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Condé: The Politics of Gender and Identity

By MARIE-DENISE SHELTON Today, in the French-speaking Caribbean,

in the domain of theory, a choice is presented among three terms: *africanité*, *créolité*, and *antillanité*. As with any option which presents itself in exclusive forms, this choice is embedded in the complex antagonisms of contemporary Caribbean politics. The dream of a return to Africa which had its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s continues to have a certain resonance in Caribbean imagination. For many the connection to Africa is actualized in various aspects of life and cannot be severed by a stroke of the pen. However, one can say without fear of contradiction that the Caribbean has now entered what could be called the post-Négritude era. For the past few years writers and intellectuals have expressed their opposition to the Négritude concept. For some it represents a retrograde and hegemonic ideology which has recycled the discourse of racism and given it a black face. The title of René Depestre's essay *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude* (1980), written in the language of a manifesto, is in this respect rather revealing. For others the link to Africa appears illusory, given the geographic and cultural distance which separates the Caribbean and Africa. They view the Caribbean as an autonomous terrain: neither a detached piece of Africa nor a remote province of France nor the backyard of the USA. This is the basis for the concept of *antillanité*, which represents a reformulation of historical agency in terms of *méïssage*. Caribbean theorists most recently have found a retrenchment in the linguistic field with the concept of *créolité* or *oralité*. Creole in this instance is established as a metalanguage through which the Caribbean people transcend paralyzing historical antinomies. In literature the concept of *créolité* can be illustrated by the obstreperous novels of Patrick Chamoiseau, for instance. In the Caribbean, as elsewhere, the formulation of theories often puts at risk the very notion of identity. It has led to contests between actors representing antithetical interests or to isolated struggles generated by specific conjunctures.

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What does theory mean when we speak of the woman writer in the Caribbean? What are the resonances of concepts such as *africanité*, *créolité*, or *antillanité* in her consciousness? In which voice will she speak to signify her presence, being confronted as she always is with the fear of invisibility and silence? Can she in any way transform the theorizing space?

Maryse Condé, like the majority of women writers in the Caribbean, remains outside recognized intellectual chapels and literary schools even though she echoes the predominant preoccupations of the Caribbean writer. She affirms her independence from dictated postures as she undertakes to unravel alone the system of relationships which define Caribbean existence. In her essays, novels, and interviews one can retrace the evolution of her ideas on the question of identity both at the collective and the personal level, the latter being inextricably linked to the former. The impression one has in reading Condé is that theory is for her an activity which cannot be located in a set of predefined principles. Rather, she seems to proceed in the manner described by the Afro-American critic Barbara Christian, who believes that women of color "theorize often in narrative forms, in the stories [they] create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to [their] liking."¹

Condé's discourse on culture and identity is formulated such that it represents a critique of power. Here I refer to power rooted in historically determined relations—master/slave, white/black—power generated by the sociocultural system which governs male-female relations. In this undertaking, History as event and as concept becomes for Condé a necessary reference point. In an important essay entitled *La civilisation du bossale* (1978) Condé interprets the social and cultural realities of the Caribbean in a historical continuum of slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism. Her investigation reveals the depressing fact that Caribbean culture is a culture of dependency. "The entire history of the Caribbean can be placed under the sign of dependency," she writes. Dependency, she adds, "constitutes a heavy legacy especially when one knows that the system of production and the power relations in the Antilles have not changed in spite of the evolution of political status."² Condé does not dissociate culture and collective consciousness from the socioeconomic context. She examines the formation of Caribbean identity in terms of chains of relations rooted in the slave/(neo)colonial system and the interplay of

strategies of assimilation and subversion, submission and revolt. Analyzing the oral literary tradition, Condé attempts to recapture the memory of the past and its echoes in the present. She asserts the historical and esthetic importance of the products of oral tradition. It is significant to note that in several of her novels Condé adopts the texture and movement of the Creole story, thus affirming its legitimacy as an artistic form of expression. Moreover, in reconstructing Caribbean history, Condé reveals the emancipatory and humanistic dimensions of the oral tradition, which she defines as "a pedagogy of survival in a hostile environment, fraught with dangers." In a variety of ways, the confrontation of the writer with the origins of the Caribbean people is painful. She uncovers a devastating experience which has left deep scars in the social structures and in the collective consciousness. This history, however, is not, as Condé will demonstrate in several of her novels, a subject for lamentations. It is an "occasion for speaking" and resurrecting the concealed side of history.

In explaining the formation of the Caribbean identity, Condé repudiates certain assumptions. She questions the validity of theories that seek to define the Caribbean in terms of a basic antinomy: Africa against Europe. This approach she describes as essentially Eurocentric: "Researchers, the majority of them Europeans, have tried to evaluate the extent to which the Caribbean people have 'remained' African or 'become' European. They have established a basic postulate that no one dares to question." That postulate is, according to Condé, a racist assertion which ironically has permeated political and ideological debates in the Caribbean. It has served to establish an erroneous classification: those who reclaim the African heritage are the so-called progressives, whereas the defenders of Western values fall into the category of "assimilationists." To Condé, the situation is far more complex, and concepts which congeal reality into fixed categories appear to her peculiarly impotent.

Confronted with the past and the African legacy, Condé sees the challenge not in finding answers but in raising questions. In her inquiry she encounters a series of paradoxes rather than absolutes. The center around which her earlier works revolve is Africa, yet the so-called African novels *Hèrémakhonon* and *Une saison à Rihata* (Eng. *A Season in Rihata*) are somber tales of disconnection, loneliness, alienation, and resentment. On several occasions Condé has reiterated the difficulty for the Caribbean person to reconnect with Africa, its people and its culture. Nevertheless, the journey to Africa was for the author crucial in translating the contradictions of history into possibilities. At the horizon there was no clear destination but rather "a journey to an expectation," an experience of self-revelation. Condé

expresses this paradox in the following terms: "It is Africa which has allowed me to see the world in which I live with my own eyes and to look at things around me in a way which properly belongs to me, Maryse Condé, a black Caribbean woman."⁶

What about Negritude? What does it offer as a theoretical framework? Like Frantz Fanon, Condé considers it a necessary stage in the development of Caribbean self-awareness. It is an experiment which has radically transformed the spiritual and intellectual landscape. No longer is it possible to return to what was: "What should we keep of Negritude? It helped us value our blackness. Formerly, to be black was a curse. After Negritude, our blackness became something we could bear and accept—we could even be proud of it. It helped us confront the world around us by possessing an identity of our own according to the various places in which we were born. Without Negritude, perhaps we would still be ashamed of ourselves."⁷ Nevertheless, Condé, like a number of other black writers and intellectuals today, rejects what she describes as the implicit racism couched in the concept of Negritude. She takes to task its proponents for perpetuating the belief "that all blacks are the same." For Condé, Negritude as a political ideology or a cultural credential seems to have outlived its usefulness. Her relationship with Africa, as a geographic place and an idea, has also been transformed. In spite of her expressed gratitude for the gift of life she received from Africa, Condé, after the writing of *Ségou*, bids a bitter farewell to the Motherland. She declares to have resolutely turned the page and vows never to write again about her. Is this a lovers' quarrel? A family spat? Or is this simply for the author the death of a myth? Whatever the response, it is clear that this new attitude has a great deal to do with the repositioning of the author within the Caribbean context.

Condé's return to Guadeloupe in 1986 is surrounded with an aura of myth and legend. Her critics see it as a major turning point biographically and esthetically. The author herself affirms that she has entered a new phase of her life. The return is characterized as a major event, that of her reconciliation with the island. "Previously, I hated the Antilles," she admits candidly. "Given the way that I was raised, the way my family looked with disdain upon everything from the West Indies. I felt contempt for the place."⁸ The tone is far from triumphant. The voice is hesitant, ambivalent. Condé feels love and hate at the same time. She wants to be here and there, in fact nowhere. "Il faut errer. L'errance est salutaire," she confides in an interview. Like the Barbadian poet George Lamming, Condé seems to celebrate the "pleasures of exile" and uprootedness.

The difficulty of reinscription in the island is reflected in the novel that marked the return: *La vie*

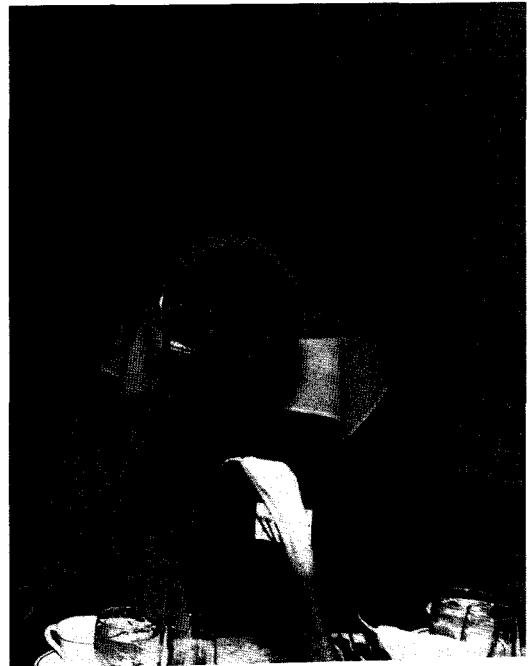
scélérate, translated as *Tree of Life*. Here the narrative runs the risk of evanescence, so ample is the gesture to embrace the totality of an experience. A complex pattern of intersecting lives and dreams emerges. The disparate stories of blacks in the Caribbean and the Americas are interwoven in a neobaroque design. The ideologies of the 1930s and the 1960s are invoked with either wonderment or perplexity. The ideas of *l'indépensans*, of the diaspora, the thwarted dream of unity, social conflicts, and prejudices are examined, as the author attempts to follow the Ariadne's thread of the Caribbean epic. The idea of black history and black identity remains hazy. One of the female characters, frustrated by the limitations of black movements, feels forlorn, suspended above the "limitless surface of the sea under the sky."¹⁰ The collective projects of recent history—Garveyism, the civil-rights movement, black power, Negritude, and indigenism—are relived in a degraded mode. Everything is gnawed by the virus of inauthenticity or failure, even the myths produced by popular imagination. Hence, for instance, the saga of Ti-Jean, who went away "to slay the Beast who swallowed the sun," is evoked as sheer velleity, not as a liberating myth.

With *La vie scélérate* Condé has entered, as it were, into an "era of suspicion." In the postcolonial world she describes, language, myth, and ideas are infused with ambiguity. The idea which prevails at the end is that in the Caribbean today a crisis of the spirit, a crisis of meaning, exists. Adopting a Nai-paulesque posture, Condé casts an estranged gaze on the world she had hoped to repossess. The novel does not, however, recount a tale of total defeat. It is the expression of a desire, a desire to belong, to be part of. Condé celebrates in a way a "false return," deprived of messianic prestige. As such, her exploration stands as a sort of parody of Césaire's famous *Return*. It is as if Condé, a woman writer, refuses in a sense to bow to the conventions which govern writing by men. At the risk of being considered iconoclastic, one wonders whether a woman writer could ever be as theatrical as the male poet in signifying her presence and her return home.

The Caribbean experience filtered through Condé's sensibility yields different responses. Already in her study *La parole des femmes* (1978) Condé had posed the question of identity in terms of the reality of women. Using the works of women writers from Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Martinique as a looking glass, she sought to define a territory of the feminine, where theory, practice, and personal experience merge. "Theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice,"¹¹ wrote Michel Foucault. The exploration of the corpus of feminine texts is for Condé the affirmation of the Caribbean existence and the recognition of the specificity of women's voices. Theories of alienation

are invoked to define the position of women in Caribbean society and the nature of feminine discourse. The literary reality is examined within the context of societies which have been traumatized by the slave/colonial experience, societies which relegate women to subaltern and marginal positions. Condé bemoans the paucity of women writers, their difficult access to education and literature. Comparing authors from different backgrounds and with distinct sensibilities, she discovers, however, similar images and echoes of the same despair. What is crucial in the analysis undertaken by Condé in *La parole des femmes* and elsewhere is the recognition not of a so-called feminine essence but of the urgency of stories told by women. The title of the essay is evocative. It uncovers the process which the poet Audre Lorde defines as "the transformation of silence into language and action."¹² Speaking of love, motherhood, nurturing, and self-image, the women writers introduced by Condé seek to redefine culture and reorder priorities. In an examination of the literary production of women writers of the Caribbean, the following observation made by the critic Trinh Minh-ha appears particularly pertinent: "More and more women see writing as *the* place of change where the possibility of transforming social and cultural structure is offered."¹³

Condé, in her essay and elsewhere, interprets woman's condition in the Caribbean in terms of socioeconomic arrangements defined by race, class and sex. She smashes in passing the images which



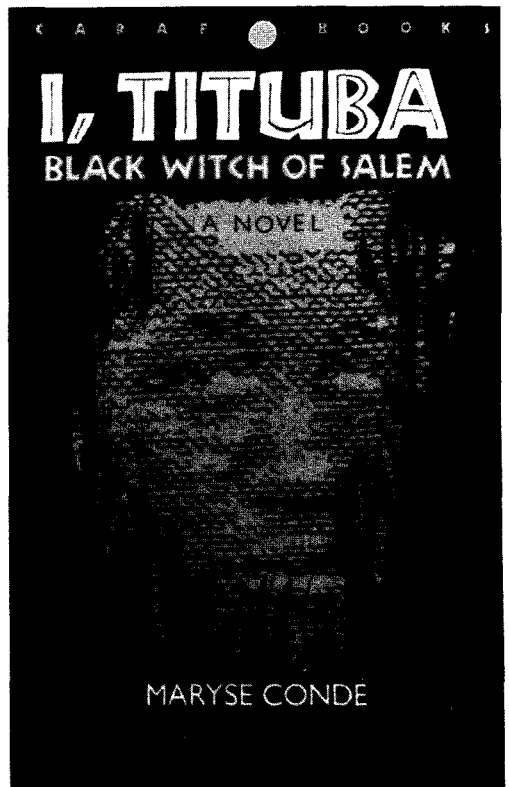
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idealize, degrade, or demonize women while giving an approving nod to the verity expressed by the Creole proverb, "Fem cé chantaïn, n'hom'cé fouyapïn" (Women are like chestnut, men like breadfruit).¹⁴ She wishes to rewrite Caribbean history to include models of womanhood who defied the logic of oppression: Nanny the Maroon or Solitude. For Condé, women are makers of history, agents of culture. However, as writers, as women, they are caught in a fierce struggle between visibility and invisibility, between voice and silence. Condé recognizes that, for women, writing is still today, in the context of Caribbean societies, an act of transgression, of defiance. Feminine discourse in the Caribbean, she concludes, "is neither optimistic nor victorious. It is loaded with anguish, frustration, and revolt. . . . Throughout the world, the woman's voice is rarely triumphant. The feminine condition is everywhere characterized by exploitation and dependency. Given the particular context of the Antilles, anguish, frustration, and revolt are expressed differently. It is that difference that needed to be apprehended."¹⁵

When examining Condé's own narrative practice, one cannot speak of a feminist imagination per se. Still, she proposes a powerful response to the theoretical and literary challenge in the Caribbean. A different vision of Caribbean existence is reflected in her work. Her novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière . . . Noire de Salem* (Eng. I, *Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) represents in this respect a turning point and a major accomplishment in Caribbean literature. Here the contemporary discourse on power, gender, and cultural politics is transposed in the fictional story of the forgotten black witch of Salem. In giving voice to the "witch," the author uncovers the complex interplay between subjectivity, the collective, and history. The identity of the witch is problematic, but she occupies today a central place in a certain feminist mythology. As a political and poetic figure, the "witch" initiates the liberating processes through which the feminine can be reconfigured. She enters into feminist imagination as a being who struggles against repressive powers and is celebrated as a symbol of freedom and contestation. We know that, together with the hysteric, the figure of the witch has been interpreted as embodying the contradictions of feminine existence. In *La jeune née*, which can be read as a sort of feminist manifesto, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément exalt the indomitable spirit of the witch engaged in a strategy of subversion and revolt: "La sorcière, sert a joindre tous les bouts d'une culture difficile a vivre . . . , elle accomplit tous les compromis; et surtout femme, la sorcière est avorteuse. Elle transite imaginativement, juchée sur le bouc noir qui l'enlève, empalée par le balai qui la fait s'envoler; elle va du côté de l'animalité, des plantes, du non-humain."¹⁶ *Tituba*, like

the witch reconceived by Cixous, transcends the accepted historical construct. In a first-person narrative, she appropriates the author's voice to recount her story through slavery, persecutions, revolts, and her experience as a maroon.

In the creation of her witch, Condé removes what Cixous calls "the old crust of interdictions" so that the identity of her heroine is restored in a "decensored relation to her sexuality and her being as a woman."¹⁷ With this novel Condé displaces the narrative beyond boundaries, across borders, in an attempt to reconstruct personal and collective history. The notion of "marronnage culturel" can be invoked here to describe the strategy of "detour" used by the novelist to assert the Caribbean presence. Desire and history appear at the same time. It is in a dynamic confrontation with history as desire that Condé activates the dialectics between nature and culture, speech and silence, Eros and Thanatos. The voice is powerful, as the novelist draws on the energy of the Creole phrase to explore the realm of the feminine, the supernatural, and the contradictions of history, past and present; yet the voice falters somewhat when contemplating the relationship of black women to the feminist agenda. Feminism as a concept remains for Condé and her heroine a foreign notion which is not quite congruent with the Caribbean woman's experience. In the foreword to the English version of the novel, however, Angela Davis finds a useful critique of feminism in Condé's



fable: "Tituba is a powerfully sexual being. She accepts and embraces her sexuality and does not allow the strong sexual attraction she feels for men to dilute her active solidarity with women, black as well as white. Yet, because of her defense of her sexuality, she is reluctant to call herself a feminist. From our contemporary vantage point, feminists of all cultures may find enlightenment in her ambivalence."¹⁸

Ambivalence is a key word when one attempts to understand Condé's writing and vision in general. This is not to suggest a deficiency or an absence, but to define the fundamental identity of her work. Ambivalence constitutes the irreplaceable flaw upon which rests the literary edifice she has created. The secret of literature or of any art, as Maurice Blanchot reminds us, resides in the existence of a particular and necessary flaw: "Tout art tire son origine d'un défaut exceptionnel, toute œuvre est la mise en œuvre de ce défaut d'origine d'où nous viennent l'approche menacée de la plénitude et une lumière nouvelle."¹⁹ Such is the necessary but paradoxical proposition which carries with it the promise of a new reality to come.

This reality is not a given; it is a fleeting possibility which has to be captured through a bold affirmation of creative exigency and exclusive passion. This is what Condé successfully achieves in one of her latest novels, *Traversée de la mangrove* (Crossing the Mangrove; 1989). Here again the narrative voice transgresses boundaries and blurs borders. Gender limits are crossed as the author becomes one with her male protagonist, an enigmatic and disruptive adventurer whose death becomes the pretext of the storytelling experiment. Through him/her the people of the small village of Rivière au Sel, where the story takes place, recover the meaning of life and a sense of their identity. Language strongly creolized becomes sufficiently expressive to allow the successive "speakers" to tell their story and communicate with one another. The duality inherent in the protagonist, who is both male and female, creates a tension central to Condé's search for a more complete sense of self. Other women writers have expressed a similar desire for a sort of plenitude in the integration of the feminine and masculine principles. Far more explicit than Condé, the American poet Audre Lorde, for instance, says: "I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks."²⁰ These words could quite aptly capture an important aspect of Condé's narrative project. The horizon in her work, however, is located more in the esthetic and cultural realm than in the erotic, as she attempts to erase antagonisms and amplify our vision of the Caribbean.

Condé today argues for the appreciation of the pluralism of Caribbean culture. Whereas the narrative in previous novels up to *Tituba* was essentially univocal, in her latest novels she restores the vitality of diverse utterances. This creates a decentered effect. Creole, virtually absent before, finds now in her work, albeit guardedly, an accommodating site. Such a narrative strategy based on linguistic displacement and multiplicity of voices is a contestation of the idea of a hegemonic culture. Condé interprets Caribbean culture as the meeting site of oppositional voices which are not mutually exclusive. Here one can see at work the conceptual system prevalent today among a great number of Caribbean writers, that of the so-called *identité métisse* of the Caribbean.

Condé today appears to share the view of modern or rather postmodern theorists such as the Haitian poet Anthony Phelps, who denounces the imposition of prefixes such as *Negro-*, *Afro-*, or *Euro-* to define Caribbean identity. The culture that has been created in the Caribbean, according to a number of contemporary writers, including Phelps, René Depestre, Glissant, and other proponents of the concept of *antillanité*, is something unique. It is neither African nor European but rather the product of a long historical process of *mélange*. The Caribbean writer for some time now has asked to be recognized "neither as an African in exile in America nor as a prefixed writer." In this respect one may recall Anthony Phelps's stern objurgation to his audience at a conference of French-speaking writers held in Padua in 1983: "You would do me a great favor if you would consider me an American writer, a Caribbean writer . . . or more simply, more humanly, neither black nor white, neither red nor yellow, just a poet."²¹ I do not know whether Condé feels as strong a revulsion for prefixes as does Phelps, but on a number of occasions she has expressed her discontent with definitions of the Caribbean which ignore the complexity of Creole culture. However, where Condé perhaps parts ways with proponents of the new ideologies of *antillanité*, *créolité*, or *métissage* is that for her these terms need to be problematized constantly. Condé remains skeptical of a terminology which poses as all-encompassing. To assert oneself as "American" or "Caribbean" in absolute terms, as does Phelps, is to reinstitute the battle of labels, which for Condé has little connection to reality.

When assessing the position of Maryse Condé in relation to the question of gender and identity in the Caribbean, one notes a constant oscillation between exteriority and interiority, acceptance and rejection, a desire to settle and an impulse to wander. Condé herself admits that she is still "in the process of reevaluating West Indian culture." With regard to the gender question, the novelist shares the ideals of

emancipation and freedom expounded by feminists. However, afraid to be boxed in, she has exhibited a certain mistrust toward *feminism* as a call to action or as a catchall word which in the end eludes the specificity of the Caribbean woman's situation.

No definite truths can therefore be pronounced about Condé's work. Her oeuvre is a dynamic and open structure which defies our impulse to categorize. As a woman and as a writer, she has maneuvered through the pitfalls of ideological rigidity, indifference, and political expediency in order to find meaning. Through a rich body of texts, she has shown that the exiguous space of the island is not a finite world, closed unto itself. With a voice which is by turn caustic, blunt, and lyrical, Condé signifies the infinite depths of human reality. She is not afraid to provoke or even displease. Her idea of Caribbean identity has evolved over the years. However, she has remained unchanged about one fundamental principle: her refusal "to pour old drugs into new bottles." In the process she has offered to us texts which challenge the tyranny of authoritative discourse and extend the boundaries of imagination.

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¹ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," in *Making Face, Making Soul—Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., Aunt Lute Books, 1990, p. 336.

² Maryse Condé, *La civilisation du bossale*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1978, p. 6. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵ This is the title of a chapter in George Lamming's essay *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960, 1985) devoted to Africa.

⁶ Maryse Condé, "Le difficile rapport à l'Afrique" (interview), *Autrement Revue*, 41 (1989), p. 105.

⁷ Maryse Condé, in "I Have Made Peace with My Island," an interview conducted by Vèvè A. Clark, *Callaloo*, 12:1 (Winter 1989), pp. 115–16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁹ Condé, interview in *Autrement*, p. 103.

¹⁰ Maryse Condé, *La vie scélérate*, Paris, Seghers, 1987, p. 280.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald Bouchard, ed. & tr., Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 209.

¹² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, N.Y., Crossing Press, 1984, p. 40.

¹³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. 135–36.

¹⁴ This popular Creole proverb celebrates the strength and fortitude of the Caribbean woman. The chestnut tree and the breadfruit tree look alike. However, whereas the breadfruit splatters when it falls, the chestnut fruit, protected with a hard shell, does not break easily. As Condé notes, this image cannot be understood by those unfamiliar with the Caribbean world. See Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes: Essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1979, p. 4.

¹⁵ Condé, *La parole des femmes*, p. 113.

¹⁶ Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *La jeune née*, Paris, 10/18, 1975, p. 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁸ Angela Davis, "Foreword," in Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Richard Philcox, tr., Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1992, p. xii.

¹⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir*, Paris, Folio/Gallimard, 1959, p. 148.

²⁰ Audre Lorde, *ZAMI: A Biomythography*, Trumansburg, N.Y., Crossing Press, 1982, p. 7.

²¹ Anthony Phelps, "Moi, nègre d'Amérique . . . ou Je ne suis pas un écrivain afro-américain," *Notre Librairie*, 74 (1984), p. 59.

