

Journeys of Détour in

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L'article de Maryse Condé « A Season in Rihata » est utilisé ici par l'auteure pour théoriser la diaspora noire selon les

in seeking to reclaim one's beginnings hold particular resonance for black writers in the diaspora who

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genres. La révision des cartes de la diaspora par Condé est conditionnée par les retours personnels des femmes en Afrique. C'est ce retour avec ses implications spirituelles, culturelles et générées qu'elle a repensé et elle le questionne face à l'efficacité de localiser ses origines en Afrique surtout les femmes noires de la diaspora..

It may be that writers in my position or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or village, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Rushdie 10)

To imagine “homeland” for those in the Black diaspora is a difficult journey. The complications involved

“look back” to Africa and envision “return” as a mechanism for recuperating black identity. Black writers, unlike other writers in exile or dispossessed from a homeland, are often not only generations removed from Africa, but also must precariously imagine a continent rather than a nation as their homeland. Thus because of the systematic stripping away of cultural identity that defined the Atlantic slave trade, black writers in the New World literally “create fictions ... or [Africas] of the mind” in their work (10).¹ The Black diaspora thus depends on a “fiction” or imagined homeland. In this vein, I argue that Africa plays a complicated role in the lives of black people in the diaspora. As we struggle with forming national, racial, political and individual identities in diverse settings, our heritage as people of African descent is the only thing linking us. I imagine that proportionately it is only a few of us in the diaspora who actually ever get the chance to physically visit the continent we collectively claim as homeland; and yet, our ties to Africa are undeniably active and often pursued.

In my complication of the romanticized notion of “going back” to an

idealized Africa, I will attempt to offer a vision of this journey that simultaneously acknowledges the Africa of our imaginations and the Africa that exists in real time and space. This acknowledgment of a constructed and, if I can be reductive for one moment, a *real* Africa is important, for most journeys back are complicated by these two distinct and non compatible visions.² In her first novel, *Hérémakhonon*, Maryse Condé succinctly articulates the limits of constructing a static and singular “African” identity for Africans, “They’re not African. But we are! We, the so-called diaspora!” (122). Thus, black writers in the diaspora face the knowledge that they will be unable to reclaim “precisely the thing that was lost,” as they attempt to access a romantic, non-mediated Africa.

That many black women writers employ fiction to construct and reconstruct a return to one’s beginnings in Africa only serves to heighten the tension between what is considered real and what is imagined. An example is Maryse Condé, who in her novels *Hérémakhonon* (1982) and *A Season in Rihata* (1981) presents return for black women in the diaspora a form of exile, one that mirrors Rushdie’s sense of alienation from India. Condé’s oeuvre provides opposition to the romance that often attends imaginations of home, proposing instead that for women, home can represent a place of oppression just as well as a place of comfort.

When black women from the diaspora, educated and raised in Western cultural traditions return to Africa in search of a space free from racial prejudice, they often encounter gender politics shaped by patriar-

Maryse Condé's *A Season in Rihata*

chal discourses. Condé's early novels call specific attention to the very way gender can revise how we theorize the Black diaspora. Unlike the old maps of this diaspora, shaped by different material journeys, including the Atlantic Slave Trade or more recent masculinist discourses which look beyond nationhood, Condé's revision of diasporan maps is additionally shaped by women's intimate travels. In a revision of the people for sugar for rum that shaped an early mapping of the African diaspora, connecting Africa with the Caribbean and both to Europe, Condé maps the diaspora as a space where women become the commodities in exchange between relationships with men and thus in this early novel entering into marriage becomes symbolic of entering patriarchal culture. It is this re-thinking of return as having not only spiritual and cultural, but also gendered implications that calls into question the efficacy of locating one's beginnings in Africa, especially for black women in the diaspora.

In her analysis of *Hérémakhonon*, Françoise Lionnet reads Condé's novel as a deliberate break from the romantic and masculinist discourse of "return." Instead Lionnet focuses on the possibility of *détour*, a term she borrows from Edouard Glissant. In Glissant's terms *détour* is a re-thinking of *retour* or the static fixation on a singular identity and homeland:

The first impulse of a transplanted population which is not sure of maintaining the old order of values in the transplanted locale is that of *retour*. *Retour* is

the obsession with a single origin. (16)³

In contrast, *détour* suggests diversity, multiplicity as well as multi-directional journeys. Lionnet employs the idea of *détour* in her reading of *Hérémakhonon* to explain Condé's focus on the Caribbean in later works. Responding to Lionnet's work, Christopher Miller suggests that her reading of *détour* in *Hérémakhonon* depends on the logic that if "the myth of Return to Africa [has] been repudiated, new cultural agendas must be set close to home" (174). However, Miller rightly points out that the mapping of Condé's first novel in terms of a focus on a Caribbean reality elides the fact that

ten years of literary production separate *Hérémakhonon* from

Africa as a whole," but rather to study and explain a more complex vision of the continent.

While Miller's assessment of Condé's work provides one account for Condé's investment in the idea as well as the physical place of Africa, I am suggesting here that a consideration of gender also helps to explain Condé's simultaneous focus on and complication of the idea of return to the African "motherland." Black women in the diaspora must exist within the realms of patriarchal culture when they enter African communities as wives of African men and mothers of African children. In *A Season in Rihata* Condé's protagonist negotiates patriarchal culture; more specifically she invests in, reconciles with, as well as repudiates patriarchal culture. In the novel the culture I speak of is familial and political, per-

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Condé's more recent treatment of Caribbean themes... The supposed "negation" of Africa in *Hérémakhonon* somehow does not erase a continuing interest in the continent, an on-going Africanist discourse created by Condé. (174)

For Miller, Condé's oeuvre in *A Season in Rihata* and the two volumes of *Ségou* signals an investment in Africa that is not intended to "reject

sonal and public. In addition, the negotiations of these different spaces, all shaped in some way by patriarchal discourses and practices, produce journeys of *détour* and not return. In this way they do not ultimately suggest that traveling to Africa will be coterminous with a cure for a singular and original disruption of culture and dispersion from the continent.

Marie-Hélène, the protagonist of *A Season in Rihata* first travels to Africa as a young bride, with ideals

about a free post-colonial Africa, but as the novel opens she is pregnant with her seventh child and inextricably tied to a corrupt and patriarchal African nation. In *A Season in Rihata*, the implications of patriarchal culture for women's diasporan journeys makes return impossible. In the novel, Condé tells two interweaving stories: one, a Caribbean woman's personal journey from idealization to alienation and the other, a political story tracing the rise of an

dent, the first, though not favored, son of an important Ngurka man, fell in love with Marie-Hélène. Shortly after delivering her child, a son named Christophe, Delphine kills herself and Zek begins his campaign to expose Olnel to Marie-Hélène as a careless and unworthy lover. When Olnel is called back to Haiti and fails to write, Marie-Hélène agrees to marry Zek. As Marie-Hélène remembers it,

She did not love him (Zek). She

While Marie-Hélène's journey seems part and parcel of idealizations of return, Condé signals that in reality her protagonist's journey may be as much about *détour* as it is about return,

oppressive post-colonial African nation. The former story occupies the foreground of the novel, while the latter the background. In the reading below, I focus on Marie-Hélène's personal story, the core narrative. This early drama is told in bits throughout the novel in narrative flashbacks in both Marie-Hélène and her husband's minds.

Marie-Hélène and her sister Delphine begin their journey from home, in this case Guadeloupe, to Paris, France. There they encounter blacks from the Franco-phone Caribbean and West Africa who are invested in larger global understandings of their identities. However while this community helps the sisters gain intellectual understandings of black identity, Condé instead focuses on the importance, and ultimately pitfalls, of romance in any narrative of return. Highlighting this ideological romantic focus, Condé presents a literal romance: two men become pivotal in shaping the women's future. Olnel a Haitian pursued a naïve Delphine, "boasting of his family fortunes and his aristocratic origins," eventually getting her pregnant before starting an affair with Marie-Hélène (12). Zek, an African stu-

dent, had told him over and over again. Each time he merely laughed as if he did not believe a word. He had worn her right down. One evening, when she had been more desperate and worn out than usual, she had agreed to marry him. (62-63)

As I discussed above, in many ways, these personal histories seem to depend on romance. In this vein, when Zek recalls confronting Olnel and Marie-Hélène about their betrayal of Delphine, they protested, "There's no duplicity. We love each other," Olnel "violently" arguing that "I'll never marry (Delphine), never" (114). And thus while there is no literal definition of romance in Marie-Hélène's mind about her marriage to Zek, an ideological romance operates in her thinking, motivating her to accept Zek's proposal. And it is at this point that Condé engages with the larger romance of return. In contrast to Lionett's argument that the alienation that shaped Veronica experiences in Africa in *Hérémakhonon* would encourage Condé to cast her fictive imagination back across the Atlantic Ocean to figure the Caribbean home in her second novel,

Condé again imagines Africa as a site of possible rejuvenation for black women in the diaspora. Referring to her acceptance of Zek's proposal, Marie-Hélène reveals her investment in this larger romance with ideas, that "To be quite honest, the idea of Africa had a lot to do with it ... So Africa, Mother Africa, had appealed to her imagination and raised her expectations" (63). It becomes clear that as a young student in France she idealized Africa, resting on the continent her desires for an unproblematic future. Tellingly Marie-Hélène remembers that she "and her entire generation had dreamed of Africa demanding independence like a magnificent birthday cake" (3). However, unlike a birthday that celebrates an individual's birth, African independence allowed a community of people in the African diaspora to celebrate a sense of re-birth and re-newel of collective black identity.

However while Marie-Hélène's journey seems part and parcel of idealizations of return, Condé signals that in reality her protagonist's journey may be as much about *détour* as it is about return, for like the anecdote with which I begin this chapter, and to borrow from Paul Gilroy, it may be that "it ain't where you're from, (but) where you're at" that defines if a journey is perceived as one of return, rather than *détour*.⁴ In other words, one's subject positioning strongly influences not only how they imagine their journey, but how they articulate this journey. In this vein, Condé suggests that while Marie-Hélène may have imagined Africa as a welcoming home, her journey there, in real terms, was a *détour* from a return to Guadeloupe:

Returning to Guadeloupe had meant little more for Marie-Hélène than going back to her mother. The island symbolized one thing: her mother, a womb in which she could retreat from her suffering ... But her mother was dead. The grief of having lost her, ... had made her hate the

island and it had become like a sterile womb, never to nurture a fetus again. (63)

Condé's rendering of Marie-Hélène's conflation of home and mother necessitates a reading that depends on understanding the subsequent conflation of Africa with a new, surrogate mother as an essential part of journeys of *détour*.

In many ways, Marie-Hélène's disenchantment with her life in Africa can be traced to a number of personal and political disappointments, all in important ways tied to women and men's role in a patriarchal community. When Zek and Marie-Hélène return to Africa, they have their own ideals and aspirations about the future. On the one hand Marie-Hélène imagines her marriage to Zek as a vehicle as good as any other in which she can seek out a nurturing home in Africa. On the other, Zek hopes to gain favor in his father's eyes. Seeing Marie-Hélène as a wonderful addition to his large extended family, Zek returns home anticipating a welcome worthy of an eldest son. For many reasons Zek's father had always favored Madou, the eldest son of one of his younger wives. When Zek arrives at his father's compound with Marie-Hélène, Christophe and Sia, their eldest daughter, he is ready to dismiss his former bitterness and start a new relationship with his father, but "then had come the words which stifled the immense joy he felt at being there":

'Why did you do it? Why did you marry a white woman?' [Zek] tried to laugh. 'She's not a white woman. She's a West Indian. Her ancestors were the same as ours.'

He had launched into a long explanation about the slave trade and the settlement of Blacks in the Americas. He soon realized that his father was not listening to him, and he had not heard a word. So he stopped and once again, silence prevailed between

them. He had never been back to Asin. He had never seen his father alive again. (13)

The gap in epistemology between Zek and his father is representative of a larger gap in what Africans and blacks in the diaspora know and understand about the middle passage and the history of blacks in the Americas and what both groups "know" about Africa. An unmediated return to origins depends in no small part on shared knowledge of a history considered common or collective. However, Zek's father's view does not include embracing blacks in the diaspora sharing his ancestry. And thus Zek has betrayed his family, his country and perhaps his continent, for marrying Marie-Hélène, who when not considered white, is always considered "foreign."

Because Marie-Hélène is never able to escape the definition of foreign, she feels exiled in the sleepy community of rice fields and long rainy seasons in Rihata, a former colonial out-post.

She was the only one the market women, the traders in the rue Patrice-Lumumba, and the lit-

on marriage is exemplary of these differences and provides a site for particular conflict within her household. Her foreignness disrupts and challenges patriarchal norms that shape women and men's existence. In contrast to Marie-Hélène's disruption of these norms, Zek's mother, Sokambi, carries the patriarchal tradition proudly, embittered by her son's alienation from his father and general failure in his governmental post. As an aging mother of an eldest son she expects what patriarchy has promised her: a peaceful retirement in which her son, his wife or wives and her granddaughters look her after. Instead, she views her son as cuckold to a foreign woman, who neither respects nor cares for her mother-in-law. Watching her grandchildren indulged with useless toys she muses:

She did not like the way her son brought up his children. But was he really running it? All the responsibilities and all the decisions were left to Marie-Hélène. If ever a man was dominated by a woman it was Zek, the son she had given birth to over forty years ago. What had these for-

Condé's work helps to shift the very nature of how the diaspora is imagined. That is rather than being about finding a true home in Africa, the diaspora here is about rupture and disconnection.

tle date and peanut seller called "Semela," Ngurka for the "woman from over there." (2)

Condé explains that it is Marie-Hélène's gestures and mannerisms that set her apart, rather than her hair and color, for the area had seen its share of mixing with the French, Lebanese, or Greek. In other words, what keeps her always foreign exists internally, in consciousness, sentiment and ideas. Marie-Hélène's view

eign women got? How did they manage to control their husbands? Sokambi recalled the things she had been taught when she was young. Never look your husband straight in the eye, speak to him in a low voice, serve him and continue to serve him and never be unfaithful. The word unfaithful was a crime itself. Who had brought up Marie-Hélène and taught her how to behave? (6).

Sokambi articulates an important question, one that resonates with the complicated nature of women's relationship to patriarchy. It has been argued that women are the bearers of culture, and while this idea invests women with historical importance it also begs the question of what kind of culture do they bear.⁵ What does it mean when the culture women bear is patriarchal culture, one that designates an inferior place for women in society?⁶

While Africa ultimately figures as a non-nurturing mother for Marie-Hélène, she ironically becomes just the type of mother to her children that Africa comes to represent in her mind: alienating, distant and at times unreachable. So while she remembers her own mother with fond and vivid memories of closeness, she offers her six young daughters and adopted son no such intimacy. It is as if the earlier conflation of home with mother still plagues her, trapping her in a quicksand from which she cannot escape. In this case, her collapsing of Africa with an ideal mother has gone terribly wrong and so it seems that she too has gone wrong, unable to mother her daughters and teach them the lessons she learned about love, marriage, betrayal, and motherhood. While she is in labor with her seventh child, she thinks of the distance between her oldest daughter, Sia and herself:

She had never talked to her daughter about her birth. They never talked about anything like that. Judged by the number of words exchanged they communicated little. Unless your counted looks, facial expressions, and gestures. She knew what Sia was thinking, and knew exactly when she was calling for help. But how can you help when you yourself is drifting without a bearing? When your own life was on the verge of madness. (147)

For Marie-Hélène this last preg-

nancy signals her utter disappointment with not only Africa and her "cramped existence" there, but also with her life in general. And so while

Marie-Hélène loved her children, of course, she had no time to devote to them. If she was not careful they would distract her from her sole interest: the disintegration of her life. (14)

The idea of motherhood, like the idea of Africa, has so disintegrated in Marie-Hélène's mind that she seems incapable of imaging any other viable reality and so waits for a new idea, a new romance in which she can invest her life.

The alienation she feels late in the novel puts Marie-Hélène in mind to reminisce about an earlier time plagued by a dissatisfaction similar to the one she feels before the birth of her seventh child. This earlier moment occurred before the birth of Sia, her first child, when she has an affair with Zek's younger brother Madou, the son more favored by their father. For Marie-Hélène, a visit from Madou years later sparks memories of their affair, when looking for yet another romance as the idea of Africa comes into focus in real rather than romantic and ideal terms, she turned to him. Resentful of Zek for having brought her to an Africa that kept her always at a distance, Marie-Hélène's pursuit of Madou has as much to do with her husband's younger brother, as it has to do with her husband:

Young Madou, whose feelings for Marie-Hélène were held back by his education, had been the instrument of her revenge. She knew better than anyone that Zek was jealous of him, even though he played at being the brotherly, debonair protector. Their father was dead and yet his shadow still loomed over them and kindled their rivalry. To start with she had no set plan, merely the intention of

playing with the both of them. Then she had completely lost control of the situation and had found herself in love. Desperately in love with Madou. (22)

And so romance returns: Madou represents another way for Marie-Hélène to map her emotional geography back home and like Veronica she comes to negotiate the African landscape solely through relationships with men.

Maryse Condé explodes the possibility of return in the African diaspora in these two early novels of black women traveling "back" to Africa in search of roots. Importantly, Condé's work helps to shift the very nature of how the diaspora is imagined. That is rather than being about finding a true home in Africa, the diaspora here is inherently about rupture and disconnection. And so while Condé's protagonists employ romance as the rubric through which they imagine Africa and their individual relations to the continent, the novels ultimately provide for a more complicated and contested notion of African diasporan connections. And yet, the exile and alienation which attends the journeys in *A Season in Rihata* does not work to invalidate the notion of diaspora, rather it demands that understandings of diaspora be structured around multiple representations of difference, especially gender.

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¹As Alice Walker notes in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* "it [is] so easy to forget Africa in America. What most people remembered was strange, because... they had never been there." "Strange" indeed, this idea of "remembering" a place you have never been, almost as strange as "going back" to that same site.

²For one thing Africa is a large and diverse continent and as Kwame Appiah has pointed out, Africans have

a "good deal less culturally in common than is usually assumed." In this vein, any imagination that locates one's beginnings in Africa, has to almost automatically ignore the non-commonality among Africans so that they can assert commonality with Africans.

³Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillias*. A partial translation by J. Michael Dash has been published as *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. I have modified Dash's translation: Dash uses "reversion" and "diversion" for "Retour" and "Détour" in Glissant's French. In these cases, I have used the original French.

"It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at," is the title of the eighth chapter in *Small Acts*. (Gilroy 120-45).

⁵Gay Wilentz thinks about the cultural continuity in black women's writing—idea of "cultural custodians"—to think through the connection in black women's writing across national boundaries.

⁶Sokambi represents a larger phe-

nomena: Western women, like Alice Walker, as well as African women write and speak out against female mutilation, understanding the tradition as a tool of oppression, a way for men to control women's sexuality. However, often women are the ones who carry out the actual procedure, complicating the notion of patriarchy as solely a man's tradition.

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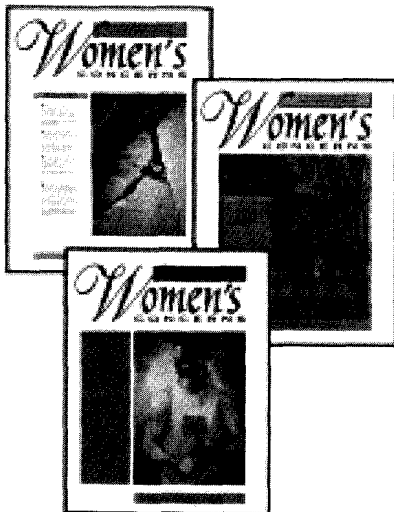
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