

TAKING ROOT:
LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY IN FRENCH CARIBBEAN NARRATIVE

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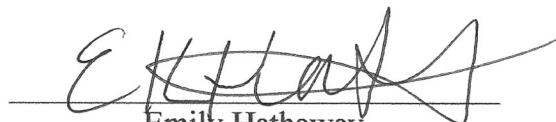
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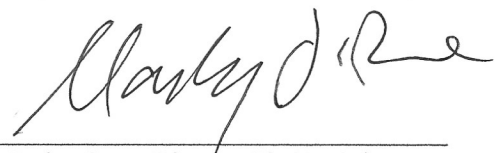
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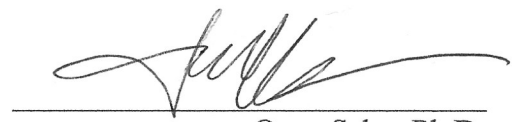

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The search for identity is often presented as a search for roots, whether they be related to personal ancestry or a grander historical connection to ancestors. In either case, roots are often seen as a singular source that provides a concrete sense of self within a larger socio-historical context. In formerly colonized places, such as the Caribbean, this single root model becomes problematic because multiple cultures were thrust together for the sake of economic profit. Edouard Glissant develops a solution to this problem across his works, specifically within his presentation of *Relation*, wherein the differences between individuals and cultures are both recognized and celebrated. In his *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Glissant explains that identity needs to be seen in a multiplicity of roots interacting with each other (23). This is particularly important in the Caribbean because it offers “a rejection of unique identity of exclusive roots, and/or a hierarchy of cultures” (Degras quoted in Mitsch 57). As an alternative, Glissant presents the image of multiple roots, within the context of a rhizome. The use of landscape in French Caribbean narrative supports the need to search for identity not in a single origin, but in rhizomatic relations. Just as the people were defined from without, the Caribbean as a region and as individual islands had a singular identity thrust upon them. Defining Caribbean identity and identities through a relationship with the landscape(s) reinforces the necessity of self-discovery within a lived reality in order to overcome contrived colonial identities. I focus my analysis on Maryse Condé’s Guadeloupian novel, *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989). In order to comment on how these themes manifest across the various islands that make up the French Caribbean, I will also be looking at works from Haiti and Martinique. Within these works, I specifically consider depictions of water as well as relationships with flora and fauna, specifically trees.

To see how my chosen writers deviate from established models, it is necessary to recapitulate key theories on roots in a Caribbean context. As with other areas that participated in the forced migration of millions of Africans and others, a large portion of the population was torn from their physical connection with their ancestral land, uprooted and transplanted across the Atlantic Ocean. During the Haitian Revolution, the root metaphor was applied to the questions of emancipation when Toussaint Louverture was arrested, saying “En me renversant, on n’a abattu à Saint-Domingue que le tronc de l’arbre de la liberté, mais il repoussera car ses racines sont profondes et nombreuses” (Beniamino 114). In saying this, Toussaint ties roots specifically to black identity, to the rightful identity of free subjects, and highlights the importance of roots as a source. His association of Haitian identity and trees also starts a connection to the landscape that becomes central to the development of Caribbean identity. Further analysis of this quote could be used in order to reflect Glissant’s focus on multiple roots as reflecting the state in the Caribbean.

After emancipation, roots continued to serve as an important defining factor in Caribbean life. They were “easily imagined as source and conduit of an essential identity, and for blacks in the Diaspora this concept has for the most part meant establishing ties with Africa” (Mitsch 55). With the founding of the Négritude movement, the need for a connection with Africa was a crucial part of the development of identity in the French Caribbean. Established in 1930s Paris, *négritude* was a response to the experience of isolation and racism felt by black colonial French students such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. This was especially troublesome for Césaire who had grown up immersed within the rhetoric of assimilation in Martinique. Together, this

group of students worked to identify and promote “universal black values” (Adi 169). Their underlying message was that blacks across the globe, French or otherwise, needed to rediscover and accept their African roots (Ormerod 360). For Césaire, this gave the Caribbean writer a sense of history and civilization, rather than forcing them to start from nothing in order to form a Caribbean identity. Césaire is often critiqued for his promotion of Africa over the Caribbean, but his ideal of Africa was ultimately lacking because the effects of colonialism had “disfranchised him from that original homeland” (Snyder 729). Ultimately, the presentation of Africa as origin was seen as unsuited to the political and social realities of the French Caribbean (Ormerod 361). Despite this, some of the rhetoric still continues, as evidenced by the advice that Maryse Condé received from other Caribbean writers that she should affirm “West Indian identity by means of a renewal of African roots” (Gaensbauer 396). This is perhaps closer to Césaire’s actual intent, an understanding of universal black identity as seen through the lens of Africa but with room to interpret individually based on lived reality. All three authors discussed here use the landscape in order to establish and branch away from this singular African root.

In contrast to Césaire, Glissant looks towards the Caribbean as the point of departure from which one can develop Caribbean identity. His “ultimate motivation is to place the Caribbean at the center of its own discourse” (Mulira 115). Additionally, the *négritude* that Césaire described, while useful in establishing a sense of unity across the Caribbean based on shared historical experiences, does not acknowledge the plurality of potential origins present in Africa. In this sense, *négritude* can be seen as a switch from a Eurocentric singular root system to an Afrocentric one. Glissant does not, however,

suggest that Africa should be ignored in the development of Caribbean identity. In his work *Poetics of Relation*, he looks at the ships that brought Africans to the Caribbean as an incubator of Caribbean culture that was “impregnated on the shores of West Africa” (Mulira 116). He opens the book with a descriptions of the horrors of the trans-Atlantic voyage:

This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death. (Glissant, *Poetics* 6)

This shared history is monumentally important to Glissant, but within this work, he establishes this violent rupture from Africa as the origin of Caribbean identity, rather than Africa itself. The people of the Caribbean “are not Africans, as Africans did not suffer the rupture” (Mulira 125). This also reiterates a point from his earlier work, *Caribbean Discourse*, of the importance of Caribbean identity as an identity in the making. While any identity benefits from the understanding that it is always “in the making,” it is particularly important in the Caribbean because of the history of static categorization of people in order for European colonizers to continue exploiting their colonies.

The idea of ‘becoming Caribbean’ is central in both the rejection of the single root theory of origin as well as in the discussion of the role of landscape in and on Caribbean identity. Within *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant presents his concept of *métissage*, hybridity across cultures. For the French Caribbean, this means not rejecting either the French or African “root” of identity, but recognizing origin as shared between the two:

Today the French Caribbean individual does not deny the African part of himself; he does not have, in reaction, to go to the extreme

of celebrating it exclusively. He must *recognize* it. He understands that from all this history (even if we lived it like a nonhistory) *another reality* has come about. He is no longer forced to reject strategically the European elements in his composition [...] He can conceive that synthesis is not a process of bastardization as he used to be told, but a productive activity through which each element is enriched. He has *become* Caribbean. (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 8)

Here, “becoming Caribbean” is already connected to the synthesis of European and African origins and points to a start of rhizomatic relations.

In developing his ideas of Relation, Glissant applies the philosophical concept of the rhizome as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. They based their theories on the botanical rhizome, that being “an enmeshed root system, whose plant product appears self-contained and singular above ground. However, underneath the soil it is comprised of a network of roots so intertwined that one could never be freed from the other” (Mulira 117). In comparing the root and the rhizome, Glissant adds that “the root is unique, a stock taking upon itself and killing all around it [...] The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of the totalitarian root” (*Poetics* 11). Glissant sees French Caribbean identity as a multicultural unit made of a combination of French and African roots. Looking to just one of these roots would be ignoring not only a part of the history of colonialism and slavery that brought Caribbean culture and society as it is known today to be, but in many cases also a part of an individual’s heritage. This also continues his anti-négritude stance and suggests that there is no single black or diasporic experience. Rhizomatic relations can and should lead to different realizations of identity within each region of the Caribbean, let alone individual islands or communities. Moreover, this concept of understanding cultural heritage as it informs identity is against the idea that a singular root can be transplanted

and remain the same. Glissant sees this way of thought, which led to the rhetoric of assimilation that Césaire found so misleading, as a dangerous sort of nationalism (Mulira 118). Replacing colonialist assimilation with *négritude* just continues this way of thinking by trying to force a return to a transplanted African culture that was never developed because of colonialism.

Rhizomatic relations should allow for a multiplicity of identities based on the level of specificity. In his works, Glissant stresses the need for both a universal and an individual or specific sense of Caribbean identity. Landscape is central in the development of specificity. Just as identity should be found in the Relation between peoples and cultures, it should be developed in the Relations between individuals and their landscape. This is another way of combatting colonial practices where the land was exploited for gain. In fact, Glissant emphasizes man's place within nature, rather than the ability of man to master nature (Prieto, "Landscaping Identity" 143). This allows for the development of multiple identities based on specific regions of islands.

Travel is a key element shared by the three works which illustrates the importance of specificity and the importance of a specific land, the homeland, in the development of identity. Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) obviously addresses this topic. Written about his return to Martinique after living and studying in Europe, Césaire uses his worldly position in order to address the continued colonial situation in his native land. In his analysis, Eric Prieto explains that:

the return in Césaire's title is not a simple matter of travelling back to his homeland but rather a matter of excavating a lost homeland that had been buried under centuries of colonial domination [and] the need to (re)discover a more authentic vision of the homeland. ("Evolution" 158)

While he is physically traveling back to his homeland, Césaire suggests that a mental return to the African past is necessary in order to combat the colonial reality. Négritude itself, however, does not propose a solution. Jacques Roumain offers an example of how to move from Césaire's desire for critical awareness to the development of Caribbean identity through a connection with the landscape. His novel, *Gouverneur de la rosée*, also centers around a character who comes home, to Haiti, with a fresh perspective after spending time abroad. Having spent fifteen years in Cuba, the main character Manuel is able to use revolutionary concepts he learned there in order to reunite his community and save them from a drought.

In "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," Maryse Condé credits Césaire's and Roumain's texts as fundamental and explains how it is believed that every West Indian novel written since their publication is nothing but a rewriting of their two texts (156). She, across her body of work, reflects on the effect of the diaspora on Caribbean identity. Her novel *Traversée de la Mangrove* is the only one of her books that is set entirely in her native island of Guadeloupe. Rather than telling the story of one character who leaves, comes back, and attempts to better their community, Condé has a plethora of male characters who leave and return to an unhappy existence who she contrasts with female characters who desire to leave but are unable to. She creates a scale of unhappiness: staying means limiting opportunities while leaving means a feeling of alienation from the community they try to join, and those who return are generally affluent, but struggle with emotional problems. All of her characters "share this kind of love-hate relationship with the village and with Guadeloupe in general. It is what they know, it is home, and it feels comfortable, but it is not enough" (Prieto, "Landscaping

Identity” 149). While she recognizes its influence, Condé refuses to essentialize the role of landscape on Caribbean identity. The mysterious character of Francis Sancher, or Fransico Sanchez, represents the impossibility of an essentialized identity. His “true” identity can never be established and his attempts to find it leave him wandering around the world seeking to understand his lost past.

In addition to presenting the important and sometimes complicated relationship that Caribbean people often have with their native islands, these three works also place the landscape at the center of their narrative. In fact, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* was “among the first Caribbean texts to link landscape and identity in this overtly ideological, quasi-anthropomorphic manner and it provides an especially powerful use of the landscape as a symbol of persona and collective identity” (Prieto, “The Poetics of Place” 142). Césaire’s work, somewhere between a poem and prose, features a “narrator who struggles to affirm his race identification and destiny through a series of complex interactions between a self-in-formation and his colonized country” (Eshlemen in Césaire 55). Césaire has been critiqued for not reflecting a specifically Martinican vision in *Cahier*, but the titular return is less about his personal return to Martinique, reflecting instead the call to “return to an authentic vision, to the native land that had been hidden by the assimilationist policies of colonial France” (Prieto, “The Poetics of Place” 145). While there are some aspects that do reflect the specificity of Martinique, *Cahier*, the work in which Césaire coined the term “négritude,” also functions on a universal level. Perhaps the best way to consider *Cahier* is as reflective of the need for a universally Caribbean négritude, rather than simply a move towards a pan-African identification, marking his ideological split with his co-founder Senghor.

Contrary to Glissant's analysis, Césaire suggests that members of the diaspora should use their historical connections to Africa as a tool to “strip away the blinders of colonial ideology” (Prieto, “Evolution” 158). Rather than expressing the need for a return to Africa, Césaire underlines a need to return to awareness of the reality of the colonial situation by reconnecting with Africa. In his poetry at large, Césaire “explicitly identifies *négritude* with nature and opposes it to the technological achievements of Europe” (Prieto, “Uses of Landscape” 237). Through his works, the city becomes associated with European influence, and the natural landscape takes on a moral superiority. In an interview he gave in 1960, Césaire stressed the importance of Martinique to his works: “I must name Martinican things.... all of these astonishing words are absolutely necessary, they are never gratuitous” (57). Césaire goes so far as to use the landscape of Martinique in order to address the binary between European and African values. He suggests that looking to the land is reminiscent of the African cultures which, contrary to European culture, held nature to be important (Prieto, “Uses of Landscape” 238). This is carried further by the image of the tree that appears across his poetry. On the most basic level, the tree and other flora represent *négritude*'s bond with nature (Prieto, “Evolution” 158). The same image of the tree can extended to metaphorically represent a link to the African past as the root to a promising future.

Perhaps the best example of landscape in *Cahier* is the continued reference to the volcano and its eruption. Together with representations of storms and earthquakes, these destructive images symbolize “Césaire's desire to sweep away the injustices of the past in a cataclysmic moment of renewal and to start over from scratch – to return to a state of nature and rebuild society along more just lines (Prieto, “Evolution” 157). Simply put,

Césaire uses natural disasters as a call for revolution against colonial rule. Given his later support of the departmentalization of Martinique by France, Césaire is often criticized for this apparent change of position. In addition to the general revolutionary imagery, the use of volcanic imagery refers to the 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée, giving the image a historical and local specificity in Martinique.

Similarly, Jacques Roumain's work is not only connected to the landscape, but valorizes a way of life that holds the land in high regard. He was one of the founders of the Indigenous Movement in Haiti and his work is often considered to be "Peasant literature." The Indigenous Movement believed that the rural Haitian peasant life should be the real basis of Haitian culture (Cook in Roumain 5). For Roumain, this was partly in response to the exploitation of Haiti by both the French and the Americans. He established the *Bureau d'Ethnologie* as an institution to validate the culture of the Haitian peasant as well as Haiti's significant colonial history (Cook in Roumain 6). In his posthumously published novel *Gouverneur de la rosée*, Roumain tells the story of Manuel, recently returned from Haiti to his drought-stricken village of Fond-Rouge where a feud has divided the people into two factions. Upon learning of the situation, he decides that two things must be done: reuniting the village and finding water. He believes that he can accomplish the two goal simultaneously and sets off to the woods to find a new spring. Once he finds water, he uses his love interest Annaise to convince the two sides of the feud to work together in order to bring the water to the village and ultimately bring everyone together. Eric Prieto makes an interesting observation about Glissant's characters in his novel *La Lézarde* which is equally applicable to Manuel and his endeavors:

The genius of his characters, that which makes them heroes is to have understood the nature of their link with the land. This sets them above the rest of the population which fails to understand that the town in which they live is not so much an assemblage of people and buildings as a particular manifestation of general laws determined by the natural environment. ("Landscaping Identity" 144)

This is particularly evident in Roumain's novel where Manuel's desire to find water is dismissed and his success is immediately seen by others as a chance for exploitation. Roumain also uses this as a chance to push his Marxist agenda, one which calls for renewal of the community and contrasts with Césaire's conflictual and destructive call for revolution. While in Cuba, Manuel participated in a workers' revolt, where he learned that the power of many is greater than the power of one, but in his return he adapted the violent techniques to his desire for a peaceful reconciliation.

Like Césaire, Roumain uses the image of the tree in order to establish the importance of roots. Manuel describes his experience in Cuba as that of "an uprooted tree" struggling to find his way back to his native land of Haiti (Roumain 28). When he does arrive back home, he finds it changed and feels betrayed. The metaphor of the uprooted tree is tied to the connection between the inhabitants and their landscape when Manuel explains that the drought in Fond-Rouge is a punishment for betraying the land by removing the trees (Roumain 30). Working with the land, as opposed to the European model of exploiting it, is the key to survival. Roumain once again uses trees in order to support this. When Manuel does find a new spring that will end the drought for his village, it's because he follows a flock of birds to a giant fig tree, "the keeper of the water" (Roumain 107). He goes even further, saying that "his head is in the sky" and "his roots are like feet," reflecting Césaire's metaphor of the connection between the

African past and the Caribbean present (Roumain 107). The roots hold the water that will provide a future for the village and reconnecting with the peasant past is the necessary step in obtaining that future.

In her own works, Maryse Condé has remarked that “even the most superficial study of literature from the West Indies demonstrates that every writer keeps to his or her own island” (quoted in De Souza, “Guadeloupean Literature” 185). She moves away from island specificity in making the mangrove, arguably the emblematic landscape feature across Caribbean novels, the center of her only book that takes place entirely on one island. The mangrove represents the place where land meets sea, resists human exploitation, and provides refuge to diverse and specially acclimated species of flora and fauna (Prieto, “Landscaping Identity” 150). Most applicable here though, is the emblematic root structure that both represents and furthers Glissant’s discussion of rhizomatic identities. The mangrove’s roots, although not a true botanical rhizome, is a physical representation of specially adapted root structures necessary in the Caribbean. Patrick Chamoiseau supports this reference to the mangrove as emblematic, citing it as “in our nature, a cradle, a source of life, a birth, a rebirth” (quoted in Gaensbauer 397). It is interesting to note, in looking at the idea of individual or multiple roots of identity, that the word “mangrove” itself expresses this duality depending on the language used; in English, mangrove is used to refer to the individual plant, whereas in French its in reference to the mangrove forest as a unit. Condé also presents a multifaceted understanding of the mangrove as both threatening and a safe haven. After learning of the mysterious Sancher’s titular memoir, one of his lovers remarks “on ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans

la boue saumâtre” (Condé, *Traversée* 192). Here, Condé embraces the multifaceted nature of the mangrove. While it is a source of life and protects the community, it is also a threat to those who try and cross. It is a cradle that confines, much in the same way that a singular understanding of an African or French root limits the development of Caribbean identity.

Francis Sancher’s novel-in-progress is also titled *Traversée de la Mangrove*. Within this novel, and through all of his mysterious actions in the book, Sancher is conducting his own search for his identity in retracing his family history (De Souza, “Crossing” 368). He is presented as either a man of multiple or no identity (Mitsch 54, 59). This is evident through the polyphonic structure of the novel. Each chapter is narrated by a different character who gives their understanding of Sancher, with the exception of his first lover, Mira, who narrates two chapters. Across all of these voices, which often contradict each other, the reader and Condé’s other characters are left without a full picture of the man. Condé uses this structure to combat the idea that there is ever a single essentialized identity. She does not “want to promote a normative vision of what is authentically Caribbean” (Prieto “Landscaping Identity” 147). Instead, she promotes images of fluidity of identity that cannot be nailed down.

Through her use of the mangrove, Condé also uses the image of the tree in order to continue the discussion of the construction of identity. Just as Manuel is described as a tree, Condé’s mysterious Sancher is seen at intervals as either a mahogany or a child. Already this is a move away from the idea of the singular root because he is seen in two contradictory ways: the strong, sturdy tree or the child in need of protection and care. Sancher is impossible to nail down and many of his descriptions are contradictory, both

from other characters and what he says about his own past. Perhaps one of the only concrete things that can be said about him is that he drifts from place to place, much like Manuel's uprooted tree. He claims to have family from Rivière-au-Sel and he has finally come back after having spent some time in Africa. Here, Condé, like Glissant, contradicts Césaire's notion of Africa as source. Sancher has completed the return home by way of Africa, but his identity remains elusive. Her use of the tree continues when Rosa observes:

Life's problems are like trees. We see the trunk, we see the branches and the leaves. But we can't see the roots, hidden deep under the ground. And yet it's their shape and nature and how far they dig into the slimy humus to search for water that we need to know. (Condé, *Crossing the Mangrove* 139).

Trees also present the difference between what is seen and what is hidden. A singular rooted identity focuses on what is hidden. According to Condé's metaphor, the root is important in sustaining life. It informs one's identity but it does not define it. The visible, the lived reality, the trunks and the branches express more. This is confirmed by Sancher's obsession with correcting his family's past mistakes that eventually leads to his death.

One of the most obvious ways in which the characters of West Indian novels interact with their environment is through images of water. The most common of these would be water as representative of birth and rebirth. Glissant uses this imagery as well when he talks about the origin of Caribbean culture being in the rupture from Africa, with the slave ship as the womb and the birth of a new culture in the crossing of the Atlantic. This can also be seen as a non-racialized reference, as everyone on those ships regardless of race played a part in the development of the Caribbean identity. Following the

decimation of the indigenous peoples, no one in the Caribbean can claim any privileged link to the land that would grant them a more authentic identity than anyone else (Prieto, “Landscaping Identity” 141). Glissant’s image also connects the Atlantic crossing with death. The crossing itself was dangerous, and the birth of Caribbean plantation society was violent and led to many deaths. Roumain references this connection between crossing the Atlantic and death, and ties it to the idea of Africa as root. When Manuel dies, his mother exclaims that he is crossing the sea and returning to their ancestral home in Africa. The first crossing, that of the slave ships, led to both birth and death. The second crossing, following death, affirms the idea of Africa as the root of Caribbean culture. Condé takes the threat of the sea further in her development of water as both life and death. Her character Léocadie Timothée walks on the beach once a week but avoids the water because her inability to swim would mean death, but the sea calls to her, saying, “Don’t you know this is where you came from? Don’t you know I’m part of you? Without me, you wouldn’t be alive” (Condé, *Crossing* 113). This directly reflects Glissant’s idea that the rupture from Africa is the source of Caribbean identity. Without having crossed the Atlantic, they would still be Africans. It was in the crossing, through an interaction with the sea, that allowed the birth of the Caribbean as Léocadie experiences it.

In Roumain’s novel, the plot centers around water, but it remains an image of birth and rebirth. Across the entire work, the island is presented as a body where water represents the lifeblood. In his desire to find water in order to bring life back to the community, Manuel sees “the water running through the canals like a network of veins transporting life to the depths of the soil” (Roumain 40). But water doesn’t just represent

a rebirth of the soil and a return to life for the landscape. Manuel also uses the water in order to reconnect the two sides of his feuding community. In order to bring the water from where it is “sleeping in the veins of the mountain” to the village of Fond-Rouge, Manuel needs the assistance of the entire community (Roumain 112). In arranging a *coubite* of all the peasants, Manuel confirms that the rebirth of the land hinges on the reunification of the village, the rebirth of the community. This reconnection is brought to the forefront even more when, at the end of the novel, Anaise reveals to Manuel’s mother that she’s carrying her grandchild just when the water starts to flow back to the village, bringing both Fond-Rouge and the next generation back to life.

In her novel, Condé discusses water as a source of both life and death. Mira, while searching to connect with her dead mother through nature, discovers Gullies that develop different meanings for various characters (De Souza, “Crossing” 374, Gaensbauer 400). To her, they symbolize solitude, she meets Francis there because he sees them as leading to his destiny; for others they represent danger, such as the alleged rape, or threaten flood (Prieto, “Landscaping Identity” 148). Condé presents a community in which “water doesn’t lead to rebirth and empowerment, but back to the lost womb of dead mothers and the dead-end tracks of silent fathers” (De Souza, “Crossing” 374). Here, the lack of mothers and fathers also represents an inability to connect with one’s roots. While Mira understands the disconnect from her past as something missing, Condé shows that a lack of roots is not detrimental to identity. Rather than a disservice, Mira’s detachment from her past leaves her more free to develop her own identity than any of the other characters. At the end of her second

chapter she is possibly the only character who has a chance of successfully crossing the mangrove and escaping an imposed identity.

The image of water as birth or rebirth takes on a sexual imagery as well. In *Gouverneur de la rosée*, Annaise agrees to sleep with Manuel when he shows her the spring and their baby is announced with the arrival of water in the town. More than that, another pregnancy convinces a man who is hesitant to join the *coumbite* with his perceived enemy. He sees his baby as giving the orders that allow him to overlook the feud. Additionally, water itself is sexualized with images of springs flowing “between the legs of the mountains” (Roumain 134). These are all representations of a singular understanding of water as necessary for the continuation of life. Condé uses the connection that Roumain establishes between water and sex in her novel as well. For example, Carmélien, having read Roumain’s novel, goes on his own search for water and instead finds his sexual awakening when he sees Mira bathing in the Gully. Condé then complicates this direct connection between water, sex and the next generation. The general gossip surrounding Mira’s trips to the Gully is that she goes there for sex, but when she does have her sexual encounter there with Sancher, the gossip turns to the issue of alleged rape. Rather than the water allowing procreation, it becomes a place of sexual violence. However, Mira’s connection to the Gully has nothing to do with her own sexuality, she started her nighttime swims in order to feel connected to her mother. For her, the sexual imagery is not about her own sexual acts, but about her birth which coincided with her mother’s death. Her attempt to connect to her mother leads to her rebirth as well, “life began when I went down to the Gully” (Condé, *Crossing* 36).

Mira's relationship with the Gully makes it clear that there can be no singular understanding of either her identity or of what the Gully represents.

Condé's choice of the name for the community also reflects a dual understanding of water: Rivière-au-sel. While a river should bring water that provides life, a river of salt would do just the opposite. Naming takes on a huge importance across these works.

Césaire addresses this specifically in an interview:

It is true that the language of my poems is very precise; it is because I have wanted, above all, to *name* things. If I want to speak of a certain tree, I say a palm tree, of a certain flower, a hibiscus. And why not? The French poet, in his turn, does not speak of flowers but of the rose or of the violet. (quoted in Snyder 728).

Naming takes on a political implication which is meant to reterritorialize the victim, forcing them into a rootless situation where their options are to remain alienated or to assimilate into the dominant culture. By naming specifically Caribbean things, Césaire claims for himself "an unchallenged plot of land from which he cannot be disfranchised" (Snyder 729). This is reflected in Condé's novel through the character of Xantippe who names the island. By insisting on the importance of Caribbean specificity, these authors attempt to undo the single root structure that suggests France is the only origin of their colonies' culture.

The knowledge of Caribbean plants and animals also becomes a part of identity in both Roumain's and Condé's novels. Manuel would not have been able to find the spring if it wasn't for his ability to recognize the wood pigeons as birds who would roost somewhere near water. Similarly, Condé uses the recognition of trees in order to express a sense of safety. Joby explains that he's not frightened in the forest at night because he knows each tree by its name and Sylvester took each of his sons to the forest to teach

them the names of the trees (Condé, *Crossing* 72, 133). Rather than tying identity to a singular island or place, these are examples of how identity is enriched by a connection to the landscape that could be applied to any identity. The importance of Caribbean specificity here, as Césaire suggests, is the development of an identity that is individual and does not come from a singular historical root. Xantippe, a character who lives on the margins of Rivière-au-sel, allows for a rhizomatic understanding of this relationship with local flora. He opens his chapter by framing himself as the creator: “I named all the trees of this island” (Condé, *Crossing* 201). After listing the names of the trees, he goes on to say that “the trees are our only friends. They have taken care of our bodies and souls since we lived in Africa” (Condé, *Crossing* 203). The trees of the island are not the same trees of Africa, but the connection to the land and the plants remains a shared trait with the African ancestors. This alone, however, is not enough to conceive of Caribbean identity as an African one. Instead, it supports Césaire’s understanding of Caribbean identity through the recognition of an African heritage.

Once again, Condé complicates the relationship between flora, fauna and Caribbean identity by using characters who exploit the island’s resources. The more affluent characters have become so by making the natural unnatural. For example, Loulou not only grows non-native flowers, but grows them for export (De Souza, “Crossing” 364). His son, Aristide, explains that “flowers have no motherland” so he can grow them anywhere (Condé, *Crossing* 58). Loulou and his son represent the conflict between the singular rooted identity and Glissant’s idea of Relation. While Loulou wants his flowers to decorate the table of the Queen of England, he counts on the exotic nature of his product in order to secure business with colonizing powers. He has essentialized

his flowers. Arisitide on the other hand is not tied to the island or the specific flowers of his greenhouse. He is more interested in the connection with nature, as seen with his morning explorations of the forest. His understanding that flowers have no motherland enables him to leave the island. A continued career in flowers allows him to remain connected to his family history without the singular exploitive identity associated with the Lameaulnes Nurseries. This same model is used by Ramsaran, who farms crawfish, rather than fetching them from the river like everyone else, so that he can sell them to hotels. This allows him to profit from island and from essentializing the Caribbean experience (Gaensbauer 406). These two families also represent a continuation of the plantation system, although they mourn for the “good old days” of sugarcane. The plantation system is a continuation of the attempt to master the land and the belief that man can improve nature, rather than attempting to work with nature (Mitsch 63). All of these examples are instances of assimilation into the European way of thought and represent the dangers of a single root system.

In addition to revealing how colonization is harmful to the relationship with the environment, Condé continues her use of polyphonic images through the flora and fauna. Condé shows that it is difficult to assign a singular understanding to the mangrove forest, which she uses to represent both a border and freedom. While there are paths through the forest, she shows how following tracks and traces does not lead to new understandings. Glissant explains the dangers of using a “mythical past” as the basis for understanding Caribbean identity today. Condé’s novel shows that simply following the same paths that already exist is not a viable solution in order to improve the Caribbean situation (De Souza, “Crossing” 371). She addresses this directly with the character of Carmélian who

looks to *Gouverneur de la rosée* as a set of instructions for how to reconnect with the world. He spends his time looking for a spring the same way Manuel did, not because he has a particular need to, but because he's looking for his own "back to nature" experience (Prieto "Landscaping Identity" 148). This attempt to reproduce a fiction is the same as looking to a singular root for identity.

Condé goes on to show that the search for a singular root of identity can be both dangerous and fruitless. She challenges the idea that Caribbean people are simply displaced Africans in multiple ways. There's the simple cultural distinction of the development of a new language which required a man from Guadeloupe to hire a translator while in Africa, as well as Cyrille the storyteller saying he would have stayed in Africa if he hadn't been told to go back where he came from. These experiences make it clear that Caribbean identity cannot come directly from a singular African root. The construction of such an identity does not reveal anything about the individual, but instead provides a context in order to make a group of people more easily categorized by others outside of that community. Glissant addresses the idea of meaningless form in *Caribbean Discourse* with the image of a flower, "I am struck by the fate of flowers. The shapeless yielding to the shapely. As if the land had rejected its 'essence' to concentrate everything in appearance. It can be seen but not smelt" (52). Single rooted identities provide form and nothing else. They erase individuals and replace them with constructed ideals. Glissant continues:

The flower without fragrance endures today, is maintained in form only. Perhaps the emblem of our wait? We dream what we will cultivate in the future, and we wonder vaguely what the new hybrid that is already being prepared for us will look like, since in any case we will not rediscover them as they were, the magnolias of former times (52).

Césaire, Roumain, Condé and Glissant all suggest that one cannot look to past models when it comes to developing Caribbean identity. Something new must be discovered. The connection with Africa as root was severed by the forced migration and cannot be reestablished as the core of Caribbean identity. Césaire calls for the complete destruction of the colonial society and rebuilding community from scratch and Roumain suggests a return to the earth through peasant life. Condé and Glissant look to the future of the Caribbean and the wider world. Building on Roumain's idea of cultivation, they turn to the idea of the hybrid, allowing for organic discovery of multifaceted identities.

Condé goes on to show how a singular root is also ineffective within the individual island of Guadeloupe. Etienne the Historian is surprised by Sancher's appearance because "he thought he knew everyone in Rivière-au-Sel by name, father, and grandfather" (Condé, *Crossing* 195). Identity, here, is determined through the single root of filiation which becomes especially important in maintaining racial purity. The Guadeloupe that Condé portrays in her novel, however, is not divided into black and white. Even more, the community distinguishes between those who come from Guadeloupe and those who come from other Caribbean islands. The fact that Sancher spent time in Cuba immediately sparks an interest because of the images of revolution, whereas Haitians are present only to work. The country is shown as having changed even more with the inclusion of the Ramasarans, an Indian family who cannot develop a Caribbean identity based on either an African or European root. The Ramasarans represent a clear distinction from the idea that Caribbean people share Gaulish ancestors with the French while teaching children anything different results in disciplinary measures (Condé, *Crossing* 115). In order to indirectly counter this, the school teacher in

Condé's novel uses a poem about the Guadeloupian landscape because she "found it strange that the little Guadeloupeans are never taught anything about their own country" (Condé, *Crossing* 119). Any understanding of the island is based on lived experience which is contradicted by the official teachings of the French schools. Rather than conflating race and historical experience into a singular African identity, this system of education tries to force a falsely constructed singular European identity on people whose shared connection to Europe is a legacy of exploitation.

All three of the authors considered here highlight the role of landscape within the French Caribbean novel. Césaire and Roumain use images of the landscape and characters who connect with the landscape in order to stress the importance of developing a Caribbean identity that is not determined by colonial powers. Condé, however, takes it one step further and uses the diversity of nature to reflect the need for a multiplicity of Caribbean identities. Her work supports and furthers Glissant's theories of Relation and the necessity of looking for rhizomatic origins that lead to *métissage* as opposed to trying to mimic a transplanted culture. The singular root system of identity continues the essentialized image of the Caribbean, whereas the rhizomatic root system would mark a move towards de-essentializing Caribbean identity in a way that allows for the development of multiple identities distinct from language divisions or specific islands. Allowing for de-essentialized Caribbean identities would also be a move towards a universal human community not based on colonial divisions of power.

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Biography

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