

A part le bonheur, il n'y a rien d'essentiel:

The Transnational Narrative Model in Maryse Condé's *Desirada*

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Abstract

Maryse Condé's novel *Desirada* (1997) has been repeatedly read as an identity quest novel (Dawn Fulton, 2005; Laurie Edson, 2013), since the narrative impulse is determined by the protagonist's search for her father's identity. Critics have also rightfully noted that Condé distorts this model in order to display a network of "minor transnationalisms" (Lionnet, Shih, 2005) through the character's marginal relationships across her quest, in guise of a critique of vertical colonizer-colonized postcolonial relations (Edson, 2013).

What I propose through this reading of *Desirada* is that Condé goes one step further in her well-documented iconoclastic practice by entirely subverting the very expected model of the identity quest novel, and presenting us with an excess- the production of fiction-, which becomes something entirely different: a quest for an aesthetic truth rather than of a filially determined identity. It is only when the protagonist, Marie-Noëlle, begins producing her own narrative that her story can truly begin. As such, by presenting us with a pastiche of the identity quest model, one expected from a postcolonial writer, Condé's transnationalism moves from minor to major, as her critique aims to dismantle the solidification of postcolonial ideology within the fields of literary and cultural studies.

Keywords: Maryse Condé, *Desirada*, transnationalism, identity quest

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I wanted to show that there is no Truth.

(Condé, 2000)

The modern work of art takes the figure of a paradoxical object. It is the inclusion of an aesthetic truth, of a truth of the pure sensible, of the heterogeneous sensible in an Aristotelian poetics: the plot of change in knowledge and fortune that passes by peripeteia and recognition.

(Rancière, 2004)

A novel haunted by crossings - departures, relocations, detours, and returns- between the Caribbean, the U.S, and France, *Desirada* (1997) leaves the reader in expectancy, to continue journeys of unfinished business and thwarted desires. Yet the waiting has been enriched by spectacles opening on either side of the protagonist's journey, both unexpected, and which come to supplant the initial justifications of the crossings. Almost none of the protagonist's stated purposes for travel are fulfilled: Marie-Noëlle's search for the truth about her origins along her complicated route between Guadeloupe, Paris, Boston and Désirade is answered only in riddles, lies, and conflicting stories. Her journey, while failing to reach its stated goal, inadvertently

¹ "Aside from happiness, nothing is essential", Martinican proverb, motto of *Desirada*.

unveils an uncharted becoming, clearing the way for the pursuit of new potentialities through the revelation of an aesthetic truth.

These repeated, and seemingly unsuccessful crossings hold the potential to situate the novel within what Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (1985) called *la nouvelle narration*. Presenting itself under the sign of the power of the false, and renouncing all claims to truth, *la nouvelle narration* thrives on the potentialities of memory and of the present, is disinterested in truthful outcomes, and replaces an action-driven plot with direct time-images:

En découle un nouveau statut de la narration: la narration cesse d'être véridique, c'est-à-dire de prétendre au vrai, pour se faire essentiellement falsifiante. [...] C'est une puissance du faux qui remplace et détrône la forme du vrai, parce qu'elle pose la simultanéité de présents impossibles, ou la coexistence de passés non-nécessairement vrais.

A new state of narration ensues from it: narration ceases to be truthful, in other words to pretend to truth, in order to make itself essentially falsifying [...] It is a power of the false that replaces and dethrones the form of truth, because it proposes the simultaneity of incompatible presents, or the coexistence of pasts that are not necessarily true. (Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'Image-Temps*. 171)

The possibility of a malleable memory as well as the dethroning of the idea of an absolute truth in the *nouvelle narration* passes therefore inevitably through a refiguration of time

relations. Along with the renunciation of an essentialist notion of truth, we witness the implosion of the linearity of narration, and the intertwining of past(s), present(s) and future(s), constantly interrupting and intervening into each other's flow. These aspects of narration have certainly not been introduced into world literature by the novel under discussion. Deleuze develops much of his commentary based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), where the latter discusses these same features in his own novels, as well as in those of some of his contemporaries. Yet I contend that the prominence of these features in *Desirada* require consideration in the specific context of Francophone Caribbean writing because of two primary factors: their relative novelty within the Francophone Caribbean literary tradition, and the refiguration of the narrative representation of memory operated through them. By paying closer attention to the narrative form of the novel, I further argue, we are led to a way of interpreting memory that is often ignored by the critical institution, which often lends precedence to the socio-historical context of this, and similar works.

In order to understand how the novel operates a shift both in the narrative tradition and in the ways in which this same tradition has written memory, I now turn to a detailed analysis of *Desirada*. Exiled, searching, and haunted by questions about her past, the novel's protagonist, having once reached, internalized and voiced the conclusion that "le pire exile est celui du retour," slowly grows into the idea of a perpetual nomadism of thought: "L'exilé est comme le prêtre: *In aeternum*." (Phelps, 1963, p. 20) This in turn frees not only the space toward which she will travel, but, and most notably, the space of memory, which becomes malleable, meandering, and a site of possibility.

Through an analysis of the ways in which direct time-images restructure narration in *Desirada*, I propose that it offers a refiguration of the workings of memory as nomadic, one that renounces claims to truth and welcomes “la pure et simple fonction de fabulation” (Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’Image-Temps*, p. 196), neither a re-creation, nor a recovery, nor a re-writing, but rather a direct and conscious creation of the past, inside the present, and which opens itself to the possibility of a different future, one that points in the direction of an escape from a cyclical idea of history by inviting repetition, certainly, but repetition with a difference. Secondly, I argue that such a refiguration of memory is always contingent on artistic creation, which is a key enabler of the process, and that the truth of memory necessarily becomes an aesthetic truth. Last but not least, I propose that the refiguration of the narrative model by way of the pastiche signals the embrace of a transnational subjectivity predicated on the production of fiction, and which aims to dismantle the postcolonial ideology of the fields of literary and cultural studies.

The complete unreliability of memory is a motif throughout Maryse Condé’s oeuvre, and, in the case of *Desirada*, it has already been discussed by critics such as Mildred Mortimer (1998) and Lydie Moudileno (2003). Marie-Noëlle’s quest for her father’s identity, which leads her from Guadeloupe to France, to Boston, back to Guadeloupe, then to Désirade, back to France and finally back to the US, is traced by memories in some of which she inserts herself as an active participant (such as the description of her own birth), some of which are designated as “souvenirs imaginaries/ imaginary memories”, (her baptism), by events clearly manipulated into oblivion or remembrance (“Marie-Noëlle ne gardait aucun souvenir du départ de sa mère.” / “Marie-Noëlle hadn’t retained any memories about her mother’s departure”; “(Ranélise) avait totalement oublié que Marie-Noëlle n’était pas sortie de son ventre.”/ “(Ranélise) had completely

forgotten that Marie-Noëlle hadn't come out of her belly"; (Reynalda :) "Chère Amie Ranélise, Contrairement à ce que tu peux croire, je n'ai pas oublié ma fille"/ (Reynalda:) "My dear friend Ranélise, contrary to what you may think, I have not forgotten my daughter.") and by pure *fabulations*:

Dehors, le ciel tremblait gris et lourd au ras des toitures. Il neigeait. Est-ce qu'il neigeait ? Il neige rarement à Paris. Et pas le 1^{er} novembre. En tous les cas, il tombait dans le souvenir de Marie-Noëlle de gros flocons qui voltigeait comme des insectes de nuit autour de la flamme d'une lampe à pétrole.

Outside, the sky was shivering grey and heavy over the roofs. It was snowing. Was it snowing? It rarely snows in Paris. And not on November 1st. In any case, in Marie-Noëlle's memory large snowflakes were falling, floating like night insects around an oil lamp. (35)

A detail that stands out immediately, by speaking specifically to the problem of the work of art as a site of subversion, is the mention, on the very first page of *Desirada*, of one of Frida Kahlo's paintings. As Marie-Noëlle describes her own birth, stating that the event had been recounted to her so many times that she now feels as if she had been present, she recalls seeing Kahlo's depiction of the same event years later and feeling that "cette femme-là, inconnue, avait peint pour elle/ that woman, unknown to her, had painted for her"(13). Although the name of the painting is not specified, one can safely assume that the reference is to Kahlo's *Birth* or *My Birth*

from 1932. The painting represents a woman giving birth, with the child's head coming out on a blood-splattered bed, and with the woman's head covered by a white sheet, while a painting of a Mater Dolorosa watches over the scene. The child's head is clearly that of Frida herself, which would lead to the conclusion that she was, indeed, referencing her own birth. As Kahlo's mother had died while the painting was being completed, the covered head is usually taken to reference that event and reinforces the above interpretation. However, that same year, Kahlo had also suffered an abortion (also depicted in *Henry Ford Hospital* of 1932), which constitutes a second, superimposed interpretation of the painting². As Liza Bakewell (1993) states: "The mother is both Frida and Frida's mother, Matilde Kahlo, and the child is both Frida and the child she lost. Generations merge in a confluence of female bodies giving birth to one another [...]" (176). Consequently, Condé can be seen to hint, from the beginning, to the idea of a gathering of past, present and future within the same work of art, to the breaking down of linear time through the potentialities of art, and to the renewing potential of such an approach to both memory and future projections.

Interestingly enough, yet intimately tied to what I will further on propose as a key difference between the general critical reception of the novel from the one discussed here, the 1997 edition of *Desirada* from Editions Robert Laffont features Frida Kahlo's *The Roots* (1943) as the front cover art. Certainly, the fact that the name of the specific painting that Marie-Noëlle is referencing is not mentioned in the novel leaves room for various hypotheses. Nonetheless,

² see Liza Bakewell (1993)

given that it is expressly said in the novel to represent Frida's birth³, the choice of *The Roots* seems rather arbitrary, as the painting makes no specific reference to such an event:

In 1943's *Roots*, for example, a tangle of green vines flows from a Magritte-like window in the chest of a reclining Frida. The shoots lead to leaves which are sprouting human veins of their own. Despite the sense of interconnectedness the roots provide, the background colors in combination with the subject's facial expression and barren breast create an uneasy sense of stunted growth. (Friis, 2004)

The insistence in this latter painting is clearly on human relations (to be read as family ties in the case of *Desirada*), but ones which stifle becoming, and point forcefully to a pain demanding a healing process. While lively due to their color, the green vines traversing Frida's chest, extending both before and beyond her, make of her an empty vessel, who cannot profit from the relations that they establish, but is rather further drained by their traffic through her. To juxtapose *The Roots* to *Desirada* is to read the novel principally for what it presents in terms of trauma, as it has in fact been read, namely for what it deploys in terms of a tragic history which has resulted in ruptures of human relations, and which has become inscribed in the body of the characters. It means to impose a vertical, arborescent reading of the novel upon what gestures much more forcefully toward a rhizomatic understanding of relation, in the vein of Deleuze (1987) and Glissant (1990). Marie-Noëlle's journey, according to the former interpretation, is thus taken literally to be that of a quest for the identity of her father, without which her own

³ "Des années plus tard, devant un tableau de Frida Kahlo, représentant sa venue au monde, il lui avait semblé que cette femme-là, inconnue, avait peint pour elle/ Years later, in front of one of Frida Kahlo's paintings representing her birth, it seemed to her that that woman, unknown to her, had painted for her". *Desirada*, 13.

growth, like Frida's in *The Roots*, will be stunted, impossible. And while a relationship with the Caribbean past which has "made the search for historical truth evasive and problematic" (Mortimer, 1998) is certainly central to the novel, what literary critics and publishers alike, given this choice of cover art, seem to ignore, are Condé's own statements about looking to overcome the discourse of victimization and the obsessive search for linear historical truth through forms of the excessive, such as irony: "À propos de mon ironie, ce que je peux dire, c'est que j'ai horreur de cette sensiblerie de victime qui traverse toute la littérature antillaise et africaine./ What I can say about my irony is that I'm appalled by this sentimentality of victimhood that crosses all of Caribbean and African literature." (Interview with Sourieau, 1096). Already through the choice of painting for the cover art, the reader is lead toward what I consider as only one possibility of reading *Desirada*, and which, while surely pertinent, diverges from what the current discussion presents as a nomadic reading of the novel, one focused around the search for an aesthetic truth rather than for historical truth, and which re-opens the possibility for transnational becoming.

Marie-Noëlle's chance at the pursuit of happiness rises from the ruptures in her journey, through the fictions of her past, and, ultimately, from the decision to begin creating her own fictionalized becoming. And where else to better begin such a discussion than from the motto chosen by Condé, drawn from a Martinican song: "À part le bonheur, il n'y a rien d'essentiel./ Aside from happiness, nothing else is essential." From the outset, the novel problematizes happiness, and not history, the possibility of creation and self-invention over the need for reconstruction by looking to the past. Marie-Noëlle's quest for her father's identity will thus prove to be a false search, as she will not find herself through it, but rather through the places, people

and events which present themselves along her path, yet which can only be read as tangential or haphazard through a linear, genealogical reading.

Such a reading of *Desirada* comes as a response to the criticism the novel has received thus far. *Desirada* tends to have been read as marked by insolence, iconoclasm and a series of lies- as each character has a different and conflicting answer to Marie-Noëlle's questions about her father's identity-, yet these considerations seem to be more born out of our own critical projections, from what we have learned to expect from modern Caribbean writing through the type of critical attention it has received so far, rather than emerge from the novel itself, which points instead forcefully at the very dismantling of an expectation for truth, especially one born out of identity quests. My contention is that Condé is in fact turning the written page into a mirror, to reflect our expectations, as readers of postcolonial fiction, for a linear progression of the narration, our desire for a unified identity for the characters as to compensate for our own postmodern fragmentation and rootlessness. Surely, we have been trained to expect such models of consistency, as Lydie Moudileno very well demonstrated through the example of the Antillean grandmother, one of the many subversive figures in *Desirada*⁴, yet it is important to emphasize once more that the value of Condé's writing does not lie in insolence and iconoclasm as facile attempts at rebellion, but rather in revealing a paradigm that dismantles essentialist notions of truth and shifts toward a conception of creativity in motion: "Je commence à contester ces mots d'errance, d'exil, de nomadisme, je préfère les remplacer par le terme renouvellement./ I have begun to contest all these words: errantry, exile, nomadism, I prefer to replace them with the term renewal." (Condé, Interview with Sourieau, 1091).

⁴ see Moudileno, Lydie. "Le Rire de la grand-mère: Insolence et sérénité dans "Désirada" de Maryse Condé."

Consequently, my analysis of the novel begins precisely from within this gap in criticism, from the assertion that *Desirada* presents us with a genealogical model of being in the world, and that the grand gesture of the novel is not the *mise-en-scène* of a traumatic memory in order to stage a healing process, but rather to step beyond it, by willfully restructuring it. In other words, Marie-Noëlle's quest is not to be considered primarily for what she is able to gather together from the variety of stories she is offered, but rather from within the gaps between them, which become indicative of something more than a desire for healing, namely a desire for happiness. Condé does not seek to understand nor rewrite Marie-Noëlle's story, but rather to cut, tear it apart, and subsequently tailor a narrative that will suit Marie-Noëlle's search for happiness, which eventually passes inevitably through the work of imagination and of art.

In *Friends and Enemies*, a far-ranging study on the relationships between literature, politics and memory within postcolonial studies published in 2008, Chris Bongie makes a very similar argument regarding the forces at play both in the marketing of Maryse Condé's work and in its critical reception. While avowedly shying away from the general adulatory tone adopted by critics in the field when it comes to the literary quality of Condé's writing⁵, and labeling her as a "middlebrow writer"⁶, Bongie however insists on a "certain quality" of her work which has not played a role in its immediate success with the general public and has been omitted by the critics, but which, according to him, addresses and subverts the *nomos*, the very foundational biases, of the field of postcolonial studies. This "certain quality", in other words, which is the

⁵ "As someone who has never been wholly able to understand why my colleagues make such a fuss about Condé...", *Friends and Enemies*, p. 294.

⁶ "In sum, Condé is in many respects the very model of a middlebrow writer, with all the stylistic restrictions, political ambivalence, and capacity for success in the literary *and* academic market that this adjective entails," *Friends and Enemies*, p. 294.

principal merit of her work as Bongie would have us believe, may in fact turn Condé into a more “post-postcolonial” writer than most postcolonial critics would like to admit.

Bongie’s argument relies on the specific case of *La migration des cœurs*, Condé’s Franco-Caribbean revision of *Wuthering Heights*. In a very similar manner to my present argument about *Desirada*, Bongie reads *La Migration des coeurs* as the *pastiche* of the revisionist novel, which “has become the most commonplace of authorial moves” (Bongie 302) through the work of writers such as Alice Randall and Sally Beauman. Bongie argues that, while seemingly presenting the type of revisionist model that postcolonial critics such as Françoise Lionnet have come to expect and cherish, Condé manages in fact to turn that very model on its head as to question its resistant value as well as the modernist values of the field of postcolonial studies. While her novel presents itself as a revision of *Wuthering Heights*, the references to the original disappear progressively and make way for something entirely new and separate from it. And while the traditionally expected political work that a revisionist novel should perform is to address the colonial fallacies of narratives such as *Wuthering Heights*, through the dedication, as noted by Bongie, Condé expresses no such interest, rather the contrary, declares her “honor and respect” for its author. And, to further support Bongie’s argument, when asked to speak of her literary influences, Condé named Brontë as her earliest source of writerly inspiration, followed by Mishima and Duras, and, only lastly, Aimé Césaire, with the mention that the latter’s impact is of a different nature.

Two parallels that can be immediately drawn between Bongie’s analysis and the present reading of *Desirada* are the reference to the dedication and what he coins as the *pastiche* of expected narrative models- of the revisionist narrative in his reading of *Whuthering Heights* and

of the identity quest in the case of *Desirada*. In both cases, the dedication fully counters traditional postcolonial readings of the novels, which is also why it has been, in most cases, fully ignored, likely shoved under the rug of the paratextual and therefore irrelevant. In the case of *La migration des coeurs*, the dedication announces no desire to counter the colonial impulses of its model, on the contrary, by paying homage to its author, it subverts the expectation for the kind of resistance assigned by the field to this type of narrative. As for *Desirada*, the dedication announces no nostalgic desire for a lost history, but rather a strong belief in happiness and its possibility. The subversion of these expectations, as Bongie argues, and an opinion which I contend to hold true in the case of *Desirada*, continues through the subversion of the narrative models themselves, as Condé's revisionist novel strays from its fixed models and the quest for roots is transformed, by way of intersecting stories and the ultimate failure of the initial quest, into a quest for happiness.

Bongie's argument, through the case of Condé along with others, reaches further, proposing that these novels do not stop being resistant nor become apolitical, as some would argue, but that they resist something entirely different from what we have come to expect, namely the very values of the field of postcolonial studies, which he qualifies as "modernist" and briefly identifies as: "aesthetic resistance (promoting stylistic difficulty) and political resistance (promoting social change)." (Bongie 289). As widely-read "page-turners", Condé's novels can hardly be said to promote stylistic difficulty, while ideas of political resistance are effaced by much stronger impulses toward change, errantry and renewal. Nonetheless, I would insist that this effacement does not result in work that is apolitical, but rather that the political resistance it proposes is to something else than what is expected from a postcolonial novel and, furthermore,

that the very relationship between politics and aesthetics is also refigured. *Desirada* responds to the political conditions of the errant, of the nomadic subject of a globalized world, and therefore to a set of entirely new problems than those of the traditional postcolonial subject, and it does so by also rejecting the idea of *littérature engagée* in any traditional sense.

Like desire, art in its pure form exists in a state of permanent exile, a nomadic state which resists the territorialisation of particular styles, genres or modes of capture. Both art and desire in its schizo form have an affinity with those states that carry the potential for change and metamorphosis. (Patton 73)

Marie-Noëlle's story begins from exile, from a non-place, and only by acknowledging her distance from her island of birth, from her mother's Paris, and even from her own Boston, along with all the meaning they carry, will she be able to begin anew.

Both in form and in content, *Desirada* attempts to resist territorialisation. It performs the tropes expected from a novel of its type, while at the same time making the performance visible and subverting them into something else, while Marie-Noëlle resists the genealogical impulse in order to morph into someone else. It is a genealogical approach which is to be detected in many critical analyses of contemporary Caribbean writing as well, and against which I position the current reading. While critics such as Mildred Mortimer describe Marie-Noëlle's journey as a "healing process" and the back cover of one of *Desirada's* editions labels it as a "redemptive novel", Maryse Condé's writing is read here in its singularity, and not through the filter of a critical tradition which expects the Caribbean novel to perform a rewriting of history, to become

the platform for a healing process from the evils of slavery, colonization, racism, sexism or others, and to propose or instate an alternative model of continuity. While certainly weaving through the effects and remnants of a very painful history of oppression, one deeply inscribed in the body and psyche of the novel's characters, *Desirada* testifies to a search for something else than healing, for something beyond healing, for an excess produced, certainly, from an accumulation of painful experience, but which, as excess, becomes stimulating, provocative, engendering, through the work of imagination and art.

One such excess is the production of fiction, often confounded by critics with lies. The blurring of demarcations between truth and lies rests at the very core of the novel, and Condé herself attests to the way in which she categorizes such "lies": "On m'a fait la remarque que le livre est basé sur le mensonge. Pas du tout, l'histoire n'est pas un mensonge, il s'agit d'une pluralité d'interprétations que propose Reynalda." It has been noted that the book is based on lies. Not at all, the story is not a lie, what Reynalda proposes is a plurality of interpretations." (Interview with Sourieau, 1096) If Marie-Noëlle is presented with a different story about her birth from every person whom she attempts to interrogate, be it Reynalda, Ranélise or Nina, and if the protagonist herself will eventually resolve to building a story for herself, in a framework where historical truth is a burden rather than a way of defining identity, these stories morph from lies into fiction. If there is no will to truth, there can be no lies, as they must necessarily be defined as its negation. The lies then become fictions which, on the one hand, serve as a survival mechanism for these women confronted with their disjointed histories and, on the other hand, place the product of imagination- art- at the forefront of a new mode of being in the world. The identities of these three generations of women are no longer to be

understood through the familial scheme, but rather through the fictions they propose about themselves. These fictions open the way toward happiness, become the line of the future, although their creation entails forgetting, falsification and projection, processes which are consciously acknowledged and, furthermore, placed at the forefront of becoming. And, in the case of Marie-Noëlle, she navigates the fictions she is offered about her origins only to finally internalize that they cannot lead to her constructing an identity until she actively begins to create her own fiction.

Each person to whom she turns for the truth about her father's identity offers Marie-Noëlle a version, an interpretation, yet always declared as truthful and always with the intention of liberating her from her incessant self-questioning. Yet, because these are *another's* interpretation, *their* fictions, because they are external, they cannot suffice, and Marie-Noëlle will have to build her own. When her mother, Reynalda, promises to continue telling her daughter the story of her life, in guise of an explanation for why she could not be a good mother, she prefaces it with: "C'est tout ce que je peux te donner. La vérité. Dans l'espoir que tu comprendras et, que de cette manière, tu commenceras à vivre ta vie./ It is all that I can give you. The truth. In hopes that you will understand, and that, in that way, you will begin to live your life." (102) These declarations thus imply a movement of causality : the understanding and acceptance of truth as the primary and necessary condition for freedom. Consequently, to understand that these truths are, in fact, individual interpretations of the same set of events-fictions- means to fully replace truth with fiction as the primary and necessary condition for freedom. For it becomes clear to Marie-Noëlle that what she is being told is nothing more nor

less than personal creations produced through the recombination of memories, imagination and *fabulation*. In considering her mother's version of the story, she concludes:

[...] c'est une de ces histoires, trop belles pour être vraies, avec lesquelles on écrit les romans. Dans le fond, elle est un écrivain, ma mère, et elle a bâti sa fiction. Moi qui vis, je dois chercher ma vérité autre part. Où ? Il faudrait tout réinterpréter, tout recommencer depuis le commencement.

[...] it's one of those stories, too beautiful to be true, with which novels are written. In the end, she is a writer, my mother, she constructed her fiction. I, who live, must look for my truth elsewhere. Where? I would have to reinterpret everything, restart everything from the beginning. (254)

Once again, having accepted that what she was being offered in guise of truth is, in fact, her mother's fiction⁷, it is important to emphasize that Marie-Noëlle begins to understand that the truth for which she will continue to look cannot be an absolute essence, but will always be an interpretation, or a reinterpretation. But building her interpretation will precisely be that which will allow her to begin, to build an identity, not one from scraps from the past, but one based on her own fiction of becoming.

⁷ This is further reinforced by Ludovic's explanation of his wife, Reynalda's, story: "Ainsi, elle se libéra une fois pour toutes de la vérité. Pourtant, la connaissant comme je la connais, je sais que cette vérité-la sera une fiction. D'ailleurs, qu'est-ce que nous pouvons construire quand nous parlons de nous-mêmes ? / That way, she freed herself once and for all of the truth. However, knowing her as I do, I know that that truth is fiction. But anyway, what can we build when we speak about ourselves?" (278)

Consequently, Marie-Noëlle passes through that almost necessary movement of return of the migrant to the native land, as she travels to Guadeloupe and Désirade after years spent between Paris and the United States. Her return to Guadeloupe, where she had spent her childhood, is sparked by Ranélise's death, and, on this occasion, she travels to Désirade in order to interrogate her grandmother, Nina, about her past. But her return bears the indelible mark of impossibility, as she is provided with yet another version of her family history and comes to understand her otherness both in relationship to her place of birth as well as to herself.

The images with which she is confronted upon her return to her childhood home fail to correspond to those she had projected for herself all along the years spent away, and give way to the recognition of the unreliability of memory:

Marie-Noëlle ne se comprenait pas. Depuis son arrivée, elle essayait de se rappeler qu'elle avait vécu les moments les plus heureux de sa vie dans cet endroit. Pendant des années, pour lui tenir chaud, sa mémoire lui avait offert des images de cartes postales, des maisons basses en bois colorié, des pieds-bois touchant la voûte du ciel, des bosquets de fleurs rigides et barbares, plantés au bout de leurs tiges, des figures chaleureuses et souriantes. Au lieu de tout cela qu'elle avait imaginé, elle ne voyait autour d'elle que pauvreté, laideur.

Marie-Noëlle couldn't understand herself. Since her arrival, she was trying to remember that she had lived the happiest moments of her life there. For years, to keep her warm, her memory had offered her postcard images, low houses made of colored wood, trees

touching the vault of the sky, bushes of rigid and barbaric flowers, planted on top of their stems, warm and smiling faces. Instead of all she had imagined, all she could see around her was poverty, ugliness. (139)

Marie-Noëlle is on her way from here on to revisiting the workings of memory, which until this moment had only been presented in a vague way, in the manner of matter-of-fact statements, as she noted, along the way, episodes that she remembered although she hadn't witnessed them directly, or others which she chose to remember in a certain way, although all evidence pointed to a different reality: "Combien d'années passèrent? La mémoire de Marie-Noëlle n'en garde pas compte./ How many years had passed? Marie-Noëlle's memory doesn't keep count." (61) or "Bizarre, bizarre que la mémoire de Marie-Noëlle ne garde aucun souvenir de cet après-midi-là !/ Strange, strange that Marie-Noëlle doesn't remember anything about that afternoon!" (78). This is one of the first instances in which she passes judgment, where she begins to analyze the effects of her memories on her way of situating herself in the world: her memory had offered her these fabricated images of her childhood in Guadeloupe "pour lui tenir chaud/ to keep her warm". The return thus catalyzes her self-reflection, as she begins to understand that she had already been creating memories for purposes of self-preservation, in an instinctual move toward happiness. Furthermore, she acknowledges the place of imagination in this process ("tout cela qu'elle avait imaginé/ all that which she had imagined"), and therefore that, subconsciously, she had already begun telling her own story, even if only to herself. Her homecoming is thus marked by the discomfort of displacement ("Marie- Noëlle ne se comprenait pas/ Marie-Noëlle couldn't

understand herself”), as she becomes a stranger to herself by taking note of her multiplicity, independent from the others’ stories:

L’homme véridique meurt, tout modèle de vérité s’écroule, au profit de la nouvelle narration. [...] Il y a une raison profonde de cette nouvelle situation : contrairement à la forme du vrai qui est unifiante et tend à l’identification d’un personnage (sa découverte ou simplement à sa cohérence), la puissance du faux n’est pas séparable d’une irréductible multiplicité. « Je est un autre. » a remplacé Moi= Moi.

The veracious man dies, all models of truth crumble, in the interest of the new narration. [...] There is a profound reason for this new situation: contrary to the form of the truth, which is unifying and tends to identify a character (their discovery or simply their coherence), the power of the false is not separable from an irreducible multiplicity. “I am an-other.” has replaced I=I. (Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’Image-Temps*, 172-174)

If we are to follow in the vein of Deleuze’s description of the powers of the false, Marie-Noëlle’s homecoming can be equated to a death, the death of the search for a linear, coherent truth- about her past, about her father, about her belonging. Her falsified memories about the places of her childhood, once confronted with reality, hold the power to open her awareness to a multiplied selfhood, to the possibility of becoming an-other.

As she continues her incursion on the island, following the few indications she had collected from her mother's stories and those of Reynalda, acquaintances she makes along the way deride her quest, alerting her to its futility:

Comme cela, elle était venue à la recherche de sa famille? (Il riait.) À la recherche de son identité? (Il riait plus fort.) L'identité, ce n'est pas un vêtement égaré que l'on retrouve et que l'on endosse avec plus ou moins de grâce. Elle pourrait faire ce qu'elle voulait, elle ne serait plus jamais une vraie Guadeloupéenne. [...] Qu'est-ce que cela voulait dire être une vraie Guadeloupéenne?

Just like that, she had come in search of her family? (He was laughing.) In search of her identity? (He was laughing louder.) Identity isn't a lost piece of clothing you find again and slip on more or less gracefully. She could do whatever she wanted, she would never again be a true Guadeloupean. [...] What did it mean to be a true Guadeloupean? (172)

Beyond the acknowledgment of the futility of her quest for a unified selfhood, her *narration nouvelle* adds two distinguishing features of memory in its relationship to identity formation. First, as a child, Marie-Noëlle falls into a coma when she finds out that her mother, Reynalda, now living in France, has sent for her and that she will have to leave Guadeloupe, where she had lived until then. The coma is not a contained event, as its aftereffects will haunt her for the rest of her life. We are told that Marie-Noëlle “tombe en état/ loses her wits” from time to time, moments when she becomes absent and which do not remain unnoticed. She will

then of course be categorized by the others' gaze as "un peu braque/ a little nutty." Nonetheless, what is salient about these moments of absence is that they are described as moments in which space and time construct an unexpected relationship: *within an instant*, "elle traversait des espaces immenses/ she crossed immense spaces" (32-33). These repeated events, which simultaneously defy both notions of time and space, could then be read as concentrated prescient instances of the eventual openness of the novel toward nomadic memory and its creative, renewing potential, as well as toward transnational becoming.

A second distinguishing feature is the reference to monstrosity. Toward the end of the novel, Marie-Noëlle describes herself as a monster, yet an identification in which she has come to revel:

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

Ludovic used to get irritated when I would talk to him about my monstrosity. [...] He didn't understand that ultimately, real or imaginary, I had ended up liking that identity. In a sense, my monstrosity makes me unique. Thanks to it, I don't have either a nationality,

or a country, or a language. It also explains what surrounds my life. I understand and accept that around me, there was never a place for a certain kind of happiness. My path is traced elsewhere. (281)

The idea of the pleasures of otherness, of the advantage of a certain detachment, which allows Marie-Noëlle to distance herself from concerns that are very much anchored in fixed notions of history, truth, and belonging, extends naturally from her newly-developed sense of the world. However, by associating it with monstrosity, Condé insists further on the deformities of this type of identity, and on the distortion necessary for it to be set in motion. That which creates this monster is the capacity to create memory, or “le flagrant délit de légèder”:

Ce qui s’oppose à la fiction, ce n’est pas le réel, ce n’est pas la vérité qui est toujours celle des maîtres ou des colonisateurs, c’est la fonction fabulatrice des pauvres, en tant qu’elle donne au faux la puissance qui en fait une mémoire, une légende, un monstre.

That which opposes fiction, is not the real, is not the truth, which is always that of the masters or of the colonizers, it is the fictioning function of the poor, in as much as it lends the false its power to create from it a memory, a legend, a monster. (Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps*, 196)

Marie-Noëlle can only come to accept and, further, to relish in her monstrosity, once she will have begun to let go of her quest for a unifying past, once she will have begun to grow into the

idea of perpetual self-creation, which becomes both liberating and creative: “Honteuse, je me tairai donc en attendant qu’à mon tour j’apprenne à inventer des vies./ Ashamed, I will thus keep quiet, waiting that, in turn, I too learn how to invent lives.” (281) And, simultaneously, by mapping Marie-Noëlle’s transnational becoming outside and against the lines drawn by the literary establishment, Condé’s novel presents us with a new model of resistance to postcolonial ideological capture.

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