Happiness Deferred: Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon* and the Failure of Enunciation

Wilt thou tell a monstrous lie, being but half a fish, and half a monster?

*Shakespeare, The Tempest*

I am an ambiguous animal, half a fish and half a bird.

*Heremakhonon*

Africa has been a powerful magnet and a source of inspiration for several of the the major writers of the French West Indies—those of Martinique and Guadeloupe especially. Maryse Condé is no exception to the rule, and her recent series, *Ségou*, was a resounding success. In it, she creates a vast historical saga and goes back to the eighteenth-century splendors and miseries of a West African kingdom. But in her first novel, *Heremakhonon*, her narrator and negative alter ego Véronica confronts a myth, the myth of Africa as welcoming mother. In measuring the myth against the depressing realities of contemporary neocolonialist Africa, Véronica discovers its shortcomings: “Africa” turns out to be a fantasy and a will-o’-the-wisp, which continues to elude her grasp after a disappointing three months’ stay: she fails to open up to its cultural realities, to learn its languages; she remains caught up in the grammar of her own alienations.

Véronica comes to this unnamed West African country in search of roots and ancestors: “Who am I? We have said it over and over again. I’m a down-and-out traveller looking for her identity”(89).¹ Her quest is a misguided attempt to be reborn, “to emerge again from [her] mother’s womb”(166), to re-create a different past, and to be reconciled with herself. She wants to envisage a different personal history, a new genealogy that has not been marred by slavery and

the Middle Passage, by her bourgeois parents' blind need to mimic European standards and to idolize French culture. To fall in love with "Africa"—"cristalliser l'amour qu'à travers elle je cherche à me porter [to crystallize the love I am seeking for myself through her]" (261/146)—would be a way for her to rediscover and retrieve that aspect of herself which she cannot love, because it has been erased or devalued, thanks to colonial patterns of hatred and domination. The narcissism of her quest is made abundantly clear: by means of identification with an idealized maternal symbolic system the narrator attempts to gain mastery over her past traumas. But her voyage only proves to be an aimless detour that brings her back to her point of departure, Paris, where she had been living in exile for the previous nine years.

_Heremakhonon_ is thus the autopsy, the post-mortem, of Véronica's illusions, of the myths typified by a certain image of Africa as maternal figure, as enveloping womb where a return to plenitude becomes possible at last. The novel is Condé's somewhat hermetic and allegorical treatment of the problem of exiled Antilleans, who, for lack of political self-determination in their own islands (which are still French "départements d'outre-mer"), cannot imagine empowering structures of meaning grounded in the cultural realities of this "poussière d'îles" (131), and thus become nomads. Véronica is dimly aware of this problem, but as a figure for the Antillean peoples' lack of political purposiveness, she is a passive individual who cannot act upon her own limited understanding of the situation: "If I wanted to come to terms with myself, i.e. with them, i.e. with us, I ought to return home" (71). Yet return and reconciliation are not possible, for she is still too much a product of that restrictive environment to be able to cope with its demeaning aspects: just as the black bourgeoisie of her parents' generation mimics Europe, she falls victim to another—the same—mirage created by her desire for the (African) other.

In his remarkable theoretical text on the political and cultural dy-

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2This "sprinkling of island specks" (my trans.). This phrase is attributed to General Charles de Gaulle, during a trip to the French islands of the West Indies: he meant to imply that between Europe and America lie nothing but a few specks of land, hardly to be taken into serious consideration in policy decisions. See, e.g., Edouard Glissant, _Le Discours antillais_ (Paris: Seuil, 1981), epigraph page, _Caribbean Discourse_, trans. J. Michael Dash, forthcoming from the University Press of Virginia in 1989.
namics of the Antilles, *Le Discours antillais*, Edouard Glissant has argued that in the New World populations forcibly exiled through the slave trade, who continue to undergo economic exploitation, have been unable to take possession of their social and material environment because of a duplicitous form of domination by the "Other." Such cultural domination involves a hidden process of assimilation of great magnitude, an urge to mimic the "Other" which is a form of insidious violence. Furthermore, he argues, this domination tends to favor models of resistance which are universalizing and self-defeating because they follow the same pattern of mimetic illusion while displacing those patterns onto a "One" that is but a mirror image of the "Other." As a strictly oppositional category, the "One" leaves no room for difference and diversity, for the elaboration of new cultural forms more resistant to assimilation:

Domination (favored by dispersion and transplantation) produces the worst kind of change [le pire des avatars], which is that it provides, on its own, models of resistance to the stranglehold it has imposed, thus short-circuiting resistance while making it possible. . . .

The first impulse of a transplanted population, which is not sure of maintaining in the new surroundings the old order of values, is that of Reversion [le Retour]. Reversion is the obsession with the One, with a single origin: being must not undergo change [il ne faut pas changer l'être]. To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact [con-sacrer. . . la non-relation].

It is through this obsession with being ("l'être") as a stable category, and the concurrent essentialist, Manichean notions of race and origin, says Glissant, that the lure and seduction of the "Other" can become effective. For the Antilleans, the situation is most acute because "the community has tried to exorcise the impossibility of Return by what I call the practice of Diversion [le Détour]."3 Glissant sees Antilleans as being particularly prone to a collective and unconscious attempt to deny or negate the realities of domination because they have not squarely confronted the legacy of slavery and because they possess a dangerous semblance of democratic self-determination which co-opts all serious efforts of emancipation.

3Glissant, pp. 29, 30, 32. I have altered J. Michael Dash's translation whenever I found it necessary to emphasize a particular nuance not fully rendered in his English version. Here, I have modified the quotation from p. 30.
"Return"—real or metaphoric—to an authentic past was always impossible for the slaves and their descendants because connections to the mother country had been abruptly and artificially severed; it therefore became a psychic necessity to retrieve and conserve shreds of history through oblique and duplicitous means—a practice with which Afro-Americans are quite familiar, as was discussed in the previous two chapters on Hurston and Angelou. These duplicitous tactics can constitute, in Glissant’s terminology, a practice of the détour or diversion, which may end up, unfortunately, in a mythifying enterprise grounded in denial—the overriding situation in the Antilles. Some of the most insidious and traumatic consequences of the slave trade, Glissant adds, can be obscured and disguised by this denial, which leads the Antillean to pursue solutions involving a mystical return to an imaginary place, to “France” or “Africa” (as the case may be), a return that is but a detour leading to a dead end. What is needed instead, Glissant points out, is a painstaking effort aimed at reinserting the self into the concrete realities of Caribbean diversity (“le Divers”) with its de facto relationships of creolization, métissage and cross-cultural fertilizations (or transculturación, as Nancy Morejón, the Cuban poet, has explained it).

In that respect, Glissant is theorizing about a practice that is already quite familiar to readers of Hurston’s corpus. Hurston’s search for a symbolic geography brings her back again and again to those parts of the New World where descendants of slaves have been forced to create new cultural forms. Such forms are resistant to domination precisely because they exist in a realm outside of, or marginal to, obviously oppositional practices. Hurston’s genius is to have recognized the importance of delineating the concrete realities of what Glissant would later call “le Divers.” Her search for maternal connections thus bypasses a simplistic focus on an imaginary “Africa.” Rather, we might say that she attempts to unveil present connections to an occluded history, fully aware of the transformations that cultures undergo through time and transplantations. Hers is not an impulse to “return” but a determined effort to articulate those transformations within the marginal realms where they occur. For Hurston, to unveil and re-member the mother’s face is, by the same token, to refuse to have it be frozen in an imaginary dimen-

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sion—like Véronica Mercier’s “Africa”—where time stands still and myths contribute to the paralysis of future generations.

By contrast, Véronica Mercier epitomizes this paralysis: hers is a pathological desire for the African other and with all its lethal consequences. Since this desire is metonymically displaced onto the protagonist Ibrahima Sory, he figures as the locus of her most profound alienation. Because he corresponds to the authentically mythical idea of the “nègre avec aieux [nigger with ancestors]” (311/175), as she has imagined it, he functions as a symbolic screen that prevents her from decoding the nature of his brand of tyranny. In her relationship with him, she is made into an object, and knows it: “But there’s a secret unhealthy voluptuousness in being treated like an object” (89). She acquires a tremendous vis inertiae that stops her from taking sides in the very real conflicts of the people and the students and from acting upon the obvious connections between their situation of exploitation and her own.

Again, Glissant plainly states the question: “Diversion is not a systematic refusal to see . . . Rather we would say that it is formed, like a habit, from an interweaving of negative forces which go unchallenged. . . . Diversion is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: they then must search elsewhere for the principle of domination.” And we might add that in the case of Véronica this “elsewhere . . . may be internal.”5 Véronica is not totally blind to the nexus of forces that paralyze her. Indeed, hers is not a refusal to “see” but an inability to act, because the “elsewhere” as she has internalized it is constitutive of her subjectivity and finds in the external world its own reinforcement. Ibrahima Sory buttresses the myth precisely because he represents an interesting inversion of that myth: whereas the idealized and sexualized image of “Africa-as-Mother” is the common archetype used by male writers of the diaspora (Aimé Césaire, for example, in his Notebook of a Return to the Native Land makes extensive use of such female imagery), here it is on a male character that desire for the absent “other” is displaced and crystallized.6

5Glissant, p. 32.

6As Jonathan Ngaté has shown, Condé—like Césaire—uses the myth of a “maternal” Africa, except that Condé implicitly refers to Africa as “step-mother.” See Ngaté, “Maryse Condé and Africa: The Making of a Recalcitrant Daughter?”, A Current Bibliography on African Affairs, 19 (1986–87), 5–20. My point, however, is that it is a male character who represents the myth for Véronica.
As a figure of the Lacanian Imaginary, the protagonist Ibrahima Sory cannot fall under the scrutiny of Véronica’s gaze: in him are bound up complex unconscious processes in which the split between Real and Symbolic is confirmed and binary Manichean positions prevail. Véronica can recognize and assume the negativity of her situation, the “interweaving of negative forces” about which Glissant is so perceptive, but this simple fact prevents her from having to deal with alternative solutions, decisive resolutions. Ibrahima Sory reinforces Véronica’s delusions and obsessions by obscuring the “real,” that is the struggle embodied by Saliou, his political double, who dies for his convictions and whose murder eventually galvanizes the narrator into cutting short her “detour” through Africa on her way to “finding herself.” In the final analysis, that is how Sory—and “Africa”—function in the text: as a catalyst and a mediator who can ultimately reveal the Real by obscuring it. It is because of Sory’s opacity that Véronica ends up realizing how completely desultory it is for her to appropriate him as symbolic object of desire, as signifier for “Africa.” To make the myth her own, that is, to make it “Real,” she would have to place herself outside the fundamentally Western posture she retains, something she cannot do, because she clearly cannot be free of her upbringing—and neither can Sory.

Although the ending does not constitute a positive resolution of conflicting ideologies, it does offer the suggestion that the impasse of mimetic identifications has been recognized and attempts at transcending it initiated. This knowledge, and Véronica’s dawning awareness of the dead end she has reached spell the beginning of wisdom for her and, it is hoped, for other Antillean émigrés as well. The narrative illustrates the urgent need to bring to the forefront of Antillean consciousness—by this “practice of Diversion” or this detour through the realm of symbolic identifications—the imaginary realities of political disenfranchisement and its attendant existential “angoisse.” But the narrative raises those very questions that it cannot answer directly, because it can offer neither visionary constructions nor blueprints for the future, remaining as it does in the realm of a reality its author feels powerless to transform. On that point

Conde has made her position quite clear: "The role of literature is to provoke thought and reflection, to articulate the existential anguish which burdens people." In other words literature can invite and provoke reflection, not directly influence change in the world. Its function is to disturb and disrupt: "inquiétier." Heremakhonon succeeds well at perturbing its readers. Critics and reviewers alike have generally noted the disturbing elements of the book, its negativistic posturing, but not the means by which this disquieting effect is produced. In this chapter, I would like to analyze the way in which meaning is produced in Heremakhonon: how does the unfolding of the story reveal the inner workings of the protagonist's mind and translate the anxiety that inhabits Véronica? What are the devices that allow the text to manifest those inner conflicts? Are there particular structures that allow Conde's fundamentally political message to be transmitted without didacticism? To answer these questions, I shall look briefly at the textual strategies and rhetorical features that reinforce patterns of passivity and disjunction. These strategies usually consist in a skillful manipulation of the traditional techniques of interior monologue and in strict control over the flow of narrative time, which mimics and reproduces psychological durée, or lived time.

Exemplary Passivity

Published in 1976, Heremakhonon was Maryse Conde's first novel, although she was already known for her critical essays and her plays. So controversial is the novel that it has been out of print for several years, although an English translation is available. It is a first-person narrative, but as the author has strongly stated, not stricto sensu an autobiography: "The use of the first person was simply a writer's device." Although Véronica's family clearly resembles Conde's own, and the events with which the heroine is confronted parallel those Conde had to witness during her first stay in

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Guinea in 1960, the book is the story of an "anti-moi,\textsuperscript{11} an ambiguous persona whose search for identity and origins is characterized by a rebellious form of sexual libertinage. Her pride over having read Laclos's \textit{Liaisons dangereuses} at an early age, over her precocious curiosity about sexual matters, reveals her ironic reliance on common stereotypes of early sexualization of nonwhite women. Having received a classical French education in Guadeloupe and Paris, she refers in her text to Pascal, Laclos, Spinoza, Rousseau, Hugo, Flaubert, Stendhal, Zola, Bergson, and Proust. These writers constitute the formal model of philosophical and literary expression for Véronica, and it is within a very specific stylistic and narrative tradition that we can situate her story of those three months in Africa, of her \textit{éducation sentimentale} in the manner of Frédéric Moreau or Julien Sorel.

In her unsuccessful attempt to re-create herself and to find the personal happiness she naively longs for, Véronica represents a version of the formal paradigm of the nineteenth century hero of Bildungsromane. Transplanting a European project of self-fulfillment and self-gratification onto African soil, though, she is bound to fail, for in Africa, as her lover implies, the self cannot be conceived outside of a community that determines its options and legitimates its choices: "There's no room here for little personal problems, sentimentality, whims" (78). The obsession with private childhood experiences, scrutinized to derive psychologizing interpretations of a person's state of mind, as well as the concurrent need to display one's inner landscape, "the outbursts at first sight, the exhibitionism, the tears, the whole arsenal of pathos" (93), are sarcastically denounced as a symptom of decadent individualism. The confessional mode always gets aborted in the text: it is either directed at the wrong narratee (e.g., 7) or cut short by Sory's indifference (36, 52)—a predicament strangely similar to the one faced by Maya Angelou's narrator when she returns "home" after her utopian adventures in the junkyard and is forced into self-imposed silence by her family's indifference.

For Véronica, however, the absence of a "natural" audience (that is, of Guadeloupeans aware of her alienation and conscious of being caught in a similar predicament) is compounded by the fact that she

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 125.
and Sory do not even share a common language, let alone a common grammar of the "self." The canonical trajectory of the autobiographical heroine from blindness to insight is nonetheless followed here: Véronica reaches a new form of knowledge, if only a negative one, still based in a Nietzschean form of anarchic and negative ressentiment. But she goes through this stage of negative mediation, this being a necessary and unavoidable step in the history of her conscience malheureuse, following Sartre's famous analysis in "Orphée Noir." The narrative is divided into three parts, and there is a clear progression from interior monologue to more description and commentary in the final part. But this progression is literally forced upon Véronica. In particular, the focus on external events becomes determined by her arrest (137–39) and by the students' rebellion. As she says, "For the first time I'm afraid" (150). External political factors are the real determinants of Véronica's discovery, not introspection and reflection.

The narrative thus provides implicit answers to the questions it asks: it privileges action over reflection and self-analysis in the movement from blindness to insight. But the narrator's failure to act upon the insights she gleans point to a passivity and a lack of will symptomatic of her colonial background and ambiguous situation. She represents the impasse of exile for the colonized self and the difficulty of finding a viable position within the cultural constellations of the "other," be that "other" French or African, because for either she will remain "A false sister. A false foreigner" (137). Véronica's "history" of childhood traumas ("I still have a complex from my awkward days of childhood" [24]), reenacts on a personal level the collective cultural difficulties of a people, and it is possible to read her attempts at "confession" as an allegory of the historical conditions that have determined the "in-between" state of New World blacks: "Years of being downgraded in comparison with my two sisters" (24), the sisters being seen as the "perfect" bourgeois siblings of this "degenerate" and rebellious offspring. Marginalized by these sisters (whom I am tempted to read as personifications of Europe and Africa, not culturally or symbolically, of course, but because of the unproblematic assurance they exhibit, because of

their self-righteousness and their lack of self-doubt), Véronica is the stereotypical métis, the one who embodies the maledictions of miscegenation: the boundary crosser. She is the third term, the excluded middle and the voice of the Antillean double bind.

Frantz Fanon has lucidly delineated the historical contradictions that contributed to this polarized weltanschauung of the people of the French Antilles. In an essay included in the collection *Toward the African Revolution*, Fanon writes:

> Until 1939 the West Indian lived, thought, dreamed . . . , composed poems, wrote novels exactly as a white man would have done . . . . Before Césaire, West Indian literature was a literature of Europeans. The West Indian identified himself with the white man, adopted a white man's attitude, "was a white man."

> After the West Indian was obliged, under the pressure of European racists, to abandon positions which were essentially fragile, because they were absurd, because they were incorrect, because they were alienating, a new generation came into being. The West Indian of 1945 is a Negro . . . .

> Then, with his eyes on Africa, the West Indian was to hail it. He discovered himself to be the transplanted son of slaves; he felt the vibration of Africa in the very depth of his body and aspired only to one thing: to plunge into the great "black hole" [le grand "trou noir"]. It thus seems that the West Indian, after the great white error, is now living in the great black mirage [le grand mirage noir].


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She engages in a picaresque search for a different past, for a “before” (12), for a beginning (“But where did it all begin?” [6]) which existed prior to contact with the Europeans. But she is still wrestling with her own internalized stereotypes about the cultural commonplaces of “the great black mirage.” Yet, by making the myth available for parody, the narrator derides her search and thus implicitly deconstructs her own motives, her romantic delusions.

As a disillusioned post-negritude “intellectuelle de gauche [left-wing intellectual]” (22/9) who refuses to let herself be taken in by a purely sentimental need to fill in the gaps in her family’s history, Véronica retains an ironic stance on her search for origins, but her distancing attitude is soon revealed to be the sign of an inability to commit herself to political engagement. Despite her attempts to free herself from the contradictory ideologies of her family, she is still a colonized individual who mirrors the antinomies of her culture as well as the oppositional politics of those she befriends in Africa. Indeed Maryse Condé would say in her interview with Ina Césaire that “Véronica is just a mirror which reflects both sides,” echoing Stendhal’s famous dictum in The Red and The Black: “A novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at your feet.”

The narrator’s private failure to reach a satisfying conclusion at the end of her stay also bespeaks the historical political failure of the people of this newly independent African nation to progress toward revolution and popular power. During Véronica’s stay there as a coopérante (or French technical assistant) with assigned duties as a philosophy instructor—an aberrant situation, since she is there to teach Western philosophy within the framework of the educational system exported by France—the regime becomes increasingly authoritarian, severely repressing opposition, imprisoning students and dissidents. Although Véronica is caught in the middle of this political struggle (Ibrahima Sory is the strongman responsible for putting down the rebellion, whereas her friends at the institute—Saliou and Birame III—are under fire for opposing the regime), her vain and presumptuous attempt to remain neutral proves self-serv-

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ing and ultimately self-defeating: she soon loses her already tenuous self-respect and having reached bottom, decides to run away, back to Paris, to a future that offers, ironically, a very dim possibility of renewal: “Spring? Yes, it’s Spring in Paris” (174).

This return to Paris repeats an earlier flight from Guadeloupe after her first unhappy and secret love affair at age seventeen. The three months’ hiatus in Africa, which corresponds exactly to the narrative time of the story, thus figures as an abortive attempt to break out of an illusory cycle of juvenile rebellion and contestation, of pseudo-sexual “liberation,” which only indentures her to another form of patriarchy, the one practiced by her Moslem lover, who mocks her “identity crisis”:

—Pourquoi êtes-vous venue en Afrique?

Ah, tout de même! ... Attention à ne pas le rebuter en dégoûtant en bloc tous mes problèmes! Depuis le temps que l’envie de me confesser me démange! Essayons d’être désinvolte.


—Avec un Blanc!

Le ton est nettement choqué. Oui, oui. Laisse-moi continuer. Tu comprends, je voulais fuir mon milieu familial, le marabout mandingo, ma mère, la négro bourgeoisie qui m’a faite, avec à la bouche, ses discours glorificateurs de la Race, et au coeur, sa conviction terrifiée de son infériorité. Et puis j’en suis peu à peu venue à penser que cette forme de fuite n’était pas valable, qu’elle cachait tout autre chose. Car enfin j’aurais pu fuir en sens inverse. Combler la distance qu’ils avaient créée. Me réenraciner. Tu comprends?

—En somme, vous avez un problème d’identité? [99–100; my italics].

[“Why did you come to Africa?”]

Ah, at last. . . . Be careful not to discourage him by pouring out all my problems in one go. It’s been some time since I’ve been dying to make a confession. Let’s try and be relaxed.

I was fed up. I was living in Paris. With a white man.

“With a white man?”

Really quite shocked. Yes, yes. Let me go on. I wanted to escape from the family, the mandingo marabout, my mother, the black bourgeoisie that made me, with its talk of glorifying the Race and its terrified conviction of its inferiority. And then gradually I came round to thinking that this form of escape was not valid, that it was hiding something
else. I could have escaped in the other direction. Make up for the distance they had lost. Put down roots within myself. Do you understand?

"In other words, you have an identity problem?" (52).

The critique of confessional modes of introspection such as autobiography and psychoanalysis is evident throughout. The tension between Véronica (who yearns for soul-baring displays of emotion) and Sory (whose opacity paradoxically seems to be that of a perfectly transparent, uncomplicated, and forthright character lacking any interior life precisely because his frame of reference does not intersect with Véronica's) are especially revealing. In this passage the impossibility of genuine dialogue between the two protagonists is made amply clear; they talk past each other rather than to one another. In fact, direct speech is Sory's alone. Véronica's answers, and what she thinks to herself in petto, are rendered in direct free thought ("Yes, yes. Let me go on") so that we never know exactly what she actually says to Sory. This device seems to set Véronica's discourse within a frame of reference so alien to Sory's own that whatever she may say will not be heard by him. Her language is literally not the African's: Véronica has not made the effort to learn any local languages and can only communicate in French, hence the symbolic disjunctions that operate on the level of communication and exchange.

The use of the pronouns vous ("Pourquoi êtes-vous venue en Afrique?") and tu (Tu comprends, je voulais fuir . . .") reinforces their failure of intimacy, their inability to relate on an equal level. Furthermore, Véronica's use of the familiar form connotes the French colonialists' demeaning usage of the tu in their interaction with African natives and thus produces an uncanny sense of discomfort and disease at the pronominal shift. But on the other hand, Sory's vous reduces the woman to just another partner to whom respect is due but with whom intimacy is superfluous. Exchange and dialogue are stalled and foreclosed.

Véronica never speaks directly, for she is spoken by the discourse of the "négro bourgeoisie," the patriarchal other. Like them, she suffers from an inferiority complex, from a disjunction between what can be said ("avec à la bouche") and what is felt ("et au coeur"), indeed between what must be said and what can't be believed.
Véronica does not have a language she can call her own since she cannot subscribe to any of the voices that possess her. Attempting to relate to Sory as an imaginary “other,” she fails to establish communication because patriarchal structures short-circuit any possibility of a different syntax as well: “Me réenraciner [Put down roots]” is a meaningless phrase for Sory, who has never known exile and belongs to an ancient landed aristocracy. The phrase, sarcastic though it may be, can only expose the sentimentality of a speaker who pretends to “take root” outside of the common local languages, nurtured by the very soil of Africa.

As she progresses toward greater awareness of her state of complete ignorance, Véronica recognizes that she does not have “the key to the characters” (88), that Oumou Hawa’s “code of behavior is completely beyond [her]” (159), whereas the point of view of the more Westernized characters, that of Ramatoulaye, for example, who has furnished her house with antique French furniture, “a le mérite de la clarté [has the merit of being clear]” (284/159). She thus comes to accept the opacity and silence of Sory as inevitable: “I accept his silence because there is nothing to say. To be more exact, I’ve understood there is nothing we can say that doesn’t end up dividing us. And the only form of dialogue is the one that satisfies him, whereas I consider it inadequate, even despicable in my Westernized infantilism” (157). Unresponsiveness and impenetrability become metaphors that subtend the shaky ground of their relationship, since there is literally nothing they can say that doesn’t end up dividing them.

Indeed, the polyglot doctor Yehogul, a foreigner like Véronica but one who speaks all five of the main languages of the country, tells her insistently: “Learn the languages! It’s not difficult” (87). The key to the discovery of the other is to learn to speak his/her language and not to allow oneself to be passively spoken by the language of the master code, French, which will necessarily color her perceptions of reality and deform her vision: “I shall never know the truth. . . . the prisms of my desires and dreams would have distorted the reality. It’s a fact there’s no such thing as reality. The facts are made of Venetian glass” (94). The title of the novel, *Hermakhonon*, ironically underscores this fact while criticizing Véronica’s search: in Malinké, *here* means “happiness” and *makhonon*, “to
wait for.” It implies a colonized passivity coupled with the Western fallacy that life is a search for “happiness” rather than a struggle for survival and emancipation.

*Heremakhonon* is also the “Welcome House,” the name of the compound where Ibrahima Sory and his extended family live and where Véronica spends many hours either waiting for him or happily tucked in bed with him, indifferent to the world outside with its disturbing poverty and repressive politics: “En somme ce qu’il me faut pour voir la vie presque en rose, c’est a good fuck [What I need to see life through rose-colored glasses is a good fuck]” (222/125). In *Heremakhonon* she is passively content to obliterate the outside world, to gratify her sensuality and satisfy her physical needs. She is in love not with the man himself but with his past, and she hopes to be magically restored to a lost form of plenitude: “I now realize why he fascinates me. He hasn’t been branded” (37); “Through him I shall at last be proud to be what I am” (42). But the “idea” of Africa, “that of an Africa, of a black world that Europe did not reduce to a caricature of itself” (77) is an impossible dream because material political realities forestall any such construction of a totalizing entity named “Africa.” What do exist are only concrete situations in which class distinctions and problems of oppression take on the universal appearance of a master-slave dialectic. But to recognize the dilemma, to be lucid about her compromising situation, is not enough to empower Véronica to act upon her insights: “It’s not the first time, but perhaps never as clearly, I realize my place is not here. At least what I came to do is absurd. Yet I know I won’t move. Held back by a hope I know is thwarted from the start” (100). This is precisely the double bind of the nomad, whose journey is nourished by the hope of returning to an imaginary origin while knowing full well that her pursuit is bound to remain unsatisfied.

*Heremakhonon* is thus an indictment of the sentimentalism of many New World blacks—“neurotics from the Diaspora” (52)—who come to Africa in a selfish search for personal fulfilment, remaining safely uninvolved in the revolutionary struggles of the local populations. The narrative draws out the social and political implications of Véronica’s private and deeply personal conflicts. While attempting to

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15 Condé’s own explanation in the interview with Ina Césaire, in *La Parole des femmes*, p. 129.
face those conflicts, the narrator remains nonetheless strangely un­able to summon up the will to become a truly free agent, one who can accept and thus overcome the determinants of her situation. At the end, she “knows” what is to be done but cannot commit herself to it. As Condé puts it, “She has learned some lessons from her stay but she has not understood her situation as completely as she could have” (NL 24).

A Transparent Mind

This lack of agency and focus is reinforced by a narrative tech­nique that makes systematic use of free direct and indirect dis­course, giving the reader unmediated access to the narrator’s mind. Past and present voices are telescoped into one another in a confus­ing array of internalized points of view which seem to divide and tear at Véronica’s consciousness, making it difficult to determine exactly when the voices are shifting and when their superposition spells a deadening conflict between different cultures, different moral and political codes.

Dorrit Cohn, in *Transparent Minds*, talks about the “singular power possessed by the novelist: creator of beings whose inner lives he can reveal at will,” and she invokes the “unreal transparencies” to which the novel has accustomed us.16 To be able to enter into the thought processes of a narrator or a character is a feature of narrative which we have come to take for granted. Condé’s technique in *Here­makhonon* is to take this representational power to an extreme of psychological realism that conveys the polyphonic nature of all mental processes and the paralyzing effect that this multiplication of social voices can have when the mind experiences them as a “trans­mission de mots d’ordre [transmittal of a set of orders],” as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, but more specifically here as schizophrenic “mots d’ordre” that contain conflicting messages and ideologies.17

The most striking features of *Here­makhonon* are this multiplication of points of view within Véronica’s interior monologue and the com-

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plete absence of Véronica’s own voice in direct quoted speech: she is never engaged in direct conversation with any other character. We enter into her consciousness, and like her, we experience a whole array of voices, simultaneously or in sequence, as they emerge from the past or are expressed by other protagonists in the present. This technique creates an uncanny sense of distance and disengagement, a feeling that she is simultaneously living in two worlds, her consciousness shifting gears, as it were, in response to the direct stimulation of past and present voices, which carry on in a totally dissociative manner, feeding her nothing but cliches and making her unable to decode the reality of Africa as she sees it around her every day: “Play-acting? Sincere? . . . I look around me, but I can’t read a thing on these faces” (46; my italics). Her perceptions are always filtered by the ideology on which she has been brought up, and which she tries to shake off, but which continues to plague her. The opening paragraphs of the book illustrate this phenomenon well:


Je les imagine. Ma mère soupirant. Mon père tordant ses lèvres minces. (Tous les nègres n’ont pas les lèvres “éversées.”)

—Une folle! Une tête brûlée! Avec l’intelligence qu’elle a, elle ne fait que des conneries.

Une connerie? Peut-être que, pour une fois, il a raison.

—Raison du voyage? [11; my italics]

[Honestly! You’d think I’m going because it is the in thing to do. Africa is very much the thing to do lately. Europeans and a good many others are writing volumes on the subject. Arts and crafts centers are opening all over the Left Bank. Blondes are dying their lips with henna and running to the open market on the rue Mouffetard for their peppers and okra.

Well, I’m not! Seven hours in a DC-10. On my left, an African desperately trying to make small talk. Behind me, a French couple as average
as they come. Why am I doing this? At the moment, everything is a mess, and this whole idea seems absurd. I can see them now. My mother, sighing as usual. My father pinching his thin lips. (Not all blacks have protruding lips.)

“She’s insane! So headstrong! All those brains and nothing but foolish ideas.”

Foolish? Maybe he’s right for once.

“Purpose of the visit?” (3; my italics)

The impersonal pronoun *on* marks the common place knowledge of the moment, the Eurocentered reality that surrounds Véronica. She must deal with it, even if only to situate herself in opposition to its discourse. That is when the sudden shift occurs, without transition, from free indirect speech, attributed to an indistinct *on*, to a statement made in/by Véronica’s oppositional consciousness: “Or c’est faux.” This swift, irregular movement of the prose, with abrupt and sudden juxtaposition of sentences, produces discontinuity. Since there is no obvious transition from the clichés, the *oui-dire*, to the “direct free thought” of the narrating instance, it is the reader who is left with the task of filling in the gaps, of effecting the perspectival shifts. In other words, the reader is forced to participate actively in the production of meaning, while the narrator is in the more passive position of having to submit to the meaning produced by the voices that speak through her. The text thus simultaneously coerces the reader into active decoding, while representing a transparently passive narrator. By ruling out reader identification with the narrator, the text stages its own “interweaving of negative forces,” revealing its oppositional ideology.

Whereas Véronica’s abortive attempts at “confession,” discussed

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18Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 182. See also John T. Booker, “Style Direct Libre: The Case of Stendhal,” *Stanford French Review* 9 (1985), 137–51. Booker prefers the term “free direct discourse” to “direct free thought” (which I borrow from Chatman) when describing the “relatively brief representation of a character’s thoughts, which, if carried to any length, would be called free interior monologue” (141). I follow Booker’s analysis of Stendhal’s style in *The Red and the Black*, which is a definite intertext of *Heremakhonon*. In *Heremakhonon*, however, the representation of the character’s thoughts are *consistently* made through this device of “direct free thought,” hence my preference for that terminology, which is itself a subcategory of the free, untagged, interior monologue or “narrated monologue” as defined by Dorrit Cohn (chap. 3) and Booker (141 n. 10).
earlier, resulted in a failure of communication and could thus be said to function as an antimodel for the specular relationship necessary to produce understanding between implied author and implied reader, here, by contrast, the narrated monologue or direct free thought requires sustained reader involvement in order for it to be decoded as an instance of conflictual weltanschauung. The text requires active participation from its “ideal” reader, one who would be ready—unlike Ibrahima Sory—to engage the narrator on her own terms. Such a reader would have to be able to recognize Veronica’s oppositional stance and remain alert to the frequent shifts in conceptual or ideological perspective. A careless reader, on the other hand, would quickly confuse the level of oui-dire—the alienating internalized viewpoint of French “others”—with the beliefs the narrator wants to communicate as her own. Unlike Augustine and Marie Cardinal, for example, who provide us with embedded figures of their own ideal readers and thus suggest to us ways in which we might identify with that type of reader (the one I called X in the Confessions and the narrator’s husband in The Words To Say It), Con-dé systematically abolishes any possibility of identification. All the protagonists of the novel are caught up in their own different worlds, none of which overlap. Veronica’s isolation is thus compounded by a narrative technique that forces the reader to admit his/her own antithetic situation before a text so adverse to relying on mimetic principles to establish any conceivable parallel between narrator and narratee.

The mimetic illusion of durée thus reproduces on a textual level the alternatively mimetic and oppositional stances of the narrator, short-circuiting any possibility of a more authentic vision set outside of this binary framework. Despite the use of a narrating “I” with which we would normally have the tendency to sympathize, we remain nonetheless voyeurs before a transparent mind in which, to quote Glissant, the “secretive and multiple manifestations of Diversity” are represented but then thoroughly negated. We are never seduced into an intimate relationship with the narrator. Possibilities of closeness or complicity are neutralized by irony, detachment, and a singular lack of purposive enunciation: we are kept at a distance,

19As Oruno Lara does at times in his review. See Présence Africaine 98 (2d quarter 1976), 253–56.
20Glissant, p. 12.
never trusted. The scrambled interior monologue has a jarring and confusing effect, but it is through this simple narrative device that the split nature of Véronica’s subjectivity is revealed. We are the addressees of her failed confession, cast in a role homologous to that of those textual narratees who are but strangers and chance encounters (cf. the blond woman on the subway platform and the bald man in the bar, p. 7). Our active participation is demanded, yet subverted by distancing irony and sarcasm. The narrator undermines the tragedy of her situation by turning herself into an object of derision. 21

The scene in the DC 10, in limbo, in transit between point of departure and point of arrival, contains all the major elements of the novel in embryo: the narrator stages herself. She is sitting next to an African and behind a French couple. Her mind is filled first with cliches, then with the memory of her parents’ disapproving faces and voices: “Une folle! Une tête brûlée.” Suddenly the present interferes in the shape of an immigration officer: “Raison du voyage?” His words provoke a dreamlike free association: “Une connerie? Peut-être que, pour une fois, il a raison.” Although the sentence (which refers to her father’s opinion of her) comes, for the reader, before the officer’s question, it is clear that it is the question that triggered the actual wording of her thoughts in her daydream, just as sometimes we may awake from a dream only to realize that environmental stimuli had provided a particular sound around which unconscious images could crystallize.

Véronica’s subjectivity is determined to a large extent by her obsession with the past, even when she briefly focuses on the events of the present. The future, however, is remarkably absent from her speculations, or it figures in a negative way. When she entertains

21As Fanon clearly outlines in Toward the African Revolution, “One must be accustomed to what is called the spirit of Martinique in order to grasp the meaning of what is said. . . . It is true that in the West Indies irony is a mechanism of defense against neurosis. . . . A study of irony in the West Indies is crucial for the sociology of this region. Aggressiveness there is almost always cushioned by irony” (19). It is thus not hard to see why irony is the dominant feature of Heremakhonon: negativity and failure function as antimodels of the forms of emancipation which might be available to a protagonist once her “mechanisms of defense against neurosis” have been stripped bare of their layers of irony. Because of their identical political dependence on France, I feel justified in extending Fanon’s remarks about Martinicans to the people of Guadeloupe as well.
the moot possibility of returning home to Guadeloupe, she can only imagine an unpleasant confrontation with disapproving parents; the notion that such a return might be spurred by the desire for positive involvement in the local struggle for independence never enters her mind. She cannot even imagine such an emancipating gesture. Like other heroines of recent Antillean literature—such as Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s Juletane and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s Télumée—Véronica sees herself as impotent, barren, and sterile: “In any case, I’ll never have a child. Only little bastards” (20); “What would have happened if I had been pregnant? . . . Thank goodness my womb was already sterile” (55). She is a failed daughter and an unlikely mother, and her connections to the past and to the future are thus metaphorically severed, leaving her in limbo, in a “no-man’s land” (29) where long-term choices have become pointless. She has internalized the scientific racist discourse about infertile hybrids and mulattoes which the author implicitly parodies here.

_Heremakhonon_ is, first of all, this narrative representation of barrenness and failure. The failure is one of enunciation, and it marks a failure of political agency on the individual and collective levels for the colonized subjects of history whose lives are lived on the periphery of events beyond their control. Maryse Condé gives us a glimpse into the mind of an Antillean woman whose lack of commitment, dedication, and direction is symptomatic of a broader cultural problem, one which may not be solved for quite some time, since its resolution would imply the adoption and successful implementation of a different political economy in the French West Indies. After showing the abortive process of revolution in Africa, _Heremakhonon_ ends on a pessimistic note; it has become even harder for Véronica to envisage new structures of meaning which would empower her to adopt a discourse directed toward the future, to imagine new and purposive forms of political self-invention.

Her inability to take sides, to “choose between the past and the present” (161), to renounce this sterile stance of impartiality and objectivity which paralyzes her, is a narrative device that allows Condé to explore nondidactically the numbing predicament of many Antillean intellectuals, who are culturally “French” and affectively “African” and thus ignore the possibility of becoming what they already are—Caribbeans, geographically situated in a cluster of islands with ties to each other which should be reinforced, because, as
Condé has said, "beyond our differences in terms of socio-cultural organizations, we want to believe in the unity of the ‘Caribbean world.’"\(^{22}\)

Condé has always refused to be duped by the idealist project of previous generations of Antilleans—represented here by Véronica’s parents and the “negro bourgeoisie”—with their unproblematic focus on a notion of “cultural identity” which bypasses the often unconscious political realities of life in Guadeloupe. She feels that the generations who searched “elsewhere” for self-legitimation, looking either to France, which continues to impose its system of education on the children of the islands, or to Africa, whose history is radically different from that of the New World (since its citizens have never suffered from the prolonged effects of the Middle Passage and of slavery), are indeed mystified and deluded. She has forcefully criticized this kind of cultural alienation, arguing that as long as Guadeloupe and Martinique remain political dependencies of France, it will be impossible even to talk about “cultural identity” because there are no existing economic and political infrastructures through which local and indigenous cultural responses can be articulated. It is only after political independence is achieved and a federation of Caribbean states is created that Antilleans—Martinitains and Guadeloupeans—will be able to begin to effect changes on the symbolic level, to think and act in terms of their own geopolitical situatedness:

It may be necessary to recall briefly some of the historical background of these two Francophone islands. Because Martinique and Guadeloupe are very small, the phenomenon of Maroon slaves could not develop the way it did in larger islands such as Jamaica where a real form of oppositional power had already taken shape in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the relatively small number of slaves and the diversity of their origins forbade the preservation of African religions such as Voodoo in Haiti or santería in Cuba. What is left [in the French Antilles] is a group of practices known as “le quimbois.” Later, the French school system, which was put in place as soon as slavery was abolished, completed the work of depersonalization of the black populations and can claim some spectacular results.

[In the Antilles], the colonial problem was not that of the importation

\(^{22}\)Condé, *La Parole des femmes*, p. 5.
of a foreign culture and of its imposition onto a national reality which it slowly attempted to destroy—as is the case in most colonized countries. Rather, the problem lay in the difficulty inherent in the attempt to construct, from the incongruous and dissimilar elements that coexist in such a general climate of aggression, harmonious cultural forms. Until now, the conditions under which the Antillean personality has been allowed to develop are largely the consequence of this situation. There remains a vast horizon which the Antilleans of tomorrow will have to discover.23

The difficulties involved in the creation of a quilted “state” made up of the heterogeneous pieces of the colonial past is a question to which I shall return in detail in my discussion of Marie-Thérèse Humbert and the island of Mauritius. Condé’s concerns are quite similar, but unlike Humbert, who writes after independence has been achieved, Condé can only paint a negative picture of the status quo in Guadeloupe, leaving it to the reader to draw the appropriate conclusions concerning the homologous relationships that inevitably exist among literary agency, textual production, and political emancipation. Because she believes that Antilleans will continue to find themselves in an impasse so long as they do not succeed in shaking off the complicated structures of domination that rob them of self-determination, her portrayal of Véronica is a dramatic enactment of the debilitating myths that fossilize the colonized self. Véronica’s efforts to reject and transcend those myths end in failure because she remains unable to imagine empowering and enabling countermyths. Having absorbed all the racist myths about miscegenation and métissage, Véronica becomes the living symbol of sterility and barrenness. She cannot legitimate her own existence, let alone envisage a genuine future for her own country. As a negative model of hybridization, she represents everything that nineteenth century science subsumed under the word *mulatta*. It is thus quite clear why Maryse Condé calls her an *anti-moi*: as a fictional character, Véronica is the parodic embodiment of racist beliefs, the negative pole around which all such beliefs have condensed. She can therefore be used as a useful contrast to the ideas of abundance

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and creativity which Condé, Glissant, and Morejón associate elsewhere with the concepts of *antillanité* and *mestizaje*.

Maryse Condé herself has now returned to live in Guadeloupe after almost thirty years of exile, and she is involved in the non-violent political struggle for the independence of the island. She has also written a children’s book on local history, which is now used in the primary school system.24

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to show ways in which the impasses of exile and nomadism have also been overcome by two female subjects who succeeded in creating positive and visionary narratives of the self. Marie Cardinal and Marie-Thérèse Humbert will first have to deconstruct the patriarchal notions of selfhood and of national or cultural identity, as well as the representational practice that subtends their own discourses. By suggesting that utopian images of the future can empower us to act in the present *and* to reinterpret our past, they celebrate the relational patterns Glissant posits as the necessary first steps toward a positive “pratique de *métissage*.” 25 These writers will thus show us different and mutually complementary allegories of emancipation, inspired by the colonial histories of Algeria and Mauritius.

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24As she explained during a recent talk given at Pomona College on April 8, 1988. She emphasized the need for Afro-Caribbeans to respect diversity among all the Antilleans, stating quite categorically that it is “because we are so diverse that we can be united. If we are not allowed to be diverse, we’ll never be united.” She is active within the nonviolent UPLG party, the Popular Union for the Liberation of Guadeloupe.

25Glissant, p. 462.