Queer Roots for the Diaspora
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Chapter 1

Looking for Roots among the Mangroves

In an article entitled “L’honneur des makoumès” [The Makoumès’ Honor] and published in the gay French monthly Têtu, Joël Métreau describes men cruising one another on the beaches of Martinique. Behind one beach in particular, frequented by heterosexual families on weekends, saltwater marshes offer a perfect meeting place for gay men during the week: “All along the pathway, crabs, mongooses, and herons scatter when men approach. In the vicinity of the cape, called Catherine Point, men wander about among the mangroves, seemingly nonchalantly, starring at each other out of the corners of their eyes.” Whereas Métreau uses the term gay to describe these men, the title of his article highlights the Creole word makoumè, which roughly means “sissy faggot.” Considered insulting by most Martiniquan men regardless of their sexual orientation, this label nonetheless appears in a number of Caribbean texts in French. And, as on the beaches described above, these makoumè might often be discerned circulating among the mangroves. This chapter follows through on the introduction’s discussion of the importance of the mangrove in Caribbean thought and fiction particularly as regards the interrelated political, narrative, and sexual paradoxes of roots as a concept. When the makoumè circulates among mangroves, he (or she, if one uses the transgender pronoun) therefore literalizes the sexual implications of roots narratives already visualized by mangroves as an image for
a less patrilineal and repronormative family tree. Furthermore, the use of a Creole word for same-sex desire and cross-gendered identification puts the makoumè at the center of debates about the politics of language as it has played out in the history of French Caribbean thought and troubles the Oedipal genealogies that have often been used to write the history of this thought.

In 1989, Martiniquan writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant would make the mangrove image central to their articulation of Créolité, or Creoleness, as a model for understanding Caribbean identity: “Creoleness is our primitive soup and our continuation, our [original] chaos and our mangrove swamp of virtualities” (892; 28). This passage appeared in their manifesto Éloge de la créolité [In Praise of Creoleness], which announced Créolité as a movement that valorizes the multiple origins of Caribbean identity and the resulting diversity of Caribbean (and other) Creole cultures. Indeed, like Glissant before them, who opposed Négritude with Antillanité (Caribbeanness), the Créolistes refused to seek a model of identity in a “mythical elsewhere” and sought to define not their racial affinity to Africa but their cultural difference from both Africa and Europe. Bernabé and his colleagues thus rejected the politics of purity associated with Négritude, whose return to Africa they saw as just as alienating and as much an imposition of foreign values as those imposed by colonialism. Yet, whereas Glissant rooted his geopolitical notion of Antillanité in the Caribbean archipelago, the Créolistes chose a more linguistic paradigm exemplified by the confrontation of multiple languages (and therefore the cultures that spoke them and were spoken through them) that produced not only Caribbean Creoles but all the Creole languages and cultures on the planet.

Nonetheless, although the mangrove, here, challenges what Glissant calls the “racine unique,” as the words primitive and original attest, it still stands as a figure for origins. The Créolistes’ theoretical deployment of this image, like Glissant’s reworking of the rhizomatic outlined in my introduction, finds fictional parallels in a substantial body of Caribbean novels in French. Glissant himself would name the very same tree in most of his novels, from La Lézarde (1958) through Ormerod (2003). Tout-monde (1993), the first novel published after Poetics of Relation, is particularly notable in its use of the word mangrove along with French synonyms for it, including mangle and paletuvier. Furthermore, taken together, Glissant’s novels might be characterized as a mangrove text, for they all offer parts of the story of four intertwined (and therefore mangrovelike) family trees: those of the Longoué family, whose ancestor
marooned upon arriving in Martinique from Africa; the Béluse family, whose ancestors remained in slavery; and the Targin and Celat families. Their story spans the years from 500 BCE to the present; one novel—*Sartorius: Le roman des Batoutos* (1999)—even tells the story of the Batoutos, the fictional ethnic group to which Odono (the ancestor of a number of characters) belongs. Odono thus parallels Haley’s “farthest-back” Kunta Kinte except that, taken together, these novels read as if the pages of *Roots* had been torn apart, scrambled, and rebound “out of order.” In addition, the interlocking roots of these families’ genealogies allegorize the dialogic relation between resistance and submission in Glissant’s epic story of Martiniquan identity. Finally, as Glissant has authored an essay that rereads the novels of William Faulkner from a Caribbean perspective (see *Faulkner*), his mangrove novels provide a counterpoint to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County and rhizomatic family trees in the form of the re-creation of a world of slaves’ descendants instead of one of slave owners’ descendants.

The Créolistes, too, have authored a number of mangrove novels, ones whose plots are often just as twisted as the roots of a mangrove. More literally, the eponymous neighborhood of Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco*, which won the Prix Goncourt in 1992, is described as an urban mangrove constructed on the site of a former mangrove swamp (just like Terres-Sainvilles, the neighborhood setting of Confiant’s 1994 novel *L’allée des soupirs* [Avenue of Sighs], as well as Fort-de-France as a whole in Chamoiseau’s 1986 *Chronique des sept misères* [Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows]). Instead of offering a complete survey of Caribbean mangrove novels, however, this chapter opens with a single mangrove novel, Maryse Condé’s 1989 *Traversée de la mangrove* [Crossing the Mangrove], which begins in a Guadeloupan village with the discovery of Francis Sancher’s body. Francis’s story is told retrospectively by different villagers in a jumble of competing versions that are as hard to untangle as the roots of a mangrove. Furthermore, Condé gives this mangrove a queer twist in the rumors spread by other characters about a homosexual relationship between Francis and a Haitian buddy. *Makoumè*, the word that Condé uses to describe these rumors, is also the word for a gossiping woman and therefore binds questions of sexuality in the novel to its gossiplike structure in which there is no beginning or end to the story of Francis’s life, no cause-and-effect explanations that could fit into and be strengthened by such a chronological order. *Traversée de la mangrove* is thus a prime example of how queering roots affects the structure of roots narratives as much as their representations of sexuality.
Condé’s novel takes its title from that of the fictional novel Francis was writing when he died (or more accurately not writing, since he had not gotten any farther than the title). When one villager learns of this novel, she objects, “On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192). In other words, the very title *Traversée de la mangrove* signals a difficulty that I suggest might be read as an allegory for reading other Caribbean novels, particularly those of the Créolistes. Whereas the latter have been criticized by a number of feminist and antihomophobic scholars for their representations of female characters and the propensity on the part of their male characters to hurl *makoumè* as an insult, the difficulty announced by Condé’s villager can be put to productive use as a strategy for dragging their sexual politics across the roots of their own mangroves. In spite of the homophobia several critics have accused them of, queerness lurks as much among the roots of their mangroves as among Condé’s. If, as Malena writes, “*Traversée de la Mangrove* can be seen as a thoughtful ‘mise en scène’ of the concept of ‘créolité,’ inscribing its undoing within the performance itself” (*Negotiated Self* 68), the *makoumè* who serve as figures for this queerness, then, will also prompt a rereading of the Créolistes’ intellectual genealogy and their so-called Oedipal revolt against the founding father(s) of Négritude. In *Homosexual Desire*, Hocquenghemb writes, “The cruising homosexual, on the look-out for anything that might come and plug in to his own desire, is reminiscent of the ‘schizophrenic on a walk’ described in *L’Anti-Œdipe*” (131; 151). Like Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizophrenic on a walk,” then, the homosexual cruising through a mangrove swamp described by Métreau similarly offers a countergenealogy for Caribbean identity, one that decen ters Oedipus as much as Oedipal structures marginalize nonnormative sexualities and desires.

*Makoumès in the Mangrove*

Like Négritude and Antillanité before it, Créolité was developed as a model for understanding Caribbean identity by men, and Martiniquan men at that (cf. Burton, “*Ki moun nou ye?*” 8, 17). In her 1993 feminist history of Caribbean writing, “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West
Indian Writer,” Maryse Condé situates Créolité within a male-centered tradition of Caribbean thought, which she traces back to Haitian writer Jacques Roumain’s 1946 novel Gouverneurs de la rosée [Master of the Dew] (126). Regarding Roumain’s representation of sexuality, Condé writes, “Although [his characters] produce children, no reference should be made to sex. If any, it will be to male sexuality. . . . Of course, heterosexuality is the absolute rule” (126). She goes on to argue that the Créolistes’ literary practices do not substantially alter this paradigm: “[W]e see only minor changes. . . . Sexuality (especially in Confiant’s novel [Le nègre et l’amiral]) is no longer absent, but is exclusively male sexuality” (129). A number of other critics have also argued that the account of Caribbean cultural unity articulated in the Éloge and other writings by the Créolistes “is not only masculine but masculinist” (Arnold, “Gender-ing” 21). Thomas C. Spear adds, “Implicit in the exaggeration of male sexuality and the glorification of men “who have balls” is a flourishing heterosexuality that is often extremely homophobic. Homosexuality is only exceptionally evoked by Caribbean novelists, as a joke for example, when a character is called a makoumè” (141). A. James Arnold similarly argues, “[H]omophobia in the French West Indies is linked dialectically to the representation of the island male as a superstud. In literature this extreme form of gendering the masculine has resulted in the effective suppression of any homosexual discourse in the culture” (“Créolité” 39). These critics have singled out the Créolistes as being especially homophobic, thereby suggesting that they share a politics of sexual purity with many black nationalists in spite of their critique of Négritude’s politics of racial purity.

About Confiant’s novel Eau de Café (1991), named after its narrator’s godmother, Arnold writes, “Confiant has two majors—toughest of super-males—insult one another with the term makoumè in ritual boasts” (“Gendering” 34). In this fresco of life in an Atlantic Coast town, such verbal duels are the way majors jockey for the recognition of their masculinity. The major (majô in Creole) is a frequent archetype in Créolité novels, and has been defined by Chamoiseau as a “[s]orte de héros de quartier. Chaque quartier avait le sien” (Chronique 88) [kind of neighborhood hero. Each neighborhood had one]. On two occasions in Eau de Café, the Frenchified version of makoumè (ma-commère) is shouted during the daily drag races between Major Bérard, driver of the taxi “Bourreau du Nord” [Executioner of the North], and Maître Salvie, who only picks up hooligans in his taxi, the “Golem”:
Lorsque ce dernier, rempli bien avant lui comme d’habitude (que voulez-vous, les nègres vagabonds n’ont pas d’occupations si tôt le matin !), stoppa à sa hauteur et que Major Bérard lui lança le même défi vieux de quinze ans: «Si tu arrives sur le pont du Galion avant moi, je suis un petit ma-commère !» Maître Salvie n’en fut pas humilié. (166)

[When the latter, filled before it as usual (what can you say, vagabond Negroes have nothing to do so early in the morning!), stopped beside him and Major Bérard hurled the same challenge he has used for the past fifteen years (“If you get to Galion Bridge before I do, I am a little ma-commère!”). Maître Salvie wasn’t humiliated by it.]

The arrival of Charles de Gaulle for a visit in Martinique is the occasion for another verbal joust; one of Maître Salvie’s passengers chides him along: “Si tu permets à ces ma-commères du ‘Golem’ d’atteindre le Gros-Morne avant nous, je ne voyagerai plus avec toi, mon nègre. C’est fini! fit une voix au bord de l’hystérie” (297) [If you let those Golem ma-commères get to Big-Hill before we do, I’ll never ride in your taxi again, old buddy. It’s all over, said a voice on the verge of hysteria].

Anthropologist David Murray describes such verbal jousts as central to Martiniquan masculinity: “The Creole pejorative ‘macoumé’ is a dangerous and highly volatile insult if slung by one man at another, as it challenges the very foundation of masculinity. Yet it is a term which helps to ground the ethic of hypermasculinity in its creation of an opposite anti-male” (14–15). Furthermore, “Extending the analogy, the homosexual was thus fundamentally implicated in the constitution of official constructions of a Martiniquais Cultural identity” (11). During the drag races in Eau de Café, however, the sexual implications of the term makoumè seem far from the intentions of those who use it, which is perhaps why, when the Creole equivalent is used in the same context, its French translation is given merely as sissy, not faggot: “A l’instant du doublément, les nègres-Golem criaient à l’endroit des nègres-Bourreau : ‘Sakré bann makoumè ki zôt yé !’ (Tas de femmelettes !)” (296) [When Bérard passed Salvie, the Golem-gang shouted at the Bourreau-gang: Sakré bann makoumè ki zôt yé! (Tas de femmelettes!)]. (The Creole expression translates roughly as “You bunch of goddamned faggots!” whereas its French translation is more like “Bunch of sissies!”) Indeed, in the first passage from Eau de Café cited above, makoumè is used as a hypothetical self-labeling, which implies that the loser, hopefully Salvie
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(in the eyes of Bérard), will be a *ma-commère* instead. But then again, this passenger’s wagering of his own masculinity seems perilous. What if Salvie wins? Would that really make the passenger a faggot? Is masculinity in such short supply that one man must deny another’s masculinity to assert his own? Furthermore, in the heat of calling each other faggots to confirm their own masculinity, these male characters falter on the verge of hysteria, a malady usually associated with femininity. Although many have described such passages as a glorification of masculinity, what is often missed is the irony with which these displays of male bravura are parodied. Instead of glorifying masculinity, therefore, the *makoumè*'s numerous guises and the frequency with which the term recurs in the Créolistes’ novels may indicate an analytical understanding of the complexity of masculinity and even its deconstruction.

Confiant’s 1994 novel *L’allée des soupirs* [Avenue of Sighs], set during riots in Fort-de-France at the end of 1959, contains similar rituals of verbal jousts in which the *makoumè* plays a central role. Here, two Pieds-Noirs, or European settlers from Algeria, occupy the public bench habitually used by Fils-du-Diable-en-Personne and Bec-en-Or. When the latter fail to react, “Eugène Lamour . . . se mit à les traiter de ma-commères” [Eugène Lamour began to call them *ma-commères*]. This insult spurs the two Martiniquans into action as they prove their manhood by chasing the Pieds-Noirs away from the bench. The Pieds-Noirs respond in kind: “[V]a te faire voir chez les Grecs, bicot!” (155) [Fuck off with the Greeks, Nigger!]. Within a few pages, one of these same Pieds-Noirs calls Charles de Gaulle an *enculé* (someone who has been fucked in the ass) (158). Thus, for Eugène Lamour a *makoumè* is someone who allows Europeans to dominate him, and for the Pieds-Noirs homosexuality is associated with a weak commitment to French colonial rule in Algeria. In both cases, political strength is seen as masculine and passivity is a sign of queerness. *Makoumè* is thus applied here less as a sign of sexual otherness than to signal political, cultural, or even racial difference. Such is the case when the Hôtel de l’Europe’s European boss is similarly labeled because he wears an apron: “Il était pour nous tout-à-faitement honteux qu’un homme, à moins qu’il soit un ma-commère, s’affichât dans cette tenue” (187) [For us it was completely absolutely disgraceful for a man, unless he was a *ma-commère*, to display himself dressed in this way].

These political associations are echoed in the description of the event that sets off the riots constituting the novel’s main event—the fight that breaks out after a French man backs over a Martiniquan’s Vespa without apologizing: “Heureusement, le docker n’a pas accepté ça, c’est un
nègre qui a du sentiment dans son corps, il n’est pas prêt à baisser sa culotte face à un étranger” (188) [Fortunately, the docker didn’t take that sitting down; he’s a black man with pride who is unwilling to lower his britches for a foreigner]. Bending over for the colonizer, therefore, entails being not only colonized but also unmanned; colonized men are screwed, literally and figuratively, by the colonizer. Even Martiniquan men who go too far in adapting French manners become suspect; the more-French-than-the-French journalist Romule Casoar is thus designated in an association of Frenchness with a lack of masculinity:

Ainsi donc, comme d’aucuns le soupçonnaient, Romule Casoar n’était qu’un vulgaire ma-commère, un homme qui aimait les hommes et voilà pourquoi il demeurerait avec obstination célibataire. Pour bailler le change, Casoar se proclamait “célibertin” afin qu’on s’imaginât qu’il était aussi coureur de donzelles qu’Eugène Lamour mais la preuve venait d’être faite. Bec-en-Or en fut à nouveau statufié. Des braillards le dérisionnaient avec une méchanceté revancharde :

“Ta concubine te cocufie avec un ma-commère ! Ouaille, man-man, foutre que c’est triste pour toi !” (385)

[Thus, as some suspected, Romule Casoar was nothing but a vulgar ma-commère, a man who loved men, and that’s why he obstinately remained a bachelor (célibataire). To hide his intentions, Casoar proclaimed himself a “bachelibertine” (célibertin) so that everyone would think he was as much of a skirt chaser as Eugène Lamour, but the proof was just given. Bec-en-Or was frozen from shock once again. Loudmouths mocked him with a vengeful cruelty:

“Your woman is fooling around on you with a ma-commère! I’ll be damned, it’s a fucking sad day for you.”]

Such associations of homosexuality with the colonizer are far from rare in political discourses of Africa and its diaspora. They are, for example, central to the oft-quoted discussion of homosexuality in Frantz Fanon’s Peau noire, masques blancs (1952) [Black Skin, White Masks], which contains an explicit claim that all male racists are repressed homosexuals and all female racists secretly desire black men (127). In a lengthy footnote, Fanon elaborates:

Mentionnons rapidement qu’il ne nous a pas été donné de constater la présence manifeste de pédérastie en Martinique. Il faut y voir la
conséquence de l’absence de l’Œdipe aux Antilles. On connaît en eff-

tet le schéma de l’homosexualité. Rappelons toutefois l’existence de
ce qu’on appelle là-bas “des hommes habillés en dames” ou “Ma Com-
mère”. Ils ont la plupart du temps une veste et une jupe. Mais nous
restons persuadé qu’ils ont une vie sexuelle normale. Ils prennent
le punch comme n’importe quel gaillard et ne sont pas insensibles
aux charmes des femmes,–marchandes de poissons, de légumes. Par
contre en Europe nous avons trouvé quelques camarades qui sont de-
venus pédérastes, toujours passifs. Mais ce n’était point là homosexu-
alité névrotique, c’était pour eux un expédient comme pour d’autres
cei de souteneur. (146)

[Let me observe at once that I had no opportunity to establish the
overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique. This must be viewed
as the result of the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antil-
les. The schema of homosexuality is well enough known. We should
not overlook, however, the existence of what are called there “men
dressed like women” or “godmothers.” Generally they wear shirts and
skirts. But I am convinced that they lead normal sex lives. They can
take a punch like any “he-man” and they are not impervious to the
allures of women—fish and vegetable merchants. In Europe, on the
other hand, I have known several Martinicans who became homosex-
uals, always passive. But this was by no means a neurotic homosexual-
ity: For them it was a means to a livelihood, as pimping is for others.
(Black Skin 180)]

When Martiniquan men succumb to homosexuality in Europe, he
claims, it is because such neurotic, abnormal practices are imposed by
the colonizer, characterized, unlike Martiniquans, by the Oedipus com-
plex. Martiniquan men become homosexual when screwed by Europe-
ans; when Confiant’s Vespa operator challenges the colonial privilege
of the Metropolitan French man who damaged his scooter, other char-
acters characterize him as refusing to be screwed in a like manner. If,
for Martiniquan men, homosexuality can only arise in relations with the
colonizers, a “truly” Martiniquan homosexuality cannot exist. Yet, as the
footnote attests, in spite of his initial denial of Martiniquan homosexual-
ity, Fanon knows quite a bit about and expands at great length on some-
thing that supposedly does not exist.6

Interestingly, in the French version of this passage, instead of makounè
Fanon uses its corresponding French words, which do not carry the same
meaning, hence the original translator’s rendition as “godmother” as opposed to the more accurate “sissy faggot.” In a French-language text, *Ma Commère* might seem out of place since using this term to address the godmother (on the part of the godfather) is no longer even current in French (although in Caribbean texts one may still see respected women addressed as *ma commère* in a more general use of the original meaning). Had Fanon given the Creole version, he would have had a harder time denying the existence of Martiniquan homosexuality, since a distinct Creole word for such practices would seem to imply a culturally specific way of understanding them. Fanon’s language choice in this footnote thus connects his assertions with parallel ones that use as part of their evidence the claim that there is no word for homosexual in the indigenous languages of non-European cultures.

In spite of their affirmation of the *makoumè*’s centrality to Martiniquan culture, in many passages the Créolistes seem to share Fanon’s language politics as well as the homophobia it implies. In the passages of *Eau de Café* and *L’allée des soupirs* quoted above, either most references to the *makoumè* are given as *ma-commère* without suggesting that it is a French translation of a Creole word or the Creole is given with no transcription/translation or one that gives no indication of the word’s homosexual implication (which to a non-Creolophone reader might seem to represent a similar denial). In the case of the Créolistes, the relation between sexuality on the one hand and their use and translation of Creole words and expressions on the other has resulted in much spilling of ink. Indeed, the extensive replacement of *makoumè* with *ma-commère* in Créoliste novels, while perhaps sometimes making the homosexual implications of the Creole term invisible to “outsiders,” is also quite consistent with the Créolistes’ project of Creolization of the French language in their novels, particularly as regards the topic of sexuality. This linguistic procedure has been the topic of a number of essays, but most focus on how Creole words for *heterosexual* acts are used to make literary French more Creole. Creole words (or their Frenchified versions) for female genitalia (*coucoune*), penis (*kal*), to have sex (*coquer*), testicles (*graines*), and buttocks (*bonda*) abound in their novels, and the Créolistes’ use of *ma-commère* is inseparable from their use of Creole in relation to sexuality. Arnold regards this language politics as an important component of the masculinist aspect of Créoliste fiction:

The eroticism that has so titillated European readers of Chamoiseau and Confiant is couched in one or the other of these linguistic tech-
niques. The local names of human sexual organs are written both in a frenchified form, to make them more recognizable, and, elsewhere in the same text, in their creole form, presumably for purposes of authenticity. . . . [T]he sexual terms used are ones that women novelists avoid because they find them invasive and potentially violent. (“Créolité” 40)

While quick to defend themselves against such accusations, the Créolistes nonetheless often seem to ignore the sexual politics of the language position at the heart of Créolité.

Scholars studying gender divisions in the use of Creole corroborate Arnold’s assertion. Both David Murray and Schnepel have described taboos against speaking Creole faced by women in certain contexts. Furthermore, Schnepel associates Creole use with an affirmation of masculinity:

[I]n order to signal their masculinity and sound more “macho,” men tended to identify with lower-status groups by imitating their speech, while women of all class backgrounds (except the lowest) were known to reproduce the speech of the dominant group or “hypercorrect” towards the standard. . . . [I]t was more acceptable for a little boy to speak Creole than for a little girl. . . . Furthermore, swearing in Creole was the marker of being “on ti-mal,” part of the cult of masculinity. (251, 254)

Although Confiant and Chamoiseau implicitly recognize this gendered tension between French and Creole in the numerous passages in which women faint upon hearing proper French, their specific use of Creole in novels may be unavailable to women writers. Thus, even when they might be read as ridiculing the major’s male bravura, they imitate his use of sexual language as an exercise of male privilege.

The sexual politics of language choice in Créoliste novels has also become the justification for a substantial body of criticism of women writers on the part of the Créolistes: “[T]he official créolistes have denounced, both publicly and privately, women writers—usually from Guadeloupe—whose use of creole they deem inadequate. . . . Language is both the major focus of the créolistes’ polemical writings and the club with which they batter those whose fiction they don’t like” (Arnold, “Créolité” 37, 39). The question of how Creole words are used in French-language Caribbean novels has thus been the object of a rather persnickety debate.
In “Reflections on Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*,” Chamoiseau takes the Guadeloupan writer to task for providing footnote definitions for the Creole words she includes in her 1989 novel: “[A]ll the footnotes that explain what we already know make us think, dear Maryse, that you are not addressing us, but some other people. Self-explication is not, it seems to me, appropriate. Why not leave that task to editors and translators if they deem it necessary?” (394). Likewise, Confiant has claimed in an interview, “Before Créolité, most Antillean authors would agree to add glossaries or footnotes explaining Creole words. So you’d see ‘Morne: low-lying hill in the Antilles,’ or ‘Chabin: mixed-race, black and white,’ and so on. Patrick [Chamoiseau] and I were the first to refuse to explicate the Creole in our writing” (Taylor 148). No doubt catching on to the equivocal nature of this assertion, the interviewer modified Confiant’s response to make it more accurate: “Sometimes you do provide such ‘tools,’ but you turn the whole idea on its head, poking fun at the idea of cross-cultural dictionary definitions by playing with the language—making puns or rebuking the reader for his or her ignorance” (148). Chamoiseau, however, does not admit that Condé’s use of footnotes might be just as playful or parodic. Furthermore, *chabin* is precisely the word that he defines (incompletely, I might add) in a footnote in *Chronique des sept misères* with the following definition: “Métis blanc-nègre” (31) [Black-white mix]. It is thus around the question of footnotes that Chamoiseau articulates a position of nationalist “insiderism” that one might view as contradicting the assertion of Créolité as enabling multiple solidarities.

Queering the Mangrove

*Makoumè* is another Creole word that the Créolistes frequently feel the need to translate for their Francophone readers. Unlike them, however, Condé neither Frenchifies the word nor glosses over its homosexual meaning. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, when one of the villagers of Rivière au Sel describes a rumor concerning the nature of Francis’s friendship with Moïse, Condé writes:

[C]e fut Moïse qui vint y dormir et y boire des nuits entières. Faut-il le dire ? Les méchants ricanèrent. Cette amitié-là avait sale odeur et les deux hommes étaient des makoumé ! Pour sûr !
Nomebrus étaient ceux dans ce village guère dévot, mais perdu au fin fond des bois et de ce fait ignorant des vices courants dans les villes, qui n’avaient jamais vu de makoumé, à part Sirop Batterie qui s’habillait en femme les jours de Carnaval à Petit Bourg. Ils examinèrent les compères avec incrédulité. Moïse, passe encore ! Mais Francis ! Il n’en avait pas l’air ! Néanmoins la plante malfaisante de cette médisance crût et fleurit dans le terreau du village et ne s’étiola que lorsque éclata la nouvelle de l’affaire avec Mira. Un violeur de femmes peut-il en même temps être un makoumé ? Peut-on avoir goût aux femmes et en même temps aux hommes ? (36–37)

[There were some wicked sneers. There was something fishy about that friendship and the two men were makoumeh! That’s for sure. Many of the inhabitants of this hardly God-fearing village, buried in the back of beyond, were ignorant of the vices common in towns and had never seen a makoumeh except for Sirop Batterie who dressed up as a woman at carnival time in Petit-Bourg. They inspected the two in disbelief. Moïse, perhaps! But Francis! He didn’t look like one. The poisonous plant of mischief, however, grew and flourished in the compost of the village and only wilted once the news of the affair with Mira broke out. Can a rapist of women be a makoumeh as well? Can one have a liking for both men and women? (20)]

On the one hand, Condé’s passage could be said to go along with Fanon in some respects. Both texts mention a tradition of cross-dressing, and Condé’s use of the word compère recalls Fanon’s commère. Both Fanon and Condé seem to associate homosexuality with foreigners like, in Condé’s case, Francis (of elusive but probably Hispanic origins) or the two Haitian buddies Désinor and Carlos:

Un jour, las de se heurter aux refus de ces [femmes] sans-cœur, ils s’étaient enfourchés l’un l’autre et surprise, au bout de l’étreinte, ils avaient trouvé la même fulgurance de plaisir. Alors, ils avaient recommencé. (199)

[One day, tired of being refused by these heartless women, they climbed on each other, and to their surprise found the same flash of pleasure at the end of their lovemaking. So they had started all over again. (165)]
As in Fanon, a description of what supposedly does not exist immediately follows its denial, and like Fanon, the villagers claim to be ignorant of the practices of *makoumè*, even though they occur in broad daylight during Carnival.

What Fanon describes as a Caribbean/Metropolitan France dichotomy, however, becomes a rural/urban one in Conde’s novel. Presumably, the cities to which the *makoumè* are confined are subjected to a much greater French influence. Perhaps, however, it is because homosexuality (and its transgender associations) can only be seen during Carnival that its existence can be denied during the rest of the year. Indeed, Carnival has often been described as a time when reversals in the social order are allowed so that this order may be maintained throughout the rest of the year. Furthermore, other aspects of Conde’s passage almost seem as if they were written to refute Fanon. Conde contradicts the villagers’ association of homosexuality with urban vice through the presence of Sirop Batterie, the very rural *makoumè*. She replaces Fanon’s French expression “Ma Commère” with the Creole original he translates and even glosses it as “homosexual” in a note. She dislodges *makoumè* from its association with femininity by applying it equally to both active and passive partners and by attaching it to its gendered opposite, *compère*. Why use the Creole *makoumè* in a novel in French when, in fact, any number of French equivalents would have worked just fine? It is as if the homosexuality she describes is so Caribbean that only a Creole word will do. The Creole word, in fact, asserts the Caribbeanness of homosexuality. For Fanon, there are no queers at “home” in Martinique, and homosexuality represents a false or alienated identity for Martiniquans; for Conde, there must be a “home” for queers in Guadeloupe. Her fiction, in fact, asserts the “truth” of this necessity.

When one considers that the word Conde glosses as “homosexual” is related to that for a gossiping woman (*une commère* in French), her discussion of homosexuality becomes much more central to the concerns of the novel: the homosexuality in question is a subject of gossip, and this in a novel whose plot consists entirely of gossip. To the extent one can say that *Traversée de la mangrove* has a plot, its plot is fairly simple. As Leah Hewitt has written, Conde’s novel “is structured around the death of one character, Francis Sanchez, whose shadowy identity and enigmatic death are presented as two puzzles to be solved” (84). Francis, alias Francisco Alvarez-Sanchez, came to the small Guadeloupan village Rivière au Sel and had affairs with at least two village women. Through the stories told by villagers at his wake, the novel attempts to reconstruct Francis’s
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origins, his past, his reasons for moving to Rivière au Sel, and the circumstances surrounding his death. Its narrative consists solely of these different and conflicting versions of Francis’s story, and, although the novel resembles a “popular detective story” (Hewitt 84), it never provides definite answers to the questions it asks. Indeed, Hewitt has also compared Condé’s novel (as opposed to Francis’s) to a mangrove swamp:

The mangrove of the title . . . provides a metaphor for the reader’s situation. . . . The mangrove’s tree branches . . . are a physical equivalent to the jumble of stories that overlap, intersect and crisscross one another. In the mangrove’s thick growth it is difficult to tell roots from trunks and branches, origins from effects, beginnings from ends. Similarly, the entanglement of contradictory facts, beliefs and attitudes undermines the reader’s desire to get to a univocal truth concerning the “root” or “origin” of Sancher’s identity and the cause of his death. (85)

The gossip about Francis Sancher—the various versions of his story that Hewitt compares to the jumble of roots and branches of the mangrove tree—makes up the narrative structure of Traversée, so that finding truth amid all this gossip or establishing a definitive version of the plot is just as impossible as the eponymous endeavor of crossing the mangrove.

Renée Larrier has argued that what I call the novel’s gossipy structure calls Francis’s masculinity into question. If “male characters are associated with trees and tree roots with which they have special communication” (137), “the roving Iš, through multiple perspectives, reconstruct the life of a migrating central character whose masculinity . . . is undermined” (129). In addition to his masculinity, I would argue, since “Francis Sancher remains a mysterious figure, emblematic of Caribbean identity” (Larrier 144), Condé also interrogates the roots of Caribbean identity in offering an alternative model of roots to the patrilineal family tree through the mangrove as an image of genealogical accounts of identity. Furthermore, since the makoumè figures as one of the many roots of the mangrove, Condé simultaneously highlights the sexual paradox of all roots narratives. In showing that roots can also be rewritten in sexually subversive ways, Condé therefore queers not only the roots paradigm but also the structure of return narratives. For the expression Condé uses to describe the spread of gossip about Sancher’s homosexuality, “the evil-doing plant of malicious gossip,” associates gossip with roots in the image of rumor taking root in Rivière au Sel. This equivalence
between gossip and narrative, both of which are like roots of the mangrove, means that in Condé’s mangrove the narrative paradox is intertwined with the sexual one. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, the *makoumè* in the mangrove thus literalizes the queering of Caribbean roots that can happen when the mangrove structures alternative versions of roots narratives and highlights the political, narrative, and sexual paradoxes inherent therein. Condé’s novel thus queers the model represented by Haley and can also prompt a rereading of the Créolistes’ own mangrove novels, in relation to which the agency for the critical maneuver of queering lies more squarely with the reader.

**Queering Créolité**

While the critics cited above have elaborated an accurate understanding of the way gender infuses Créoliste novels, I would also argue that antihomophobic criticism can gain even more by paying careful attention to the insight the Créolistes provide into the workings of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. While one may find in the Créolistes’ novels many male characters who fit Spear’s and Arnold’s descriptions of their homophobia, it would be hasty to assume that homophobic characters are sufficient to make a novel homophobic. The Créoliste novelists Chamoiseau and Confiant (especially the latter) are also unique in the openness with which they deal with topics related to homosexuality, and the sheer frequency with which they use *makoumè* or *ma-commère* merits further consideration. What some critics have seen as a glorification of supermasculine characters is often treated with a great deal of irony by Chamoiseau and Confiant, and even characters who seem to represent the Créolistes’ anti-Négritude position can be subjected to a significant amount of ridicule. It is therefore necessary to carry out close readings of the so-called homophobic passages (including their language politics) to contextualize them within each novel’s general presentation of its characters.

To return to Confiant’s *L’allée des soupirs*, for example, in spite of journalist Romule Casoar’s reputation as a “godmother,” he did manage to steal Bec-en-Or’s mistress. When loudmouths then tease the latter by referring to the former’s alleged homosexuality, the insult *makoumè* is used to attack not Romule but Bec-en-Or, whose masculinity suffers from this defeat at the hands of a sellout. The fact that the rumor about
Romule is wrong does not prevent other Martiniquan men from using it to shore up their own masculinities at the expense of Bec-en-Or’s (not to mention Romule’s). Thus, while Fanon used the term *Ma Commère* to name a homosexuality that supposedly does not exist, Confiant, while making reference to the existence of homosexuality, uses *ma-commère* in a context far removed from its actual practice. Furthermore, in spite of Confiant’s general adherence to Fanon’s language politics, a single passage in *L’allée des soupirs* disrupts them by giving the French translation of *makoumé* as “pédéraste” or “faggot.” When the young Jean, one of the novel’s most important characters, pays more attention to a film than the girl he is watching it with, “*Ou sé an makoumé oben ki sa ?* (T’es pédéraste ou quoi ?) s’énervait Lamour” (117) [Are you a faggot or what?” said Lamour impatiently]. One might even argue that, in contradistinction to an avoidance of using the Creole word in other passages, this passage proclaims the Créolité of the *makoumé*.

Published one year before *Traversée*, Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) [*Solibo Magnificent*] resembles Condé’s novel in a number of interesting ways. Detailing the investigation that follows the eponymous storyteller’s death during Carnival from choking on his own words, it begins like Condé’s novel with a dead man. Solibo falls dead into the roots of a tamarind tree, and, as one of the characters, Chamoiseau is also a witness to Solibo’s death. Chamoiseau’s novel also disrupts Fanon’s association of homosexuality with the colonizer, as well as the gender politics described by Murray of using *makoumé* as an insult. In this novel, *makoumé* occurs in a confrontation not between two men but between a man and a woman. In a confrontation between the major Diab-Anba-Feuilles and the *majorine* Lolita Boidevan, nicknamed Doudou-Ménar, the latter says, “*J’ai des outils pour toi !*” (92) [I have some tools for you]. He interprets this remark as an accusation and an insult:

[T]u me vois avec le bleu de la Loi, tu te dis : aye, c’est un ma-commère ! . . ., je ne suis pas un ma-commère han, je ne suis pas une commère, regarde si je suis une commère . . .—et il porte flap ! le poing à la bouche, se mord hanm ! (93)

[You see me in a police uniform and you say to yourself, My God! he’s a *ma-commère*! . . . I’m not a *ma-commère*, no way, I’m not a *commère*, you’ll see whether I’m a *commère*. And wham, he sticks his fist in his mouth and, crunch, bites it.]
By bleeding for her, the passage implies, he is threatening to kill her (see Plumecocq 131).

Doudou’s perceived insult then elicits a barrage of words that can only be transmitted in Creole. The following passage is exclaimed by Diab-Anba-Feuilles during the bloody fight that ensues:

Man sé an makoumè ? ès man sé an makoumè ? mi oala ou défol-manté akôdi sé koko siklon fésé, han ! man sé pilonnen’w até-a là, wi ! man sé grajé’w kon an bi manyôk ek pijé’w anba plat’ pyé mwen pou fè’w ladýé sos fyel-ou ! ou modi ! oala man menyen’w ou modi ! pon labé pè ké tiré’y ba’w é dyab ké ayé oute zo’w yonn aprélot ! mé ansé an jan mentsiyan, man grafyen’w ou pwézonnen ! fwa’w pwézonnen ! koukoun-ou pwézonnen ! dréséguidup anpé ba’w fifin bout’la. (94)

The French translation of this passage is given in a footnote as follows:

Je suis un pleutre ? suis-je un pleutre ? te voilà comme un cocotier dévasté par un cyclone ! oh, j’aimerai te détruire, te piétiner ! tu es maudite ! maintenant que je t’ai touchée, ton corps, ton foie, ton sexe sont soumis à ma malédiction ! aucun sacrement n’y pourra rien désormais ! tu es maudite ! relève-toi pour que je puisse t’achever ! . . . (Chamoiseau’s ellipsis)

[I’m a coward? am I a coward? there you are like a coconut tree blown down by a cyclone! oh how I would love to destroy you, trample on you! curses to you! now that I have touched you, your body, your liver, your sexual organs are under my curse! no sacrament will do anything for you from now on! get up so I can finish you off! . . .]

Here the French translation of the Creole gives no indication of ma koumè’s homosexual implications; the word is simply translated as “pleutre” or “coward.” Yet the way makoumè is translated is not the only discrepancy between the two versions. Many of the Creole original’s sexual implications are lost, as are culturally specific references such as cassava, manzanita, and suggestions of popular religious practices and/or beliefs. A more accurate translation of the Creole passage would yield something more like:

I’m a faggot? am I a faggot? goodness, you are as scattered as coconuts spanked to the ground by a cyclone! I feel like trampling you into the
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In addition, although some critics have made much of the use of the term *makoumè* by *majors* in their jousts, the fact that one partner here is a *majorine* complicates readings that argue that these passages glorify the masculinity of their characters. Yes, it is true that Doudou is wounded in the violence that a male character deploys in the name of masculinity, but she responds to this attack with a formidable amount of resistance. At first the police-squad chief Bouafesse does not let the rescue squad take the wounded Doudou to the hospital simply because she is a witness to Solibo’s death. After the ambulance attendants persuade him to change his mind, Doudou regains consciousness en route to the hospital and sees Nono-Bec-en-Or. She knocks out all his teeth (forcing the ambulance to veer off course) and throws him against the back window, breaking it, before falling back into a coma. Upon awaking once more, she again attacks Nono before escaping from the hospital. When she returns to the scene of Solibo’s death, she attacks Diab again, knocks him out, and then turns to Bouafesse. Two of his subordinates beat her to death before they can be stopped. Only the combined forces of five armed police officers, one of whom is a *major*, can subdue what might be read as this female character’s resistance to masculinity.

Doudou’s tragic end, a result of police brutality, occurs after a heroic battle during which she usurps the male position, and she pays for this gendered revolt with her life. Yet one might also argue that she has usurped no one but is merely playing out a role available to Martiniquan women and that this sequence is a minor variation on previous ones involving two male *majors*. Doudou would thus, like the *major*, constitute an archetypal figure, one that Chamoiseau himself has discussed in describing his own mother: “She’s a woman with balls (*femme-à-graines*), a mannish woman; all Caribbean women are like that” (McCusker 731). Ellen M. Schnepel articulates a different view of this archetype: “[T]he Creole expression *on mal-fanm* . . . means literally a ‘male-woman.’ The phrase refers to a strong-willed woman and has a pejorative significance, implying that the woman doesn’t know her place” (252). Whereas Chamoiseau describes the archetype in an effort to defend himself against
accusations of sexism, Schnepel sees the archetype itself as a product of sexist social forces that attempt to keep women “in their place.”

While Chamoiseau seems to see the archetype as evidence of a lack of sexism in Caribbean societies, his own self-defense relies less on the value of the archetype than on the fact that he is accurately representing a “real” aspect of Caribbean cultures:

I’ve never been able to understand the “masculinist” critique of our work; it seems completely unfounded. In fact, I am astonished at how many of my novels have been about women. But not “Western” women—this is the big error in the Western masculinist critique, they always imagine women as Western women. My novels are about Creole women, *matadoras*—women who come from matrifocal families and have always had to fight, to develop strategies of survival and resistance. (Taylor 154)

Although Chamoiseau echoes the critique of western feminism’s cultural biases articulated by a number of nonwestern feminists, his notion of representation as value neutral and politically unmotivated has long been discredited. Arnold dismisses such defenses and links issues of representation to questions of sexuality, as well as those of gender: “[T]he créolistes reproduce . . . an aggressive heterosexual eroticism, envisaged from the perspective of a more or less predatory philandering male whose activities can be justified—if need be—through the claim of verisimilitude” (“Gendering” 37). Contra Chamoiseau, however, I would argue that it is not the Créolistes’ representations of mannish women that offer something useful for gender studies but their representation of mannish men as objects of ridicule. Contra Arnold, I would point out that, while gender and sexuality are certainly intertwined here, even if one could maintain that the overabundance of supermale characters constitutes a glorification rather than a critique of masculinity, the abundance of *makoumè* cannot be treated as a strict parallel. While sexism may be reproduced through displays (representations) of male bravura, as one can see from the example of Fanon, homophobia often works by hiding (refusing to represent) what it attempts to repress. It is precisely the latter rule that the Créolistes refuse to follow. A truly antihomophobic criticism, I feel, should guard against critiquing sexual representations in ways suggesting that desexualized representations are the best alternative to either sexism or homophobia.
The entire battle between Doudou and the forces of masculinity, as well as those of social order, intercut with the investigation that continues during her trip to the hospital, is also imbued with a significant amount of ridicule. The entire sequence of events not only displays the police force as being inept but also exaggerates reactions by attributing monstrous effects to innocuous causes. Diab’s reaction to Doudou is one such monstrosity; since Doudou does not pronounce the word *makoumè*, one must recognize that it is inferred or imagined by Diab. The cop creates the homophobic insult himself and then responds in a homophobic manner. Whereas Fanon associated the imposition of homosexuality with French colonization, in this passage at least, Chamoiseau associates *homophobia* with the French-run police force (which he explicitly treats as a representative of the Republic itself). While Diab assumes that his police uniform makes him more vulnerable to being called a *makoumè* (presumably because he has already bent over for the French Republic!), ridiculing Diab’s masculinity is part and parcel of a Créoliste’s political critique of colonial violence. Chamoiseau describes this tactic in an interview in response to a question about precisely this sequence of police brutality: “Because the Creole storyteller has used laughter, irony, mockery, derision—in short, the whole effect of mocking distanciation—in an exemplary manner, I can only situate myself in the same tradition. In fact, laughter allows me to make fun of myself, in other words, not to take myself seriously, to maintain an amused distance with what I am, what I do, my ambitions, my worries” (McCusker 728). Although Arnold has argued that this identification with the male storyteller is another aspect of the Créolistes’ masculinist bias (“Gendering” 30), in *Solibo*, Chamoiseau actually appears as a writer-character who is clearly differentiated from the oral storyteller and of whom other characters occasionally make fun. Thus, not only is the ridicule of burlesque masculinity a frequent aspect of these novels, but it is also an integral aspect of a self-critique firmly embedded within the Créolistes’ fictional writing.

One passage in Confiant’s 1988 novel *Le nègre et l’amiral* [The Negro and the Admiral] actually identifies this practice with an antiseexist politics explicitly. In this novel about life in Martinique during World War II under the pro-Vichy Admiral Robert (referred to in the novel’s title), the former Latin teacher Amédée Mauville describes how his beloved, the prostitute Philomène, teaches him to appreciate the subtleties of the word *coucoune* (written by Chamoiseau in more a standard Creole as *koukoun*):
According to this passage, therefore, Creole’s sexual vocabulary is less vulgar than that of French, and its valences are the opposite of those described by Arnold, Murray, and Schnepel. In addition, Amédée’s praise of the antisexist valences of Creole’s sexual vocabulary coincide with his condemnation of misogyny on the part of Rigobert (the nègre of the title) (267). While the novel obviously valorizes Rigobert’s resistance to the Vichy government, Amédée is more representative of the Créolist position on language. Amédée thus accuses the major Rigobert of being sexist as part of a Créolist position on language politics. It is probably also fair to say that the novel embraces his critique of misogyny even though (or perhaps because) this critique remains inherently male. The sexual politics of the Créolistes’ use of Creolized French is thus harder to pin down than some critics have suggested.

In addition to the Créolistes’ use of makoumè as part of a Creolization of both sexuality and French linguistic hegemony, a Creolization that demarginalizes not only Creole but also a specifically Creole vision of sexuality, Confiant’s Le nègre et l’amiral further brings the makoumè into public view, even if only during Carnival. In a mixture of French and Cre-
Les obsèques de Vaval, roi bwabwa
Vaval le plus grand majô
surnommé nonm a bonm
Ses obsèques auront lieu à partir de deux heures cet après-midi dans tout le pays et en ville menm parèy.
Le cortège se réunira la zôt ka wè anlo moun ki ka mò ri.
l’inhumation aura lieu ansanm nwè fèt
en même temps que l’incinération.
Cet avis est diffusé de la part
des actuellement en Métropole
des yichkôn
des boulé, des bwètzouti, des gólbo
des soubawou, des nègmawon
des soukouyan, des totoblo, des vagabonds
des bitako, des pété’y man ka pété’y
des déserbants, des matadô
des makoumè, des malélivé
An tout bagay-tala, si nou obliyé condoléances aux
parents, amis et alliés
Après la cérémonie, toute la famille sera heureuse de
vous recevoir, mizik par-devant, dans les zouk les bals,
les diri san kriyé, les dékalé mangous, les touféyenyen
kon lidé zôt di zôt. (75–76)

In the following translation, I have left in the words that are in Creole in
the original with a translation in parentheses (or in the notes for longer
ones):

The funeral for Vaval, king bwabwa
Vaval the greatest majô
nicknamed nonm a bonm (party man)
His funeral will begin at two this
afternoon throughout the country and in town menm parèy (in the
same way).
The procession will gather la zôt ka wè anlo moun ki ka mò ri (where
people are dying laughing).
The burial will occur *ansanm nwè fèt* (at nightfall) at the same time as the cremation.

This announcement comes from those who have moved to France *yichkôn* (sons of bitches),

*boulé* (drunkards), *bwètzouti,*

*soubawou* (wild men), *nègmawon* (maroons)

*soukouyan* (bloodsuckers), *totoblo* (musicians), vagabonds/good-for-nothings

*bitako* (rednecks),

*makoumè, malélivé* (misbehavers)

*An tout bagay-tala, si nou obliyé* (In all this affair, if we forget)

condolences for parents, friends, and allies

After the ceremony, the family invites you for *mizik* (music) up front, in *zouk* (big parties with music), balls,

*diri san kriyé* (dishes of rice that has not been sorted), *dékalé mangous* (mongoose killings), *touféyenyen* (dirty dancing)

*kon lidé zôt di zôt* (to do as you like).

The list of sponsors for this announcement reads somewhat like a Carnival procession in itself, and, although it contains several labels that might be considered pejorative (the first among which is *makoumè* but also *bitako* and, in some contexts, *nègmawon*), a number of the characters they describe (such as the *vakabon* and *nègmawon*) have been valorized by the Créolistes as Creole supermale heroes, often seemingly at the expense of the *makoumè*. So, although one might read the passage as describing a group of marginalized figures sending out a funeral announcement for their enemy Vaval, represented here as a *major*, it is precisely this *major* who brings these figures out of the margins during Carnival. During Carnival, then, the *major* can parade side by side with the *makoumè*. On the one hand, there might be nothing unusual about giving the *makoumè* a platform equal to that of the *major* during Carnival; as soon as Carnival is over, the *makoumè* can be whisked quickly back to the margins. On the other, the distinction between Carnival and the rest of the year is consciously blurred in the Créolistes’ novels, in which Carnival seems to last all year. In other words, this funeral announcement could just as easily be the list of characters in a Créoliste novel.

In addition, the announcement occurs not as part of the narration
of the novel’s events but during a digression, a flashback that recounts the meeting of Rigobert and Julien Dorival, nicknamed Lapin Échaudé (Scalded Rabbit), the head crieur, a person paid to entice customers into a store. The announcement is heard on the radio in the second version of their meeting. The existence of competing versions of the same event signals that the makoumè enters narrative as the object of gossip as in Condé’s *Traversée*. Indeed, the plots of Créolistes novels are often driven by gossip or the radio-bois-patate (the grapevine or rumor-mill), and, as we have seen, it is often as the object of this gossip that the makoumè disrupts the masculinity of the most super-male characters. Using Condé to queer the mangrove of the Créolistes’ novels can thus lead us back to the passage in Confiant’s *L’allée des soupirs* in which the Indian undertaker Ziguinote could not bear to see an animal killed as a child: “On l’affubla très tôt du sobriquet de “Petit Ma-commère,” le plus infamant dont on disposât dans nos contrées en ce début de siècle” (252–53) [He was immediately saddled with the nickname Little *Ma-commère*, the most slanderous one available in our region at the beginning of this century].

As an adult, he falls in love with a woman, the notions store (*mercerie*) keeper Sylvanise: “Dans une première mouture, il est dit que Ziguinote, alias Petit Ma-commère, espéra la mulâtresse au sortir de la messe” (255) [In a first version, it is said that Ziguinote, alias Little *Ma-commère*, waited for the mulatta to come out after mass]. A reference to the first *mouture*—usually the first version of a written text before it is revised but used here to describe the first *oral* version of a story—implies that later versions will be different, precisely the kind of transformation that characterizes gossip.

The etymological association between the makoumè and gossip is thus also a thematic one in many Créolistes novels. In *L’allée*, for example, Hilaire Tersinien gains the title of *major* by defeating Maxime Saint-Prix, the legendary “danseur de damiers” (checkerboard dancer or fighter/wrestler), in a fight. When the “checkerboard dance” is outlawed (except when it actually consists of dancing), Maxime is delighted: “‘Divertissement pour ma-commères!’ lâchait Saint-Prix avec morgue quand on l’invitait à rejoindre les jeunes mâles nègres dans le cercle des danseurs” (308) [That’s a pastime for *ma-commères*! Saint-Prix scoffed when invited to join the young black males among the circle of dancers]. From that point on, Maxime was able to live off the reputation of his masculinity without having to prove it, until, that is, Hilaire took that reputation from him. Masculinity, like homosexuality, is therefore often more a matter of rumor than fact. And since it is so frequently fought over (i.e., in high
demand), it also seems to be in rather short supply. We have also seen how, in *Eau de Café*, the nègmawon Julien Thémistocle asserted his own masculinity by calling others makoumè. Yet, as far as using makoumè as an insult goes, *what goes around comes around!* The following insult was supposedly pronounced by Franciane, Eau de Café’s mother, but it is related by Man Doris, who has dubious motives: “[Julien est un ma-commère,’
clame-t-elle partout” (368) [“Julien is a ma-commère,” she declared everywhere she went].

The supermale’s comeuppance, however, is much greater than hearsay; Julien and Bérard (the major whose masculinity is also established at the expense of the makoumè) are the only ones who are also actually sodomized during the course of the novel. The character referred to as the Syrian (because none of the other characters can pronounce his Arabic name) carries out his threat to punish Major Bérard for sleeping with his wife by sodomizing him, first with a gun, then with his penis:

Lentement mais sûrement, il enfonça le canon de son arme dans le trou-caca de Major Bérard qui mordit un oreiller pour ne pas meugler. . . . Puis Syrien retira brusquement l’arme et l’encula à grands coups de reins qui arrachèrent au nègre des cris déchirants. Et de lui dire : “Après ça, je te mets au défi d’aller claironner que tu as coqué la femme d’Abdelhamid Tanin. Je veux qu’à chaque fois que tu t’avises de faire ça, tu sentes tes fesses te brûler, mon bougre.” (346)

[Slowly but surely, he pushed the barrel of his weapon into the arse-hole of Chief Bérard, who bit a pillow so as not to make a mooing sound. . . . Then Syrian suddenly pulled out his weapon and buggered the black man with great thrusts, which drew excruciating screams from him. And then he said: “After this, I challenge you to go and spread it about that you fucked Abdelhamid Tanin’s wife. Each time you’re tempted to say anything, I want you to feel your buttocks burning, my friend. (266–67)]

Julien Thémistocle apparently even brags about being sodomized by the hermaphroditic snake god(dess) Bothrops (whom he also penetrates while being penetrated) because this act of sexual initiation is the source of his sexual prowess and spiritual power (cf. Spear 146; Arnold, “Gendering” 38). Is this the way the male writer gets the upper hand over his most masculine characters? Confiant could be read here as engaging in the same kind of verbal joust as his characters in order to position
himself, the writer, as a male hero above all the *majors* and *nègmawon* of his novel. Is he, in turn, sodomizing his *majô* characters?

*Oedipus among the Mangroves*

Beyond the possibility that the Créolistes are screwing their male characters, there is another way in which the *makoumè* comes out of the mangroves to screw the Créolistes by overturning the patrilineal intellectual genealogy that they have deployed in situating Créolité within the history of Caribbean thought. This genealogy is neatly presented by the dedication of the *Éloge*:

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Pour
AIMÉ CÉSAIRE
Pour
ÉDOUARD GLISSANT
ba
FRANKÉTYÈN
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It reads, first in French, “for Aimé Césaire, for Édouard Glissant,” then in Creole, “for Frankétyèn,” the Haitian author who writes in Creole. If one reads this passage as a family tree, Négritude begat Antillanité, which in turn begat Créolité, asserted by the Créolistes as the teleological culmination of Caribbean literary history. No genealogy could be less like a mangrove and more dependent on a strictly patrilineal structure; as in biblical trees of begats, each movement is sired solely by a father, which means that each is also personified by a male writer. Heather Smyth writes, “It is clear in the *Éloge* which gender is the agent of culture in their program for creoleness: in order to return to oral Creole culture they must ‘inseminate Creole in the new writing.’ The male figure is responsible for the insemination of this reborn culture, and the male writer suffers a metaphorical ‘castration’ when cut off from Creole culture” (15).

In the *Éloge*, the Créolistes also explicitly posit Césaire as an intellectual father: “Nous sommes à jamais fils d’Aimé Césaire” (18) [We are forever Césaire’s sons” (888)]. Likewise, in *Aimé Césaire*, Confiant describes his critique of Césaire’s politics and poetics as “le cri sincère d’un fils qui estime avoir été trahi par ses pères et en l’occurrence par le premier d’entre eux” (37) [the sincere cry of a son who considers himself betrayed by his fathers and, in this case, by the first and foremost
among them]. It would therefore be the duty of these betrayed sons to rebel against their father’s treason. Créalité, then, comes into existence through what Richard D. E. Burton has called the Créolistes’ “attack on the Father” (“Two Views” 143); the roots of Créalité are thus not only patrilineal but also Oedipal. Yet in the Éloge the Créolistes also claim to rescue Césaire from the Oedipal tendencies of other critics: “Nous voilà sommés d’affranchir Aimé Césaire de l’accusation—aux relents oedipiens—d’hostilité à la langue créole” (17) [This brings us to free Aimé Césaire of the accusation—with Oedipal overtones—of hostility to the Creole language” (888)]. As Burton describes it, “the father-son bond is affirmed, denied and then reaffirmed” (“Two Views” 143) in a peculiar kind of flip-flopping.

Condé’s queer mangrove can also be used to overturn this patrilineal genealogy. As Chamoiseau himself has suggested, the tangled roots of the mangrove also describe Francis’s family tree: “The character of Francisco Sanchez has an unclear genealogy; he isn’t transparent, and we do not know where he comes from, where he was born, what he wants, what he fears” (391–92). Since the characters’ genealogies are intertwined but only become obvious bit by bit, reading this novel and making sense of it are like retracing one’s family tree in a mangrove swamp, where it is impossible to isolate one’s family tree from all the others. And since it is never clear which branches belong to which roots in the mangrove, a family tree structured like a mangrove also casts doubt on the paternity of individual family members. Finally, because Condé’s mangrove opens up the lines of descent to allow for nonheterosexual roots in Traversée, the specter of homosexuality also interferes with the heterosexual purity of the novel’s genealogy.

If Fanon attributed a lack of homosexuality in the Caribbean to an absence of the Oedipus complex there, rereading the Créolistes through Condé can bring their literary deployment of Oedipus into conflict with the more explicit denial of Oedipus in their essays. For example, at the end of Confiant’s Eau de Café, one finds a fictional example of reversing Oedipal accusations when the narrator sees the character Bec-en-Or masturbating at the foot of the statue of Napoleon’s wife Joséphine in Fort-de-France and hears him shout:26

Crevez tous, bandes de couillons ! Vous avez forniqué avec vos propres mères, vous avez enseveli sous des laves de béton vos terres à ignames, vous avez prostitué vos femmes et vos sœurs, vous avez sacrifié la langue patiemment édifiée par les ancêtres, vous vous êtes
découlottés jour après jour, maintenant crevez ! . . . Ah, je revois . . . vos discours lamentables de maires et de députés véreux et verrats, vos bavasseries risibles de littérateurs de la Négritude et j’en passe. Alors crevez maintenant ! (377–78)

[Die, dumbasses! all of you. You’ve fornicated with your own mothers, you’ve buried your yam gardens under concrete slabs, you’ve prostituted your wives and sisters, you’ve sacrificed the language patiently elaborated by the ancestors, you’ve lowered your britches day after day, so die now. You crooked pigs, I can still hear your pitiful speeches as mayors and deputies, your laughable chatter as Négritude littérateurs. Just die now!]

It would be hard not to read this passage as targeting Césaire, who has had a long political career as mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French National Assembly, especially since the political speeches condemned here are so clearly associated with the literary discourse of Négritude. Since Césaire, though unnamed, is associated with those who have betrayed the Creole language and culture, as well as fornicated with their mothers, he becomes the Oedipus figure here. The sons, however, are the ones who harbor a death wish for him, which is an Oedipal desire as well. And since the Oedipal father lowers his pants for the colonizer, what are we to think of the Créolistes who proffer this insult when the very same insult comes back to them?

In Caribbean Discourse, Glissant questions the relevance of the Oedipus complex in the Caribbean. He also argues (albeit in a much more nuanced fashion than Fanon) that “here, the Oedipus complex should be approached with caution, at least with the will to avoid imposing on the psychic reality of Martiniquans stereotypes that have been developed in the West” (99; my trans.). As reasons he cites “women’s traditional energy, men’s practice of avoiding responsibility, the ‘historically’ non-binding nature of family structures, and the ambiguous way in which they are lived” (98–99; my trans.). Thus, “Oedipal relations with the mother have not been a problem here (or more generally, Oedipus as a problem is a western invention) inasmuch as Martiniquan society has not really been required to adopt the western (triangular) model of family organization. In the extended family, the Oedipal relation is not problematic” (286; my trans.). In other words, in addition to his explicit acknowledgment of Deleuze and Guattari in taking up their theorization of the rhizomatic, he also shares their association of Oedipus with colonization.
Unlike Fanon, however, Glissant does not assert that homosexuality is impossible outside of an Oedipal kinship structure. In one passage, he even refers to female homosexuality as a rather positive indication of resistance to *machisme* and as a logical consequence of the matrifocal tendencies of the Caribbean family (298). Like Hocquenghem before him, therefore, Glissant explores the possibility of a homosexual desire decoupled from Oedipus. Furthermore, following Glissant’s argument, one might say that, in the mangrovelike family trees of the Caribbean, Oedipus can only get bogged down where he can do no harm. Furthermore, in spite of the Oedipal structure inherent in the articulation of Créolité’s descent, Oedipus gets lost in the Créolistes’ fiction as well. Unlike the *major*, the *nègmanvou*, and even the *makoumè*, Oedipus is not a Créoliste character.

Even if Confiant seems to get the upper hand over his *major* characters, however, the insult *makoumè* also comes back to him in *L’allée des soupirs* through the character of Jacquou Chartier. Chartier clearly verbalizes the theories of Créolité; he praises the Creole language (206), criticizes Césaire (209–10), and proclaims, “La Martinique est un grand pays parce qu’elle est diverselle” (149) [Martinique is a great country because it is diversal.] (*Diversel* is obtained by combining the French adjectives for *diverse* and *universal*. Taking their cue from Glissant, Confiant implies with this neologism that an anti-essentialist notion of diversity is a universal value.) Chartier is even writing a novel that strangely resembles those of Confiant (264). Yet his name associates him more with the European colonization of the New World than with the Creolization that occurred once the Caribbean was populated with people with diverse origins. He is also a Blanc-France, a European-born Frenchman whom none of the locals understands. When he speaks French, women faint, and he defends Créolité while people are being shot in the street. As J. Michael Dash writes, “In Chartier’s incessant babbling, all the main ideas of créolité are parodied” (122). In one scene, he is even subjected to a litany of insults not unlike those in which other characters are called *makoumè*:

D’après Mathilde, il fallait à tout prix dérissonner l’habitude qu’avait Chartier de parler comme un perroquet-répétiteur : Un soir plein de fraîcheur, on se réunit donc place de l’Abbé Grégoire et l’on mit son intelligence en commun afin de le sobriqueter. Chacun eut son mot à proposer que l’on examina avec le plus grand soin : blablateur (la logeuse de monsieur Jean), jaspineur (la mère-maquerelle), hâbleur (la
pacotilleuse), baragouineur (Jojo Coiffeur), bavardeur (Ziguinote), paroleur (Ho-Chen-Sang, dit Chine), jargonneur (le Syrien Mehdi Aboubaker . . .), jacoteur (Bec-en-Or), bagoulard (Siméon, le fils de la logeuse de monsieur Jean), brimborioneur (Acinelle Bertrand), plaidoyeur (Cicéron . . .) et puis clapotier, caquetier, et des mots par grappes, des dévalaisons de mots à dormir dehors—car le Martini- quais est un grand fabriqueur de mots, oui ! (212)

[According to Mathilde, we had to mock at all costs Chartier’s habit of talking like a miming parrot, so one cool evening, we got together at L’Abbé Grégoire Square, and we pooled our intelligence so we could nickname him. Each person had a word to propose, which we examined with the greatest care: blablabla (Mr. Jean’s tenant), chatterbox (the brothel madam), talker (the odds-and-ends seller), yack-yack (Jojo the Hairdresser), babbler (Ziguinote), windbag (Ho-Cheng-Sang, aka China), jiver (the Syrian Mehdi Aboubaker), drivel (Bec-en-Or), prattler (Siméon, Mr. Jean’s tenant’s son), gibber-jabberer (Acinelle Bertrand), whiner (Cicéron . . .), and then twaddler, cackler, and words by the bunches, an avalanche of words that would put you to sleep—because Martiniquans are great word manufacturers, yes they are!]

In this passage, a long list of Creole characters ridicule the white Créoliste, and it would be difficult not to read this critique as somehow affecting the real-life Créoliste writers as well. By Confiant’s own admission, it is the Créoliste writer (in Chartier) who has most thoroughly assimilated the psychological paradigms of the colonizer. If, in the same novel, Romule Casoar and the hotel boss are treated as makoumè because of their behavior, what are we to think of Chartier and through him the Créolistes? Are they not likewise implicitly accused of bending over for the colonizer?

While Bec-en-Or may accuse Césaire of bending over for the French in L’allée des soupirs, in Chamoiseau’s Chronique des sept misères, the character similarly accused embraces a cultural politics that are considerably more ambiguous. In this portrait of the lives of the djobeurs (odd-jobs men for hire at the Fort-de-France market), the protagonist and head djobeur Pierre Philomène, nicknamed Pipi, is accused of being a makoumè:

Quelques gens du marché lui demandaient s’il n’était pas devenu ma- coumè (homosexuel). Sans rire de la blague, Pipi se réfugiait dans
A quick glance at this passage might lead one to believe that Pipi responds to one insult (makoumé) with another (nèg Kongo). Carefully contextualizing this passage, however, leads to another reading. The djobeurs are disappearing as a result of economic transformations brought about by departmentalization. (Césaire proposed the law that turned French Caribbean territories into départements in 1946.) Pipi is thus a Creole archetype and hero, and like the djobeurs he literally disappears from the marketplace (in the end, he is never heard from again) as he spends more and more time in search of the gold of a former master who killed the slave who helped him bury it. Afoukal, the ghost/zombi of that slave, guards the treasure, speaks to Pipi in dreams after being dug up, and becomes Pipi’s connection with his past, his history, and therefore his identity rooted in that history.

Pipi’s regular visits to Afoukal and his subsequent deep meditations on the African past lead those who know him to confuse his distraction with the behavior of a makoumé. Instead of responding to this epithet with more insults, he escapes into a reflection on the history of slavery; the word Congo is uttered not to label his detractors but to list the peoples deported from Africa to the Caribbean, peoples with whom he establishes a family tree (tous fils d’Afrique). Pipi is thus protected from the insult makoumé by embracing his Négritude. While at first it may seem that Afoukal leads Pipi back to African roots, when Pipi wants to “return” to Africa the zombi laughs at him and tells him that this is impossible. Although Pipi is a victim of Césaire’s politics, he is temporarily “duped” (from the Créoliste point of view) by Césaire’s cultural ideology (Négritude), which Confiant has argued is intertwined with his politics. Yet the tensions between Créolité and Négritude are never resolved for Pipi. Though treated as a makoumé, Pipi is unfazed and thus is an anti-major; and it is unclear whether Créolité or Négritude makes his masculinity immune to such attacks (although on one occasion he is practically reduced to a state of hysteria upon meeting Césaire and being
addressed by him in French). Perhaps, rather, it is the symbiotic relation between Créolité and Négritude that leads Pipi to reject the call to a violent masculinity implied in the epithet. The critique of Négritude is thus much more ambivalent here than in the Créolistes’ nonfiction writings.

Yet, rather than argue that these blind spots represent a shortcoming in the Créolité model, I would argue that the Créolistes’ complex reliance on a genealogical notion of filiation, yet also an almost Oedipal revolt against the forefathers acknowledged through this genealogy, might best be visualized as the roots of the mangrove, where Pipi is surprised to wake up one morning and whose image has been deployed by the writers of all three movements, Négritude, Antillanité, and Créolité. Even Aimé Césaire deployed the image of the mangrove in the service of Négritude. More specifically, his collection of poems moi, laminaire... contains two poems, “Mangrove” and “La condition-mangrove” [The Mangrove Condition], in which the mangrove figures prominently (Poésie 9, 30). Although Richard D. E. Burton has argued that “the mangrove frequently suggests torpor and stagnation in Césaire’s poetry” (“Ki moun” 29n11), Césaire counters (in advance), “La mangrove respire” [The Mangrove Breathes] (30). To use the title of a poem by Césaire, identity, according to this model, is a “condition-mangrove.” The mangrove in Césaire’s poetry also serves as a reminder of the line from the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, forgotten by so many of those who accuse Césaire of being an essentialist: “[M]a négritude n’est pas une pierre” (46) [My negritude is not a stone (35)]. Négritude had its anti-essentialist tendencies all along; both Antillanité and Créolité have developed these, reflected on them, and strengthened them. J. Michael Dash has described Chamoiseau’s Solibo Magnifique as “a better manifesto of the créolité movement than the polemical Éloge de la Créolité” (12), and one might generalize this statement to include other Chamoiseau novels and perhaps those of Confiant as well. Pipi certainly demonstrates the complexity of Créolité’s relation to Négritude better than the Éloge or Confiant’s and Bernabé’s essays on Césaire. In comparison with the Éloge, Pipi embodies an alternative genealogy, one not structured by Oedipal conflicts between father and sons and in which the term makoumè loses its role of enforcing masculinity through violence.

Créolité becomes even more accepting of nonnormative sexualities in Confiant’s Le nègre et l’amiral after Amédée’s praise of the Creole word coucoune (quoted above). This passage leads to a reflection on a conversation with his intellectual friend Dalmeida:
Dans les moments fusionnels de l’amour créole, je mets enfin un sens sur les propos de Dalmeida se méfiant de la valorisation excessive de la race noire par les jeunes intellectuels martiniquais.

“Être créole, me disait-il, c’est être une manière de compromis entre le Blanc et le Noir, entre le Noir et l’Indien, entre l’Indien et le bâtard-Chinois ou le Syrien. Au fond, que sommes-nous d’autre que des bâtards ? Et bien revendiquons notre bâtardise comme un honneur et ne recherchons pas, à l’instar des békés, des ancêtres héroïques dans une Guinée de chimère ou dans l’Inde éternelle. Voyez-vous, mon cher Amédée, tout ce mélange a produit une race nouvelle, une langue neuve, souple, serpentine, tout en étant conviviale et charnelle. Je suis trop vieux pour espérer voir le jour où notre peuple se dressera face au monde dans sa créolité. . . .” (127–28; Confiant’s ellipsis)

[. . . I finally understood what Dalmeida said in suspicion of the excessive valorization of the black race by young Martiniquan intellectuals.

“To be Creole,” he told me, “is a sort of compromise between White and Black, between Black and Indian, between Indian and mongrel Chinese or Syrian. In fact, what are we if we’re not bastards/mongrels? So let’s reclaim our bastard/mongrel nature as an honor and let us not seek, following the honky’s example, ancestors in an imaginary Africa or eternal India. You see, dear Amédée, all this mixing has produced a new race, a brand new language, one that is supple and serpentine all the while being convivial and sensual. I’m too old to hope to see the day when our people will stand up to the world by affirming their Creoleness . . .”]

In this simultaneous critique of Négritude and praise of Creoleness, the descent of Créolité’s intellectual genealogy spills out of western kinship structures altogether, first by separating the roles of pater and genitor (combined in the person of the father in nuclear families). (A less euphemistic description would acknowledge that the “father” is treated here as a cuckold.) While the family romance (a fantasy involving, among other things, denying the paternity of one’s father) is not incompatible with an Oedipal family structure, this passage does more than deny the very paternity that is affirmed in the Éloge. More than inventing an alternative set of nuclear parents, this passage multiplies lines of descent; more than replacing one family tree with another, it proposes a mangrove.
Furthermore, as another kind of *Créoliste avant la lettre* (because he articulates his Créolité in the 1940s), Dalmeida stands out even more than Jacquou Chartier. This perfectly tailored character (92) is quite a dandy (101) and one of ambiguous race at that. In this Dalmeida is truly unique as a Créoliste character. Although Créoliste novels celebrate the racial diversity of the Caribbean, their usual mode of doing so involves carefully cataloging their characters’ racial affiliation through such labels as *chabin*, *échappé-couli*, *câpresse*, and so on. Dalmeida has tried to convince Amédée to stop hanging out in Morne Pichevin, a kind of slumming that, in addition to bringing Amédée into solidarity with the most disfavored classes of Fort-de-France, also leads him to bond with its most supermale inhabitants. Furthermore, Dalmeida has taught Alcide (a fellow teacher and resistance comrade of Amédée’s) how to abstain from sexual relations with women (91). Though not labeled a *makoumè*, Dalmeida is certainly not a supermale, and we might even say that his ambiguous race parallels an ambiguous sexuality. Yet he articulates a cultural position that is most indicative of the Créolistes’. Since the *makoumè* may be a heterosexual misconception of homosexuality, the fact that Dalmeida is not called a *makoumè* may be one indication of his queerness. (Murray carefully points out that the term *makoumè* is not used by homosexual men in Martinique to label themselves; rather they prefer the term *branché*, which in Metropolitan French means “hip,” or “in the know.” Murray also describes scenes of violent reaction to being called *makoumè*—such as those written by the Créolistes—among homosexual men.)

Following Dash, then, I suggest that the Créolistes’ fiction proposes a much more mangrovelike theorization of Créolité than their so-called theoretical essays do. While they may seem at first glance to hurl *makoumè* as an insult even more vociferously than their most obnoxious major characters, on closer examination their representations of *makoumè* are rich with the possibility of challenging the very masculinity that many readings have accused the Créolistes of glorifying. In *Lettres créoles* (1991), Chamoiseau and Confiant write, “Dans la culture créole chaque Moi contient une part ouverte des Autres, et au bordage de chaque Moi se maintient frissonnante la part d’opacité irréductible des Autres” (51) [In Creole culture, each Self contains an open portion of the Other, and on the border of each Self, the Other’s portion of opacity stands shivering from excitement]. This admittedly very male Creole self or subject (*Moi*) might therefore be read as being more open to his sexual other, the *makoumè*, than has been assumed. Perhaps, then, the many passages
considered above produce similar states of excitement on the part of their Créoliste writers, for whom contact with the *makounê* results in a distinctly sexual frisson. In short, instead of rejecting the African roots with which Négritude sought to ground black identity as the Créolistes frequently claim in their essays, manifestos, and interviews, Créoliste fiction, like Condé’s writing in general, may be read as queering them.