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Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé

Melissa L. McKay

One of the most prolific writers of the French Caribbean, Maryse Condé is well known in France and throughout the Francophone world. She has written novels, essays and plays, the latter of which have been performed in the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and the United States. Although Condé's plays are not as renowned as her novels and essays, they are an important key to understanding her work as a whole. Throughout her plays, we see themes that will be treated in more depth later in novels such as *Ségou* and *Traversée de la Mangrove*. Perhaps for autobiographical reasons, or perhaps since given the history of the islands, these ideas are very important in French Caribbean literature, Maryse Condé is especially interested in the problems of exile, the eventual return to the native country, and the effect that exile has on one's identity. In this paper, I would like to explore the relationship between exile and identity in three of Condé's plays, focusing on the different ways in which the author, who herself spent many years away from her native Guadeloupe, examines these themes.

Dieu nous l'a donné, published in 1972, deals with a common problem in post-colonial literature: the conflicts that arise when traditional values are threatened by modern European ideas. The main character is Dieudonné, a young doctor educated in Paris who returns to Guadeloupe hoping to use the things that he has learned in France to effect some sort of change. He befriends Mandela, a traditional healer, and his daughter Maëva, but is eventually betrayed by both, due to their suspicions of his motives for coming back to the island. Instead of leading a revolution as he had hoped, Dieudonné is met at every turn by resistance to his liberal ideas, and in the end, he is rejected by his friends and killed by his own people. In *Mort d'Oluwémi d'Ajumako*, published in 1973, some of the same conflicts can be seen between Oluwémi, an African king and his son, Ange, who has been educated in Europe. The tension is even greater due to the fact that Ange has had to forget about his love for Séfira who was forced to become Oluwémi's bride. The young lovers eventually try to escape together but

return just as the king is dying. In this play filled with symbolism, we witness the death of the traditional African kingdoms and the birth of new nations, symbolized both by the European-educated Ange and l'Etranger (Condé does not give him a name), a former soldier who takes care of Oluwémi in his last hours. L'Etranger is the personification of a new Africa, but not an Africa of "unscrupulous adventurers and nonchalant youth detached from African values" as Juris Silenieks argues in his article about the play (514), but rather an Africa that questions its traditional values and admits that, as a continent, it must take the blame for many of its problems.

The last play I would like to examine is *Pension les Alizés*, written in 1988 for Sonia Emmanuel, an actress friend of Maryse Condé. This two-character play focuses primarily on the relationship between two Antilleans living in exile in Paris: Emma, an actress and dancer from Guadeloupe and Ismaël, a political refugee from Haiti. Yet, *Pension les Alizés* is more than the story of a love affair. As she has done in many of her works, here Condé uses the relationships of specific characters to explore larger socio-political and class problems. In this particular play, the author touches on relevant issues throughout the African diaspora such as the Duvalier régime in Haiti and the Négritude movement.

Whether the exile is chosen or imposed, living away from one's native country can prove to be a profoundly difficult experience. Both the period away from and the return to the native country are full of conflicting emotions. According to Rob Nixon "the unsteady vacillation between affiliation and isolation appears altogether characteristic of exile" (7). If this is so, how does the experience of exile affect the identities of the exiled characters in Condé's plays? And once they return, how has this time away from the homeland modified the eventual interactions of these characters with other people? Each of the exiled characters in these plays returns (or will return) home with a different view of his/her country. Exile has forced them to see things in a different light; theirs is a view from the exterior, not the interior of the country. Since they have lived abroad, they return with different ideas, having been changed by their experiences of travel and distance from their own land. Yet, due to these differences, the "I" of the exiled character has been forever altered and his/her true identity

is constantly called into question either by the character him/herself or the group to which s/he once belonged.

Exile is treated similarly in all three works in that in each, the exile of an Antillean character takes place in Europe or somewhere where there is contact with white Europeans. In both *Dieu nous l'a donné* and *Mort d'Oluwémi d'Ajumako*, the action of the play focuses on the former exile of a character who has had such contact and either returns to his homeland, as does Dieudonné, or returns to his race, as does the escaped soldier, l'Etranger. Since they have seen other ways of life, Dieudonné and l'Etranger have undergone a transformation, and each has a message of change that he brings back to his people. But instead of being welcomed with open arms, both characters eventually find that they are outsiders amongst their own people. Dieudonné returns from Paris to the French West Indies with the intention of living in a small village and practicing medicine. At the same time, he wants to help his country out of the poverty and oppression in which it finds itself by organizing a rebellion to reform the present system. Dieudonné's exile has been an experience which has afforded him a different perspective on his country, albeit an unrealistically distorted one. As Condé explains it, when one is away from his/her homeland, one begins to see it in an idealized way, "... on le mythifie. C'est normal. On imagine. On voit une sorte de paradis de nature exubérante et d'êtres amicaux Quand on revient, on voit la réalité du pays. On cherche ce qu'on croyait avoir laissé, on ne le trouve pas. On est déçu" (Pfaff 46). Because he has left his homeland to live abroad and returns with such modern idealistic views as freedom and revolution, Dieudonné is not accepted in Guadeloupe and his people are suspicious of his motives. Government leaders such as Laborderie suspect that Dieudonné is being controlled from the outside and that he has been sent back home by some group to organize a revolt. Laborderie wants to know for whom Dieudonné is working since he can only defend his people from that which he understands: "Qui l'envoie ici? Quel parti? Quelle organisation? Je peux lutter contre ce que je comprends ..." (59).

In his introduction to the play, Guy Tirolien speaks of the "impossibilité de communiquer" which isolates each character from the others, especially Dieudonné, from those whom he is trying to befriend (7). It is this lack of communication and under-

standing more than anything which destroys the doctor little by little throughout the play as he comes to realize that he no longer belongs in Guadeloupe and that the ideas in which he believes such as liberty and equality cannot hold up against the realities of daily life. In one particular scene, we see clearly this contrast between ideals and reality and the difficulties of introducing reform into a well-established traditional system. Gastonia, the local prostitute who eventually denounces the young doctor to the authorities, speaks of Dieudonné's idealism to Laborderie:

Gastonia. Il a parlé de justice, de liberté, d'amour.... Il a parlé d'aider des hommes à exiger leur dû.

Laborderie. Ils ont tous les mêmes mots à la bouche: Justice, Liberté, Amour.... Et c'est avec ces mots-là qu'ils sèment le trouble et la révolte.... (60)

Dieu nous l'a donné is full of these oppositions and juxtapositions between young and old, modernity and tradition, the future and the past. Dieudonné practices medicine, the science of the white European, while Mandela, the "quimboiseur" or traditional healer, practices the African-based "quimbois." Although he has been educated in modern medicine, Dieudonné respects Mandela and recognizes the need for his healing in the community. In fact, it is precisely through his union with Mandela that Dieudonné hopes to find a voice that the people will understand: "Il faut simplement qu'il apparaisse à tous que toi c'est moi, moi c'est toi. Que si ma bouche parle, c'est la tienne.... Que si je commande, c'est que toi, c'est-à-dire les dieux ont ordonné ..." (64). Condé herself said that in *Dieu nous l'a donné*, she wanted to show the difficulties of integrating new ideas into a traditional society like Guadeloupe, and that in order to do so, one must work within the culture, using the beliefs that already exist in the minds of the people: "si on veut faire quelque chose en Guadeloupe, il faut s'appuyer d'abord sur les forces traditionnelles: croyances populaires, traditions, et un certain rapport à l'invisible ..." (Pfaff 56). Thus, by uniting the traditional and the modern, the past and the future, Dieudonné hopes to bridge the gap between himself and his island because after such a long exile, he can no longer speak the language of his people: "Une seule idée me tenait debout: revenir dans ce pays où je suis né. Et aujourd'hui, de retour chez moi, je m'aperçois que je ne sais plus parler à mon peuple" (27). Yet, according to Mandela,

Laborderie and the others, Dieudonné is no longer one of them; he has betrayed his race and his culture to become a white man who cannot be trusted. This stranger who comes back home after so many years in France symbolizes everything that his Caribbean community fears, and at the end of the play, he is denounced and killed by those that he had wanted to lead to knowledge and freedom.

Unlike Dieudonné, l'Etranger in *Mort d'Oulwémi d'Ajumako* is not an idealist. His travels throughout Africa and his contact with Europeans have given him a more clear and realistic vision of the situation in his country. Having been a soldier, l'Etranger returns home after several years of combat with specific ideas on relations between whites and blacks and where to place the blame for the current problems in Africa. Since his exile has forced him to see the truth about traditional African society, he is not afraid to criticize his own people and to state that all of the continent's problems are not necessarily due to European involvement. According to l'Etranger, the African kingdoms have had their share of violence, war, and injustices. He also points out the lack of education for girls, the extreme violence accepted in some traditional African kingdoms, and the abuses of power by many of their leaders. As he says to King Oulwémi: "Avant nos ministres, avant les Blancs, c'est toi, ce sont les tiens qui ont écrit l'histoire de notre pays, une sanglante histoire de viol, à la lueur des incendies" (32). Like Dieudonné, upon returning home, l'Etranger finds himself in a sort of no-man's land, on the outside looking in on his people, and thus feels free to critique and pass judgement on his own society, bringing to light things that only a foreigner would dare to notice.

Through the use of such a character, Maryse Condé is able to voice her own views of the problems and hardships facing post-colonial Africa, where she herself spent several years before returning home to Guadeloupe. Interestingly, Condé has often compared her role as author to that of the outcast and exiled characters in her works, stating that she identifies with their feelings of alienation and estrangement. In an interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé stresses the importance of the author's objectivity and detachment from the literary subject. According to her, to be successful, a writer must always remain a stranger to the world and maintain a certain distance from the things about which she is writing:

Je crois à présent qu'il est bon qu'un écrivain soit un étranger au monde, à tous les mondes dans lesquels il se trouve. C'est le regard de l'étranger qui est le regard de la découverte, de l'étonnement, de l'approfondissement. Si on est trop familier avec un lieu, si on est trop enraciné dans un lieu, on ne peut pas écrire sur ce lieu. (46)

L'Étranger, who is only passing through on his way to the city, sheds light on Oluwémi's situation, acting as a sounding-board for the King who is conscious of his imminent death. Here, Condé paints a complex portrait of modern Africa, a continent which is itself searching for a new identity, with its disappearing traditions, its emerging new ways of life, and the struggles it is still undergoing in order to make sense of its history and live with the remnants of European colonialism.

Later, in *Pension les Alizés*, written in 1988, Condé once again examines the links between exile and identity, this time instead of showing the return of the exiled person, she chooses to focus on life during exile itself. Ismaël, a Haitian political refugee is haunted by his past and escapes to Paris to begin a new life. Originally from Guadeloupe, Emma has been working in Paris as an actress and a dancer for several years. Both Ismaël and Emma are in Paris for different reasons yet each experiences the same contradicting emotions about his or her home. The distance imposed by exile makes them idealize and dream of their countries, especially when they are together since, as Ismaël says: "[L]a Guadeloupe, Haïti, est-ce que ce n'est pas pareil! Est-ce que nous ne sommes pas le même peuple sorti du même ventre de négriers?" (99). Likewise, both Ismaël and Emma question the life that awaits them and roles that each will play upon returning to the Caribbean after such a long absence.

As she has done in other works such as *Ségou*, in *Pension les Alizés*, Condé explores the question of identity by linking the image of the mother with the image of the native land. As Smith writes, the mothers in Condé's works are often portrayed in the same way, never playing a concrete role in the story, yet having a great influence on their children nonetheless:

...les mères ont rarement une existence concrète et agissante, elles ne sont pas prises dans le présent de l'action: elles existent soit dans la mémoire de leurs enfants chez lesquels elles sont

l'objet d'une nostalgie inassouvie, soit dans leurs fantasmes, dans le cas où ils ne gardent d'elle aucun souvenir. (52)

In *Pension les Alizés*, the image of the mother is so closely linked to that of the motherland that one cannot be separated from the other. Both images ignite extremely powerful emotions and passions in the characters, taking them back to a time quite different from the present. Ismaël has fled Haiti for Paris in order to escape the violence and turmoil of the current political régime of which his father is an important dignitary. Yet, instead of finding fault with his father, Ismaël places much of the blame on his mother, symbol of the mother country, for having helped his father's success through her unethical behavior: "Dans chaque assassinat, il [mon père] avait son mot à dire. Et ma mère l'aidait dans son ascension. Elle s'est couchée là où il faut, a baisé qui il faut pour que son mari grimpe, grimpe.... Et bien, ma mère, je la haïs. C'est à cause d'elle que j'en suis là où je suis" (33-34). Conversely, for Emma, memories of Guadeloupe and her childhood dreams and fears are intertwined with memories of the security and love that her mother gave her as a child. In one scene, Emma's watching Ismaël sleeping soundly triggers thoughts of the songs her mother used to sing to her at bedtime, the timbre of her mother's voice, and the way she smelled as Emma curled up in her lap. At times, Emma has the impression that nothing has changed on the island during her absence and that the loss she has suffered has been erased. In her mind, it is as if time has stood still, and that if she returned to Guadeloupe her mother, who has died during her stay in Paris, would be there to greet her when she arrived:

Oui, parfois, je me dis qu'ils m'ont trompée et qu'elle sera là à l'aéroport du Raizet quand j'arriverai. Petite sous ses cheveux blancs. Dans la robe noire qu'elle n'a plus quittée depuis la mort de mon frère José.... Oui, elle sera là, maman et j'entrerai à reculons dans son ventre. Une fois là, rien ni personne ne me fera naître à nouveau! (84-85)

Like Emma, Condé experienced the death of her mother while she was living abroad in France. This was one of the most difficult experiences of her life, and as a writer it has influenced her work in many ways. In an interview with VèVè Clark, she describes the guilt she felt at missing the last moments of her mother's life:

A cette époque j'étais folle de l'Italie et au lieu de rentrer à la Guadeloupe pour les grandes vacances de 1956, je suis partie vagabonder à Rome et à Florence avec une amie. Ce fut une découverte incroyable. C'est en rentrant à Paris, juste après ce voyage que j'ai appris la mort de ma mère. J'étais là à découvrir l'Europe et je venais de manquer les derniers instants de ma mère. Ce fut pour moi très difficile à supporter émotionnellement. Après la mort de ma mère, je suis tombée gravement malade. (98)

Thus, for Emma, as for Ismaël, exile is a mixture of nostalgia, sorrow and regret for the mother country and all that it represents. At the end of *Pension les Alizés*, the reader is left realizing that it is only a matter of time before Ismaël, who has decided to risk his life by going home to Haiti, and Emma, who has stayed behind in Paris, come face to face with the truth of their situations. Together they had romanticized their return to the Caribbean, daydreaming of opening a little hotel and living a quiet life by the sea. These are dreams in which everything is peaceful and beautiful and their business flourishes. But the fantasy must come to an end, and reality eventually sets in, destroying the illusions that they had created about their countries, their futures, and their love.

In all three plays, the exiles of the characters change them forever. Because of the distance imposed by their exiles, like the author, the exiled characters all see themselves in a different way than those who stayed in the homeland. They yearn for their homes, yet their identities will be forever altered due to the years spent away. As we have seen in the case of Dieudonné and l'Etranger, as with Antillean writers, upon returning to the native land, the period of exile does not necessarily come to an end as one realizes that the idealized place that appeared so often in dreams and fantasies does not in fact exist. As Rosello explains in her article on exile and intertextuality in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier du retour au pays natal*:

... the 'return to the native land' is yet another form of exile. Exile here is perceived as a permanent gap, no longer between the speaking subject and a clearly identified cultural or national identity, but between the "I" and the community within which that "I" temporarily finds itself.... Every displacement, every attempt to return, every new departure renders the "I" more and more aware of the gap, of his or her difference. (181)

In these works, we witness the complex relationship that exists between exile and identity and the difficulties that the exiled person has returning home and subsequently re-integrating himself into his native land and culture. Condé shows us that distance from the native land often creates mixed feelings of both nostalgia and clarity, love and hate, and that the identity of the exiled person will be forever hopelessly intertwined with these emotions.

Melissa L. McKay is a doctoral candidate in Romance Languages at the University of Georgia.

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STATES OF IDENTITY

*Limits and Possibilities
of Writing "French"*



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Special Issue
Paroles Gelées 15.2 1997

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA
French Department Graduate Students'
Second Interdisciplinary Conference*

STATES OF IDENTITY

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

SELECTED PROCEEDINGS FROM THE UCLA FRENCH
DEPARTMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS' SECOND ANNUAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE. APRIL 25-27, 1997

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELEES
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Introduction

When we began preparations for the Second French Graduate Student Conference at UCLA, we learned very quickly that the concept of "being late" is a phenomenon that haunted not only the Romantics. To follow an original event of any kind is a challenging task, but the successful outcome of our conference *States of Identity: Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French,"* documented by the high quality of the present proceedings, demonstrate that there can be original "seconds," as paradoxical as this might sound.

Our "Call for Papers" for a conference on "identity" in the context of 'French' writing generated national and international responses from students in different disciplines such as Art History, ESL, Philosophy, Theater, as well as French, German and Comparative Literature thus underlining the interdisciplinary appeal of this conference.

Denis Hollier's thought-provoking keynote address on the very timely and controversial question of teaching literature in translation inaugurated the three-day event. Hollier's talk was complemented by insightful responses from Janet Bergstrom and Andrea Loselle from the perspective of film and poetry. We want to thank all three of them for setting the stage for an intellectually challenging yet collegial discussion among students, faculty and the many guests from outside the academic community.

Though the papers presented by the graduate students in six panels contributed much to our knowledge regarding individual aspects of "identity" in different cultures and time periods, the subsequent discussions made it clear that attempts to reach "sameness" regarding a given problem were inevitably deferred by new questions and concerns. What remained was the realization that in spite of the plurality of opinions, we had achieved "identity" in the overarching collective gesture of intellectual

exchange. It is this discovery that justifies this conference and our work in the humanities in general.

This conference and the publication of its proceedings would not have been possible without the generous financial support from our sponsors and we want to thank the Borchard Foundation, the French Consulate at Los Angeles, the UCLA Graduate Student Association, the Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies and the Campus Programs Committee of the Program Activities Board. Last but not least, we want to express our gratitude to the UCLA French Department and its faculty, whose continued support, encouragement and presence during the panels was much appreciated by the graduate students. A special thank you is due to Jean-Claude Carron for his introduction of the keynote speaker and tireless personal *engagement* in the organization of this conference.

Our last acknowledgment goes to the graduate students of the French Department who contributed in many ways to the successful outcome of this event and sacrificed much precious time to meetings and other organizational tasks. We hope that the success of the first two conferences will serve as motivation and inspiration to those who are currently working on next year's conference, which we are all eagerly anticipating.

The Editors

Diane Duffrin

Markus Müller

States of Identity

Limits and Possibilities of Writing "French"

*Selected Proceedings from the UCLA French Department
Graduate Students' Second Annual Interdisciplinary Conference,
April 25-27, 1997*

Friday, April 25, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM OF SUNSET VILLAGE COMMONS

4:45 p.m. Introduction of Keynote Speaker

Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA

5:00 p.m. Keynote Address

Denis Hollier, Yale University

"Blanchot, Speaking in Tongues: Otherness in Translation"

Respondents

Janet Bergstrom, UCLA

Andrea Loselle, UCLA

7:00 p.m. Reception

Saturday, April 26, 1997

NORTHRIDGE ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #1

Grafting Past to Present: Hybrid Identities

Moderator: Michael Stafford

1. "Norman French, Latin and Scots English: Three versions of the *Leges inter Brettos et Scottos*," *Kristen Over (UCLA, Comp. Literature Program)*
2. "Verlan: An Expression of Beur Identity or Reversal by Inverse," *Amy Wells (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*

3. "Marcel Mauss on Nationalism: An Approach to *The Gift*,"
Luke Bresky (UCLA, Dept. of English)

10:45 a.m. Panel #2

The Politics of Pedagogy: Translating Culture in the Classroom

Moderators: Natalie Muñoz, Marcella Munson

1. "Silent Words: Language as an Obstacle to Immigrant Integration and Identity in French Society," *Katharine Harrington (Texas Tech University, Dept. of Classical and Modern Languages)*
2. "*The Guest in the Classroom: The Voice of Camus in Multicultural Academic Discourse*," *Ajanta Dutt (Rutgers University, ESL Program)*
3. "Radical Chic(k): The American Roots of Marie de France,"
Susan Purdy (University of Western Ontario, Dept. of French)

2:30 p.m. Panel #3

Bodies in Writing: Feminine Identity and the Literary Text

Moderator: Heather Howard

1. "Discordant Locations for the Me-ospheric Void: Théophile Gautier vs. *La Sylphide*," *Regina Fletcher Sadono (UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept.)*
2. "The Bodypolitics of Feminist Science Fiction: Elisabeth Vonarburg's *Le silence de la cité*," *Lorie Sauble-Otto (University of Arizona, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "The 'I' Which Is Not One: Dual Identity in the Case of Simone de Beauvoir's Autobiography," *Kim Carter-Cram (Idaho State University, Dept. of Foreign Languages)*

4:15 p.m. Panel #4

War and Remembrance: National Epitaphs of Self

Moderator: Stacey Meeker

1. "Proust's Poetics of Recontextualization," *John S. LaRose (Louisiana State University, Dept. of French and Italian)*
2. "The Body and the State: Fantasies of Identity in Genet's *Pompes Funèbres*," *Leslie Ann Minot (UC Berkeley, Dept. of Comp. Literature)*
3. "Ecriture et Mémoire: Identity and Collective Memory in Jorge Semprun's *L'écriture ou la vie*," *Marcus Keller (California State University Long Beach, Dept. for German, Russian and Romance Languages)*

Sunday, April 27, 1997

SOUTH BAY ROOM

9:00 a.m. Panel #5

Lieux de Mémoire: Negotiating Boundaries of Francophone Identity

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Exile and Identity in the Plays of Maryse Condé," *Melissa McKay (University of Georgia, Dept. of Romance Languages)*
2. "Personal and National Narrative in *Une vie de crabe* by Tanella Boni," *Laura K. Reeck (New York University, Dept. of French)*

10:45 a.m. Panel #6

Representation and the Reconsideration of Identity

Moderator: Diane Duffrin

1. "Classical Aesthetics, Modern Ethics: Lacan, Kierkegaard, Sophocles, Anouilh," *Joseph Jenkins (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*
2. "The Stage of the Stage: Representation from Corneille to Diderot," *Ben Kolstad (UCLA, Comparative Literature Program)*

Open Discussion

Closing Statement

Markus Müller, UCLA

