as Francisco Alvarez Sanchez, was of mixed ethnic and cultural heritage; as Mira describes it, “il avait tous les sangs dans son corps!” (229). Those of his ancestors who lived in Rivière au Sel were both murderous slave owners and slaves alike. This complicated history, physical traces of which have disappeared to a considerable extent, was inaccessible to Sancher. The ancestral home, the site

---


80 “St-Calvaire” is French for “Calvary,” or Golgotha, and evokes the mythical site of the crucifixion of Jesus.

81 Sancher searches the forest for the mythical homestead, and enlists the help of Moïse, Émile Étienne and Lucien Évariste, but to no avail.

82 Sancher describes in detail his family history and curse to Cyrille, “le conteur” on pages 155-156, and to Lucien Évariste, pages 221-223.
of many painful ordeals inflicted by Sancher’s ancestors, is forever lost, as are the testimonies of those who suffered at the hands of Sancher’s family.

This inaccessibility of history is further exemplified in Sancher’s book project, entitled “Traversée de la Mangrove”. He had come to Rivière au Sel to seek his family’s history and to write his life story. After spending his life traveling across the world, Sancher confined himself to the role of writer, which he characterized to Lucien Évariste as the opposite of living: “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” (221). He described his project to Vilma, a young daughter of the wealthy Ramsaran family who became his lover and eventually the mother of one of his children. When asked what he did for a living, Sancher responded to Vilma with a laugh and stated:

Tu vois, j’écris. Ne me demande pas à quoi ça sert. D’ailleurs, je ne finirai jamais ce livre puisque, avant d’en avoir tracé la première ligne et de savoir ce que je vais y mettre de sang, de rires, de larmes, de peur, d’espoir, enfin de tout ce qui fait qu’un livre est un livre et non pas une dissertation de raseur, la tête à demi fêlée, j’en ai trouvé le titre : “Traversée de la Mangrove.” (192)

Sancher explained that his project was impossible because before writing a single line, he had already found the book’s title. Instead of communicating his experiences in written form, thereby allowing a reader to access his life, his secrets, his personality, in short, himself as a legible narrative, he had produced an impasse: the naming of a work that does not yet exist. Yet, the apparent content of this hypothetical work would be the accumulation of Sancher’s life experiences, and possibly the lives of his ancestors. The hypothetical content of this work has already existed in the realm of lived experience: the events that Sancher would have written about have already taken place. By prematurely naming his experiences, Sancher had somehow rendered their writing obsolete. Dawn Fulton writes that Sancher’s “premature naming of the content is paralyzing, and obliterates the very existence of that content; in a sense it is ‘toujours déjà’ too late.”83 Sancher had become paralyzed by an obsession with a past he could never forget and a curse he could never understand. In this way, he was unable to author his autobiography, because he was focused on self-destruction, not on creation. The impossibility of Sancher’s testimony is summarized in Vilma’s response: “On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterrer et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192).

Writing is a perilous task, an ordeal. It threatened to overwhelm and suffocate Francis Sancher with the ineffable shame of a past too horrible to imagine, much less write down for posterity. Just as crossing a mangrove may pull one down into the brackish mud, there are many hidden perils and obstructions to writing the truth of an event or situation. The truth of the past is often hidden beneath the murky waters of interpretation. If one attempts to discover the truth, traveling in search of hidden realities, one can, as Vilma warns, be pulled down into the mire of history. By looking to the past for truth and answers, one can remain locked in place, bound to the past and unable to move forward. Furthermore, if an event is in the distant past, then how does one begin to understand that part of history? Generally one relies upon a dominant point of view from which to tell the past, as the adage dictates: History is written by the victor. However, what happens when it is unclear who “won” or “lost”, and how can reality be understood through

only one perspective? How could one man, Sancher, have begun to account for the horrors perpetrated by some of his ancestors, and how could he have understood the misery inflicted on slaves who have borne his family name?

Many writers of history attempt to provide a voice for the subjugated, the “vanquished”, whose story has been obliterated by the “victor.” Aimé Césaire, the poet laureate of the Caribbean and hero to Lucien Évariste, one of Sancher’s closest friends, once described the role of the writer as restituting the voice of the vanquished, “la voix des sans voix”: “Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont point de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s’affaissent au cachot du désespoir”. Sancher’s own family history contained examples of both the victor and the vanquished, of master and slave. Sancher characterized his personal and family history as full of “sang, de rires, de larmes, de peur, d’espoir”, as complex as the history of the Caribbean itself. It is fitting that the text that Sancher offered Émile as an authoritative history of his family, a text supposedly written by one of his ancestors, is entitled *Wonders of the Invisible World* (236). Émile cannot read English, and because Sancher refused to serve as translator, the text remains inaccessible to him. The Sancher / Sanchez family history is indeed an invisible wonder to the reader of *Traversée de la Mangrove*.

Francis Sancher died without having to account for his own crimes, much less those of his forebears. He recounted to Lucien Évariste a horrific episode of his past, and described with relish the rape of a young girl:

> Tu sais mon plus beau souvenir? Nous avions reconquis un village. Recrut de fatigue, je suis rentré dans une concession que je croyais déserte. Une fille, presque une enfant, ses seins pointaient à peine, était pelotonnée sur une natte. À ma vue, elle a eu un cri de frayeur. Je sens encore dans mes narines l’odeur de son sang vierge. (226)

Sancher never wrote down what he called his favorite memory. This horrific and savage act will not know a place in Sancher’s autobiography, but is instead confined to Lucien Évariste’s memory, and provided to us as a retelling. No one else at the wake seems to have been made aware of Sancher’s delight in the scent of “sang vierge.” No one will speak for the brutalized young girl, whose only utterance in Sancher’s account is a cry of terror. Her history is likely unwritten and cast into the void of lived experience long forgotten.

Sancher’s lust for “virgin blood” was not so different from his preoccupation with and pursuit of his bloodline, or origins. His satisfaction from the rape of the young girl suggests, as does his preoccupation with destiny, that Sancher was perhaps a product of his genes, a man who was destined to behave as savagely as his ancestors. His former lover Dinah implies this, stating, “[c]et homme-là aussi que j’avais cru différent n’était qu’un assassin. Il l’avait dit lui-même, un bourreau” (109). His identity had been forged in the fires of violent history, and his destiny was an abrupt, brutal death. He expected, and perhaps sought, a violent end. However, even though this self-fulfilling destiny took its course, Sancher did not spill any blood when he died. The men who collect Sancher’s corpse from the path remark on the fact that he does not have any wounds or blood on him. The coroner, puzzled by this fact, has difficulty determining the cause of death. However, it is decided that there was foul play: “A l’en croire, en dépit des apparences,

---

même s’il n’y avait ni sang ni blessure sur le corps, cette mort ne pouvait être naturelle” (23). However inscrutable the cause of his demise, Sanche could not have died of “natural causes”. In death, Sanche remains as a totality, no ruptures or cracks in his physical structure. Both his life and death remain a complete mystery.

Throughout the course of human history, there has always existed a realm of the unknowable. In her article “A New Antillean Humanism”, Françoise Lionnet characterizes the unknowable in Traversée de la Mangrove thus: “The narrative harbors lacunae, and the death of Sanche underlines the fact that in reality as in fiction there are zones of nonknowledge and nonpower which the reader must learn to accept” (80). No one individual, including the reader, can fully know Francis Sanche. His life before his arrival in Rivière au Sel remains shrouded in mystery. Lucien Évariste, for example, can only attempt to understand the fascinating Sanche: “Rongé par la curiosité, Lucien était revenu voir Francis Sanche pour tenter de mettre morceau à morceau le puzzle que constituait sa vie” (223). Although he was a “moulin à paroles” to many who knew him, Sanche’s past remains an illegible text, an incomprehensible puzzle. He had not completed writing his personal history; instead of producing work, Sanche took to destroying his text after having written it. As Vilma describes, “Il écrivait sur la terrasse des pages et des pages. Quand il était las de les déchirer, il s’en allait dans les bois...” (193). This absence of autobiography implies the absence of a single authoritative narrative. Instead, the “novel within a novel”, Sanche’s own “Traversée de la Mangrove”, remains unfinished. The collective portrait of the meta-text Traversée de la Mangrove is therefore the only written account of his life. Sanche’s acquaintances are his chroniclers as they silently describe stories that he told them about his previous lives, and yet others rely upon rumors or legends about Sanche that have circulated throughout Rivière au Sel. This circulation of knowledge and gossip, and the expression of opinions and imperfect memories, are a source of history in Traversée de la Mangrove. As in the rhizome, there is no singular source of growth, or firmly rooted totality from which all of its life emanates. History is similarly unrooted, produced instead by the collective, which is comprised of individual and contradictory sources of knowledge.

Deleuze and Guattari envision the rhizome as ensconced in history, always in the middle of a rushing stream: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, interbeing, intermezzo.” This rejects a vision of history as teleological and linear, a chain of chronological events with distinct beginnings and ends. Sanche’s wake in Rivière au Sel is located precisely in between the moment of his death and the first day in which he is officially, recognizably dead. The mourners at this veillée, as at any wake, are charged with witnessing the dead’s first night in the realm of the beyond. Through solemn prayers, the vigilant living guide the deceased to the after-life, and in so doing form a united community of watchful mourners. They help him cross over, these psychopomps, like Charon who channels the dead across the river Styx. The wake is a perfect example of this “interbeing” of the rhizome.

Instead of following a linear model of history, Deleuze and Guattari propose a “Nomadology”, which would replace a totalizing History that is “always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus” (23). Sanche led a nomadic lifestyle before his arrival in Rivière au Sel, and then attempts to write a history from a sedentary position, returning to a point of origin, attempting to trace his lineage and understand

his history. This desire to return to a place and time out of his reach, this search for elusive beginnings, cannot be but a failure. Deleuze and Guattari describe the impossibility of movement back to historical roots:

The tree imposes the verb “to be,” but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, “and…and…and…” This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb “to be.” Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation – all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic…). (25)

Sancher admitted that a new beginning was impossible for him: “Cuba, c’est le pays que j’avais choisi pour ma re-naissance. Vois-tu, là j’étais naïf. C’est impossible. On ne re-nait jamais. On ne sort jamais deux fois du ventre de sa mère” (155). Instead of attempting to locate “a beginning or a foundation”, one must reconstruct Sancher’s story as a “nomadology”, from several sources and in rhizomatic form. Sancher could never return to his distant ancestral past, nor could he start over or find another beginning. When attempting to trace his origins, Sancher continually faced impasses, unable to track down or write a long-lost past. He could not access his roots. Deleuze and Guattari caution against such an appeal to roots, arguing that the arborescent model of genealogy and history is founded on hierarchies, the tree being an “object of reproduction”. The tree is “defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points”, those points being fixed in time and place. The tree is associated with dialectical relationships, whereas the rhizome “pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (MP 21). The rhizome is produced by multiple sources, whereas the tree is produced by a dialectical process. The dialectic produces history as a teleology, a linear progression through time. Deleuze and Guattari reject such a teleological understanding of history, conceiving of the rhizome as “an antigenealogy”, “without an organizing memory or central automaton” (21). “Nomadology”, therefore, is conceived as “the opposite of a history” (22).

Nomadology accounts for the rhizomatic qualities of human relationships and histories, and subverts the notion of time as a linear construct. Nomadology refuses master narratives of History. In a rhizome, there are multiple, tightly bound connections among roots and stems; in Nomadology, there are infinite strong connections between individuals and their past and present actions. However, as with the roots and stems of a rhizome, it is difficult for an observer to make sense of these connections, to trace origins and ends. For Deleuze and Guattari, this is why tracing is “so dangerous”, because it reproduces “impasses, blockages, incipient taproots, or points of structuration” (13). One cannot trace origins or sources of roots when looking upon a rhizome. One can only reach impasses. It is the same with history. One cannot make a tracing of past events because they are multiplied through individual perspectives. Therefore, if one attempts to discover the absolute Truth, one will only encounter multiple, even contradictory truths. Furthermore, it is impossible to trace roots when looking upon a mangrove, because all of

---

86 Ibid., p. 21.
87 Ibid., p. 21.
these confusing connections are largely submerged beneath murky waters. Although there might appear to be a crossing between trees that would provide a viable route through the mangrove, one does not know whether there are obstructions along the intended route hidden beneath the water. Tracing the past involves searching for roots that are impossibly difficult to disentangle.

Historical inquiry is therefore a risky endeavor. The present is inextricably linked with the past. One can never find singular sources, and one can confuse causes and effects. Sancher was obsessed with discovering the source of his family’s curse and with uprooting the family tree forever. He claimed that he could never escape history: he felt that he was accountable, culpable for all of his ancestors’ sins. During a night full of nightmares, Sancher ranted to Moïse that he could not escape his fate:

On ne peut pas mentir à son sang! On ne peut pas changer de camp! Troquer un rôle pour un autre. Rompre la chaîne de galère. J’ai essayé de le faire et tu vois, cela n’a rien changé. [...] Toi, tu crois que nous naîssions le jour où nous naîssons? Où nous atterrions, glants, les yeux bandés, entre les mains d’une sage-femme? Moi, je te dis que nous naîssons 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 vénèriels 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! (41-42)

Unable to trace and deracinate his poisoned roots, Sancher could not deny his inheritance. His destiny was polluted by the miasma of shared family guilt. Entangled in the history of a curse, he was accountable for the sins of those whom he had never known. Instead of accepting and welcoming his death as a sacrifice for these sins, in a Christ-like gesture of grace, Sancher lamented his “punition” and attempted, unsuccessfully, to escape his fate.

Throughout his time in Rivière au Sel, Sancher awaited death as though he were slowly being consumed by the mud and incoming tide in a mangrove swamp. He called himself a “zombie” when describing his life as a writer, explaining to Lucien Évariste, “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” (221). In L’espace littéraire, Maurice Blanchot likens the writer to a suicide victim, both of whom become passive and dispossessed in the face of their project. In describing suicide, Blanchot states that, because death is beyond experience, “c’est donc l’extrême passivité que nous apercevons encore dans la mort volontaire, ce qui fait que l’action n’y est que le masque d’une dépossession fascinée” (EL 102). In “Blanchot’s Suicidal Artist: Writing and the (Im)Possibility of Death”, James Gregg summarizes the connection between writing and suicide:

The more [the author] writes and the farther he advances into the literary space, the less clear his original project becomes. Writing involves a pact made with the night and cannot be equated with any mundane task to be accomplished in the realm of the day. Therefore, the writer is not related to what he has written in the same way that he is to anything else he has done through an act of power. In the cases of both suicide and writing, what begins as a concerted act of the will is transformed into fascination, indecision, and passivity. (49)
If writing does involve “a pact made with the night”, then for Sancher writing involves the torments of night terrors. As his work, also called “Traversée de la Mangrove”, deals with family and personal history, it is fitting that he would describe history as a “cauchemar” to Émile Étienne (235). He admits to Lucien that writing is the opposite of living, an act that has only produced “sénilité” (221). Sancher was facing the dispossession that Blanchot describes in The Space of Literature: “Even there where I decide to go to death, by a courageous and ideal resolution, isn’t it death which possesses me, dispossesses me, hands me over to that which cannot be possessed?” (118). Sancher was a man possessed by death; he described himself as a “zombie” and a “mort-vivant” to Man Sonson, explaining, “Je ne suis pas venu ici pour planter des enfants et les regarder marcher sur cette terre. Je suis venu mettre un point final, terminer, oui, terminer cette race maudite” (87).

Instead of mapping his history, making it a comprehensible, legible text, Sancher attempts to destroy it. Vilma witnessed Sancher’s writing and subsequent destruction of the text (193). Sancher also attempted to destroy his future bloodline. He tried to perform an abortion on Mira to prevent the birth of their child. Dinah reflects on Sancher’s betrayal of her stepdaughter, stating “Cet homme-là aussi que j’avais cru différent n’était qu’un assassin. Il l’avait dit lui-même, un bourreau” (109). Therefore, he was both passive and destructive. However, he had only succeeded in destroying the text he had written. After his failed attempt to abort Mira’s child, Sancher tearfully explained to her why this child must not live:

Il ne faut pas que cet enfant-là ouvre ses yeux au jour. Il ne faut pas. Un signe est sur lui, comme sur moi. Il vivra une vie de malheurs et pour finir, il mourra comme un chien, comme je vais bientôt mourir. Si je suis venu ici, c’est pour en finir. Boucler la boucle. Tirer le trait final, tu comprends. Revenir à la case départ et tout arrêter. (109)

In a way, his writing project “Traversée de la Mangrove” represents an abortion. He did not allow his writing to exist. When Sancher was confronted with Mira’s pregnancy, this reality was a direct affront to his desire to end his family’s cursed bloodline. He bitterly explained to Mira that absolutely nothing could make him stay and accept his role as father: “Moi, je te dis que rien de rien ne me retient. Ni la tête, ni le cœur, ni le ventre, ni le sexe. Rien. Je ne fais que passer” (230). He then shared a terrifying fantasy, a dream of singular death for all of Rivière au Sel:

Je voudrais que ce petit volcan qui vous fait tellement peur et que vous guettez chaque matin retrouve sa vigueur des commencements et pète. PÊTE. Un soleil, plus soleil que le soleil, jaillirait de sa bouche-cratère. Des cendres soufrées aussi et nous mourrions tous. Tous ensevelis sans avoir le temps de dire ouf. Mourir tout seul, mourir une seule et unique fois, voilà ce qui est horrible! (230)

Faced with the “sénilité” produced by writing, and the fear of his final end, Sancher expressed a desire for a shared death. Even though he did not wish to share his life, he did not want to face his death alone. He was both murderous and suicidal. He desired a passive, universal experience, one in which an immanent threat, a volcano, would smother everyone.88 This desire

88 Ultimately, Sancher fell victim to an immanent threat. He had no wounds or blood on his body, and if it is true that his death could not have been by “natural causes”, as discussed in “Le
is echoed in Cyrille le conteur’s chapter, when Sancher confides to Cyrille, “J’aimerais qu’il pète, ce volcan! Qu’il mette tout à feu et à sang! Comme ça je ne serais pas seul à partir” (155). Sancher would share in a terrifying death in order to avoid facing his end alone, supplanting the banal end of life with a collective experience. Maurice Blanchot quotes Nietzsche in The Space of Literature, stating, “There is nothing more banal than death.”89 However, although death is necessarily banal, it exists firmly outside of lived experience. One cannot experience one’s death, because physical death is necessarily the death of consciousness. Sancher’s fantasy, the singular death provided by the volcano, would actualize a literal destruction of the community and allow for a kind of tabula rasa, a clean slate from which all pain and horror of the past would be completely erased. This would not only be Sancher’s death and the demise of the community, but a desired end of history.

However much Sancher wished he would not have to endure his end alone, history does not end. History is not a linear progression, a teleology that eventually reaches a culmination point. History, like a rhizome, is a multiplicity of experiences that connect to one another. Sancher destroyed his own work, “Traversée de la Mangrove”, but he had no authority to prevent or destroy the mapping of his life. This is produced by personal and communal histories, stories that overlap and contradict one another and have neither definite beginnings nor ends. As Maryse Condé describes it in an interview, the form of Traversée de la Mangrove is “circular structure, a narrative with no true beginning or end.”90 The identity of Sancher has no fixed beginning or end, as his end marks the beginning of his re-telling, and a new beginning of self-understanding in Rivière au Sel. He had no definite, firm roots in any one community, as he had traveled and lived in many different places. Condé conceives of this lack of fixed, rooted identity, evoking Césaire’s return to his native land and questioning this journey: “To be Antillean, in the end, I’m not always sure exactly what that means! Must a writer have a native land? ... Could the writer not be a perpetual nomad, constantly wandering in search of other people?”91 Instead of relying on an essential, rooted Caribbean identity, Condé imagines a rhizomatic individual who travels and establishes multiple connections through relationships.

The writer as nomad is a theme articulated throughout Traversée de la Mangrove, most particularly in the character of Lucien Évariste. Lucien Évariste is a French-educated, would-be revolutionary writer who studies politically engaged literature, except for any literature from his native land, Guadeloupe. Lucien wishes to be from any place other than where he was born: “Ah, être né ailleurs! Au Chili! En Argentine! Ou tout simplement à un jet de pierre, à Cuba! Vaincre ou mourir pour la liberté!”92 (217). Lucien seeks a cherished authentic identity, in which he would be forced to fight for the liberty of his people. The “authentic” Caribbean, serene”, then he could have been killed by something that attacks from within, a poison for example.

92 In the United States of America, the phrase might as well be translated “Live free or die!,” the motto of the State of New Hampshire. Less known is the alleged rejoinder of Gen. John Stark, who quipped, “Death is not the worst of evils.” www.nh.gov/nhinfo/emblem.html
Cuba, is where he could enact his desires to become a revolutionary. A major difference between Cuba and Lucien’s native Guadeloupe is the political status of his homeland. Whereas Cuba is an independent country, which carried out two revolutions, Guadeloupe is still formally part of France, an overseas department whose national capital is tens of thousands of miles away in Europe.

Instead of accepting a French identity as those in his parents’ generation have, Lucien desires a distinctly black, revolutionary authenticity. This would be derived from across the black world, and represented in other islands, such as Cuba, or in other continents, exemplified by his Béninois friend. To Lucien, Francis Sancher embodied an ideal, nomadic identity: he was a rogue writer, having traveled and lived so many different experiences. Before meeting him, Lucien imagines that Sancher has an essential identity, that of an authentic writer, who is exotic for having come from elsewhere. Excitedly preparing to meet Sancher, “Lucien bondit, songeant à Alejo Carpentier et José Lezama Lima et se voyant déjà discutant style, technique narrative, utilisation de l’oralité dans l’écriture!” (219). Lucien wishes to write as well, but like Sancher finds this a very difficult task, although for different reasons. Lucien would like to write a novel chronicling the heroic acts of “nègres marrons”, or “nèg mawon”, or perhaps a historical fiction of a slave insurrection, but faces an impasse:

 [...] Lucien s’était-il mis en demeure d’écrire un roman. Néanmoins, il n’arrivait à rien, hésitant entre une fresque historique retraçant les hauts faits des Nèg mawon, et une chronique romancée de la grande insurrection du Sud de 1837. Ses amis patriotes, abondamment consultés, étaient aussi hésitants, les uns penchant pour les nèg mawon, les autres pour la révolte du Sud, mais tous le sommant d’écrire dans sa langue maternelle, c’est-à-dire le créole. Lucien qui, à l’âge de six ans, avait reçu de ses deux parents une paire de calottes pour avoir prononcé à voix haute la seule expression créole qu’il connaissait: “A pa jé”, en était bien empêché et, n’osant avouer son impuissance, regardait sans y toucher la machine à écrire électronique qu’il avait achetée à grands frais. (217-18)

Lucien wishes to write a heroic history of social revolution, but is paralyzed by his unfamiliarity with Creole. Lucien’s friends insist that he write in Creole, the “langue maternelle” of his compatriots, a suppressed language of the people, which would presumably be the most authentic way to express the heroic acts of the oppressed. Out of shame from this lack of knowledge, Lucien does not write anything at all, preferring to hide his apparent shortcoming from his friends to writing what he would like in French.

The question of writing in Creole is highly relevant in the postcolonial Caribbean context. In her lecture “The Stealers of Fire”, Maryse Condé discusses the “Créolité” movement in literature, as promoted by the Caribbean authors Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau in their work *Eloge de la Créolité*. Condé questions the dichotomy laid out in the *Eloge*, of colonial language versus mother language, asking whether it is absolute. She then questions whether Creole is the only authentic language available for her to write in:

93 Lucien refers with excitement to his acquaintance from Benin as “un authentique fils d’Afrique!” p. 220.
Has not the work of Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrated the power of hybridization and of language’s double entendre? In the end, does not language belong to the one who speaks it? Does not it adapt itself depending on the ethnicity, gender, and individual history of the speaker?

Furthermore, although they claim to rehabilitate it, the language of the Créolité writers is not Creole as it is spoken. It is an interlanguage, a product of standard French and basilectal Creole. Is it more revolutionary to write in an interlanguage than it is to write in French.94

*Traversée de la Mangrove* articulates Maryse Condé’s questioning of dichotomies in the theorizing of Caribbean language and literature. Condé undermines the binary of colonial language and “native” language in much the same way as Deleuze and Guattari undermine the binary relationship of the dialectic. Instead of understanding language in the tradition of what Deleuze and Guattari call “arborescent”, or dialectical, linguistics95, Condé describes language in a way that invites comparison to the rhizome, with its malleability, reversibility, and adaptability to the individual who speaks it. In this way, language, like the rhizome, “operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” (MP 21). Language forms a map among individuals, with “multiple entryways and exits”96, varying and expanding with “offshoots.” In an interview, Condé expresses the importance of language in the creation of her own subjectivity: “To become the Maryse Condé I aspired to be, I needed to draw on the contributions of both Creole and French.”97 Deleuze and Guattari write, “[...] there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. [...] There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language [...] evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil.”98 Language is not rooted or fixed in any hierarchy. As such, language belongs to the speaker. For Condé, the importance of language is related to the questions of self-expression and subjectivity. She insists that “[e]ach writer must follow her own path and find her own voice [suivre sa voie et trouver sa voix].”99

Lucien Évariste is paralyzed by the touted supremacy of writing in Creole, and as a consequence has not written a word of text. The political reasons for writing in Creole have supplanted his ability to write a highly politicized historical novel. Condé targets such an irony

96 Ibid., p. 21.
with her question: does not language adapt itself to the individual speaking it? Could Lucien not write something extraordinary, if not revolutionary, in his own “langue maternelle”, which happens to be French? Questioning the “revolutionary” quality of writing in Creole, or in an “interlanguage” of Creole and French, and by writing her own novels in French with occasional Creole phrases, Condé is making clear her own opinion on the subject. Instead of following the example of Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau, who “lay a heavy emphasis on Créole, considered to be the sole mother tongue”\textsuperscript{100}, Condé remains singular in her firm rejection of what she sees as the “sectarianism” imposed by Créolité, “its tendency to be monolithic and shut out all difference.”\textsuperscript{101} Condé desires a middle ground, writing in a language that captures the “warmth” of orality and that is not “purely literary.”\textsuperscript{102} In an interview, Condé states, “I try to use a French that is not purely literary, but warmer – a French that sometimes follows the rhythm of the spoken word. Sometimes I use a bit of Creole, as well as slang, informal words that aren’t considered literary.”\textsuperscript{103} Ultimately, Lucien resolves to write in French, and imagines the scandal this will cause among the literary critics in his native Caribbean. The narrator of Lucien’s chapter explains, “Il lui faudrait refuser le vertige des idées reçues. Regarder dans les yeux de dangereuses vérités. Déplaire. Choquer” (227). In much the same way as Maryse Condé, Lucien is unafraid to shock or displease his audience, and refuses to conform to the demands of the literary movement en vogue. Condé takes this defiance a step further: “In general, that’s what writing is – a kind of revenge against those around you. You can say things as they are.”\textsuperscript{104}

In much the same way as Lucien Évariste and Francis Sancher, Émile Étienne finds the task of writing history to be arduous, if not impossible. Étienne’s particular historical project is writing the story of his community of Petit Bourg. Inspired by the stories recounted to him by the mysterious Francis Sancher, Émile, a nurse by trade, begins to take an interest in history. This takes shape as a thoughtful questioning of the conventional teaching of History: a linear progression involving a litany of cataclysmic events, especially wars and conquests. Émile “se rappelait ses tristes leçons d’histoire, le défilé monotone des batailles perdues, gagnées. Pourquoi n’abordait-on pas les choses de tout autre manière, restituant les témoignages éventuels, faisant revivre les faits?” (235). Émile’s interest in history is fed not by books, but by the tales of Sancher. His desire to revive history through testimony inspires two years of seeking and transcribing oral testimonies from his patients, as well as his near bankruptcy in paying a printer for the distribution of his project, entitled “Parlons de Petit Bourg.” His project is met with ridicule by “les diplômés à la Pointe”, the effects of which apparently condemn his work to critical failure (235).

Here too we are reminded of Maryse Condé’s critique of authoritative discourses on Caribbean literature. Just as Lucien Évariste is intimidated about writing his novel due to pressure to write in Creole, Émile’s project is doomed because it does not comply with the standards of the “diplômés”. However, just as Condé questions the other masters such as


\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 17.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 3.
Confiant and Chamoiseau, Émile is unrelenting in his desire to write. Émile confesses to Sancher his persistent desire to write history in spite of his previous failure; he would write a history of his community that is based entirely on the lived experience of its inhabitants:

Je voudrais écrire une histoire de ce pays qui serait uniquement basée sur les souvenirs gardés au creux des mémoires, au creux des cœurs. Ce que les pères ont dit aux fils, ce que les mères ont dit aux filles. Je voudrais aller du Nord au Sud, de l’Est à l’Ouest recueillir toutes ces paroles qu’on n’a jamais écoutées… (237)

This history is a subject of immense complexity and it is inevitably full of contradictions, as conflicting stories emerge from multiple perspectives. Émile’s project is not only arduous due to the labor and financial risks involved (his last project took two years of labor and savings to produce), but is conceptually difficult, as it requires travel and the development of trust and respect among individuals who would share their stories with Émile. It could also expose harsh realities and shameful truths, and unearth buried resentments in the hearts of those who bear witness to history. As Moïse knows, “seul celui qui a vécu entre les quatre murs d’une petite communauté connaît sa méchanceté et sa peur de l’étranger” (39). The history of the community would not be laudatory or officially sanctioned. However ambitious and difficult his project may be, in gleaning the experiences and inheritance of individuals and families, from North to South and East and West, Émile would demonstrate the very nature, in a Deleuzian sense, of history, or “Nomadology”. His project embodies a valorization of the multiple, rhizomatic qualities of a community. Testimonies would help construct a map, produced by and for the people, of this rhizome. As Condé insists in an interview, “History must henceforth be subordinated to the work of familial or collective memory.”

According to Nick Nesbitt, the “decentered discourse” offered in Traversée de la Mangrove provides for a context in which “voices re-instantiate what colonial history had threatened to erase: an experience, immersed within history, that confronts the reader from within the fictional text as a model for a subjectivity yet-to-be-achieved.”

There is no tabula rasa or Cartesian plan in Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of history, but rather “nomadology.” The rhizome is in the middle of history, and there is no master narrative or official discourse that can account for one’s place therein. Those who reside in Rivière au Sel are between the mountains and the sea, along the traces of the forest, in the houses under a canopy of trees, and sometimes in the murky waters of the ravine. They are ensconced in their own memories, fantasies, and in the different times and places of their experiences. The veillée provides the opportunity for a collective experience in which different voices give rise to fragmented portraits of the community, themselves, and the deceased Francis Sancher. In this way, the novel itself maps an oral history, similar in scope, perhaps, to Émile Étienne’s future project.

---

Music and History

In addition to mapping and writing, another rhizomatic form of communication is music. Deleuze and Guattari liken the rhizome to a musical exercise, and music to a weed, a type of rhizome: “Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many ‘transformational multiplicities,’ even overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it; that is why musical form, right down to its ruptures and proliferations, is comparable to a weed, a rhizome.”

Music figures prominently at the veillée, where many women sing hymns and prayers aloud while others silently remember familiar songs. Moïse remembers the lullaby he sang to Sancher when he was overcome with terror after a nightmare. The narrator recounts that “Moïse avait dû le prendre dans ses bras comme l’enfant qu’il n’aurait jamais, et lui chanter une de ces berceuses que, dans le temps, Shawn lui chantait” (42). This particular “berceuse” is about a “zombie kalanda” who lives in a hut in the forest (42). The lyrics of this folk song are not particularly comforting for a lullaby, but provide a mirror to Sancher’s current standing, given his isolated life in the forest and the fantastic stories that surround his character. Dinah’s chapter begins with a sad love song that cautions against falling in love: “Ah n’aimez pas, n’aimez pas / Sur cette terre / Quand l’amour s’en va / Il ne laisse que les pleurs!” (101). Dinah vividly remembers her mother singing this song as she fixed her hair, “cheveux couleur d’encre, curieusement parcours de reflets roux” (101). She recalls her mother, a Dutch woman from Philipsburg, St. Maarten, who fell in love in Amsterdam with Dinah’s father, an “étudiant indonésien” (102). Instead of marrying the poor Indonesian student she loved, Dinah’s mother followed her father’s directive and married a “commerçant prospère, mais veuf, affligé de cinq enfants et qui la fit beaucoup souffrir” (102). Dinah’s mother sang a song that told the story of her life, a cautionary tale of loss and heartbreak. Unfortunately, the same song represents Dinah’s sad story as well. Unhappily married to Loulou and finding only temporary happiness with Sancher, Dinah could, like her mother, sing, “J’ai pris mon cœur / J’ai donné à un ingrat / A un jeune homme sans conscience / Qui ne connaît pas l’amour” (101).

The music throughout Traversée de la Mangrove provides a rich accompaniment and echoes the emotional condition of the individual. Léocadie Timothée bitterly recalls a song she understood as a cruel taunt, mocking her desire for a young man named Déodat Timodent when she was younger. The lyrics, “Maladie d’amour, maladie de la jeunesse...”, underscore Léocadie’s painful unrequited love (145). This music served to mock and isolate Léocadie. However, music also provides a connecting thread among individuals at the veillée. Individuals reflect on the women’s hymns, and many testimonies involve folk songs, music familiar to most everyone in Rivière au Sel. Music can unite individuals, as represented in the women’s chorus at the veillée. Music is also an important form of communication, a way in which stories are told and handed down to future generations. According to Marie-Céline Lafontaine, in her study on Guadeloupean music, singing performs an important social function:

Chanter c’est conter, raconter. C’est raconter une histoire ou un événement, quelque chose qui s’est produit, quelque chose qui vous est arrivé ou qui est arrivé

---

108 Ibid., pp. 11-12.
à l’autre, à un autre, présent ou absent, et à propos de quoi on communique son
sentiment ou donne son point de vue [...] C’est sa relation au monde qu’exprime celui (ou celle) qui chante, et la relation
au monde de la collectivité qu’expriment les chants où sont par conséquent mises
en scène les diverses expériences des acteurs sociaux. D’où la profusion évidente,
auparavant, dans les poésies orales chantées en Guadeloupe, de références à
des noms propres, de personnes ou de lieux, évoquant des conflits interpersonnels
de toutes sortes (rivalités entre amis ou voisins, déboires amoureux...), mais aussi
de références à des conflits sociaux et à des événements concernant l’histoire
politique, locale ou nationale.  

Music forms a relation with the world, expressing events and experiences that are lived
individually as well as shared collectively. Singing is a form of telling from a particular point of
view, communicating affectively with others. Lafontaine underlines the multiplicity of
perspectives and affects expressed in song: “Critique, protestation, plainte, louange, dérision...,
c’est toute la gamme des affects qui doit donc pouvoir être exprimée dans cette parole qu’est ici
le chant, parole du groupe dont la durée d’existence est indéterminée, tant elle est liée comme
toute littérature orale, aux fluctuations de la vie du groupe...”110 Songs provide a powerful
repository of cultural history. They can express a multitude of experiences, ranging from private
emotions to political protest. Like a rhizome, or a map, music connects individuals and is
composed by multiple sources, open to creative interaction. Passed from generation to
generation, music connects past with present, ancestral memory with history. When speaking of
Antillean history, Condé emphasizes the importance of cultural memory. In response to a
question regarding collective memory, Condé asserts that, “it is positively certain that ours has
been crossed out [raturée], and replaced by a sort of French memory.”111 In order to account for
this, Condé calls upon Antillean literature when she decrees: “We must rehabilitate ancestral
memory, our memory.”112 Literature and music both share an intimate relationship with memory
and history. *Traversée de la Mangrove* incorporates both intertextuality, with references to
works of literature113, and music, whether Creole folk songs or psalms114, as it weaves a tale
composed of personal and shared memories.

---

109 Lafontaine, Marie-Céline. “Le chant du peuple guadeloupéen, ou ‘Plus c’est pareil et plus
110 Ibid., p. 915.
111 Broichhagen, Vera, Kathryn Lachman and Nicole Simek. “A Conversation at Princeton with
Maryse Condé.” *Feasting on words: Maryse Condé, cannibalism, and the Caribbean text.*
112 Ibid., p. 24.
113 Many books are evoked in the novel, including *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l’Amérique,
Nations nègres et cultures, Les Frères Karamazov, Gouverneurs de la rosée*; there is also a poem
about Guadeloupe by Dominique Guesde quoted in Léocadie’s chapter. These texts serve to
enrich to the novel with references to literature outside of the work, and the presence of each of
these (and others mentioned in the novel) merit further discussion. For the time being, however,
it is of note that these texts create a rich intertextuality, but any further anaylsis will have to be
deffered to another paper.
CHAPTER THREE

TRAVERSING THE SUBJECT

An antropological study of Guadeloupean music, “Le chant du peuple guadeloupéen”, introduced in Chapter Two, discusses different kinds of significant social events involving music. The article describes the role and importance of the veyé, or veillée, in Guadeloupean society. The veillée is discussed in the context of “manifestations musicales” performed by a typical “communauté paysanne” in Guadeloupe. The veillée is organized as a “réseau”, bringing together “parents, voisins et amis”; in this sense, a wake resembles a rhizome. Relatives, neighbors, and friends come together, watching over the dead, working together to see the deceased through the night. In spite of this communal effort, there are different roles and a division of labor according to gender.

There is a division of the sexes in a veillée: “les « chants de veillée » proprement dits sont exécutés à l’extérieur de la maison par les seuls hommes tandis que les cantiques, qui eux appartiennent au fonds liturgique de l’Église catholique romaine, sont de préférence chantés par les femmes, à l’intérieur des maisons, dans la pièce même où est exposé le mort.” Whereas men perform the traditional wake songs outside, women sing hymns and psalms in the presence of the deceased, inside the house. The women are charged with leading prayer and initiating responses to the psalms, thereby fulfilling an essential role in the Catholic tradition of the wake.

This division between the interior and exterior provides a powerful analytical tool for considering the narrative voices used for women and men in Traversée de la Mangrove. While most men are spoken for in third-person, an omniscient narrator describing their thoughts and memories, women speak in first-person, describing themselves and their thoughts without this mediation. In a sense, the women occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Speaking, or in some cases singing, from the interior, women express themselves. As the women at the wake are charged with the important role of reading from the Bible and singing holy psalms in the presence of the dead, they proclaim their memories, their experiences, and their decisions, memorializing not only Sancher but their own lives.

The division between the interior and exterior is an important element in Traversée de la Mangrove. Many individuals, including Sancher, are on the periphery of their community; there are many outcasts and exiles in Rivière au Sel. In “Mapping the Mangrove”, Ellen Munley points to another important manifestation of the interior / exterior distinction:

---

114 There are also works of classical music and opera, such as La Flûte enchantée and Madame Butterfly, mentioned in Dodose Pélagie’s chapter. Her husband Emmanuel plays these and other famous classical works in order to impress the “métropolitains” who they entertain. Dodose says that Emmanuel does not appreciate Guadeloupean music, complaining “[j]amais une biguine, une mazurka!” (208).
116 Ibid., p. 909.
117 Ibid., p. 910.
The inner life of another person seldom corresponds to the person we perceive in social intercourse. Not one of the individuals in *Traversée de la Mangrove* is transparent to the larger community. The continuous flow of inner experiences and the fluidity of intersubjective experiences in the novel reproduces in all its complexity the process that happens constantly in human interaction.\(^\text{118}\)

Subjectivity, in this sense, appears dichotomous; there is a break between the interior reality of a person and his or her social persona. However, the novel does not engage in a simplistic dichotomous division between men and women with respect to the narrative differences among individuals’ testimonies. Although all women do speak in first-person, not all who speak in first-person are women. There are two fascinating exceptions: Xantippe and Joby speak in first-person, articulating their opinions and memories without the mediation of a narrator.

As a mythical presence deeply connected with his natural surroundings, Xantippe stands out among the men in speaking not only for himself, in first person, but also communicating with the land. His testimony is inscribed in the history of the land. He named the trees, vines, and ravines of the island. He named Rivière au Sel. He is endowed with profound knowledge, not only pertaining to the natural landscape but also to human history. However, his testimony does not provide an essentialized view of the natural world. He is not Nature. He is an exile and silent witness, reappearing throughout the novel, and his testimony, while alluding to total knowledge, does not share this with the reader. In this way, he is vested with a kind of indigenous authority, which is ironic considering his alienation and homelessness. However, his testimony also alienates the reader from the truth of Sancher’s crime. He never reveals what he knows. He also defies the specificity of gender, as he is endowed with a woman’s name.

Xantippe is the name of Socrates’ wife, and an adjective used for a spirited, argumentative, and even difficult woman. He is difficult because he escapes definition, and as he shows in his testimony, he defies any essential category. In “Narrative and Discursive Strategies in Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove*”, Suzanne Crosta argues that unlike other men in Rivière au Sel, Xantippe is “sensitive to the plight and emotions of women.”\(^\text{119}\) She points to his love for his deceased wife, Gracieuse.

However, it would be simplistic to divide men and women according to a binary opposition of oppressor / oppressed. In *Traversée de la Mangrove*, there are many examples of women participating in and enforcing a patriarchal system, and men who fall victim to it. A patriarchal system is a male-dominated understanding of genealogy and history that governs a society and its discourse. The wealthy planters, Loulou and Sylvestre, enforce a patriarchal rule in their private lives, in their economic activities and in their social interactions. Loulou idealizes the era of slavery in which there was “liberté absolue pour les plus forts” (125). He feels he should have been born when his ancestor, Dieudonné, was able to murder his slaves with impunity. Now he decries the “époque de Sécurité Sociale”, a time in which he could go to prison for employing illegal Haitian immigrants (125). As the son of East Indian immigrants, Sylvestre does not hold such an ideal view of history, but instead holds an avaricious view of the present: “dans la Guadeloupe d’aujourd’hui, ce qui comptait, ce n’était plus la couleur de la


peau, enfin plus seulement, ni l’instruction. [...] Non, ce qui comptait, c’était l’argent, et elle, Vilma, en aurait à revendre” (135). Whereas he cannot wield the power of his ancestry in Rivière au Sel, like his counterpart Loulou, Sylvestre can prove dominance by material wealth. He speaks of the value of his daughter, Vilma, in terms of money, her worth being measured by the financial power she would command if she married the man he has chosen for her.

However, both Loulou and Sylvestre have also been victimized by the patriarchal system they reinforce. Even though Loulou took care of his family’s plantation after his father’s death, he is alienated from his mother through her preference for his dead brother, Paulo. His uncles, who had treated his father poorly because he had worked the family property in Rivière au Sel, did not appreciate Loulou’s efforts to take up his father’s mantle. Nor did his mother, even though he “avait renoncé à tous les plaisirs” and, thanks to him, “le renom des Pépinières Lameaulnes grandissait” (126). He complains that “[l]es valeurs d’endurance et d’obstination ne plaisent à personne” (126). Even so, he does not appreciate the labor of the “Nègres des champs” who work for him. He reinforces the dominance of the colonial system, still at work in Rivière au Sel, when he speaks with Sancher, trying to find common ground:

Nous appartenons au même camp. Dans les livres d’histoire, on appelle nos ancêtres les Découvreurs. D’accord, ils ont sali leur sang avec des Négresses; dans ton cas je crois aussi avec des Indiennes. Pourtant nous n’avons rien de commun avec ces Nègres à tête grinnée, ces cultivateurs qui ont toujours manié le coutelas ou conduit le cabrouet à bœufs pour notre compte. (127)

Even as he complains that no one appreciates the values of hard work and endurance, patriarchal values that he and his father represent, Loulou does not value the hard work of those who toil in his plantation. Although his genuine efforts in the Pépinières have been met with reproach by his mother and extended family, he does not see the irony in his reproach for the black laborers he employs. He is blinded to this irony by a wholesale acceptance of, and participation in, a discourse of racial hierarchy.

Sylvestre had been victimized at a young age by a reproachful father. When he was ten years old, Sylvestre accompanied his father to the Hindu temple. There he witnessed a sacrificial slaughter of goats, a sight so abject and shocking that he screamed and involuntarily urinated in his trousers, staining his white suit. He was henceforth labelled “celui-qui-avait-fait-honte-au-papa” by his family (133). Even though he later adopted a fervently Hindu identity in an attempt to erase this shameful event, his father never forgave him for inflicting such shame on him. He attempts to compensate for this shame by amassing wealth, “plus d’argent qu’il n’en pouvait rêver” (134). He idealizes his father’s era, in which the symbolic power of financial wealth translated into the power to command others: “Sylvestre se rappelait comment […] il faisait la paie des ouvriers agricoles, appelant chacun par son nom […] Comment il faisait claquer son fouet au-dessus de la tête des bœufs en conduisant son cabrouet” (136).

His wife, Rosa, also suffered at the hands of her father. He had taken her out of school and arranged her marriage to Sylvestre, forcibly sending her away from the happiness of her family home. Obliged to marry a man she did not know, Rosa nonetheless does not contest her fate, bearing children and resentfully accepting her husband’s possessiveness over their young boys. After the heartbreaking loss of her beloved daughter Shireen, Rosa is embittered, and becomes cold and distant in her relationship with Vilma. Sylvestre decides that Vilma will marry a man she does not love, and Rosa frigidly breaks the news. However, as Vilma observes,
“[s]es yeux démentaient ses paroles” (188). Rosa unemotionally explains to Vilma that Sylvestre “sait ce qu’il fait” (188). She explains, “[u]ne 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” (188). Vilma senses that her mother does not honestly believe this: “On sentait qu’elle n’y croyait pas, qu’elle récitaît une leçon!” (188). Rosa understands the pain of being forced into a marriage that she does not want. As a young woman, she too resisted the idea of arranged marriage. In spite of this, she half-heartedly “récitaît une leçon” of patriarchal domination, one that she knows all too well. She does not offer Vilma any sympathy, but instead a disingenuous justification of a woman’s duty to have children. In spite of childhood traumas, or perhaps because of them, both Sylvestre and Rosa reinforce a system of male domination. Both are caught in the trap of essentialized identities. Sylvestre believes that the only way to make his father proud is to adopt a devout Hindu identity. Rosa claims to identify with the essentialized image of the mother, perhaps in order to reduce the cognitive dissonance of desiring freedom while feeling powerless.

However much Rosa appears to be subsumed in patriarchal discourse and in turn reinforces this system, she ultimately subverts this domination in her testimony. Speaking in first-person, she expresses the truth of her pain, unhappiness in marriage and dissatisfaction in her relationship with Vilma. She expresses hope in light of truths she has uncovered, with the help of Sancher. She also expresses regret over how she has treated Mira, but offers a hopeful vision of their future: “Nous saluerons le nouveau visage de demain. [...] Il n’est pas trop tard pour que nos yeux se rencontrent et que nos mains se touchent. Donne-moi ton pardon” (171). She recognizes that she must build a relationship with her daughter that is not based on parental domination but on mutual understanding and forgiveness. They must meet on the same level and see eye to eye.

Loulou’s son, Joby, also subverts the male-dominated system his father espouses. He speaks in first-person, offering his own perspective, and he refuses to be spoken for. Like Sylvestre, he was made to feel ashamed for not behaving like a man in the face of the abject. When he was brought along to his stepmother Dinah’s mother’s funeral, Joby ran away from the coffin out of fear because he did not want to kiss the corpse. After coming out from his hiding place, his father hisses at him, calling him a “poltron” (92). Joby remembers this at Sancher’s wake, and understands why his father brought him there: “Pour que je voie un mort et me comporte comme un homme devant lui” (93). However, unlike Sylvestre, he does not want to please his father and compensate for the shame of not having behaved like a man at his grandmother’s funeral. He claims to hate his father: “Je me demande si d’autres garçons détestent leur père comme moi. Je voudrais qu’il meure” (95). Joby does not wish to follow in his father’s footsteps, but wishes to be disinherited. Joby identifies with his ancestor, Gabriel, who married a black woman, causing him to be “renié” by his family (99). Joby idolizes the image of his ancestor, saying, “[m]oi aussi, quand je serai grand, j’aimerais faire une chose terrible et défendue comme cela qui mettrait papa en rage” (99).

Joby’s brother, Aristide, also claims that he will deny his inheritance, the nurseries his father has maintained. He recognizes that Mira is “salie, souillée” by Sancher’s rejection of her, and this has released him from his incestuous love (78). Aristide then realizes that “[l]es fleurs n’ont pas de patrie”, and as such, he can cultivate them anywhere (79). He asks, “[a]lors, Amérique? Europe? [...] Quel grand dessein? A défaut, quel autre amour?” (79-80). He makes the decision to leave Guadeloupe, but does not know exactly where or how. These questions
remain unanswered at the end of his chapter. He, like many of the women surrounding him at the wake, makes a decision to leave Guadeloupe after years of dissatisfaction.

One is left to wonder what the future will bring. Given Joby and Aristide’s family history, which involves, like that of Sancher, bloodshed by their slave-owning ancestors, will they be able to move beyond this sanguine legacy? Even though Joby claims to hate his father and wishes to dishonor him, both he and his father idolize one of their forefathers, albeit for different reasons. Will Joby end up with a dissatisfying existence like his brother Aristide? He also wanted to scandalize his father. Aristide and Mira both wanted this, which they offer as a reason for their ultimately unsatisfying incestuous relationship. Aristide feels liberated by Sancher’s rejection of Mira, but will he go on to find genuine love? Will he ever move beyond an essentialist view and objectification of the world? Will he leave only to return, disillusioned, like Sancher before him?

These questions remain unanswered because the future is unwritten. Instead of offering a “grand dessein”, the novel foregoes a conclusion in order to allow for a multitude of possibilities. It also allows for different modes of expression for individuals. Some proclaim their subjectivity in first-person, while others are described and quoted. Those who speak in first-person subvert the dominant discourse of patriarchy, offering portraits of subjectivity that resist male domination. Perhaps the first-person narration in female characters’ testimonies reflects Condé’s assertion in “The Stealers of Fire” that “[t]he words of women possess the power of anarchy and subversion” (159). By affirming themselves in first-person, and vowing to move beyond the pettiness and isolation in their community, they are subverting the patriarchal discourse embodied by Loulou and Sylvestre. However, Aristide, even though he too has decided to leave the island, is still in the mire of patriarchal, essentializing discourse. He sees Mira, a woman he considered “le trésor de son cœur”, as “salie, souillée” by the rejection of another man (76, 78). He sees in Guadeloupe a landscape that has been “défloré”, as opposed to the splendor and bounty of the virginal forest before time. Would he continue to capture birds, keeping them prisoner in his volière? Would he move to another land only to recreate the pépinières of his father? Would he get over jealousy and the “fureur qui prit la couleur de l’amour blessé” (80)? Would he truly move beyond the phallocentric discourse that he uses when complaining that in his island, “hormis les dimensions de son pénis, rien ne dit à l’homme qu’il est homme” (79)? Again, the novel only provides possibilities, not conclusions. In this way, subjectivity, whether expressed in first-person narration or otherwise, involves questions and possibilities. As is stated in Aristide’s chapter, “[l]es fleurs n’ont pas patrie” (79): there is no essential, rooted identity that accounts for the multiplicity of the individual.

The Singular Subject

In Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific Peter Hallward discusses the trend in postcolonial literature of writing towards a non-relational, singular subjectivity. Instead of founding subjectivity in opposition to colonial oppression or making any other relation or opposition as a basis for identity, Hallward argues, many postcolonial authors choose to articulate subjectivity as entirely singular and self-generating. His study focuses on four (male) postcolonial authors who are united by their insistence that “the only genuine individual is unique, one of a kind” (3). In a “singular conception of reality” (5), according to Hallward’s definition, the individual is not defined or identified in relation to anything outside of
him or her. A singular mode of individuation differs from a specific identification in that “it is not specific to external criteria or frames of reference” (3). This singularity is generated exclusively by its own self-creation: “The singular creates the medium of its own substantial existence or expression” (2).

Hallward’s arguments regarding what he conceives as “singular” and “specific” modes of individuation are largely influenced by the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou. Hallward posits Deleuze as the foremost philosopher of the singular, citing Deleuze’s assertion in *Différence et Rénovation* that “there has only ever been one ontological proposition: Being is univocal” (54). In *Mille Plaatsen*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the “plane of immanence” as “a plane upon which everything is laid out, and which is like the intersection of all forms”, a plane of “univocality opposed to analogy” (MP 311-312).

Deleuze’s notion of “singularity” is inspired in part by Immanuel Kant’s work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In the *Groundwork*, Kant establishes as a categorical imperative the recognition that individuals are not merely means, but ends: “the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end.”120 Every individual in Rivièrè au Sel is an end to himself or herself, and each individual chapter is a story within a larger story, not subsumed by the collective but instead an entirety within an entirety. As I showed in Chapter One, the chapters of *Traversée de la Mangrove* provide individual entryways into the larger entity of the novel, and even though these chapters can and should be read as individual stories, they form a collective portrait, not merely as means to this portrait, but as ends in themselves.

Deleuze’s notion of univocality in singularity resembles the ideal state of literature described by Maryse Condé in her article “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer.” She evokes the dream of writers such as Aimé Césaire, who were working toward pan-African solidarity after the Second World War: “... there was a wonderful, generous dream those days. The dream of a black world which would not be broken up into distinct nations by the colonial languages and the various colonial systems of governments. A black world which would speak through one voice, through the *univocal voice*121 of its poets and writers” (155). According to Condé, the univocality aspired to by writers of Négritude was conflated with a larger political project, which became irrelevant with the advent of decolonization (155). The independent states in postcolonial Africa had more immediate concerns related to setting up government and managing volatile social and economic environments, and their statesmen, many of whom were members of pan-African literary societies, were preoccupied with their new roles.122 Certain places, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique, were left out of the move to independence, and instead remained part of the colonial European state. Meanwhile, Blacks in the United States were engrossed in the civil rights movement there. The formerly colonized

---

121 My emphasis.
The world was suddenly engaged in all manner of conflicts and political upheaval, and as a consequence the desired “univocal voice” of black literature remained a dream.\footnote{Ibid., p. 155.}

The particular concerns of specific territories overshadowed the universalism of Négritude. Hallward defines the “specific” as concerned with “the imperative to pay attention to ‘context’ and to the ‘specific’ circumstances of a situation or text.”\footnote{Hallward, Peter. “Edouard Glissant between the Singular and the Specific.” \textit{The Yale Journal of Criticism} 11.2 (1998): p. 441.} Hallward points to Edouard Glissant as an author and theorist who, instead of focusing on the “specific”, as are many other contemporary critics, is preoccupied, at least in his later work, with Deleuzian singularity.\footnote{Ibid., p. 442.} Hallward points to that body of writings as beginning and ending “with the assertion of a single and unlimited ontological Totality, a wholly deterritorialized plane of immanence.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 442.} According to Hallward, Glissant’s \textit{Tout-monde} and \textit{Poétique de la Relation} involve a Deleuzian “absolute or singular conception of difference.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 442.} They describe an interconnected world in which linguistic and ethnic differences are located along a plane of immanence.\footnote{Ibid., p. 442.}

Glissant views the Caribbean subject as fundamentally mixed with a history that undergoes a “subterranean convergence” with others’ histories.\footnote{Ibid., p. 67.} Identities have “submarine roots”, as in a mangrove, and it is in this concealed space that histories become entangled, through connections among individuals.\footnote{Ibid., p. 72.} Glissant goes on to suggest that a return to this “entanglement of identities” is a quest for one’s history.\footnote{Ibid., p. 75.} According to J. Michael Dash in his introduction to \textit{Caribbean Discourse}, this return or “reversion”, as Glissant terms it, is “not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 26.} In “The Stealers of Fire”, Condé agrees with Glissant’s assessment in \textit{Caribbean Discourse} that “the real history of this land needs to be proclaimed: men and sand, gullies, hurricanes and earthquakes, dried-up vegetation, animals blown away and children with gaping wounds.”\footnote{Quoted in Maryse Condé’s “The Stealers of Fire,” p. 157.} Condé, like Glissant, does not wish to return to an immutable state of Being, to use Dash’s phrase, but to proclaim realities in history in order to understand the past and present. Condé promotes this awareness of history in an interview: “To know one’s past, to dominate it, to know it in its reality without making of it an object of backwards-looking veneration, is one of the conditions of freedom.”\footnote{Nesbitt, Nick. \textit{Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature}. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003: p. 201.}
In her article, “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer”, Condé discusses the extent to which “commands decreed about West Indian literature” have contributed to an “edification of an order” that has subsequently limited freedom (152). Condé describes the demands of the 1932 manifesto “Légitime Défense”, which was authored by Martinican and Guadeloupean intellectuals, as founding a Marxist paradigm for West Indian literature. Suzanne and Aimé Césaire had codified this new order, which placed demands and restrictions on what constituted authentic West Indian literature. Condé observes that this order “didn’t affect only poetry. It also affected history, sociology, and philosophy” (154). In this paradigm, not only literature but also West Indian society in general was defined in relation to colonial domination:

West Indian society was not studied per se, as an autonomous object. It was always seen as a result of the slave-trade, slavery, and colonial oppression. This past was the cause of every social and cultural feature and thus explained everything: the relationships between men and women, the family system, as well as oral traditions or popular music. [...] West Indian society came to be considered as a Paradise perverted by Europe. Everything prior to colonization was idealized. Consequently, from the image of Africa, the motherland, were carefully eradicated any blemishes such as domestic slavery, or tribal warfare, and the subjugation of women. (154)

According to Condé, Césaire and other writers of Négritude defined the West Indies, which had been despoiled and exploited by the colonizers, in opposition to a pre-columbian idyll and an un tarnished image of the mother, Africa. Condé writes that Césaire and others were reacting to the colonizers’ “denial of an African culture” in which “Mother Africa still remained the Dark Continent.” However, the appropriation of an idealized Africa is problematic because it does not account for the realities of slavery and subjugation in the continent. Therefore, the writers of Négritude were operating in the same way as the colonial forces they opposed; they too had imagined Africa as a tabula rasa, a blank slate upon which they could write their own version of history.

By imposing an ideological order on West Indian literature, the writers of Négritude engaged in essentializing discourse and limited intellectual freedom. Perhaps this is why Condé has openly resisted ideology, claiming succinctly, “I don’t have theoretical constructs.” However, she and Glissant do share the conviction that they must proclaim history.

By imposing an ideological order on West Indian literature, the writers of Négritude engaged in essentializing discourse and limited intellectual freedom. Perhaps this is why Condé has openly resisted ideology, claiming succinctly, “I don’t have theoretical constructs.” However, she and Glissant do share the conviction that they must proclaim history.

---

purity, authenticity, and unique origins.” Condé emphasizes two particular contributions that Glissant has made “to the issue of freedom”:

First, what Césaire called *bastardization* in negative opposition to authenticity and purity, Glissant renamed *métissage*. He was the first to pen praise for creolized cultures, which would not constitute a category in opposition to other categories. [...] He consequently invents the notion of *relation*, “a complex, arduous, unpredictable notion, the driving force of the poetics to come” (Glissant, 1989/1997, p. 560), which has the mission of relocating Guadeloupe and Martinique within the complex equilibrium of the world. (158)

Condé, who claims not to have theoretical constructs, also rejects discourses of authenticity and purity. However, Condé points to Glissant’s theory of *antillanité* as a new order, albeit a “more elaborate model for fiction” than that of the Négritude writers. Condé writes that this model contains the imperative that “[c]haracters should not be individuals, but the collective expression of the West Indian soul.” Condé points to Glissant’s “belief in the importance of the community” as invoked in his *Discours antillais*, which she quotes: “The question that any Martinican should ask himself is not: ‘Who am I?’ which is meaningless; but ‘Who are we?’”

Condé also asks a similar question in an interview, in response to a request to situate Caribbean people and literature “within the current debates on postmodernism and globalization.” She views the Caribbean as a site of cultural exchange and dynamism, full of possibilities for the future:

There are so many people returning, leaving, so many passing visitors, that I wonder what the Caribbean won’t end up being? [...] Who are we? Where are we? I don’t have an answer to all these questions, but simply the conviction that we must approach the future differently. (23)

In order to learn from the past and, by consequence, “master the present,” one must look beyond identity questions and approach the future in a new way, a way that she does not specifically define. By defining this future, she would be participating in the imposition of an

---

141 Ibid., p. 158.
142 Ibid., p. 157.
144 Emphasizing the importance of history, Condé states in an interview, “I’m convinced that we need to know the past, quite simply in order to master the present.” Nesbitt, Nick. *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003, p. 201.
order that she criticizes. Condé does not offer a manifesto. Instead of adopting Glissant’s model of writing characters as expressions of the multitude, Condé faces questions surrounding identity and the community through attention to uniqueness and individuality. She states, “the question that interests me is rather how to find one’s place in the dominant world, how to maintain one’s voice, how to be oneself in this world that asks you to conform.”

In response to demands of conformity among West Indian writers, whether by an “order” imposed by Césaire or the proponents of Créolité, Condé offers a vision of what might comprise “disorder” and “freedom”. She writes that women writers from the Caribbean, because they “are located on the margins of male discourse”, subvert the imposition of order in their unique, singular writings. She offers a reading of works by Mayotte Capécia and Suzanne Lacascade, writers who, she claims, have been misunderstood by male critics. While they and other female writers from the Caribbean, such as Simone Schwartz-Bart, have not created a “literary movement or school”, their texts all “are in mutual agreement when it comes to denouncing, each in their own way, alienation and cultural dependency resulting from colonial domination.” According to Condé, these authors provide unique voices in a singular denunciation of injustice that, as women, they experience acutely. In this way, they actualize speaking through a “univocal voice” like the one desired by Négritude writers. Instead of laying foundations for a unified code for literature, however, the women studied by Condé provide unique voices in proclaiming their subjectivity and in chronicling elements of West Indian history that have affected them personally.

Returning to Traversée de la Mangrove, how are disorder, univocality and freedom represented in the novel? In the rigid social order of Rivière au Sel, Sancher has introduced an element of disorder. He has shaken things up, like an earthquake. He has inspired self-examination among individuals in Rivière au Sel, who reflect on his impact in their lives. As in West Indian literature, this disorder is an element within a larger realm. The Caribbean women’s literature that Condé writes about is located within the larger context of West Indian literature, and subverts the dominant discourse. Subjectivity is therefore articulated through the unique, individual voices that comprise a multitude. The subject is not built upon an opposition to an “Other”, unlike Négritude, which was built in opposition to colonial oppression. In the same way, Sancher had introduced disorder in a community to which he belongs. However, instead of providing an authoritative voice for a specific situation, Sancher could be seen as “a multiple individual whose divergent perspectives challenge the assumptions of a particular representation of reality.”

---


147 Ibid., pp. 161-162.


149 According to Condé’s reading, each work discussed involves social and political history and questions of family and cultural identity.

It is useful to return to the notion of the singular subject, as defined by Hallward. The singular individual does not define its existence in relation to any Other. Sancher could not write his story in relation to a distant, inaccessible past, an Other. His genealogical project was destined to fail. Although he failed to uncover the origin of his family curse and write his family history at its “point of entanglement”\textsuperscript{151}, Sancher became entangled in the lives of his acquaintances in Rivière au Sel. He befriended and seduced many, while repulsing and being reviled by others. These entanglements, like the submerged connections of the mangrove, comprise a singular community, a rhizome. In this way, Sancher was both “immanent” to his community, as he had lived in Rivière au Sel and had established connections and relationships, and he was “transcendent”, because his subjectivity transcends specific relationships and has spread throughout the community. Hallward evokes the transcendent quality of the singular individual: “If a specific individual exists only as part of a relationship to an environment and to other individuals, a singular individual is one which like a creator-god or sovereign power transcends all such relations.”\textsuperscript{152} Sancher did not build his identity in relation to a country, a race, or a political affiliation: he was mixed in every sense. In the novel, Sancher is not a center from which action radiates; he does not occupy one place. He is, as the sound of his Guadeloupean name suggests, “sans chair”, without flesh, and “sans chez (soi)”, without a home. Through death, Sancher permeates the thoughts of the community, becoming a \textit{fil conducteur} through individuals’ testimonies, transcending relationships, a “beyond-subject”.\textsuperscript{153}

Even though memories of Sancher transcend the community of the \textit{veillée}, Sancher himself was an immanent element in Rivière au Sel and in the Caribbean in general. He was not a foreign invader or colonizer, violently taking over the community, as the colonial powers who conquered Caribbean islands had done. His lust for “sang vierge”, described in Chapter Two, did not ravish Rivière au Sel in an act of violence. However, he was not a foreign rescuer, either. He did not come to Rivière au Sel with an explicit intention to cure the sick, as he did when he was the “curandero” in Angola\textsuperscript{154}. Instead, Sancher was an immanent force, a catalyst. Sancher’s identity was entangled in Rivière au Sel through a past he could never fully understand. Although he never proclaimed fidelity to anyone else, and as such lived “sans cher”, without a beloved, Sancher became entangled in the lives of his acquaintances. In life and death, Sancher became established in the plane of immanence of Rivière au Sel.

However, as Peter Hallward argues in his discussion of “singularity”, there are differences between individuals along a plane of immanence. Hallward defines individuals as “simply the \textit{immediately} produced, direct actualisations of one and the same Creative force, variously termed desire or desiring-production, life, élan vital, matter-energy, the virtual, or power – the force that governs the chaotic distribution of things across the plane of

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{153} “The specific relates subject to subject and subject to other: the singular dissolves both in one beyond-subject” (“Introduction”, \textit{Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific}.  Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 5)
\item \textsuperscript{154} Sancher explains to Joby that he felt compelled to follow his priest’s directive and “[g]uérir ceux qui souffrent” as a doctor. He speaks of the optimism at the beginning of his journey: “C’était la joie, c’était la liesse! Tous ces morituri graissaient leurs fusils russes” (97).
\end{itemize}
The individuals of the veillée are immediate to their surroundings and products of the same environment, connected and entangled in the mangrove. The differences between these individuals are “essentially quantitative”, comprised of distinctions based on “differences of creative intensity.” Individuals differ, of course, but this is not to be understood as “relational difference”: “The only significant ‘relationship’ between individuals must be measured in terms of the virtual which underlies them – a relation of purely quantitative difference along a single scale of proximity to the full Creative potential of intensity or Life.” The individual does not differ from another in a negative sense, involving, for example, a simplistic opposition such as “I” is not the same as “you.” Difference, in the realm of Deleuzian univocity, is “free from the limits of constituent relations between the differed.” Instead, individuals differ in their ability to employ creative force to affirm life.

Certain characters in Traversée de la Mangrove make efforts to reach self-understanding and utilize creativity in imagining a brighter, better future. Women in particular affirm life by making promises to seek and increase self-knowledge and love. It is no coincidence that characters who make such efforts to affirm life speak in first-person narration. Although there is no firm center or hierarchy established in the rhizomatic form of Traversée de la Mangrove, there are certainly differences between characters, and these differences are highlighted in the various forms of self-expression. As Françoise Lionnet argues in her chapter “Logiques Mêlées”, Traversée de la Mangrove “is engaged in the deconstruction of hierarchies, not in their reversal. The aim, in the end, is to reconstruct new imaginative spaces where power configurations, inevitable as they are, may be reorganized to allow for fewer dissymmetries in the production and circulation of knowledge.” Only female characters, as well as Joby and Xantippe, can affirm their individual “I” at the veillée. These characters, including all of the women, a child and a grieving exile, have been alienated in the dominant discourse of patriarchy. Their first-person narration reorganizes, to use Lionnet’s term, this power configuration. First-person narration does not place these individuals on a different plane, so to speak, than their peers, but it does allow them to proclaim their own subjectivities without being spoken for. For example, Rosa and Dodose were both married to men they did not know. They had been spoken for, because they were not empowered to decide for themselves. The novel provides a space in which they can speak for themselves. By reconfiguring the power dynamics at play between men and women, the novel provides a more level playing field for all characters’ expressions. However, it is also true that the testimonies in first-person, because they affirm the “I”, are privileged in the context of the novel. In this way, those who speak in first-person differ from those who do not in that they employ what Hallward calls “creative intensity”, affirming life through self-exploration and affirmation.

There has been much debate by feminist theorists, including Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, regarding phallocentrism in language. Many women writers have grappled with

---

156 Ibid., p. 12.
157 Ibid., p. 13.
158 Ibid., p. 12.
questions surrounding self-expression and subversion of patriarchal discourse. In her article “The Stealers of Fire”, Condé describes the Promethean task of West Indian women writers in subverting the “order” imposed by ideology and other forms of patriarchy. In her readings of a diverse group of women writers from the Caribbean, Condé emphasizes the importance of autobiography. In connecting these works beyond the gender of their authors, Condé writes:

The first connection we can detect is that they are real or simulated autobiographies. In each of them, [...] the subject says “I.” Let us recall here the question put by Doris Sommer [...] : Is [women’s autobiography] a medium of resistance and counter discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography?160 (161)

*Traversée de la Mangrove* continually calls into question “the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography” in its treatment of history and memory. Emile’s historical project, “uniquement basée sur les souvenirs gardés au creux des mémoires, au creux des cœurs” (237), is precisely a questioning of any exclusive master discourse in historical inquiry. The women, affirming their “I”, provide a counter discourse to the objectifying, patriarchal worldview espoused by Loulou and Sylvestre.

Their thoughts mediated by a third-person narrator, many men in Rivière au Sel do not affirm “creative intensity” but are content to remain firmly rooted in their present worldviews and visions of an idealized past. Loulou, for example, only dreams of serving Queen Elizabeth II and the Royal Family of England by providing their flowers. Otherwise, he idealizes the era of his ancestor Dieudonné, who sadistically murdered a number of his slaves. Carmélien, a son of the wealthy Ramsaran family, is still transfixed by a painful love for Mira. Aristide objectifies the world around him, including other people. Moïse finds himself terrified at the thought of staying in Rivière au Sel, living and dying “solitaire comme un mâle crabe dans son trou” (48). He also is afraid to leave, believing “pas un coin sous le soleil qui ne porte son lot de désillusions. Pas une aventure qui ne se solde par l’amertume. Pas un combat qui ne se conclue par l’échec” (48). Instead, Moïse is paralyzed by fear, unable to conceive escape from the suffocating loneliness of his life. He has already drawn conclusions and can envision only failure. All of these characters are moribund, rooted to present circumstances that are neither satisfying nor hopeful.

Many female characters, on the other hand, conceive of ways to improve their lives. Some, like Dinah and Dodose, will leave Rivière au Sel to discover themselves and other people. They will be accompanied by family members and as such resolve to improve these relationships. However, some male characters, such as Émile and Lucien, will also move out. Others, like Rosa, will remain, but will take steps to improve their lives and relationships. Whether or not these particular individuals express themselves in first-person, they are affirming life. They form a part of the mangrove, but they rise above the mire of hopelessness and fear, reaching like tropical flowers for sunlight above the thicket.

Towards Subjectivity

We have seen how writing, especially the writing of history, is akin to crossing a mangrove. Lucien Évariste and Émile Étienne both find themselves encountering traps and pitfalls when attempting to write. They are in danger of becoming sucked into the mire of others’ demands on their work: Lucien by his “amis patriotes”, Caribbean nationalist writers who insist that he write in Creole, and Émile by the “diplômés” in the nearby “métropole,” La Pointe, who deride his work for its stylistic inadequacies. Sancher is unable or unwilling to write his family’s storied history. Writing is an épreuve, an ordeal fraught with peril. Many characters in Traversée de la Mangrove have difficulty navigating through life, facing feelings of loneliness, disappointment and desperation. However, in the context of the novel, “crossing the mangrove” is attempting to transcend one’s circumstances, such as performing the social act of writing, or making the decision to attain knowledge. Several characters in Traversée de la Mangrove embark on a quest to learn about history, whether it be themselves, their families, their community, or the world. The crossing often involves leaving home; voyaging from the traces of Rivière au Sel and Guadeloupe onto the highways of the wider world. Mira resolves to wander as her lover, Sancher, wandered. She dreams of crossing from mangrove to mangrove on a global scale: traveling from the familiar mangrove swamps of Guadeloupe, to those encircling other Caribbean islands, and finally on to the mangroves of the West African countries Sancher once visited. Reversing the trajectory of countless slaves who crossed the Atlantic to the New World, Mira and Lucien dream of crossing the ocean back to Africa. Unlike the ordeal endured by Africans in chains, this journey is a subjective expression of freedom, a quest for knowledge and understanding.

Crossing the mangrove is also a voyage within: an ordeal of self-examination and actualization, of a subject in process. Contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou conceives of the subject as a product or consequence of an event. In Badiou’s L’éthique, the “subject” is not a given, but a process: a subject is an individual who has undergone a process of experiencing, acknowledging, reacting to and thinking according to an “event” that has taken place. According to Peter Hallward’s reading of Badiou’s philosophy, an event is a “radically transformative action” that "eludes the prevailing logic that structures and governs [specific] situations” (Hallward 107; xxv). An event ruptures the status quo, generating singular truths that are affirmed by those individuals who remain faithful to the event.

Sancher’s arrival and brief life in Rivière au Sel can be understood as the “event” to which individuals in the community respond during the veillée. This makes Sancher more than simply a stranger who happens upon Rivière au Sel and becomes the talk of the town. Instead, he is a catalyst, a force of nature who sweeps into town: “Les gens prétendent que la première nuit que Francis Sancher passa à Rivière au Sel, le vent enragé descendit de la montagne, hurlant, piétinant les bananeraies et jetant par terre les tuteurs des jeunes ignames” (34). Sancher leaves a profound impact on the emotional landscape of Rivière au Sel, as is revealed by individuals who memorialize him. It is precisely those individuals who affirm his life and render his death a universal truth during the veillée.

During a wake, the line between life and death is both blurred and reinforced. The apparent sleep of the deceased is contrasted sharply with the wakefulness of those who keep watch over the dead, and over each other. The event that was Sancher's life in Rivière au Sel is already past, temporally peripheral to the situation of the wake, yet fully established in it and belonging to it. The temporality of the event in Traversée de la Mangrove can be described as
evanescent, impermanent, on the cusp of vanishing. It is therefore much like the event in Badiou’s philosophy, which he describes as temporally “evanescent”, “[s]ince the event has no present and leaves no durable trace, the temporality of the event as such is necessarily confined to the time of a future anterior: thanks to a subsequent subjective intervention, the event 'will have been presented'.” (Hallward 115) The veillée is the locus of the subjective intervention, presenting the “event” of Sancher’s life in Rivière au Sel after the fact. The decisions that individuals make in light of this event belong both to the present of the veillée and to the future, being presented and re-presented. For Badiou, when the actions to which decisions refer take place, they “will have been presented”¹⁶¹, much like the event will have been presented by the end of the veillée.

In his treatise, L'éthique, Alain Badiou summarizes the truth procedure of the witness to an “event”:
Disons qu'un sujet, qui outrepasse l'animal…exige qu'il se soit passé quelque chose, quelque chose d'irréductible à son inscription ordinaire dans "ce qu'il y a". Ce supplément, appelons-le un événement, et distinguons l'être-multiple, où il n'est pas question de vérité (mais seulement d'opinions), de l'événement, qui nous contraint à décider une nouvelle manière d'être. (61)

During the wake, many individuals, such as Mira, her stepmother Dinah, Dodose Pélagie, and Rosa Ramsaran, engage in a subjective intervention, deciding a “nouvelle manière d'être”, as they voice memories, particularly their thoughts on their relationships with Sancher. They are revealing truths and shedding light on both the tenebrous character of Sancher and their own dissatisfying lives in the shadows of the forest. They all decide on a new way of living in the wake of these truths. Their decisions are brought about by adherence to what Badiou calls a “fidelity”:

De quelle "décision" s'origine alors le processus d'une vérité? De la décision de se rapporter désormais à la situation du point de vue du supplément événementiel. Nommons cela une fidélité. Être fidèle à un événement, c'est se mouvoir dans la situation que cet événement a supplémenté, en pensant … la situation "selon" l'événement. Ce qui, bien entendu, puisque l'événement était en dehors de toutes les lois régulières de la situation, contraint à inventer une nouvelle manière d'être et d'agir dans la situation. (60-62)

Subjectivity, in Badiou's theory, is only brought about through an essential decision to be faithful to an event. The subject must invent a new way of being according to the event. As Peter Hallward summarizes in his introduction to Badiou: A Subject to Truth, “[a] truth persists...solely through the militant proclamation of those people who maintain a fidelity to the [...] event whose occurrence and consequences they affirm—those people, in other words, who become subjects in the name of that event” (xxv). Hallward goes on to say that the singularity of truth means that, "nothing 'communally or historically established lends its substance to its process,' that no 'available generality can account for it, or structure the subject who maintains it'[a]ny singular truth...is necessarily generic or indiscernible, indifferent, the stuff of radically egalitarian homogeneity.” (xxvi-xxvii) Therefore, there is no absolute Truth, but there exist universal, banal truths that are activated through a process of subjectivation.

How do Mira, Dinah, Dodose and Rosa make such a militant proclamation, affirming truths? Each of these characters speaks in first person, revealing her past experiences, her relationships, and her hopes for the future. Each of these women contemplates her relationship with Sancher in particular, and eventually reaches a decision about her future in light of these reflections. According to Suzanne Crosta in her thorough reading of *Traversée*, “the women of Rivière au Sel redefine their existence for themselves in terms of what they truly perceive to be happiness.”

It seems that before reflecting on their priorities and desires at Sancher’s wake, these women, like many others in Rivière au Sel, could not see the forest for the trees. The wake provides the opportunity to reflect on the events that have led up to their present circumstances. Gaining much-needed perspective, they make promises to themselves and to their children that they will seek understanding and a better life. The testimonies they provide are maps, not only of their community and family life, but also of the paths they intend to take.

Mira’s map would follow paths forged by Sancher in order to understand the father of her child, Quentin. Evoking the identity quest of Ti-Jean, hers is a quest for truth: “Alors, moi, je dois découvrir la vérité. Désormais, ma vie ne sera qu’une quête. Je retracerai les chemins du monde” (230-231). Mira’s truth procedure, to use Hallward’s terminology, consists of reflections upon her life, the sources of her dissatisfaction, and the ways in which she has coped with her problems. Mira ruminates on the impasses and obstacles into which she has stumbled. The Ravine and Sancher have both betrayed her, and now she must find a new route to happiness. Sancher’s presence in her life has inspired these reflections, and now his absence provides the scene in which she can finally act in faithfulness to the truths she has uncovered: “Ma vraie vie commence avec sa mort” (231). However, it was Sancher’s life and relationship with her, and not his death, that provided the raw material for her self-examination.

Dinah reveals truths while contemplating at the *veillée*, some of which are reaffirmed by others in their testimonies. Her statement “Les malheurs des enfants sont toujours causés par les fautes cachées des parents” is reflected by Rosa, Vilma’s mother, who states “le malheur des enfants est toujours causé par les parents.” Dinah, Rosa and Dodose all express regrets regarding their relationships with family, particularly with their children. These women uncover truths in their reflections at the *veillée* and resolve to act in accordance with these truths, taking responsibility for strain and resentment in their relationships.

Dinah, in particular, recalls a moment when Sancher illuminated a truth during a conversation. She complained about the way in which her husband treated her, and Sancher responded affectionately that “c’est le lot des femmes tout simplement. Nous [les hommes] sommes nés bourreaux” (106). He then asked a simple, familiar question, one which she had asked herself, but to which she had no answer: “Mais tu es encore jeune et belle. Pourquoi restes-tu à l’attache? Pourquoi ne t’en vas-tu pas?” (106) At the *veillée*, Dinah answers this question with a decision:

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

---

164 Ibid. p. 166.
Sancher refused the responsibilities of familial fidelity and fatherhood, choosing instead to succumb to a certain death. Dinah, on the other hand, now chooses to pursue happiness, light and love beyond the confines of her forested home. Although she could not become a subject in relation to Sancher during his lifetime, i.e. Sancher’s wife, the mother of Sancher’s child, Dinah resolves to embark on a voyage to become a subject in Badiou’s sense. She is faithful to the truths she affirms in light of the event that is Francis Sancher’s presence in her life.

Hallward states in his reading of Badiou’s *L’éthique* that, “[t]ruth does not descend from on high, a ready-made revelation. If its occasion is indeed—for its subjects—experienced as a kind of grace, still ‘only the work that declares it constitutes it’ as truth.”\textsuperscript{165} It is the truth that is "sparked by an event" and that "bursts into flame only through a literally endless subjective effort."\textsuperscript{166} Dinah’s relationship with Sancher, while leading to eventual disappointment and betrayal, ignited a spark of self-recognition, a truth in the form of a question: “Une question qu’il m’avait d’ailleurs posée ne me laissait plus de répit. Pourquoi restions-nous à l’attache? Oui, pourquoi? Je me la posais, jour et nuit” (109). Dinah’s constant self-questioning is a form of work, a subjective effort to understand her current circumstances. When Dinah finally resolves to leave behind a dissatisfying life and seek sunlight and fresh air “ailleurs”, she is engaging in a process of becoming a subject, thinking and acting according to the event.

Dodose and Rosa also engage in a process similar to Badiou’s concept of subjectivation. Both women learn through their interactions with Sancher, and use this new knowledge to conceive a better future for themselves and loved ones. Dodose, like Dinah, faces her own questions at Sancher’s veillée, ones that arise from encounters she had with him. She ruefully remembers that “j’ai repoussé, injurié cet homme-là quand il a voulu m’aider et, à présent, je ne peux plus réparer” (205). She recalls her fateful meeting with Sancher on the trace Saint-Charles, a path she describes as haunted by the ghosts of slaves. He greeted her warmly and expressed concern for her son, Sonny, who is developmentally handicapped due to a brain hemorrhage at birth. Dodose had blamed herself for her son’s handicap, considering him a punishment from God for her infidelity to her husband, Emmanuel. When confronted with an offer of help from Sancher, a former doctor, or “curandero”, Dodose releases anger and frustration at him: “des gros mots, des injures qui résonnaient dans le silence du sous-bois et qui n’étaient pas dirigés contre lui, mais à travers lui contre la vie” (213). Now faced with Sancher’s death, she can never repair the wrong she did him. However, his death provides a contrast to the life that continues for her. She realizes that it is too late to apologize to Sancher, but it is not too late to help her son. Dodose asks herself difficult but very important questions: “Est-ce que j’aime réellement mon malheureux Sonny? Est-ce qu’il n’est pas simplement une Croix que je rêve de déposer? […] Ou d’un châtiment infligé à Emmanuel que je ne cesse pas de haïr, mais que je n’ai jamais su quitter?” (214) Dodose answers these questions with decisions for the future:

\textsuperscript{165} Hallward, Peter. *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 122.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., p. 122.

Dodose promises to go to the end of the world to help her son. The kindness and compassion that Francis Sancher had shown Sonny became a spark, lighting the truth. Dodose makes the effort to understand this compassion and put it into context, deciding, in Badiou’s words, “une nouvelle manière d’être”. It is for this reason that Dodose credits Sancher with showing her an important truth: “il m’a montré la voie” (214).

Sancher showed compassion and understanding to many in Rivière au Sel. He befriended wise old Man Sonson, and became a father figure to Sonny. He inspired Émile Étienne to pursue his dream of writing a people’s history of Guadeloupe. Reflecting on Sancher’s death, Émile realizes that “c’était moins que jamais le moment de mourir” (238). He was encouraged by Sancher, who had asked him, “[q]u’est-ce qui t’en empêche?” This question, revisited at the wake, incites Émile to start work as soon as possible, his courage overcoming his fear of displeasing those who had criticized and belittled his previous work. Sancher also encouraged Lucien Évariste to follow his dream as well, of traveling abroad and writing about realities that might not please the reader. Sancher “avait parcouru tous ces pays”, and now Lucien “quitterait cette île étroite pour respirer l’odeur d’autres hommes et d’autres terres” (227). Lucien also derives from his relationship with Sancher a sudden courage, like the one experienced by Émile, to write without regard to what others might think. He contemplates the project he would like to write on the “nèg mawon”, and decides that he will move forward boldly: “Il lui faudrait refuser le vertige des idées reçues. Regarder dans les yeux de dangereuses vérités. Déplaire. Choquer” (227). Ironically, Sancher encouraged both Émile and Lucien to become authors, even as he experienced an epic struggle with his own work.

Sancher exposed truths, many of which are remembered and reacted to at the veillée. He showed both compassion and understanding to Rosa Ramsaran, the mother of Vilma, during a thoughtful discussion that Rosa remembers during his wake. He seemed to intuit Rosa’s suffering when he observed “pour donner l’amour, il faut en avoir reçu beaucoup, beaucoup” (171). This inspires a self-questioning that leads Rosa to realize her lack of love: “Moï, je n’en avais jamais reçu. J’avais les mains vides. Je n’ai jamais fait que servir” (171). She understands that she has not shown love to her daughter, Vilma, who is now in pain after the loss of her lover Sancher. Rosa makes a decision to ask forgiveness from the daughter for whom she has shown so little love:

Je dirai à ma fille, mienne: “Sortie de mon ventre, je t’ai mal aimée. Je ne t’ai pas aidée à éclore et tu as poussé, rabougrie. Il n’est pas trop tard pour que nos yeux se rencontrent et que nos mains se touchent. Donne-moi ton pardon.” (171)

Rosa realizes that it is not too late to heal the wounds of a strained relationship with her daughter. As she recalls her conversation with Sancher, she understands that “cela n’est une fin que pour lui” (171).

Francis Sancher ignited a spark of subjectivation in Rivière au Sel through his recognition of truths. Even though he was unable to write down his own truth, as a “moulin à
paroles” he uttered truths that incite self-reflection among many individuals at the veillée. His words, now recalled, have a lasting impact, transcending his life and the circumstances in which they were first spoken. Françoise Lionnet succinctly characterizes Sancher’s role in Rivière au Sel as an outsider who sheds light on truths in the community: “Condé appropriates the technique of the novel within the novel to reflect upon the role of the writer as outsider, and of the outsider as catalyst or pharmakon, both poison and antidote, dangerous supplement, chronicler, and aide-mémoire of the community.”¹⁶⁷ However, this role occasionally proved difficult for Sancher, who in some cases was rebuffed and reviled for daring to speak the truth. Sancher lamented this fact during a conversation with Rosa Ramsaran:

Personne ne comprend jamais, Madame Ramsaran. Tout le monde a peur de comprendre. Ainsi moi, dès que j’ai essayé de comprendre, de demander des comptes pour tous ces morts, tout ce sang, on m’a traité de tous les noms. Dès que j’ai refusé de m’accommoder de slogans, on m’a eu à l’œil et au bon. Rien n’est plus dangereux qu’un homme qui essaie de comprendre! (170)

Sancher refused easy categorization, having been called every name in the book, so to speak, but never living up to any one label completely. He was rejected by many members of the community precisely because he represented the mixed nature of their society, defying stereotypes and facile categorization. Loulou attempted to convince him to not treat Mira as if she were a mere “Nègre à tête grinnée” by appealing to their shared ancestry, “les Découvreurs” (127). Sancher replied thoughtfully:

Tu as tort. Nous ne sommes plus du même camp et je vais te dire que je n’appartiens plus à aucun camp. Mais d’une certain manière, tu n’as pas tort. Au début, c’est vrai, nous étions du même camp. C’est pour cela que je suis parti de l’autre côté du monde. [...] (127)

He refused to enter into the essentializing discourse of ancestry and racial hierarchy, and as such angered Loulou, who characterized Sancher’s response as “bêtises” (128).

Sancher upset some in Rivière au Sel because he provided a mirror, often an unflattering image, of individuals’ lives. Dodose, for example, hurled abuse at Sancher for observing that her son might need help. Léocadie Timothée was reminded of how frightening she appears to men when Sancher ran away in fear from her on a path one evening. The narrator of the chapter “Le serein” points to the mourners’ hypocrisy, saying “car tous, à un moment donné, avaient traité Francis de vagabond et de chien” (20). In her article “Portrait of the Artist as Dreamer”, Lydie Moudileno describes the role of the artist as providing an unflattering mirror to society:

[...] The artist functions as a transgressor who uncovers structural weaknesses; his function in the narrative is to force conflicts – conscious and unconscious – to become known, and to illustrate frustrations and failure. Ultimately, it is the

fictitious writer who provides an analysis of the dynamics of the collective mind.”

The artist is dangerous to the status quo because he uncovers hidden truths and weaknesses. Lucien conceives of this transgression, imagining that by exposing “dangereuses vérités”, he will displease and shock his reader (227). As Sancher explained to Rosa Ramsaran, people do not want to understand. It is difficult for many to face the complex realities at work in their lives. Dodose defensively overreacts to Sancher’s offer of help, but this also provides a catalyst for her eventual self-questioning. Émile experiences shame when he re-encounters a question that Sancher had posed to him: what was preventing him from pursuing his dream? He realizes that it was fear that had held him back. However, both Émile and Dodose overcome their initial, visceral reaction to being faced with painful realities. Rosa also overcomes her unwillingness to face reality, to truly understand what lies at the heart of her unhappiness and her strained relationship with Vilma. Loulou, however, remains locked in an essentializing worldview, dismissing Sancher’s ideas as “bêtises” (128).

Transgression and Redemption

Sancher was a transgressor, a disillusioned vagabond who had attempted to deny his inheritance and his progeny. He crossed boundaries, disturbing members of the community with his words and actions. He upset the “natural order” by impregnating and rejecting two wealthy young beauties. He spread seeds of grief as he broke their hearts. In this way, he embodied negative elements of the rhizome, such as the image invoked by Lucien: “la vie sexuelle de tout homme est un marécage dans lequel il ne fait pas bon mettre le pied” (225).

However, he also developed friendships and inspired individuals to move beyond their unhappy circumstances. He inspired many, including Mira and Aristide, to leave and plant roots elsewhere. He offered encouragement to Émile and Lucien to resist the paralysis of fear. Although his identity is unrooted, particularly through his death, Sancher was rooted in the mire of a past he could not escape. He was unable to move beyond an obsession with his family curse. Sancher was not free; as Condé claims, “[t]o know one’s past, to dominate it, to know it in its reality without making of it an object of backwards-looking veneration, is one of the conditions of freedom.” He became stuck and fell over like a tree, too rigid and too firmly rooted to a poisonous past.

169 This brings to mind Condé’s statement that in order to write about the present, “[y]ou really need to shine a harsh light on things.” Broichhagen, Vera, Kathryn Lachman and Nicole Simek. “A Conversation at Princeton with Maryse Condé.” Feasting on words: Maryse Condé, cannibalism, and the Caribbean text. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 25.
Like her character Lucien, Condé understands that writing can displease and shock. She states, “In general, that’s what writing is – a kind of revenge against those around you. You can say things as they are.” Ibid., p. 3.
Sancher offered a vision of sacrifice for sins to account for his death. He did not die in honor to the Father and to selflessly erase the sins of the world, but he begrudgingly accepted his guilt of all the sins “commis par des hommes et des femmes retournés depuis longtemps en poussière, mais qui laissent leurs crimes intacts en nous” (42). He had tried to escape his fate, but could not find a way out. He then imagined a shared death when he envisioned Rivière au Sel reduced to ashes. As he declared to Cyrille, “[j]’aimerais qu’il pète, ce volcan! Qu’il mette tout à feu et à sang! Comme ça je ne serais pas seul à partir (155).

Francis Sancher’s murderous and suicidal vision is contrasted by the death wish of another lover of his, Vilma Ramsaran. Vilma opens her chapter with an earnest wish to burn in a funeral pyre along with Sancher. She explains that she would like to be her Indian ancestor who, when her husband passed away, would jump into the flames in order for them to spend eternity together: “nos cendres seraient mêlées, comme nos âmes n’ont pas su l’être” (185). Vilma’s desire stems from a belief that death allows communication with loved ones in ways that were impossible during life. She explains that “nos ancients disaient bien que la mort n’est qu’un pont jeté entre les êtres, une passerelle qui les rapproche sur laquelle ils se recontrent à mi-chemin pour se chuchoter tout ce qu’ils n’ont pas pu se confier” (195). Death, to Vilma, is an infinite conversation. Instead of conceiving death as a singular end to meaning and history, Vilma’s “anciens” understood the continuity of life and death, a continuum that does not exist on a straight line but forms a kind of bridge between two worlds, an infinite set, a circular, instead of linear, model. Vilma believes that her relationship with Sancher, who was all too reticent in life, will improve after death: “Je voudrais être mon aïeule indienne pour le suivre au bûcher funéraire. Alors notre causer n’aurait pas de fin” (195).

According to Alain Badiou, a truth is infinite, and "bursts into flame only through a literally endless subjective effort."¹¹⁷¹ Vilma’s desire to follow Sancher onto the funeral pyre is not an affirmation of life, as such, but the affirmation of such a subjective effort to actualize love and truth. When the ancestors whisper to each other on the footbridge, they are sharing “ce qu’ils n’ont pas pu se confier” (195). This exchange is facilitated through a perilous crossing to the unknown. Alain Badiou "considers the subjective realm precisely as a space—as something that no one figure can fully occupy and determine, as something that every subject must traverse.”¹¹⁷²

In order to become subjects, individuals must embark on a journey. For both Sancher and Vilma, subjectivity is actualized through death. Sancher understood his death as a sacrifice to atone for his ancestors’ sins, and Vilma envisions a voluntary sacrifice in order to enable an infinite exchange of truth. For Sancher to become a subject, he must die; and this death provides the occasion for his re-telling and for the re-examination of his chroniclers’ lives. Condé evokes selfless sacrifice by women writers who risk condemnation and the deaths of their literary careers for daring to speak the truth, thereby causing disorder and subversion. In the conclusion of “The Stealers of Fire”, Condé asks:

> It appears, therefore, that the victory of the women writers from the French-speaking Caribbean is a pyrrhic victory. By appropriating the fire behind the

¹¹⁷² Ibid., p. 145.
writing, they set light to themselves and destroy the role and position that their brothers were bent on taking.

Is this the price to pay for the ultimate liberation? (164)

In her desire to set light to herself, Vilma wishes to illuminate her story with Sancher, what she describes as “sans lumière” (185). In this way, she would discover the truth of the shadowy man she loved: “il me semble que j’entends sa voix prononçant des paroles secrètes que je n’avais jamais entendues et qui lèvent le mystère de ce qu’il a été” (195). Truth is spoken in a whisper, like love, and death: “L’amour vient par surprise comme la mort. Il ne s’avance pas en battant le gwo-ka” (62). It would seem that love is the ultimate sacrifice, and the way to subjectivity.
CONCLUSION

Desire, love, hate, resentment and hope all circulate at the veillée, ebbing and flowing throughout the hearts and minds of Rivière au Sel. Some mourners grieve a profound, irrevocable loss, and others smile from satisfaction and relief, unable to contain pleasure at the sight of the dead. Their voices are raised in song and in the private discord of internal monologues, expressing their memories, feelings and hopes for the future. At the end of the long, rainy night, before everyone has said goodbye to one another and one final time to the deceased, there is a singular moment of accord among this sundry collection of individuals. Léocadie, who had discovered Sancher’s body just a day prior, raises her voice:

-- Pauvre diable! Si la pluie est tombée comme ça, c’est qu’il la regrette, la vie, toute amère qu’elle est et sans jamais rien pour la sucre.
Il y eut un chœur de soupirs d’approbation sans qu’on sût très bien si c’était le commentaire sur la vie ou le commentaire sur Francis Sancher qui faisait l’unanimité. (250)

After all the different images, realistic or otherwise, of Sancher and of their community that this group had illustrated in their thoughts, they find a singular, univocal interpretation. However, there is no conclusion written for these individuals. Their futures unwritten, they can nonetheless imagine and create the paths that they wish to follow. At the end of Traversée de la Mangrove, there is only possibility. Doubtless the realm of possibility promises to be as complex and as difficult to disentangle as the multitudes of connections that exist in Rivière au Sel. In the future, there will be a time for everything, as in Ecclesiastes: “Il y a un temps pour tout; il y a sous le soleil un moment pour chaque chose. Il y a un temps pour naître et un temps pour mourir...” (131). Even though life might prove “toute amère” for many in Rivière au Sel, the future, if nothing else, is possible.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


67

