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Maryse Condé's *La vie sans fards*: Cahier d'un retour au pays natal?

In *La vie sans fards*, published in 2012, Maryse Condé journeys to the African continent through her writing, not with a novel but with a memoir.[1] Condé's life and travels, as depicted in *La vie sans fards*, not only give us an insight into her life in the 1950s and 1960s, but also provide an extraordinary first-person account of life in post-colonial Ivory Coast, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal— remnants of the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française).[2] In this memoir, she highlights her travels, and at times, the personal struggle to survive across a series of newly minted African nation states. Condé brings attention to post-colonial history and the aftermath of independence on the African continent, a period covered in her early writings of the 1970s and 1980s like *Heremakhonon*, and *Une saison à Rihata*, respectively, but then set aside in favor of a greater focus on the Antilles until the year 2000. The recollection of her travels in *La vie sans fards* harkens to an earlier period of her writing by highlighting the post-colonial reality of the 1960s on the African continent. As depicted by Condé, the period immediately following the independence of French West African colonies and Ghana, is one of tremendous deprivation and violence. Additionally, infrequently are we privy to first-hand insight into the realities of post-independence, especially by an author of Condé's renown. To make clear, authors from the Antilles born in the 1930s who lived under colonial rule, and who are still writing well into the twenty-first century, are few and far between. One would be hard pressed to find an author who fits the earlier description, who also happened to have documented her travels across the African continent, in the 1950s and 1960s. Condé's *La vie sans fards* is also notable for reaching out to Aimé Césaire's classic, canonical Francophone text, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, not just through the trip to the 'pays natal', but with explicit nods throughout her memoir. One such example is her chapter entitled 'Partir'. Mon cœur bruissait de générosités emphatiques,' which is an excerpt from *Cahier*.[3] Along with her voyage to Africa, *La vie sans fards* also marks a moment of re-engagement with Césaire's work. She 'returns' to the African continent and Césaire all at once. Accordingly, this article looks to explore the connection between Condé's travels and the journey envisioned by Aimé Césaire in *Cahier* and to show how far the dream of the *retour* was from the reality, as well as Condé's subsequent acceptance of the metaphysical distance between the two. Additionally, Condé's memoir has a secondary, but not lesser, role to play in her overall corpus: *La vie sans fards* also serves as a roman à clef to *En attendant le bonheur: Heremakhonon* and *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* by giving the reader a new perspective on certain passages in these works, as it pertains to Guinea's post-independence rule, her family's background in Guadeloupe and her own teenage years in Paris.[4]

For Condé, across multiple works, 'autobiographical writing functions as a means of understanding the Self within the complex cultural and linguistic pluralism that often defines the postcolonial era.'[5] Readers familiar with Condé's work know that her nomadic and peripatetic past is something of a recurring trope across her œuvre.[6] The gradual unveiling of her life across the decades, through her autobiographical works, recalls H. Adlai Murdoch, who points out that 'the subject of the narrative may be read as an interrogation of the disabling social and cultural dualities which figure the desire to construct a functional postcolonial Caribbean identity-structure.'[7] Murdoch's suggestion that the narrative, as designed by Condé, can serve to help construct a post-colonial Caribbean identity, is made true when one considers the history of Antilles. The presence

[1] Maryse Condé, *La vie sans fards* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 2012).
[2] With the exception of Ghana, which was not part of the AOF but a British colony.
[3] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal.* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956.).
[4] Maryse Condé, *En attendant le bonheur: (Heremakhonon)* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1976); *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer: contes vrais de mon enfance* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999).
[5] Sarah E. Mosher, 'Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* as Fictitious Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction', *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 16.1 (2010): pp. 144–56 (p. 144).
[6] She mentions *Célanire, cou coupé* specifically in *La vie*, p. 44. Cf. Condé, *En Attendant Le Bonheur: (Heremakhonon)*; *La Vie Scélérate* (Paris: Seghers, 1987) and *Desirada* (Paris: Laffont, 1997).
[7] H. Adlai Murdoch, 'Divided Desire: Biculturality and the Representation of Identity in *En Attendant Le Bonheur*', *Callaloo*, 18.3 (1995): pp. 579–92 (p. 590).

of 'cultural dualities' as Murdoch suggests, further complicates matters when Condé as author introduces a new variable: A trip to Africa, the mythical 'Motherland'. It is the trip to the African continent, not the myth, but a post-colonial Ivory Coast, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal in her memoir that creates the rapprochement with Césaire. However, the connection between Condé and Césaire does not begin with this memoir but is in fact a long-standing one. Condé has been in dialogue with Césaire's work through her essays, since the 1970s and published a dedicated study of *Cahier* in 1978.[8] Scholars, such as Fabienne Viala, recognize the ongoing dialogue between Condé and Césaire since the 1970s.[9] However, as Viala's article was published one year before *La vie sans fards*, it is missing some key aspects to its otherwise remarkable analysis. More recently, in 2014, Eva Sansavior has also written on the relationship between Condé and Césaire, while restricting their study to just *Heremakhonon*.[10] It is this enduring relationship with Césaire's work that allows one to view *La vie sans fards* as Condé's very own *cahier*, a book that is not only chronicling an attempt to return to a mythical native land but is also in dialogue with several other Condé works.

Well before she would author this memoir, in her 1978 analysis of *Cahier*, Condé raises the issue of positioning Antillean identity (Glissant's *antillanité*) in opposition to and as a rejection of *négritude*. In her writings, such as in *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, Condé highlights the problematic aspect of this position, as the African ancestry of Black Antilleans is undeniable. It would seem impossible for Antilleans to acknowledge one aspect of their heritage while denying another. For authors of a certain generation, such as Condé, for whom *Cahier* was a formative text, it causes a double bind:

> Césaire a joué un rôle capital dans la prise de conscience antillaise, qu'à un moment ou un autre de leur vie, tous les intellectuels des îles ont lu avec ivresse le *Cahier*. A notre avis, Fanon n'aurait pas écrit *Les Damnés de la Terre* s'il n'y avait pas eu Césaire.[11]

The influence of *Cahier* on a generation of Antillean writers is, as Condé points out, incontrovertible. However, the struggle to define and create an identity that acknowledges an African past, while not effacing an Antillean present also remains a reality. According to Condé, this is no easy feat as she describes the Antillean as 'le plus démuni d'entre les nègres, qui en trois siècles de servitude a perdu jusqu'au souvenir de ses dieux et auquel il faut redonner des souvenirs dont il n'ait pas honte.'[12] The loss over three centuries of Antillean history and culture, has led to a search for—or a reclamation of—an obliterated past was always going to be complicated and necessarily political. On this matter Condé sees the role of *Cahier* very clearly:

> L'acte poétique du *Cahier* est un acte prophétique qui dans sa finalité devient politique. Voilà pourquoi il importe peu que la parole du poète soit obscure comme on le lui a reproché. Il s'agit d'un chant que lui dictent des forces qui le dépassent […]. Au sein de ce peuple qui a perdu la mémoire, il est celui qui se souvient et, plus important encore, celui qui imagine qui doit venir.[13]

On Césaire, Condé places the heavy burden of not only having to recreate a lost past for an entire people but also the responsibility of having to imagine a future. It is this reading of *Cahier* that is most helpful to understanding the relationship that exists between Condé's return to Africa in *La*

[8] Cf. Condé, 'Pourquoi La Négritude?: Négritude Et Révolution', *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan*, 8 (1979): pp. 17–29; Condé, *Profil d'une œuvre: Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Hatier, 1978).
[9] Fabienne Viala, 'Maryse Condé et l'île qui se répète poétique tragique postcoloniale dans *Traversée de la mangrove*', *Francofonia*, 61 (2011): pp. 125–40.
[10] Eva Sansavior, 'Just a Case of Mistaken Ancestors? Dramatizing Modernisms in Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*', *Paragraph*, 37.2 (2014): pp. 221–34.
[11] Condé, *Profil*, p. 67.
[12] Ibid., p. 40.
[13] Ibid., p. 41.

vie sans fards and Césaire. For although she clearly holds Césaire and the *Cahier* in high esteem, she is highly critical of its tendency to idealize Africa:

> L'Afrique dans l'œuvre de Césaire est donc une grande idée, un mythe. Un mythe ne saurait s'analyser à la froide lumière de la raison. En fait, la vision césairienne s'apparente un peu à certaines croyances des esclaves aux Antilles. A leur mort, ils étaient convaincus de retourner 'en Guinée', c'est à dire en Afrique. Au fil des générations le vocable ne recouvrait plus de réalités précises. C'était simplement la terre de la liberté et du bonheur.[14]

From the above citation we come to understand that in Césaire's writing, Africa became separated from reality and morphed from a real place into a myth, divorced from reality. Furthermore, Africa also became a paradise, accessible only in the afterlife. Thus, Africa morphed into an idea, synonymous with liberty and happiness, something for the enslaved to dream about, but never to actually experience in their lifetime. This is best exemplified by the character of Médouze, in Joseph Zobel's 1950 masterpiece *La rue cases-nègres*.[15] In this novel, the elder Médouze declares that upon his death he will leave the sugar canes of Martinique and finally see Africa.[16] As touching as this scene is, it is this mythologizing that Condé rejects and instead she does what she feels Césaire could not, and that is to analyze Africa 'à la froide lumière de la raison.' It is perhaps why Condé ends her introduction and leads into her first chapter of *La vie sans fards* with a rather confrontational tone, and the following question:

> Qu'est-ce que j'y cherchais? Je ne le sais toujours pas avec exactitude. En fin de compte, je me demande si à propos de l'Afrique, je ne pourrais reprendre à mon compte presque sans les modifier les paroles du héros de Marcel Proust dans *Un amour de Swann* 'Dire que j'ai gâché des années de ma vie, que j'ai voulu mourir, que j'ai eu mon plus grand amour pour une femme qui ne me plaisait pas, qui n'était pas mon genre'.[17]

Why are Swann's years of yearning for a woman he did not love akin to her quest across Africa? Furthermore, what was it about this biographical endeavor that was, as she says, a 'waste'? It is worth noting that this is not Condé's first foray into the autobiographical genre, and of this she reminds the reader by asking: 'Pourquoi faut-il que toute tentative de se raconter aboutisse à un fatras de demi-vérités? Pourquoi faut-il que les autobiographies ou les mémoires deviennent trop souvent des édifices de fantaisie d'où l'expression de la simple vérité s'estompe, puis disparait?'[18] Condé acknowledges the inherent difficulty of transposing memories to text and how they inevitably end up a mix of fact and fiction or as she describes it a 'fatras de demi-vérités'.

The introduction to *La vie sans fards* continues with 'je déclare aujourd'hui que je veux montrer à mes semblables une femme dans toute la vérité de la nature et cette femme sera moi.'[19] The declaration of the intention to expose 'the whole truth' about herself is especially interesting in the context of her previous memoir, *Le cœur*. However, before any new truths are revealed and before she proceeds with recounting her travels to the African continent, Condé returns to her actual *pays natal*: Guadeloupe. She does so by revisiting the childhood she had first written about in *Le cœur*. She begins by adding details to the original sketch of her home island as presented in *Le cœur*, and now gives us a better idea of what it was like to grow up in Guadeloupe in the early twentieth century: 'N'oublions pas que je suis née dans un pays à l'époque, sans musée, sans vraie salle de spectacle, où les seuls écrivains que nous fréquentions appartenaient à nos manuels

[14] Ibid., p. 46.
[15] Joseph Zobel. *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1974).
[16] Ibid., p. 58.
[17] Condé, *La vie*, p. 16.
[18] Ibid., p. 11.
[19] Ibid.

scolaires et étaient originaires d'Ailleurs.'[20]Ailleurs with a capital 'a' refers to France, in this case, exposing the complex relationship between the French colonies of the Antilles and France. Suitably, in *Le cœur*, the emphasis is placed on her family identifying very strongly not with the Antilles, but with the metropole, viewing themselves as French, through and through. As such, and as members of a privileged class in Guadeloupe in the early twentieth century, they had difficulty seeing themselves as France (Aillieurs) viewed them, which was as Other: 'Nous ne sommes pas tous des *Damnés de la Terre* nous tuant à la peine dans la grattelle de la canne à sucre. Mes parents faisaient partie de l'embryon de la petite bourgeoisie et se dénommaient avec outrecuidance "Les Grands Nègres"'.[21] *La vie sans fards* fills in the blanks of the initial sketch that portrayed her family as part of the bourgeoisie, but gave very few contextual details which would give an in-depth insight into their past. As to why she omitted so much from the first memoir, one could speculate that the passage of time made sharing certain past events easier. Or it could be as she declares: 'Il est certain que j'ai souvent rêvé de choquer mes lecteurs en dégonflant certaines boursouflures.'[22] Nevertheless the picture was incomplete.

Accordingly, at the end of *Le cœur*, the reader is left with the impression that a young Maryse leaves the prestigious Lycée Fénelon in Paris to pursue an unknown but presumably bright future. In *La vie sans fards*, Maryse Condé picks up from that scene and the thread of having left school in the following manner: 'J'avais quitté le Lycée Fénelon et je ne m'enorgueillissais plus d'être une des très rares Guadeloupéennes à préparer le concours des Grandes Écoles avec toutes les chances d'être reçue.'[23] She had in fact dropped out of school and abandoned all hope of attending a 'Grande École'. It becomes clear that the new description of her family in *La vie sans fards* serves to underscore how much had been expected of her as a descendant and representative of that select class of Guadeloupians. Once described as a prodigy in *Le cœur*, she is now described in *La vie sans fards* as a mere dropout, with no foreseeable future. What had so drastically changed between the ending given to us in *Le cœur* and this new narrative in *La vie sans fards,* to radically alter the description of this moment in time? This question brings us back the *raison d'être* of *La vie sans fards*, which is the 'tentative de parler vrai'.[24] Condé reveals that shortly after leaving the Lycée Fénelon she met a Haitian man named Jean Dominique whom she describes as 'le future héros de *The Agronomist*, le documentaire hagiographique de l'Américain Jonathan Demme.'[25] Jean Dominque, as time would reveal, goes on to become one of Haiti's most revered journalists and activists.[26] Specifically, from the 1970s to his assassination in 2000, Dominique was a prominent pro-democracy activist, who was 'courageous and unrelenting in criticizing those he believed responsible for the poor's suffering: The country's elite (from where he himself came), the foreign imperial powers, and the military that served both.'[27] That said, in 1955, Jean Dominique was merely a young man that had romanced Condé, and in quick succession impregnated and fled the country—leaving her, a nineteen-year-old girl, alone in Paris. Furthermore, she painfully confesses her suspicion that the main reason he abandoned her and returned to Haiti, was the colour of her skin: 'Je refusais d'accepter la seule explication possible: ma couleur.'[28] Condé recounts how her family shunned her, and she was forced to endure a pregnancy alone and to give birth to a son in France. Afterwards, unable to care for him, she entrusts him to a *nourrice* but soon she cannot afford to pay for his care, and she must momentarily surrender her child. The gravity of this decision and the pain of walking away from her son are relayed in *La vie sans fards* in a manner that

[20] Ibid., p. 14.
[21] Ibid., p. 14–15.
[22] Ibid., p. 13.
[23] Ibid., p. 20–21.
[24] 'La vie sans fards', <https://www.editions-jclattes.fr/livre/la-vie-sans-fards-9782709636858/>.
[25] Condé, *La vie*, p. 21.
[26] *Let Haiti Live: Unjust U.S. Policies Towards Its Oldest Neighbor*, ed. by Melinda Miles and Mary Eugenia Charles, (Coconut Grove, FL: Educa Vision, 2004), p. 86.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Condé, *La vie*, p. 23.

further highlights the magnitude of this revelation.[29] As a reader of Condé's, being privy to this admission completely changes the reading of the history presented in *Le cœur*. The reach of this personal historical revision is through the indelible impact that this event appears to have had on Condé's corpus. On this matter she says: 'Les lecteurs me demandent souvent pourquoi mes romans sont remplis de mères qui considèrent leurs enfants comme des poids trop lourds à porter, d'enfants qui souffrent d'être mal aimés et se replient sur eux-mêmes. C'est que je parle d'expérience.'[30] Rejection of the maternal archetype in favor of the mother that is unable or unwilling to care for her child is a defining leitmotif in Condé's corpus.[31]

Leaving Guadeloupe and her family behind, she proceeds through her memoir, with the first chapter entitled 'Mieux vaut mal mariée que fille'. With candour she begins to address the narrative of her life, namely how her life-story has been packaged and sold throughout the years. Explaining the use of the proverb as chapter title, she begins by taking apart the narrative of her first marriage and the manner in which it has been neatly framed as part of her official biography: 'En 1958 elle épouse Mamadou Condé, un comédien guinéen qu'elle avait vu jouer à l'Odéon dans *Les Nègres*, une pièce de Jean Genet, mise en scène par Roger Blin et part avec lui pour la Guinée, le seul pays d'Afrique qui ait répondu non au referendum sur la communauté de général de Gaulle.'[32] The above official biography had her falling in love with a Guinean actor, playing in a piece by Genet, and then following him home to Guinea—in solidarity with him and in support of the only former French colony to have rejected France and de Gaulle's offer to maintain post-colonial ties. But Condé reveals that this was a complete fabrication, and she follows this quote by explaining that this fiction was meant to create an appealing persona for her as an author. Her official biography was meant to evoke a whirlwind romance, combined with a post-colonial militantism. The part pertaining to her motivations to move to Guinea was written in such a way as to evoke Sékou Touré's famous presidential inauguration speech in 1958 in which he declared 'Il n'y a pas de dignité sans liberté: nous préférons la liberté dans la pauvreté à la richesse dans l'esclavage.'[33] Echoes of Césaire's idealization and mythification of the African continent rang strongly in the words of Sékou Touré. Thus, according to the 'official narrative,' when Maryse Condé first travels to Guinea in 1959, it is due to the confluence of two events: revolutionary fervour and an auspicious marriage to a Guinean actor. Condé exposes this all-too-perfect description of her life as 'une image séduisante. Celle d'un amour éclairé par le militantisme.'[34] She quickly reveals that this biography could not be further from the truth. On her publisher's website, Condé writes:

> Trop souvent les autobiographies et les mémoires deviennent des constructions de fantaisie. Il semble que l'être humain soit tellement désireux de se peindre une existence différente de celle qu'il a vécue, qu'il l'embellit, souvent malgré lui. Il faut donc considérer *La Vie sans fards* comme une tentative de parler vrai, de rejeter les mythes et les idéalisations flatteuses et faciles.[35]

She ponders why autobiographies and memoires become fantastical fictions and laments that human beings should feel a need to paint their past in a different light than it was lived. Be that by

[29] Ibid., p. 29.
[30] Ibid., p. 28–29.
[31] Cf. Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba Sorcière ...: Noire De Salem* (Paris: Mercure De France, 1998); *Desirada* (1997); *En Attendant La Montée Des Eaux* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 2010); *L'Évangile Du Nouveau Monde* (Paris: Buchet Chastel, 2021).
[32] Condé, *La vie*, p. 11.
[33] André Lewin, 'Le 2 Octobre 1958, La Guinée De Sékou Touré Proclame Son Indépendance', *Jeune Afrique,* < https://www.jeuneafrique.com/132294/archives-thematique/la-guin-e-proclame-son-ind-pendance-2/>.
[34] Condé, *La vie*, p. 11.
[35] 'La vie sans fards', para.1 of 3.

embellishing or altering the past, and sometimes, as is her case, discovering that part of an author has been invented out of whole cloth by an editor.

With Condé's stated desire to set the record of her life straight, *La Vie sans fards* serves on the one hand to counter editorial liberties taken with her biography, and on the other is a recounting of Condé's trips across the African continent during a particularly tumultuous time in history, the 1950s and 1960s. In one fell swoop not only does she dismantle her biography, but she adds to the long list of grievances now levied against the once-heroic Sékou Touré, who has for posterity been enmeshed with her own life story. In *La vie sans fards*, Condé writes of finding herself in Guinea for reasons completely unrelated to her husband's acting career, as the old Condéan myth suggested. Her former husband's acting skills are revealed as having been quasi non-existent, and she explains how he had settled on the vocation of actor as a means to survive, after he had failed to make his way in Paris as a student.[36] As her first husband only had a primary school education, the odds of succeeding either as a student or as an actor were slim. But to her, this man was 'African,' and his African ancestry offered an entry point into the continent. More importantly, he had provided her with an exit from France, disillusionment and the abandoned dreams that came with single motherhood for her. Furthermore, she admits that having been abandoned by Haitian man had put her on her guard against Antillean men, and Mamadou Condé was African.[37] On the matter of Mamadou Condé's African heritage she says:

> Condé était un 'Africain'. Non pas un 'Guinéen' comme je l'ai prétendu par la suite impliquant menteusement que Sékou Touré et l'Independence de 1958 avaient joué quelque rôle dans ce mariage. Répétons que je n'étais pas encore suffisamment 'politisée' pour cela. Je croyais que si j'abordais au continent chanté par mon poète favori, je pourrais renaître.[38]

In other words, it did not matter that Mamadou Condé was actually from Guinea, but what mattered was that his background was not the same as the lover that had spurned her and furthermore, he allowed her to fantasize about being reborn by going to the continent that her favorite poet, Aimé Césaire, had written about. Although Condé now disavows the notion that she was so politically moved by the push for African independence that it prompted her to leave France, it is feasible to have thought that she would have been inspired by the fact that two decades earlier, in 1959, Césaire had written glowingly about Sékou Touré and his role in Guinea's independence. So touched was he by Touré that Césaire wrote: 'De toute manière, ce qui se passe aujourd'hui en Guinée, ce n'est pas seulement le sort de la Guinée qui s'y joue, c'est le sort de l'Afrique.'[39] In Touré's vision for Guinea, described as a future 'communaucratie', Césaire saw a post-colonial future which promised above all things that 'l'état guinéen, l'état africain sera, comme tout état, au-dessus des individus, mais aussi œuvre de tous.'[40] Césaire's hopeful writings for a successful post-colonial Guinea, might not have directly influenced Condé but the opportunity she saw to start anew was in the spirit of creating this 'œuvre de tous'. His writings on Touré also help to explain why *Heremakhonon* initially received the negative reception that it did in 1976. On this matter, Condé has said that the 'novel represented the first time that someone denounced Sékou Touré and African Socialism in writing. Readers were shocked, but now the critique is banal.'[41] Indeed, Césaire's outlook regarding the success of Touré, and those that led their countries in that post-colonial moment, is bursting with the optimism that in hindsight seems naïve. Césaire

[36] Condé, *La vie*, p. 35.
[37] Ibid., p. 34.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Aimé Césaire, 'La Pensée Politique De Sékou Touré', *Présence Africaine, Nouvelle Série*, 29.3, (1959): pp. 65–73 (p. 66).
[40] Ibid., p. 68.
[41] VèVè A. Clark and Cecile Daheny, '"I have made peace with my island": An interview with Maryse Condé', *Callaloo*, 38.3 (1989): pp. 87–133 (p. 121).

was not unaware of the unpopularity of many of his early political positions and made peace with them later in life:

> Mais, à la fin de sa vie, cette quête acharnée de l'origine et de l'identité qui s'exprimait dans la révolte flamboyante des œuvres passées–'Je pousserai d'une telle raideur le grand cri nègre que les assises du monde en seront ébranlées' (Césaire, 1956b)–laissa place au doute et à la souffrance: '(...) j'ai le sentiment que j'ai perdu quelque chose; une clef, la clef; ou que je suis quelque chose de perdu; rejeté, forjeté; au juste par quels ancêtres? (...). J'habite une blessure sacrée', écrivait-il dans son dernier recueil poétique Moi, laminaire...[42]

Towards the end of his life, Césaire would reflect on decisions that have come to be viewed negatively, such as advocating for Sékou Touré and regret that could have caused his fellow Antilleans to turn away from him. Césaire dwells in and on this wound, and any suffering he might have caused, hence 'j'habite une blessure sacrée.' Thus, when Condé undertook her trip to the African continent in the 1950s and 1960s, it reinforces the absolute influence of his political positions, and the undeniable force of his writing—for good or bad.

Nevertheless, and regardless of the actual reasons for doing so, when in 1959 the French government started offering incentives to people willing to 'tenter leur chance en Afrique', Maryse Condé indeed decided to try her luck and leave France for Africa (country to be determined). Yet even as she contemplated taking this trip, 'Africa' remained an idea much like the one put forth by Césaire.[43] She explains: 'En effet, l'Afrique, quand je l'avais découverte en hypokhâgne, n'était rien de plus qu'un objet littéraire. C'était la source d'inspiration de poètes dont la voix me changeait de celles des sempiternels Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Valéry.'[44] In *La vie sans fards*, Condé sets up a dichotomy which on the one side holds the Africa of Césaire—Africa as literary object—and on the other hand the reality of West African nations in the 1950s and 1960s. And, as soon as she lands in Africa (in the Ivory Coast) and experiences its reality *in situ*, the difference between literary representation and the reality is glaring. Condé is unsparing, first and foremost with herself, when confronted with reality, saying: 'Je ne connaissais que le monde des privilégiés.'[45] As she begins to make her way to Guinea, she first stops in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, where she encounters poverty and insalubrious living conditions on a large scale, for the first time in her life: 'je tombai sur un marché d'une saleté repoussante. Une odeur pestilentielle régnait. Des nuages de mouches vrombissaient autour de poissons sans couleur et de quartiers de viandes violacées et sanguinolentes.'[46] Furthermore, she notes that this scene was a far cry from Césaire's depiction of Africa as 'étincelle du feu sacré du monde.'[47] The more she made her way across the Ivory Coast, on her way to Guinea, the more the myth of Césaire's Africa began to give way to a very different reality.

Although her novel *Heremakhonon* is set in a country based on Guinea, and paints a harsh picture of post-independence, it is quite another thing to read Condé's lived experience through this historical moment of privation as she makes her way through Guinea. The revelatory moments come when she moves beyond the shock of her privilege and encountering scarcity for the first time and begins to write about what it was 'truly' like to live in Conakry, Guinea, after independence. As she experiences the misery and poverty of others, she begrudges her parents for having reared her with 'indifférence vis-à-vis des démunis de leur société et je me jurai d'agir autrement.'[48] In an effort to make up for her and her family's previous indifference towards

[42] Laurence Proteau, 'Entre poétique et politique Aimé Césaire et la "négritude"', *Sociétés contemporaines*, 44.4 (2001): pp. 15–39.
[43] Condé, *La vie*, p. 35.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., p. 39.
[46] Ibid., p. 41.
[47] Ibid., p. 67.
[48] Ibid., p. 102.

suffering, Condé takes action and denounces Sékou Touré's corrupt and violent regime, which caused her and the people of Guinea to starve, as he increased his stranglehold on the country:

> Les pénuries s'aggravant, le Butagaz avait disparu. Les plus fortunés cuisinaient sur du charbon qu'ils achetaient à prix d'or dans les magasins d'Etat. Les plus pauvres se contentaient du bois qui, n'étant jamais assez sec, fumait et empestait. Il ne s'agissait plus simplement de pouffer de rire quand Sékou Touré récitait interminablement ses mauvais poèmes à la radio et de pester parce que 'les comités de culture et d'éducation' nous obligeaient à les enseigner à nos élèves. Des choses plus graves commençaient de se passer. Du jour au lendemain, des maisons étaient vidées de leurs occupants […] on torturait ceux qui avaient l'audace de critiquer Sékou Touré.[49]

Violence in Conakry was increasing under Touré's dictatorship, including people being tortured or disappeared, and starvation became an everyday occurrence in Guinea: 'Nous faisions la queue dans nos magasins d'Etat pour nous procurer quelques kilos de riz.'[50] Endless queues for basic staples like rice, and the resulting hunger pangs, competed with the violence.

The scarcity of food during this time contributed to the title of Condé's first book *Heremakhonon,* a Malinke expression that means 'Waiting for Happiness' and it was ironically the name of the corner store that never actually had any food.[51] The irony of an empty store promising happiness is a rather apt metaphor for Guinea under Touré. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, according to Nicole Simek, Condé's descriptions of hunger are not only literal but are also part of an Antillean literary leitmotif:

> The evocation of hunger has long functioned, particularly in social realist texts, as an embodiment or trace of historical violence, as a call to conscience, and as an indictment of a contemporary society or political system that valorizes human rights in the abstract while neglecting the concrete disparities between those who eat their fill and those who go without.[52]

Condé's previous declaration that she swore to do better than her parents had, when it came to acknowledging the suffering around her ('je me jurai d'agir autrement') is in line with Simek's assertion that Condé's descriptions of violence and the horrors of children dying of malnutrition and measles are purposely juxtaposed with descriptions of the rich driving around in German luxury vehicles and purchasing 'du caviar, du foie gras, et des vins fins.'[53] Simek argues that hunger, such as that experienced by Condé and Guineans alike, thwarts 'the realization of the poetic in the prosaic, and endangering the production of food itself in its disregard not only for ecology, but also for the starvation of many, which is neglected in favor of the profits of some.'[54] In *La vie sans fards*, Condé is keenly aware of the socio-economic divide she witnesses and marks that time with the contrast of the rich guzzling on champagne and gorging on foie gras, with seeing a procession of 'petits paquets enveloppés de blanc dans lesquels je reconnus des corps. Des corps d'enfants.'[55] The deaths of children by starvation and illness is perhaps only topped by Sékou Touré's violence aimed at the Peul people. In recounting the horrors of his regime, Condé explicitly confirms that the character of the despot named Malimwana in *Heremakhonon* is indeed based on her time living in Guinea under Touré—that nation's erstwhile liberator and saviour.[56] Although *Heremakhonon* is

[49] Ibid., p. 105.
[50] Ibid., p. 89.
[51] Ibid., p. 86.
[52] Nicole Simek, 'Hungry Ironies in the French Antilles', *symplokē*, 19.1–2 (2011): pp. 107–17 (p. 107).
[53] Condé, *La vie*, p. 89.
[54] See Simek, p.115
[55] Condé, *La vie*, p. 110.
[56] Ibid., p. 129.

a fictionalized account of Condé's stay in Guinea, it is also, as Mosher describes it, a narrative that is a 'métissage of fictional and autobiographic discourse.'[57] *Heremakhonon*, it turns out, is more based in reality than was once suspected. Condé has interwoven her own experiences of living under violent dictatorships in the 1950s and 1960s on the African continent, with the fictional representation of Malimwana in *Heremakhonon*.

Although, as early as 1989, Maryse Condé was giving interviews that make reference to the atrocities that took place under Touré in the 1960s, the violence she witnessed while living there was not explicitly spelled out as it is in *La vie sans fards*.[58] As mentioned earlier, writing anything explicitly negative, at the time *Heremakhonon* was published (1976), about Touré ran counter-current to the prevalent narratives surrounding the years after Guinea's independence. As Céline Pauthier points out, 'presque tous les ouvrages parus sur l'histoire contemporaine de la Guinée débutent par une tentative de mise à distance entre histoire et mémoire.'[59] It would seem that a certain passage of time was necessary to genuinely address Touré's role played in Guinea's independence. *Heremakhonon* is certainly also marked by her having experienced a *coup d'état* in Ghana, where she lived under Kwame Nkrumah's rule, following her time in Guinea at the height of Touré's despotism. This leads to the most overt nod to *Cahier,* in *La vie sans fards*, the chapter titled 'Partir'. The selection from *Cahier* as a lead-in to the anguish and pain that caused her to flee Guinea for Ghana is remarkable. Abiola Irele has suggested that Césaire's use of the verb 'partir' is 'presented as a youthful impulse, still requiring proper reflection as to its mode of action' and is 'a first step towards […] self-realization'.[60] One could argue that much of *La vie sans fards* is best described as filled with 'youthful impulse' and a journey towards 'self-realization' for Condé, while, from 1959 to 1963, she went from living under one despotic regime to another.[61] Of this she writes in *La vie sans fards*: 'J'avais mis […] le souvenir de ma brève rencontre avec Malimwana-Sékou Touré à la Présidence de la République, […] et mes propres terreurs lors du coup d'Etat à Accra.'[62] The historicization of events in *Heremakhonon*, as presented in *La vie sans fards*, offers readers a rare insight into the parallel reality of the aftermath of West African independence movements. As Murdoch points out, Condé's autobiographical writing is 'grounded in the social and cultural fragmentation produced by the subject's Caribbean context of colonialism' which allows her to cast her writing and past into a new light 'through a discursive modernity which would reflect her own migrant experiences and sense of exile from the structures overdetermining many of her Caribbean counterparts.'[63] Of her travels through West Africa she writes of having heard 'des réflexions identiques dans les pays les plus divers après les changements de régime et les soi-disant révolutions. Elles traduisent la désespérance de nos peuples qui espèrent le bonheur et sont constamment floués.'[64] Condé's unflinching portrayal of suffering experienced by Guineans and Ghananians under their respective despotic regimes, is encapsulated by the protagonist Véronica in *Heremakhonon*, who, after her trip to the *pays natal*, exclaims: 'Je me suis trompée, trompée, d'aïeux, voilà tout. J'ai cherché mon salut là où il ne le fallait pas. Parmi les assassins.'[65] Véronica's disillusionment at the discovery of assassins where she hoped to merely uncover her African past, echoes the narrative arc of *La vie sans fards*; hopeful intentions are followed by disillusionment. Condé has spent many years lamenting the fact that the main character of *Heremakhonon*, Véronica, is often conflated with her, and has stated that this protagonist represents 'an anti-portrait and not

[57] Mosher, p. 147.
[58] Clark and Daheny, p. 121.
[59] Céline Pauthier, 'L'héritage Controversé De Sékou Touré, "Héros" De L'indépendance', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 29.118 (2013): pp. 31–44 (p. 37).
[60] Aimé Césaire and Abiola Irele, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), p. 65.
[61] She does not explicitly note the year 1963 but mentions the announcement of the assassination of President Kennedy. Cf. Condé, *Profil*, p. 170.
[62] Condé*, La vie*, p. 317–18.
[63] Murdoch, p. 590.
[64] Condé, *La vie*, p. 291.
[65] Ibid., p. 243.

a portrait.'[66] However, Condé admits that 'if you sketch an anti-portrait, you must use some features that belong to your personality.'[67] Thus, one can read *La vie sans fards* as the centre of a Venn diagram where her many novels and memoirs intersect; surrounded by works such as *Heremakhonon* (a novel) and *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* (a memoir).

In conclusion, I turn to a question Lydie Moudileno once asked of Condé as part of a roundtable discussion entitled 'Miroir des Antilles. Aimé Cesaire, Maryse Condé': 'Est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose d'universel et d'intemporel dans cette recherche de la vérité ?'[68] Condé answered:

> On peut tout voir, tout regarder, essayer d'expliquer, de dire ce qu'on croit être la vérité […] mais en réalité on cherche simplement, pour soi-même à comprendre le monde incompréhensible dans lequel on se trouve jetés on ne sait pas pourquoi, ni pour combien de temps […] Il ne s'agit pas de chercher des vérités, mais d'essayer de comprendre très humblement.[69]

I have highlighted a few key instances where Maryse Condé lets us see what has influenced her writing, across the decades, by comparing certain specific events or mentions across such works as *Heremakhonon*, *Le coeur à rire et à pleurer* and *La vie sans fards*. In taking the position of writing '*sans fards*,' as she says, we are privy to her actual return to the *pays natal* and its implications beyond. Likewise, she also addresses her enduring relationship with Césaire's writings, which she recognized shortly before the publication of *La vie*:

> Il ne s'agit plus d'analyser ni de théoriser mais tout simplement, à mon humble niveau de Maryse Condé, d'essayer de comprendre quelque chose que je ne comprends pas. Alors, évidemment, j'ai beaucoup changé, j'ai commencé ma vie d'écrivain comme une grande 'césairienne' […]. En réalité, ce n'est pas moi qui ai changé, ce n'est pas moi qui ai déconstruit l'histoire, c'est l'histoire telle qu'on me l'avait enseignée qui s'est révélée être une sorte de machination, de manipulation.[70]

Condé acknowledges her evolution as a writer, and in particular how her writing has been impacted by her relationship with Césaire's work. As history revealed itself to her, she was also able to reveal her history and that of her family in *La vie.* Moreover, in addition to further filling in the blanks around her personal history, it also allowed Condé to conclude *La vie* with a most important realization: 'L'Afrique enfin domptée se métamorphoserait et se coulerait, soumise, dans les replies de mon imaginaire. Elle ne serait plus que la matière de nombreuses fictions.'[71] These closing lines of this memoir suggest that in addition to setting the record straight on her life, and illuminating works such as *Heremakhonon* and *Le cœur*, revisiting her past, via her travels across the African continent in *La vie sans fards* has also allowed her to make peace with the myth of 'Africa' and the reality of postcolonial West Africa. As for her own complex relationship with Césaire, although the end of the memoir points to a resolution, it is worth returning to the beginning and the epigraph of *La vie*, which is a quote by Sartre: 'Vivre ou écrire, il faut choisir.' [72] The choice is presented as living or writing, yet everything appears to indicate that Condé had to first live it before she could write it. Or as Murdoch suggests it is perhaps the 'general sense of disjuncture and fragmentation generated by the discourse of colonialism' that first had to be overcome, in

[66] Clark and Daheny, p. 121.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Maryse Condé, 'Propos d'une écrivaine que l'on dit caribéenne et francophone', *Francofonia*, 61 (2011): pp. 231–34. (p. 233–34).
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 234.
[71] Condé, *La vie,* p. 334.
[72] Ibid.*,* p.11.

order to produce a more truthful discourse not only of an African past but also of Maryse Condé herself.[73]

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[73] Murdoch, p. 592.

BOOK REVIEWS

Iran and a French empire of trade, 1700–1808: The other Persian letters. By JUNKO THÉRÈSE TAKEDA. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. 292 pp. Pb £60.00. ISBN: 978-1-78962-225-6.

Junko Takeda's *Iran and a French empire of trade* offers a chapter in the history of Western Europe's commercial and cultural exchange with the Near East and Asia, joining a growing library of specialised studies exploring early modern global connections from a European perspective. Sorting through the mass of material documenting these developments—diplomatic letters and memoranda, manuscripts, travelogues, engravings, textiles—is no small task, and Takeda, like others, has framed her study in terms of contact between nations, telling a French-Persian story rooted in the documents available in the French National- and Diplomatic Archives, just as one might tell the English-Persian or French-Chinese stories. Still, even among these various slices of global exchange, the book's subject is somewhat minor: French-Persian trade was miniscule within the scope of France's overseas empire and dwarfed even by its commerce with the Safavids' Ottoman neighbours.

This ends up being one of the book's major strengths, as Takeda turns the relative obscurity of the subject and the limitations of this national framing to the historian's advantage. On the edges of the more lucrative Levantine trade, the odd French-Persian ventures that began to appear in the seventeenth century provide a view of early modern French empire as seen from its entrepreneurial margins. In offering this perspective, *Iran and a French empire of trade* is not only of interest to specialists in the history of French-Persian exchange or orientalism more broadly, but also an important contribution to our understanding of how early modern empire worked. Takeda's study captures the nuance and complexity of its formal and informal dynamics, spaces, and competing stakeholders with writing that is erudite, clear, and concise, and an eye to interesting historical detail that pulls at the strands of the larger story through engaging digressions.

The first three chapters follow the circumstances that led to the first Franco-Persian commercial treaties. Chapter One traces the origin of France's commercial links with Safavid Persia at the margins of Colbertian mercantilism, where enterprising outsiders could vie for wealth and status by furthering France's commercial interests abroad. This culminated in Louis XIV choosing between two lobbying interests to send an ambassador to Isfahan, Jean-Baptiste Fabre. Chapter Two focuses on one such outsider, Marie Petit, a wealthy gambling-house madam who accompanied (and helped bankroll) Fabre's trip to Persia. After Fabre died on the way, Petit continued the mission, which occasioned conflict (another envoy was immediately dispatched from Istanbul) and her eventual arrest. Chapter Three discusses the subsequent Safavid embassy to Paris, and dives into the details of the French-Persian treaties, situating Safavid interest in French support as a bulwark against threats on the borders of a weakening state, in particular from Omani ships based out of Muscat. These first three chapters form the heart of the book, and they capture well the complex dynamics of the 'entrepreneurial imperialism' that Takeda highlights throughout. Among these, the first chapter, which draws on Takeda's deep understanding of the workings of early modern Marseille, deserves special mention. It stands out as a rich portrait of the local circumstances of early modern global trade and would make engaging and accessible reading for students and non-specialists.

The final chapters bring the story of French-Persian relations into the nineteenth century while touching on points of broader historiographic interest. Chapter Four considers French echoes of the fall of the Safavids in terms of contemporary understandings of 'revolution', looking for traces of how Persia served as more than a mirror for French self-criticism. Chapter Five contrasts the thought and career of Jean-François Rousseau, the son of a Genevan watchmaker in Isfahan who served French commercial interests as consul in Basra and Bagdad, with that of his more famous cousin, Jean-Jacques, situating the two Rousseaus as a case study in 'global Enlightenment'. Finally, an epilogue concludes with the aborted negotiations between Napoleon

and Fath-Ali Shah. In these last chapters, we find the same rich detail that distinguishes the first part of the book, though they are sometimes hampered by attention to the major themes of European historiography. Takeda's book is so successful in capturing the texture of the 'global' early modern that its discussions of 'global' Enlightenment or the 'global' age of revolutions come across as somewhat forced and distract from an excellent study that already deserves broader consideration on account of the breadth and detail of its analysis, its importance as a case study of entrepreneurial imperialism, and its contribution to the history of cultural exchange within early modern Eurasia.

The last of these merits some emphasis. While recent years have seen renewed interest in the history and circumstances of early modern orientalism, scholars have had to navigate a variety of highly specialised secondary sources (on trade, diplomacy, intellectual history, etc.), in addition to an abundance of (sometimes still largely understudied) manuscript sources. As a result, historians have sometimes looked past the specific economic and social circumstances of early modern trade to stage broader moments of cultural encounter. In *Iran and a French empire of trade*, Takeda not only presents a definitive and engaging study of the circumstances surrounding the first French-Persian treaties, but also brings together the different pieces of this puzzle in a way that offers a model of attentiveness to the motivations and intellectual contexts of its actual participants.

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Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean: Cultural and Literary Perspectives. Edited by MARKUS ARNOLD, CORINNE DUBOIN and JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK. Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée 2020. 334 pp. eBook £9.49. ISBN: 978-2-36781-357-8.

This bilingual and multidisciplinary volume extends the ecological concept of the ecotone to diverse regions of the Indian Ocean: its southwestern islands, the South African Cape, and the deltaic and coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent. Although the guiding thread of the 'ecotone' sometimes gets lost, the main strength of *Borders and Ecotones* is its ambitious spatiotemporal and disciplinary scope, which weaves one of the richest tapestries of the Indian Ocean seen in contemporary scholarship. The volume is thus of interest to both students and experts on the Indian Ocean, as well as to any readers interested in exploring new conceptualizations of the border.

As explained in the introduction to the volume, the botanical term 'ecotone' refers to the 'transitional zones' between distinct ecosystems, where species mix and diversity is multiplied (p. 12). Ecotones can coincide with human frontiers: '[F]ollowing the path of rivers or mountaintops, traversing deserts or crossing seas, borders are more often than not ecological ecotones as well as sites of experimentation and cultural innovations' (p. 10). Additionally, as Florence Krall has established, the ecotonal concept productively engages with humanistic and social science disciplines (p. 13).[74] But how, specifically, does the ecotone—be it ecological, cultural, or both—relate to the Indian Ocean world? This capacious volume explores the question through a wide-ranging collection of contributions in English (ten) and French (five).

Until recently, the vast waters of the Indian Ocean were fragmented by invisible disciplinary borders: Francophone scholars working on the Mascarenes were siloed off from Anglophone scholars focused on the coastal regions of Africa and India. This volume joins growing efforts, spearheaded by literary scholar Ananya Kabir and writer Ari Gautier, to put them in direct conversation. Temporally, the volume's contributions stretch from seventeenth-century colonialism to contemporary migratory tensions. Geographically, the essays span the islands of the

[74] Florence R. Krall, *Ecotone: Wayfaring on the Margins* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

southwestern Indian Ocean (Mauritius, Rodrigues, the Comoros, Mayotte, Madagascar, and Reunion), and reach out to the South African Cape and Robben Island. They touch upon a small island off the coast of Bombay (Mumbai) and weave through West Bengal, exploring Calcutta (Kolkata), the Sundarbans and the temporary islands called 'chars' that emerge at the confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers. Comparative analyses reach out toward the Caribbean and French Polynesia. Essays are drawn primarily from literary studies, as well as from creative writing, sociology, anthropology, and history.

Conceptually, the 'ecotone' can be illuminating as it fosters richer and more expansive notions of the borderland. For example, in her essay 'Is "The Unity [...] submarine" ? Hommes et femmes à la mer dans quelques textes des îles du sud-ouest de l'océan Indien', Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo's framing of an ecotonal submarine realm full of 'corps-déchets [trash-bodies]' and 'créatures amphibies' (p. 81) challenges us to rethink the precarious migrant condition. For its part, Annu Jalais' essay 'The Human and the Nonhuman: "socio-environmental" Ecotones and Deep Contradictions in the Bengali Heartland' explores the overlapping valences of the concept in the Sundarbans region, which she argues is 'an ecotone both geographically as it is between land and water as well as socio-culturally as it is a borderland between Bangladesh and West Bengal, between Hindu and Muslim, between land-based and forest-based and river-based occupations' (p. 128).

Certain essays, such as Cécile Do Huu's article 'Une archéologie des îles des Mascareignes et de Polynésie française' on archipelagic archeology, and Pallavi Chakravarty's piece 'Ecotones of Resistance: The Contested Narrative of the "Refugee" in post-Partition Bengal (1947–71)' on the need for a distinct category of 'partition refugee,' are fascinating in and of themselves. However, their linkage to the 'ecotone' does not seem to be a conceptual necessity. In the context of those contributions, it is a challenge to understand the unique theoretical merit of the 'ecotone,' especially as opposed to that of other key concepts already entrenched in the field of border studies (and evoked in the volume itself), such as Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the borderland or Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone.

The curation of such a wide-ranging collection is no minor feat, and the editors rise to the challenge by structuring the volume into four thematic sections. The first 'Between Land and Water: Motion, Flux and Displacement,' revolves around mobility. The second, 'Individuals and Communities: The Human and the Nonhuman Ecotone,' explores the inter-human and inter-species valences of the ecotone. The third section, 'Here, There and Across: The Macro and the Micro Ecotone,' toggles between granular and broader geographical perspectives. Finally, 'Beyond Borders' is an interview of the Mauritian author Shenaz Patel, whose self-identification as an 'exploratrice' (p. 293) frames her prolific and diverse literary production. The organisation of contributions is perhaps not intuitive, but it is definitely productive: readers are pushed to grapple, for example, with the conceptual (dis)continuities between the 'foreign' status and assimilation efforts of Comoran migrants in Mayotte, as well as those of Muslim citizens and migrants in India. Ultimately, it is precisely this commitment to weaving new links between hitherto academically-, geographically and linguistically compartmentalized regions that constitutes the greatest contribution of *Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean*, and that will make it a lasting scholarly reference.

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Dany Laferrière: La vie à l'œuvre. By BERNADETTE DESORBAY. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2020. 460 pp. Pb US$68.95. ISBN 978-2-8076-1692-9.

Dany Laferrière: La vie à l'œuvre follows through brilliantly on the pun of its title. It analyses Dany Laferrière's 'life at work'—his writing habits and patterns—at the same time as it parses out how

Laferrière's reality meshes with his fictions, going 'from life to work' and back again. Desorbay's masterful monograph locates Laferrière's life work in a deep historical context, including Saint-Domingue's colonial setting, Haiti's war of liberation, its independence in 1804, its long period of indebtedness to France, its occupation by the United States from 1915 to 1934, and its repression under Duvalier *père et fils*.

There is no reducing Desorbay's argument in *La vie à l'œuvre* to a single phrase; the monograph rather follows the multiple, nuanced, sometimes contradictory arguments contained in Laferrière's work and luminously contextualizes them. Not merely a work of history or literary criticism (although it does analyse Laferrière's novels and Haiti's history with verve and insight), *La vie à l'œuvre* engages with such diverse fields as psychoanalysis, onomastics, neurology, postcolonial studies, the history of European thought, and reception theory. Desorbay's writing style is highly appealing, performing through its own linguistic play and creative parenthesizing some of the complex themes it means to illustrate—the significative potential of ambiguity, for example, or the intricacy of familial and social interweavings.

The monograph traces Laferrière's biography in parallel with his works; it investigates his interviews, speeches, and novels to ascribe meaning to his living myth, and vice versa. In addition, Desorbay explores Laferrière's decisions as a writer in parallel with events surrounding his family, including a fascinating section on the family's proper names, which she tracks from his family history through his novels and back. Desorbay orients her study of Laferrière's 'life at work' along Lacanian lines, analysing the erasure of shame in the constructions of his characters' and his own identity—a process she neologizes as '*dé*-h*ontologie*'. Desire, she asserts, more strongly defines identity than origins or a search for authenticity; she reads Laferrière's work as exorcizing the shame shored up against this desire. Desorbay carefully locates Laferrière's resistance to being classed as a 'writer of identity' or a 'political writer' in the matrix of his various commitments and positions, outlining, among other things, how writing about sex and race is political without being necessarily recognized as such.

La vie à l'œuvre gives meaning to the entire—and enormous—corpus of Laferrière's cultural production, grouping and regrouping works in significant relationships with each other. When she analyses the theme of death, for example, Desorbay traces its association with the colour yellow and the trope of spit, tracking these through novels and interviews, and comparing them to secondary texts Laferrière (may have) consulted. *La vie à l'œuvre* takes seriously the near-death experiences and hauntings narrated in Laferrière's novels, comparing them to scientific scholarship on the subject and performing a rapprochement between this scholarship and studies of *vaudou* traditions before finally effecting a turn to a postcolonial perspective that understands haunting as a form of colonization. Desorbay follows Laferrière's critique of occidental discourses that label the supernatural in his work as magical, sketching out an understanding of reality that includes phenomena that go beyond rationality and logic, in which opacity sometimes must remain opaque. *La vie à l'oeuvre* dedicates a section to the many authors and artists whose works resonate intertextually in Laferrière's novels. Desorbay underscores how Laferrière's work is in conversation with Gombrowicz, Matisse, Miller, Lawrence, Magloire St-Aude, Faulkner, Borges, Choderlos de Laclos, Condorcet, Bukowski, Tanizaki, Mishima, and Bashō. Through readings of Montesquieu, Diderot, Malraux, and Céline, she outlines the debate surrounding the deplorability of France's role in and enrichment from the enslavement of Africans, locating Laferrière's nuanced position vis-à-vis this centuries-old argument. Desorbay also tracks his reserve regarding la Francophonie, asserting with him a sense of infuriation at being always and narrowly defined as a 'Haitian writer' and offering in response to his exasperation a critique of France's lack of recognition of its own post- (or neo-)coloniality. She underlines the humour with which Laferrière's work criticises structures of global inequality, linking his wit to the seductive quality of his prose, which shows not reality but its significance.

The main body of Desorbay's monograph is followed by useful annexes: a previously unpublished interview with Laferrière by the author herself, a complete list of his works and awards, a record of other writers' reactions to Laferrière's election to the Académie française, and

a thorough bibliography including a list of Laferrière's interviews and speeches, complete with web links. With its exhaustive analysis of the many-layered context surrounding his work, *La vie à l'œuvre* makes a significant contribution to Laferrière scholarship and, more broadly, to Francophone studies. Although selected chapters from the volume may land on advanced undergraduate course syllabi, *La vie à l'œuvre* will find most of its readers among graduate students, scholars, and lovers of Laferrière's work who are interested in its biographical resonances.

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Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies

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