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## Voice and Resistance in Maryse Condé's *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer*: Dynamics of Race, Gender, and *Écriture Féminine*

Maria M. Klingele  
mklingel@iwu.edu

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*Voice and Resistance in Maryse Condé's Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer:  
Dynamics of Race, Gender, and Écriture Féminine*

Maria Klingele

Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé (1937 - ) writes with a voice of strength and credibility: combating multiple forms of oppression, Condé's past experiences and self-perception are the result of a life lived in a colonized and patriarchal society—which elicited resilience rather than fear. In her many works, such as the acclaimed novels *Ségou* (*Segu*, 1987) and *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, 1986), Condé gradually constructs a collective female identity that counters a world of supremacy, and her inspiring journey hinges upon her ability to criticize openly issues previously hidden by men and hegemonic ideals. In her 1999 autobiographical collection of short stories, entitled *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (*Tales From the Heart: True Stories From My Childhood*, 1999), she reexamines scenes from her childhood, dissecting the complicated and painful dynamics that informed her character, which ultimately led her to discover a path of resistance. Particularly striking in this work is her ability to examine aspects of her thinking and writing that are capable of dismantling ethnocentric viewpoints and "healing women's suffering." As *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* presents episodes from the author's early life and her own self-reflection about those experiences, she forms her identity as part of her own processes of *écriture féminine* that allow her to unveil the silence promoted by subjugation.

### **Condé's Vision and Critical Position**

In order to contextualize Condé's autobiographical work and her vision of an idealized future, important to note is that Condé's narratives become not simply stories of repression but rather critical analyses of the perpetuating systems of imperialism, injustice, and globalization.

Condé's criticism is authentic since, after living in a "colonized" and an "imperialistic" world—as she is a native of Guadeloupe (an overseas department of France) and a French citizen, as well as a citizen of the United States—she understands the consequences of sustaining a society that divides itself between the "inferior" and "superior".<sup>1</sup> This alienating dichotomy becomes personal for Condé, since compliance to such rhetoric leads to a broken identity and consequently, a lost voice. Writing and speaking then transform into an essential tool that helps to deconstruct the categorization assigned to Condé. However, unique to Condé's writing is her effort to argue for an equality that is universal and applicable to all societies succumbed to injustice. She fights for "non pas une liberté portée par les ailes de plomb des dogmes, non pas une liberté étroitement circonscrite à sa race, ses origines, à son sexe, mais la liberté absolue qui fait de tout être humain une speculation à la fois tragique et épique."<sup>2</sup> She desires a complete integration of society, thus giving her novels innovative character.

Due to societal pressures to conform to the mainstream culture, both men and women are capable of actively perpetuating this system of inequality; however, Condé's stories that examine exploitation assign women the responsibility of questioning their beliefs. Since she grew up in a culture consumed of patriarchal values, she has not yet seen the power and complete utilization of women's voices, and a man's categorization presents an additional blindness of male dominance that only women can disrupt. Condé thereby offers her suspicions and questions from her early childhood in order to invite women to reflect upon their own experiences and "write their own stories." Nick Nesbitt argues that Condé's writing "stands as the subjective, limited refusal of a contemporary capitulation of all autonomous productive forces," or those that work to sustain subjugating discourse.<sup>3</sup> When she tells women that "writing is not something useless, but rather that it is full of creativity," she gives them opportunity to expand their knowledge and

idea of the essence of self-expression.<sup>4</sup> Condé does not encourage women scholars to hide within an illusory, "u–topic, nonexistent world" but instead to realistically examine their own path to survival.<sup>5</sup> Only after this transition to a direct confrontation will the world shift toward equality.

Condé's short essays, *The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation* (2004) and *O Brave New World* (1998) particularly reflect her advice to women to overtly challenge their world of oppression. Condé's *The Stealers of Fire*, targeting women from the Caribbean specifically to gain a "pyrrhic victory" as they write and ultimately demolish their expected condition of subordination, shows Condé's readers how to save their islands from the development of a Western construction of black culture.<sup>6</sup> As these women take possession of their language away from their oppressors, a sense of freedom emerges. Condé explains the significance of this act:

Women writers from the Caribbean are located on the margins of male discourse, they preempt it, accentuate it, or contradict it, and they introduce into the field of literature the notion of disorder. The words of women possess the power of anarchy and subversion.<sup>7</sup>

Women therefore act as the primary aggressors since the Caribbean writer has to combat " a tradition shaped by the culture of official language," or, in other words, the "European language" developed by male suppressors.<sup>8</sup> Condé defines a woman's voice as capable of providing a perspective that creates inventive forms of literary expression unattainable by men, or more specifically, by the voices that uplift the patriarch and the colonizer. As a group trampled on by their husbands, sons, and imperialists, the task of exposing their reality is difficult but consequently powerful in the face of this hierarchical system. Although the significance of Caribbean identity and voice is unique in itself as it emerges from silence, Condé's proclamation to women is explored initially in order for her to understand her role in impeding the deep-rooted patriarchal world.

As Condé outlines the meaning of a "brave new world," the novelist examines the difficulty for women to declare their authenticity in a realm of oppression. She warns her audience that creating a sense of unrest alone will not lead to liberation, since, as she notes as an example from the *Stealers of Fire*, the abolition of slavery did not equalize the African culture with that of the superior "white" culture.<sup>9</sup> She believes the best way to resolve such issues of injustice is to eliminate the notion of "an inferior being" altogether and instead support "a universe where the notions of race, nationality, identity and language, which for so long have divided us, are re-examined and find new expressions."<sup>10</sup> Relationships between countries, men, and women need to be reinterpreted so that subordination becomes a term of the past.<sup>11</sup> Again, this lingering aspiration accordingly lies in the hands of women since they possess the tools to dismantle the conception of male authority. Undoubtedly, for Condé, writing and speaking are the instruments that women must use to level themselves with men. Thus, an appreciation of Condé's goals for humanity allows readers of her novels to understand the weight of her words and their implications.

Scholars who have analyzed Condé's work recognize that the author's purpose is to go beyond merely teaching her readers a lesson; she instead pushes her colleagues to acknowledge their individual sufferings and use them to join a growing network of resistance. *Ségou*, *Traversée de la mangrove* (*Crossing the Mangrove*, 1985) and *Hérémakhonon* (*Heremakhonon*, 1976) are three works out of a multitude of others that present Condé's stance on her desire to change women's frames of mind. These writings also present the origins of Condé's inspiration to challenge the segregated world so prevalent in her life. They each reflect the importance of identity development, and the character's experiences present parallels to the author's own childhood.

In an insightful article that investigates how Condé employs her novel *Ségou* set in Africa to assert "ethnographic discourse" and "reinforce the authenticity of the fictional world of the narrative,"<sup>12</sup> Victoria Lodewick gives a brief account of Condé's educational background and how her schools in Guadeloupe forced assimilation to the dominant, French society. As she finished her schooling, Condé had taught in Africa and was able to reconstruct her heritage and creole identity. Such identity transformation allowed Condé to present an element of truth-telling in her work, and Lodewick notes how Condé, through her effort to maintain ethnography in her text, is able to portray Africa in a realistic light from acknowledgements, footnotes, an appendix, and historical facts within the narrative itself. Lodewick accordingly notes Condé's own explanation of how to use creativity in literature as she effectively proves how a work of fiction can also preserve the culture's history and struggles against its subjugators. Condé's past necessitated a veritable account of her story; she thereby learned to develop her gift of writing and celebrate those silenced. Her inventiveness in accomplishing this objective additionally offers her female writers with a sample of how to avoid internalizing the "superior" society's perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Ruthmarie Mitsch argues that the novel *Traversée de la mangrove* presents a sense of "multiculturalism" in both the theme as well as its organization in order to instill Condé's aspiration of achieving an integrated society.<sup>14</sup> The funeral of the character Francisco Sanchez, for example, represents the merging of diverse identities as various people with whom he established relationships attended. As a well respected character whose identity was left unknown (and therefore unable to associate itself with a particular country), Sanchez diminishes any sense of cultural preference.<sup>15</sup> As a result, Mitsch comments that as "the work stresses multiple relations to the land," as opposed to one group's dominant possession over the territory,

there does not exist an identity that deems itself the most superior.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the novel's structure further combats a Euro-centric position as it avoids a standard linear form and thus "cannot come to a close, so to speak, because it reflects a world still in the making."<sup>17</sup> Condé's writing, as noted in *O Brave New World* and shown from her novels, moves one step further with respect to postcolonial and feminist discourses: while she encourages women and suppressed countries to act against their oppressors, she also eliminates competition altogether. The establishment of a unified "us" without the "them" is Condé's envisioned end result. *Traversée de la mangrove* enables Condé's audience to understand the complexity of her egalitarian concept and its contribution to literary analysis.

Régine Altagrâce Latortue further describes Condé's vision in the narrative *Hérémakhonon* since the main character Veronica represents the "diasporic female heroine of the contemporary era."<sup>18</sup> Veronica's life symbolizes Condé's, since her past conflicts in the Antilles and the strains of modern French society cause her to combat the societal pressures of the "white world."<sup>19</sup> Consequently, Condé's own inner complexity in shaping her identity allows her to envision a character that learns to refuse the assimilation expected of her. Veronica, like Condé, thinks outside of the sphere of approved gender and racial categorizations and instead creates her own paradigm of social standards. As all three of Condé's mentioned novels illustrate, Condé's past led to a personalized construction of identity development and a visible effort to oust the dominant tradition. Accordingly, a complete understanding of this necessary transition from compliance to subversion requires an analysis of the author's autobiographical text, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*.

## Psychoanalysis and *Écriture Féminine*

Condé's collections of stories reflect an underlying purpose; without such a goal of redefining society's constructs, readers might miss the message to her female readers/writers to dismantle the literary tradition defined by men. The concept of *écriture féminine* remains problematic, for it differs from other forms of what may now be considered "traditional" feminist writing. Rather than *representing* women's issues or a woman's perspective in written work, for example, *écriture féminine* instead aims to reveal a woman's essence and place it outside of the patriarchal order. In other words, a female's voice considered to instill feminist writing remains vulnerable to male and European discourse, therefore necessitating a reconfiguration. Kari Weil notably describes the emergence of *écriture féminine* as a response to the subjugating works of theorists Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Weil argues that women search for "a different 'feminine' which has been heretofore oppressed and unspoken because it is unspeakable within patriarchal language."<sup>20</sup> Lacan's widespread viewpoint of the development of language certainly limits the power of women's writing, and his ideas have historically led feminists to create a new form in response.

Lacan's research becomes particularly objectifying to women because he believes that only men can fulfill the advancement of discourse.<sup>21</sup> In his collected works published as *Écrits* (*Writings*, 1966), Lacan outlines this goal as a challenge since "such is the fright that seizes man when he unveils the face of his power that he turns away from it even in the very act of laying its features bare."<sup>22</sup> Already from this statement women are excluded from this power as it regards access to the function of speech. According to Lacan, the only form of discourse women possess is that of a reply to the man's language for the benefit of the man being heard and understood. Additionally dissatisfying is the belief that only the most trivial response is necessary because it

does not require spoken words: Lacan explains, "even if it communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the evidence, it affirms that speech constitutes the truth."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the outcome necessitates the subjugation and abjection of women; regardless of a woman's response, whether with criticism or silence, the man's voice is that of the subject position, with the authority of credibility and meaning.

Desire also becomes an important aspect of Lacan's theory because it represents "lack" ("manque"); as men try to express their dominance through language and writing, expression will never be fully attainable as long as desire exists and limits a man's "totality."<sup>24</sup> Lacan therefore interprets Freud's Oedipus complex (in which the son wants to replace his father in order to gain affection from his mother) as "the nucleus of desire"; yet, this weakness quickly transitions to a strength as it also marks "the beginnings of morality, conscious, law, and all forms of authority."<sup>25</sup> This acquisition of desire leads to consciousness and the idea of power because, as the father intervenes and initiates separation between the mother and child, the child is forced to suppress his passions and recognize the "phallus" as the leader in restoring order.<sup>26</sup> Lacan further emphasizes language achievement at this stage since the suppression of the child's longing for the mother results in a "speaking subject."<sup>27</sup> Language is gained because there no longer remains a want for the mother. Again, Lacan's ideas problematize the position of women, because the separation from them and their lack of the phallus results in suppression and objectification of the woman, thus leaving the ability of language as a possession of the father (or the phallus).<sup>28</sup>

This dynamic explains a woman's inability to speak of her own *jouissance*, or enjoyment.<sup>29</sup> *Jouissance* denotes an important aspect of writing for feminists, because as Madelon Sprengnether summarizes in her analysis of Freudian thought on feminism and psychoanalysis, this embodiment of desire disrupts the notion that the phallus acts as the

supreme authority.<sup>30</sup> Without the possession of *jouissance*, which ultimately contradicts male supremacy, "femininity" consequently results "as a function of language in the position of subversion" as it represents the desire for a woman (or "lack") that man dismisses.<sup>31</sup> A lack of want or desire for the woman, for example, gives men authority as they avoid a woman's persuasion and thereby escape weakness. Lacan tries to remedy this fate for women by offering his language as a means of disclosing their *jouissance*.<sup>32</sup> He claims that men sympathetic to women's fated silence can expose their ideas and thoughts through their own form of writing; yet, inevitably, this assertion continues to limit feminist expression because Lacan believes the woman's voice can only be filtered through man.<sup>33</sup> The concept of *jouissance* denoted by Sprengnether, and a woman's ability to express her own desire, leads to a narrower definition of *écriture féminine* and calls into question whether or not Condé's liberal perspective is a true deliverance of her passions.

Feminist theoretician Marianne Dekoven has additionally described the influential role *jouissance* plays in the formation of *écriture féminine*. According to Dekoven, *écriture féminine* is a "revolutionary feminist mode of experimental writing" that results from feminist literary critics in particular challenging the current social, cultural, and political forms of suppression.<sup>34</sup> *Jouissance*, and the "pleasure principle" that is kept repressed under Freud's theory, then becomes essential to experimental writing because its release is accompanied by "a new, revolutionized world."<sup>35</sup> If oppressed nations continue to be silenced, for example, there would exist no medium through which the essence of *jouissance* could be propelled. Dekoven summarizes the consequence of this pleasurable state as she adds:

In opposition to symbolic language, the presymbolic language of experimental writing enacts the *jouissance* of the 'pre-Oedipal union with the mother's body, a gesture, against the repression of

the Rule of the Father, toward releasing into written culture the power of the Mother.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of Lacanian thought, symbolic language refers to Freud's "reality principle," where the transition into the Symbolic marks the procurement of language and the affirmation of the phallus's control.<sup>37</sup> This experimental writing acts beyond simply writing in a feminist perspective, because it drives an entirely new form of language into the world and causes the Mother to play the role as signifier. Rather than condemn the mother to the side of speech that lacks meaning, the woman who releases her desires undermines the man's power. Condé's written works and speeches that ask for a world of diminished notions of supremacy and subordination similarly display a sense of *jouissance*, as they aim to restructure society's developed norms, and this discourse further materializes in her engaged novels.

As Kari Weil examines the utilization of *jouissance* in French feminist theory, she denotes the primacy of the body: a woman's *jouissance* is what French feminists believe as the deepest form of female oppression, and similar to Dekoven's idea, this essence is the key for women to override the patriarchal system.<sup>38</sup> If, for example, women "unleash their libidinal force in writing," the impact threatens the phallus.<sup>39</sup> Sprengnether agrees with Weil's observation, since she believes Lacan's flaw in his psychoanalysis presents a mother who "actively arouses desire" in the child who succumbs to her seduction.<sup>40</sup> The mother then becomes "potentially phallic" during the period of the Oedipus complex and undermines Lacan's notion of the father as the signifier.<sup>41</sup> Rather than simply revealing her *jouissance*, a woman must use it to create a style of writing unattainable by the patriarchic realm.

Resulting from the shortcomings of psychoanalysis, French feminists posit a redefinition of the nature of *écriture féminine*. Women need to understand themselves and the origin of their suffering (not based on a male interpretation) as well as "the specificity of women's relations to

language and writing."<sup>42</sup> Numerous French female writers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva have constructed such meaning by providing women with a critique of Lacan's theories. Their efforts enable women to find a path to speech and language in a way that does not lead to subjugation. Instead, women learn that they are free to discover their desires and claim a style of writing entirely their own. These insights into *écriture féminine* are fundamental in order to understand the context and impact of Condé's work.

Simone de Beauvoir's work on feminist and psychoanalytic theory, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*, 1949), provides a functional foundation for later feminist writers as she includes numerous criticisms of Lacan's limiting ideas and approaches to acquiring *écriture féminine*. She believes that Freud's psychoanalysis does not provide reasoning for a woman's state of lost language and that women must not fall short of his socially constructed norms.<sup>43</sup> Such standards affectively limit women as an Other without desires, since "the absence of the penis prevents her from being conscious of herself as a sexual being."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, by denying the roles presented to them and by asserting femininity (or what also can be described as *jouissance*), women gain the ability to regard themselves as the subject rather than the object of speech.<sup>45</sup> The "libido" is not only reserved for males; it is also part of a woman's essence concealed by their oppressors.<sup>46</sup>

*Écriture féminine* then requires an exposure of women's abilities, or in De Beauvoir's words, a liberation of the preoedipal mother contained within the Imaginary and a reunification of the female body.<sup>47</sup> According to De Beauvoir, this action's necessity resides in the idea that a woman is not without discourse; rather, "her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils."<sup>48</sup> This potential language is so often repressed because it is "unspeakable within the patriarchal language" and thus undetected by women as a result of this discourse's

domination.<sup>49</sup> If a woman wishes to instill her desires, she needs to replace male constructs with the release of her already existing voice.

Hélène Cixous formulates ideas similar to those of De Beauvoir, but rather than noting a distinct separation between the object and the subject, Cixous seeks the "utopian practice" that dismantles the idea of division.<sup>50</sup> In her seminal work, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, (*The Laugh of the Medusa*, 1975) for example, *écriture féminine* evolves from a "change at the level of sexual relations."<sup>51</sup> She explains that while most women feel that a divulgence of their desires condemns them to shame, such a message is simply patriarchal and ultimately leads to a man's protection. In order to combat *phallogocentrism* (the primacy of the phallus and the male subject), women need to embrace their bodies by writing in their individual perspective. A woman must take back what has been "confiscated from her" and release her "within," so that as she retracts her shame her voice emerges with full confidence and force.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, for Cixous *écriture féminine* places an emphasis on an act of resistance rather than a woman's narrative of oppression. This particular style of writing is essential to women because it becomes "a way of writing that embodies giving without taking back and without expectation of return" and a self-satisfactory desire instead of a "desire-that-gives."<sup>53</sup> This objective certainly does not situate a woman in a position of submission, but rather presents her with an opportunity to play a leading role in her narrative.

Luce Irigaray agrees with De Beauvoir in terms of liberating the woman from the Imaginary described by Lacan, and she describes *jouissance* as a woman's ability to reveal her language and desires.<sup>54</sup> A woman's *jouissance* is necessary to her innovative writings since a "woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's."<sup>55</sup> Irigaray states that if men's libido and language are considered separate from a woman's, a woman's libido must

also then cause a type of diction only relatable to her, the subservient being. Thus, *jouissance* gives women a symbol of liberation and new perspectives. Without it, women risk their own adaptation to male, Western constructs of dominance.

Julia Kristeva provides additional explanations of the impact of *jouissance* on a male's words of domination, and her studies of linguistics in the 1960s advanced feminist discourse.<sup>56</sup> Similar to De Beauvoir's theories, Kristeva notes that as the mother is put "on the side of the socio-symbolic community," she only becomes defined through "childbearing and procreation in the name of the father."<sup>57</sup> Kristeva presents the notion that the concepts discussed from Freudian theories are more socialized than truthful; that is, "the symbolic order functions in our monotheistic West" through a "*system of kinship*" that marks the father's lineage and a "*system of speech*" that crafts a "'scientific' form of communication."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, a woman's *jouissance* is veiled by the society constructed by man.<sup>59</sup> Kari Weil discusses Kristeva's contribution to feminist theory as a way of marking *écriture féminine* as an "assimilation to semiotic" principles; women's writing needs to identify new symbolic meanings to society and to their lives in order to develop a genuine voice.<sup>60</sup>

*Écriture féminine* then becomes a potential challenge to the prevailing social constructions; thus, as Weil affirms, the "'feminine' of *écriture féminine* must not be regarded as representing something which exists in the world, but as (re) productive, giving life to new possibilities for imagining of living women's bodies and desires."<sup>61</sup> The language that evolves from this writing style is rare because it is unprecedented; as for Condé, women's voices become powerful because only they understand their oppression and therefore can articulate the necessity for a disruption of the social and patriarchal hierarchy. This discourse is an entity that pushes for liberation, equality, and a sense of hope.

## Post-Colonial Theory and the Other

The development of *écriture féminine* as a revolutionary change in writing is perhaps most tangible in the formation of voice that lies outside of the authority's constructs. The process of writing requires not only the decision to write but also a reflection of a woman's innate truth and language: if a woman is able to disassemble the dominant, male-defined system, then she also must gain an awareness of her body and confidence in her identity. As feminist writers have demonstrated in their analysis of psychoanalytic theory, a woman requires the ability to understand that male language is not the only form that exists. Women need education and a developed understanding of the supremacy-dependency concept in order to either take a dominant position or destroy the dichotomy entirely.

Both Lacan and De Beauvoir developed a notion of the "Other" to explain their present-day hierarchical perception of man's superiority and woman's inferiority, a benchmark that Condé confronts in her writing. In Lacan's case, the Other is linked to the woman because she is the source of desire, the element that men must repress in order to express meaningful language. Heeding this desire is further discouraged as it represents the man's dissatisfaction with his current life.<sup>62</sup> The Other also denotes the unconscious and the object, and the suppression of the woman is accomplished as she becomes concealed by a man's conscious.<sup>63</sup> Yet there cannot be a conscious without an unconscious or a subject without an object, and inevitably the role of the Other is crucial in the sense that it proffers man the verification of the primacy of his own speech. Lacan explains in his work *Écrits* why the Other is necessary:

What is seek in speech is the response of the other...if I call the person to whom I am speaking by whatever name I choose to give him, I intimate to him the subjective function that he will take on again in order to reply to me, even if it is to repudiate this function.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Lacan places himself as the subject, denouncing the Other as the object that he claims it to be. This stance gives to Lacan (the subject) the power of language; whether or not the replier disagrees, that person is reduced to compliance because only the speaker's idea has meaning. If women are depicted as the Other, their resistance is then only limited to an objectified or male-constructed response. This effectively places writers like Condé in a position in which any thought is inevitably controlled by the dominant authority. Understanding this concept brings forth what Dekoven described as experimental writing, as an entity that could refute and change the way the woman responds to her world.

De Beauvoir similarly utilizes the concept of the "Other" to describe the established relationship between men and women, and she adapts Lacan's idea that man is dependent on the Other to a woman's advantage. De Beauvoir finds that a woman is used to display a man's strength over her weakness, and her later compliance with man's superiority regrettably causes women to neglect their freedom as an independent person.<sup>65</sup> If women realize men's dependence on their roles, however, then women are able to expose men's flaws rather than their own.<sup>66</sup> The woman who is defined as a wife or mother, for example, is vulnerable to a perpetual "Otherness" because she will only transition her obedience from her father to her husband and son.<sup>67</sup> De Beauvoir's objective then, is to tell women to avoid the positions assigned to them by the patriarchal culture so that they are not expected to support the man's language. A woman must inhabit a fulfilling life defined by her own standards, rather than by those who claim her as the Other. In her novels, Condé posits that a "man's distance from the object is the price of his nearness to himself," and if women refuse their role, men will no longer possess any value to attribute to themselves.<sup>68</sup>

Condé's challenge is especially complex since she is a woman as well as a person of color. While she is influenced by both a patriarchal culture and a colonizer's corruption, she must eliminate both forms of oppression in order to release her body and desires, and consequently, override the beliefs that place women in a perpetual, silent abyss. This removal entails a deep-rooted understanding of her black, feminine identity. Aside from the construct of a woman as the "Other," essential to Condé's comprehension of her societal conditions is that of her post-colonial self, given that colonial oppressors exploited the hegemonic hierarchy of the Other (developing nations) in order to establish their authority. Jim B. Parsons and Kelly J. Harding provide a precise definition of this concept's objective:

Post-colonialism theory asks for justice: it seeks to speak to the vast and horrific social and psychological suffering, exploitation, violence and enslavement done to the powerless victims of colonization around the world. It challenges the superiority of the dominant Western perspective and seeks to re-position and empower the marginalized and subordinated 'Other.'<sup>69</sup>

Questioning the dominant authority and its definition of superiority is necessary to find *jouissance* and to use it toward inheriting a revolutionary form of writing. Similar to De Beauvoir's stance that women need to realize that their language exists, people suppressed by colonial authority must see that they have prevailing ideologies that are often hidden or overshadowed by Western culture.

The image of the "Other," which perpetuates Western ideals and restricts Condé's social position, was first explored in the formulated concept of "orientalism" by Edward Said, which he described as an "integral part of European material civilization."<sup>70</sup> As Europe conquered its colonies, it categorized them as the "orient," or in other words, a society unable to equate itself with civilized Europe. The notion of Otherness is especially problematic to colonized countries, such as Condé's native country of Guadeloupe, because even as humanity progresses, these

civilizations will remain perpetually different—historically, culturally, socially, ethnically—from the Western countries. Such Western nations have traditionally depended on this conception since, without it, the superior “civilized” subject would not have an (inferior, secondary, oftentimes "savage") Other to reflect itself off of and compare itself to.<sup>71</sup> The history of French oppression led Condé to reject a part of her identity during her childhood, and such a notion continues to affect her. Her ability to rediscover her heritage, as described in her autobiographical work, represents a fundamental rejection of the orient/occident dichotomy to define herself.

Condé's internalization of the concept of the "Other" is identifiable in her earlier works, including *The Stealers of Fire* and *O Brave New World*. In *Stealers of Fire*, for example, Condé reflects on past constructions of Antillean identity, as she both criticizes and admires Martinican authors Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) and Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) for their contributions to post-colonial theory. She praises Glissant for his rejection of *Négritude*, which Condé notes as the Western generalization and subjugation of black culture.<sup>72</sup> She supports Glissant's goal of "relocating Guadeloupe and Martinique within the complex equilibrium of the world" and the promotion of the idea that multiple identities merge and interconnect to everyone else.<sup>73</sup> According to Condé, Glissant redefined Césaire's image of bastardization as *métissage*, or the convergence of cultures that "would not constitute a category of opposition to other categories."<sup>74</sup> Through her research, Condé has seen the efforts of discarding the Western theories of inferiority, and she understands that they not only are shadowing other ideologies but they are also invalid. As she discusses her idea of a new world, she herself interprets the *métis* as "the pool of many cultural values."<sup>75</sup> There exist identities of "créolité" and "antillanité," for example, that become generalized into one "black" identity.<sup>76</sup> As she analyzes the various

explanations of the "Other," she reworks its meaning and finds her own objective in displaying a critical, experimental form of writing.

Combating the idea of Otherness is required for Condé to form a positive sense of self and offer new, non-patriarchal insights. Leah Hewitt finds, for example, that Condé's writings operate to counter the predetermined Antillean identity. Condé does not accept herself to be classified within the "black/slave/victim" structure because that limits her potential as a writer for social change as well as an owner of *écriture féminine*.<sup>77</sup> Hewitt explains in further detail Condé's exact objective:

[using] the outer trappings of realist fiction, Condé dramatizes with an unrelenting toughness the ways in which we fail to rise above our pettiness, our racism, and our misery, regardless of gender, color, or origins.<sup>78</sup>

Hewitt especially sees this at work in Condé's autobiographical text, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, as she explains that while Condé's parents try incessantly (and unsuccessfully) to assimilate into (dominant, white) French culture, Condé begins her work with a stark realization of a "collective otherness."<sup>79</sup> Condé communicates to her readers from the start that she is not fooled by her "superior" half; in order to fulfill the goal of relieving her expected role, her first step is to show her audience she comprehends the situation. The culmination of stories from her youth will eventually lead to her accomplishment of shifting her identity to the role of a leader.

Given the importance of identity development for women writers of *écriture féminine*, Condé's novels would not gain its widespread credibility if they did not restore "the broken fragments" of her Caribbean identity.<sup>80</sup> Condé's ability to overcome this restriction is particularly evident in her speeches, as she expands her knowledge of the source behind the homogenization of her culture. Condé further supports a change in Western discourse in her 1998 article, *Unheard Voice: Suzanne Césaire and the Construct of a Caribbean Identity*, by describing

Martinican Suzanne Césaire's (1915-1966) use of Surrealism as an outlet for promoting "the free expression of the inner self" and to reassemble the meaning of Caribbean identity.<sup>81</sup> Césaire tells her readers not to accept the given preconceived notions of the Antilles but instead "to embrace the plurality of their origins in order to see clearly the full spectrum of the Caribbean existence—not only the exotic, physical beauty, but also its hunger, fear, hatred, and burning ferocity."<sup>82</sup> Condé especially appreciates this goal, since she tries to instill in her own readers the idea of *métissage* and diversity.<sup>83</sup> The development of new ideas that redefine the African culture, just as Glissant and A. Césaire had maintained, provides Condé with sources of inspiration. As she initiated research in order to find reconciliation with her own complex individuality, she was able to then instill in her novels the complexity of modern society.

In the same article, Condé eventually compiles her own explanation of the conflict she experienced as she states, "the construction of a Caribbean identity...is caught up in many contradictions. The Caribbean, although sharing common historical founding experiences, erupted into a collection of social orders with distinctive features."<sup>84</sup> Her conceptualization of her racial identity causes her to inhibit the qualities of a writer of *écriture féminine* because she discards the Western culture's tendency to generalize outside culture's identities and thus situate them as the "Other." Condé shows in her novels, as she writes about Africa, France, and the Caribbean, that every ethnicity, race, gender, etc. is a part of a larger system in which no individual can define him or herself as possessing one identity. Just as *écriture féminine* advises, Condé seeks equality and a world where no society or country is superior to another.

### **Autobiography and the Other**

Reconciling "Otherness" for Condé and other writers is essential in order to fully appreciate an autobiographical text. Without trying to see through their cultural lens, for

example, the impact of marginalization is not as clear. Michael Fischer, for example, constructed his own model of understanding ethnicity in autobiography to give readers an outline of the identity process for a person defined as the "Other." An autobiographer's contribution to his or her culture's need for exposure is understood as Fischer writes:

Ethnicity is (a) reinvented in each generation by each individual; (b) what is invented is something new... (c) that this something new is achieved by an inner listening to different components of the self, finding a voice or style that does not violate those multiple components; and (d) that ethnicity is often something puzzling to the individual, something that the person does not feel in control of...<sup>85</sup>

As Fischer notes, a genuine voice and perspective is not effective until the writer has developed a strong sense of self as well as knowledge of how ethnicity helps to reveal truth. Condé certainly has achieved this level of understanding as she has found inspiration in other oppressed voices to aid her goal in discovering new ways of expression. As she continues to assert her heritage and her awareness of it in her writing, she then possesses a voice that assists her ultimate goal.

Betty Bergland describes Fischer's theory as a "chronotopic" analysis that allows readers to restructure the "Other" and redefine it in terms that reveal the author's injustices and the pressure of silence.<sup>86</sup> Such an examination also provides insight into the type of discourse that acts as the oppressor and how its elimination results in an understanding of cultural significance.<sup>87</sup> As Paul Smith explains in his work, *Discerning the Subject*, autobiographical writers take responsibility for their truth-telling and that "language cannot transparently *reveal* an essential and unified historical subject; rather, the speaking subject, historically situated and positioned in multiple and contradictory discourses, places the "I" in the world in positions conceptually possible in language."<sup>88</sup> As writers like Condé declare the essence of the self in writing, they can then use their autobiography as a source of power incomparable to non-

autobiographical work. Since it is the author and not the character who discloses the reality of their position in society, the "I" chooses its own position in society as one that is superior.

As an autobiographer, Condé is particularly skilled at fulfilling her goal of dissolving the notions of dominance and inferiority because as she asserts the "I" or the self into her writing, she situates herself as the subject rather than the object: she is no longer the "Other." Leigh Gilmore's discussion on confession in autobiography claims that only the "truth" results from self-reflection, a reinterpretation by one's own standards and a rejection of "the political dimension of all discourses of identity."<sup>89</sup> This action represents the embodiment of *écriture féminine* because it results in revolutionary thinking incompatible with compliance as well as an attempt to expose the underlying objective of societal norms. Rather than "telling the *truth*," as Gilmore further explains, the autobiographer focuses on "*telling* the truth."<sup>90</sup> Condé gains an opportunity to elicit the action of speech as she writes her story in her words, and by doing so she rejects the Western constructs and focuses on projecting a voice forward with a new, profound form of language.

As Condé's short stories in her autobiography progress, they support Fischer's analysis of ethnicity, as the author finds her true identity from rejecting the culture that expected her assimilation. Condé deconstructs and reassembles her past through her own perspective, and consequently this allows her to "explore her own subjectivity" and discover the meaning in her experiences that led to patriarchal rejection.<sup>91</sup> The ability to define one's life outside of the viewpoint that perpetuates the norms of modern society is what Jill Ker Conway describes in her text, *When Memory Speaks: Reflection on Autobiography*, as an illustration of authenticity in the female voice.<sup>92</sup> She also notes that a thorough analysis of an individual's past experiences by that individual leads to a "cultivation of the voice," as "we're heard when we speak confidently out of

our understanding of our own experience."<sup>93</sup> While Condé presents an honest reflection upon and reaction to her childhood life, she inevitably establishes her voice. As memories are "a major factor in shaping our expectations and ambitions for the future," Condé's restructuring of her past helps the author to demonstrate her appeal for equality.<sup>94</sup>

Each aspect that Condé incorporates into the narrative of her childhood—colonization, male dominance, identity, and the cultural "Other"—not only reveal Condé's resolve to enlighten female writers and spread her vision of dismantled supremacy, but they also embody the nature of *écriture féminine*. She expresses a sense of *jouissance* because as she develops her power of speech, she constructs a language that does not comply with traditional values. She unfolds the tension between the habit to conform and her want to resist, and this transition leads to an argument for equality. Indeed the author reconstructs her identity so that it is placed outside of the authoritative discourse as well as the restrictive "Imaginary." Thus, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* unveils itself as a basis for cultural and social change.

### ***Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* and *Écriture Féminine***

Condé's autobiographical collection of short stories, *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, presents a series of vignettes of the author's youth that contributed to the shaping of her identity as well as her eventual aspirations of promoting an integration of cultures and people. She writes from her point of view and her experiences in order to assert the Self and connect it with others, and the emotions and uncertainties that follow enable readers to "visualize one's own entanglement in these multiple webs of dependency."<sup>95</sup> As her novel becomes relatable to readers, it can be posited from both Conway's and Gilmore's perspectives on autobiography that Condé's honesty leads to genuineness and an element of truth telling. Deborah Hess, in her analysis of Condé's autobiography in her book, *Maryse Condé: Mythe, parabole et complexité*, discovers that

Condé's authenticity also provokes an alternative way of thinking toward the social constructs embedded in our minds. Hess claims that the novel demonstrates:

une approche de la réalité refusant la synthèse englobant les aspects contraires de la vie, le relativisme définissant plutôt les différentes modifications d'une approche caractérisant ce que nous appelons 'la culture' ou une approche subjective de la réalité.<sup>96</sup>

Rather than applying a definitive answer to her questions of supremacy and dependency, Condé instead offers the idea that various existing societies must work together to find meaning and value in our lives. She cannot rely on a one-sided viewpoint of the world and must instead see how a multiplicity of ideas impacts each other. Finding her various forms of identity then becomes essential to Condé's writing because it allows her to articulate their interconnectedness. This resultant form of writing, according to Hess's interpretation, aims to reinstate voice and the control of speech in order to demand a response from her listeners.

Condé's opening account, "Portrait de famille," instills in her readers from the start the stinging reality of the feeling of inferiority brought upon her culture. Condé does not begin by claiming innocence or a gradual realization of society's stereotyping. Instead, she reflects upon the quick assimilation of her parents into French society despite their "aliéné" status, or what she defines as "une personne qui cherche à être ce qu'elle ne peut pas être parce qu'elle n'aime pas être ce qu'elle est."<sup>97</sup> Condé's parents deny any form of their heritage because they only believe that they are purely French; in other words, her parents yield without hesitation to the socialized idea that only French citizens who are well-educated with numerous possessions are considered "civilized." Condé's parents become deeply embedded in this Western construct of modern society, and Condé also notes the competition between the French and the "Other." When servers at a restaurant are surprised at how well Condé's family speaks French, for example, her parents counter them by saying how they are more French than the two men. Her mother states: "Nous

sommes plus instruits. Nous avons de meilleures manières. Nous lisons davantage..."<sup>98</sup> Already, Condé describes the strict rivalry between what is considered the "dependent" and the "dominant" culture, and this counters Condé's belief in multiple identities merging together to create hybrid societies that are neither superior nor inferior. Condé presents her readers with a background of the experiences of her past that easily create tension between herself and her family.

Condé, dissatisfied with this forced assimilation, arrives at the decision that "je me fis le serment confus de ne jamais devenir une aliénée. En conséquence, je me réveillai une tout autre petite fille."<sup>99</sup> She realizes that as her parents reject the customs of her ancestors, and as they "possèdent tout naturellement cette identité française qui...était niée, refusée," they are not only subjected to accepting the colonizer's norms but they also lack a self confidence and curiosity that prevents positive identity formation.<sup>100</sup> Condé certainly does not follow her parents' example since it would deny her an authentic and audible voice. Thus, as Hess interprets Condé's set of short stories, Condé asserts a tone that reveals "la nécessité de trouver une voie entre celles tracées auparavant par les partisans d'une autonomie insulaire."<sup>101</sup> Determined to break free from internalizing the Western viewpoint of civilization, Condé assigns herself the responsibility of finding the meaning and strength of her Caribbean identity. The author uses her writing, therefore, as a tool for not only giving speech to herself but to her country that was lost under silence. She becomes a model for writers to devise a new way of thinking that challenges the current status quo.

The generational dynamics between Condé and her parents give complexity to their relationship because through the eyes of her parents, assimilation into the mainstream culture is the only path to advancing out of the societal consequences when enlisted as the "Other."

Certainly for Condé, France assisted her in her research and education necessary to advancing her career; however, unlike Condé's parents, Condé needs to feel a sense of unity in her identity rather than reject some qualities and accept others. As stated by Alec Hargreaves, the identity is "constructed to a very significant degree out of borrowing from others," and without such recognition the self becomes fragmented.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, Condé's parents should not object to their French identity but include it within the already existing pieces of the self; denying their Guadeloupean heritage leads to a loss of self worth and constant dissatisfaction. As Condé realizes this disheartening fate, she claims, *je touchais au cœur du problème*<sup>103</sup> Understanding that her parents remain "alienés" despite their success in France, Condé must revise the notion of equality and multiple identities in order for her to avoid this label. Condé's non-conformity eventually translates to a form of writing that reveals the numerous oppressions acted upon everyone working within his or her society.

As Condé's stories progress, she provides additional memories of the objectification and generalizations of black culture. Through such incidents, outside audiences recognize the importance of autobiography and its role in promoting truth. In "Leçon d'histoire," for example, Condé is directly impacted by socially constructed roles when she meets Anne-Marie, a girl who is white and makes Condé her playmate. This vignette is especially surprising because although Anne-Marie is young, she has already inherited the notion of white privilege, perhaps without even knowing it or understanding its implications. Anne-Marie assumes, that naturally, she takes control while Condé remains subservient. Anne-Marie's perceptions of Condé's position surfaces from her explanations from her actions, such as "je dois te donner des coups parce que tu est une négresse."<sup>104</sup> Just as Condé had learned from previous generations of her identification as the "Other," Anne-Marie similarly adapted from her parents the idea of supremacy. Condé illustrates

the cycle perpetuated by social obedience, and readers are stained by reality as they realize the story must somehow progress from this hindering event.

Condé's writing then examines the reasoning behind these ideas rather than accept them as fact. The affair with Anne-Marie elicits curiosity and inquisitiveness in the young Maryse, and she expects a ready response from her parents as she asks, "Pourquoi doit-on donner des coups aux nègres?"<sup>105</sup> Unfortunately for Condé, her parents do not give their daughter the criticism of society that she needs; her mother simply replies, "est-ce que tu vois quelqu'un donner des coups à ton papa ou à moi?" while her father prefers to take interest in his sons.<sup>106</sup> Condé is restricted by two oppressors, that of the colonizer and the patriarch, and as Hess states, "cette hiérarchie était à la base de la prise de position identitaire imposée par les parents de la narratrice à leur fille."<sup>107</sup> Condé must then, given her parent's replies, find a place of her own on this social ladder. She has seen how both parents support the hierarchal system. Condé's mother chooses to ignore the prejudices present in this incident so not to diminish the French part of her identity, and as a result of this avoidance, she only perpetuates the norms that keep the dominant in power. Condé's father, also avoiding her daughter's concerns, can find solace that he has some control in regards to his family and can place these questions in the hands of the mother.<sup>108</sup> Condé is left with either the choice to conform and accept the belief of hierarchical status, in that, due to factors such as education, manners, or economic wealth, she is of a superior class—or to dismantle the ideas of rank completely.

The ability to deny such established concepts remains problematic and complex, given their widespread acceptance for numerous generations, and Condé carefully navigates these dynamics in her writing in order to avoid slipping into a Western perspective. Anne Malena addresses this issue when she writes, "the black female autobiographer is highly aware of the self

being processed through language...and that, at the same time, 'language represents a weapon one must constantly distrust.'<sup>109</sup> Undoubtedly words such as "aliéné" and "l'Autre" show the impact of language on identity and must be analyzed thoroughly in order to find self-confidence. Yet since men initially laid the foundation for language and speech, Condé must be constantly aware of the initial goals for this groundwork. Condé's parents are sufficient examples of those internalizing the authoritative, male (colonial) language, and this actuality can be used as an advantage for Condé. Her parents, or her supposed role models in associating meaning to life, act as that reminder of language for Condé. She constantly juxtaposes her commentary and criticism with depictions of her parents' actions, which connotes an evolving process of self-reflection and writing.

Condé's other accounts, "The Bluest Eye" and "La plus belle femme de monde," also demonstrate Condé's ability to portray the stagnant dichotomy between French and Caribbean culture. Both memories demonstrate the clear division and inability to merge both societies, reinforcing the social coercions that weigh heavily on the "Other." As "The Bluest Eye" already offsets the readers from its English title (an homage to the 1970 work by African American author Toni Morrison), Condé is left feeling rejected and disconnected from her world as the first boy she likes, Gilbert, has beautiful blue eyes, while her eyes are a "marron foncé. Presque noirs."<sup>110</sup> Just as the episode with Anne-Marie, this memory highlights perceptions of difference and dominance which develop at a young age and give power to certain individuals. Condé also mentions the concept of *métissage* in this vignette and further describes how races are expected to be separate and define a person's identity. Les Driscoll, for example, are a family of mixed race, and rather than regarding the family as people interconnected with the whole of society, they are scrutinized as a rare and marginalized social phenomenon. Condé explains, "On disait

aussi que c'étaient des gens spéciaux et qu'ils ne faisaient rien comme les autres."<sup>111</sup> Condé states explicitly the consequences of non-conformity to the required segregation of races; they are people unlike the rest—undefinable, and therefore problematic, in that they muddle the simplified constructs of subject/other with complicated racial identity.

"La plus belle femme de monde" tells a similar story that causes Condé to see Amélie, a white woman from her church, as a role model to aspire to, despite the fact that "sa beauté m'était interdite."<sup>112</sup> She desires to be someone that she knows she never can become, and she is permanently placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.<sup>113</sup> After observing the members of her church congregation, Condé sees no representation of people who look like her, furthering her awareness of her status in the world.<sup>114</sup> However, unique to Condé's writing is that while she presents a sense of unease from exposing her life's realities,

instead of constantly helping subjects to patch up these leaks in their individual belief systems, or pandering to identity politics to make one feel beautiful in an ugly world, Condé works to describe the illusory spells subjects weave around themselves, and to rend their veil.<sup>115</sup>

Condé does not simply tell a progressive story of her life that recounts the evolution of how she learned to live in her world of disadvantage. Condé instead utilizes her past memories to indentify and reflect upon numerous injustices and expose their absurdity. Direct statements made by both Condé's narrator and the people around her (such as Anne-Marie and Gilbert) are signs of the relativity of artificial socialized constructs. As Condé shifts away from writing in a voice that replicates the authority of patriarchal colonial discourse, she instead aims to highlight the possibility of different perspectives on society. As she continues to write and speak in this transformed language, Condé expresses a new sense of freedom found in *écriture féminine*.

Another story that particularly reflects the force of her voice and her *écriture féminine* is "Bonne Fête, Maman!," a lasting memory that illustrates the complexity of her childhood and limited innocence. Condé's relationship with her mother, as well as the marriage between her mother and father, perpetually display the internalization of Otherness and the complications "of modern Antillean families seeking to understand themselves through a 'multicultural global grid'."<sup>116</sup> In the story, Condé's mother's birthday party illustrates the discrepancy between generations: already as a child, Condé develops a curiosity about her Caribbean identity, and her assertion in incorporating it into her life is prominent as she sees her mother as an example of the refusal of the beauty of that identity. Young Maryse offers a very special present to her mother—she reads her a story that incorporates both mythology and cultural aspects that reveal her mother's creole identity, which leaves her mother both stunned and visibly upset. Condé's story reveals that, upon further reflection, she later realizes from her mother that instead of incorporating both her Caribbean and French identities to define herself, her mother was forced to deny and discard any possible vestige of the Other. Rather than choosing the path that Condé later takes, her mother resorts to the silence of an artificial and simplified identity, a kind of assumed mask of assimilated Other.

As the cultural aspect of the Other proves the potential for a complex identity, Condé's evolving *écriture féminine* is revealed as she further analyzes her mother's rooted subordinate position. As De Beauvoir advises to avoid traditional and stereotypical roles reserved for women, Condé observes that this compliance by her mother led to her weakness. Condé discusses her discontent with her mother's acceptance of her husband's authority as she states, "[mon père] avait beau l'appeler constamment 'mon trésor,' il ne la comprenait pas, et, qui plus est, elle l'effrayait."<sup>117</sup> Although her father was less intelligent, and afraid of his wife, the system that

establishes him as superior allows him to employ her as an object. Once Condé's brother Sandrino is born and becomes another dominant male figure, her mother is placed at the bottom of the patriarchal hierarchy as "une femme insatisfaite et frustrée."<sup>118</sup> As *écriture féminine* promotes the ability to unleash the body and *jouissance* through discourse, Condé distances herself from her father, and her harsh criticism of the couple's marital dynamic illustrates that "c'est au cœur même du système phallogentrique qu'elle porte ses coups."<sup>119</sup>

The impact of Condé's rejection of the dominant culture surfaces most prominently in reflections of her attempts to understand the societal pressures that plagued generations of women. Condé states: "j'imagine que ma mère avait peur de la vie, jument sans licou qui avait tellement malmené sa mère et sa grand-mère."<sup>120</sup> Condé acknowledges the difficulties in her mother and grandmother's life, because a world of thought and education for women was seemingly unnatural; although Condé's mother had become "une des premières enseignantes noires," she became vulnerable to her assumed position, and shortly after meeting Condé's father, "fut vite courtisée."<sup>121</sup> Certainly life for women outside of the role of a wife and mother was marginalized if not impossible, because any role undefined by the male tradition marked a betrayal to the established culture. However, Condé discloses her desire to break away from this cycle as she notes that she did not wish to fear life, like her mother did.<sup>122</sup> This disconnect between Condé and her mother effectively demonstrates the impact of a patriarchal and colonized culture, as both are torn between the roles they want for themselves and the ones that are forced upon them.<sup>123</sup>

As Laurie Corbin writes her analysis of maternity in Condé's novels, she interprets Condé's discussion of her mother and grandmother in "Bonne Fête Maman!" as a way to understand her past and further construct her identities as a Caribbean native and a writer.<sup>124</sup>

Condé's writing requires knowledge of her cultural history and its deprivations in order for her to speak honestly and confidently. A missing piece of history, for example, such as the conditions that lead to Condé's categorization as the "Other," results in discontinuities in writing that fall vulnerable to invalidity. Corbin adds that this cultural awareness, or a "link, a lineage," helps Condé to "see herself as an individual who is/has always been related to her society and has a place in its fragmented history."<sup>125</sup> She tries to construct the pieces of her history together, and although she cannot assemble everything definitively, an effort to examine the "ambiguities of the self" marks a step in bringing life to her culture and remodeling future constructs.<sup>126</sup> A feeling of accomplishment with and completion of one's self marks a step in creating a discourse capable of providing a genuine proposal for societal advancement.

This restructuring is essential in order to understand Condé's message because as she criticizes the patriarchal system and subjugating cycle that silences women, she is not simultaneously trying to turn women against men and vice-versa; rather, she wants them to work together to combat the issues that separate them. Even though men maintain control of the family, Condé's father and his wife share a common ground that Condé stresses in *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*: they are "une paire d'alienés," unable to find happiness in their relationship with each other and with others.<sup>127</sup> This idea helps to explain why in Condé's work, as Ernest Pépin describes, "l'homme n'est d'ailleurs jamais présenté en vainqueur dans son œuvre. Il semble tout aussi désemparé, tout aussi déconstruit...et pour finir tout aussi malheureux que les personnages féminins."<sup>128</sup> The discontent with both parents illustrates Condé's contributions to feminist literary criticism. Rather than giving the patriarch the satisfaction of his traditional status and remaining the subject of speech, she presents a broken family dynamic that exposes the absurdity

of the social order. Women need to express the disorder present in society and demonstrate that the current system is dysfunctional and unproductive.

Although she might suffer during the process, Condé ultimately decides that she wants to find a place where she does not have to hide from the reality. When she finds a sense of self worth living in the system she finds herself in, this transition enables her to advance her *écriture féminine*. Condé's dedication to exposing the colonial power's forces oppressing the Other emphasizes the need to decipher "how much truth is appropriate in our relationships with our loved ones."<sup>129</sup> Condé concludes that toward her family, "il faut leur faire croire qu'ils sont ce qu'ils ne sont pas."<sup>130</sup> As her mother and father choose to deny or disregard the reality of their class status, the author decides instead to face it, find meaning within it, and construct a subject position with a voice and power of agency. This action of rejecting compliance becomes central to Condé's *écriture féminine*: she places herself as the subject, with her own perspective. Additionally, rather than only writing of her reactions and emotions toward the condition prescribed to her, her lack of conclusions underscores the idea that such circumstances are not fixed, allowing for multiplicity of meanings and denying the finite answers posited by patriarchal discourse. This becomes a necessary first step to finding "sa liberté de s'affirmer autrement" and gaining a voice that plays an active role in advancing society.<sup>131</sup>

Condé's vision of her break from tradition is additionally examined in the story of the divorce of her sister Emilia from a man whose family was of high-class stature in Paris. As Condé's narrator discusses with her friend Yvelise the conditions of divorce, she appears to be puzzled; she observes, for instance, that "les filles restaient avec leur mère. Les garçons partaient avec leur père."<sup>132</sup> As such a separation by gender further embellishes society's notion of homogeneity, Condé's narrator can only associate herself with the lower status of women,

similar to the identity of Other imposed upon her as a result of her skin color. With the assumption that the marriage between her sister and her husband represents the dependence of a woman and the idea that she can only find meaning in life through the man's accomplishments, Condé's mother is devastated from this break up, gathering a large cohort of women at her house who worry that their daughters may suffer the same fate.<sup>133</sup> The union was an important gain for her mother, since it "symbolisait une revanche sur une île que sa mère avait quittée dans la gêne et la pauvreté."<sup>134</sup> Rather than the advancement of education or employment, Condé's mother marks her daughter's marriage to a rich Parisian as a kind of "revenge" that redeems her past and the poor conditions of her homeland. As her mother represents a typical conditioned reaction to lifestyle—with the social standing of a woman relying solely on that of her husband—that nonetheless limits women's independence and free forms of thinking, *jouissance* is no longer attainable. Condé grows up and leaves for school, and the ability to release her own *jouissance* depends upon her ability to defy this inhibiting cycle.

As Condé reflects on the women's obsession with Émilie's divorce, she affirms, "je n'entendis jamais prononcer une seule parole de compassion pour Émilie."<sup>135</sup> The women express no sympathy or desire to help this situation, because the language that presents the male as signifier takes precedence over the woman's form. The women are undoubtedly unconvinced of the potential for Émilie to work and succeed independently from a husband. This example provides striking evidence that the discourse Condé observes and remembers from her childhood informs her identity as an advocate for change and self-awareness, because she is able to decode the causes of such speech and their ideological underpinnings. Condé presents her narrated Self as an outsider of the novel looking into her world, as both participant and observer, lived experience and learned behavior, with a distance necessary to construct criticism and prevent

herself from adopting a male perspective. Erica Johnson notes this disconnect, as she explains that Condé "portrays home as an originally displaced concept" so that she can resist "the temptation to reconstruct the past nostalgically."<sup>136</sup> The purpose of Condé's novel is to reconstruct her past not merely for reflection, but for identity formation that is capable of challenging oppressors who work to maintain its deconstruction.

As Condé advances in school and experiences academic opportunities at her university, she explains in her vignette "Chemin d'école" the transition from objecting to communal wrongs to actively fighting against them. She performs this shift by broadening her self-awareness after a professor asks her to research and discuss her heritage. Her story progresses from a deep realization that "je ne connaissais pas mon pays" to identifying her role models and marking "la première fois que je dévorais une vie."<sup>137</sup> She discovers the works of Aimé Césaire and Joseph Zobel (1915-2006) and uncovers the stories of oppression previously hidden to her. She especially uses Zobel's novels as a source of inspiration, and as Johnson states, through her developed awareness of her Otherness she is capable of inserting the "I" into her text.<sup>138</sup> She discusses the blindness of her parents and white culture that refuses to allow the formation of such a voice, and as "the reigning structural dependency infiltrates its way into our lives," there grows a desire to walk into the direction of disobedience.<sup>139</sup> Condé describes her newfound consciousness:

...les vraies Antilles, c'étaient celles que j'étais coupable de ne pas connaître. Je commençai par me révolter en pensant que l'identité est comme un vêtement qu'il faut enfiler bon gré, mal gré, qu'il vous siée ou non...je cédai à la pression et enfilai la défroque qui m'était offerte.<sup>140</sup>

She decides that unlike her parents, she is not going to pretend to live in a world that denies her Caribbean identity. Although reality is difficult to bear, Condé prefers this actuality to ignorance.

Equivalent to the novelists she discovered, Condé uses truth and self-knowledge to assert her voice. Vital to her own story is the value of an interconnected world community of members of equal status, as she reinvents her ethnicity and declares it as a strength rather than a limitation. Thus, her *écriture féminine* takes root at the moment she decides to embrace her heritage and use it as a central aspect to her cause.

### **Conclusion**

Although Condé is careful to avoid simple answers of how to resolve generations of oppression, she nevertheless shows a perspective and voice that is sensitive to the many complex and oftentimes contradictory facets of her cultural history. She reinstates the idea that the problem with denying one identity prevents the recovery of others. Especially with her parents, Condé notes that "[ils] sont une paire d'aliénés" not only in France but in Guadeloupe as well,<sup>141</sup> and this consequently mandates their loss of a sense of self in a state of perpetual Otherness. In contrast, Condé presents a pieced-together past and that incorporates, rather than separates, the different aspects of her identity in a whole—as a black, Antillean woman. However, Johnson adds that "it is the *relations* between fragments—as opposed to a projection of wholeness or unity—that signify. Condé's complex representation of her childhood and of Guadeloupe portrays not a singular place called home, but a series of Guadeloupian spaces."<sup>142</sup> The process of integration and incorporation of numerous homes is necessary to equality, and this aspiration becomes a revolutionary trait of resistance in Condé's writing.

Condé's determination to find her identity in a world of oppression and to educate herself of her heritage in order to find a position of autonomy additionally enables her writing to initiate debate among psychoanalytic and feminist literary theorists. Her autobiographical vision of unity and expression of complex identities gives voice to women who wish to embrace their ethnicity

and establish their own discourse as a way to uproot discriminatory systems. The certainty of Condé's beliefs and confidence in her abilities allow her to remove the male as signifier and replace it with her own voice and expression of *écriture féminine*. *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* especially embodies her spirit and inspiration that reinforces her faith that "mankind must only be too aware of the wickedness in this world. In this way, it will be better armed to fight back."<sup>143</sup>

*Condé's mentioned works:*

*Hérémakhonon*, 1976

*Ségou*, 1987.

*Traversée de la mangrove*, 1989

*O Brave New World*, 1998

*Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*, 1999

*The Stealer's of Fire: The French Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation* (2004)

## Notes:

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- <sup>2</sup> Pépin, Ernest. "Un écrivain-continent." *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*. Comp. Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Lydie Moudileno. (Paris: Ibis Rouge Editions, 2002), 41.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, 403.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 403.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, 403.
- <sup>6</sup> Condé, Maryse. "The Stealers of Fire: The French-Speaking Writers of the Caribbean and Their Strategies of Liberation." *Journal of Black Studies*. 35.2 (2004): 164.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 159.
- <sup>8</sup> Hodge, Merle. "Caribbean Writers and Caribbean Language: A Study of Jamaica Kincaid's Annie John." *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. Eds. Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1998), 47.
- <sup>9</sup> "The Stealers of Fire...", 155.
- <sup>10</sup> Wylie, Hal and Bernith Lindfors, eds. *Multiculturalism and Hybridity in African Literatures*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000), 33, 35.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, 35.
- <sup>12</sup> Lodewick, Victoria. "Truth or Lies? Ethnography as Fiction/Fiction as Ethnography in Maryse Condé's *Ségou*." *Romance Review*. 10 (2000): 71.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid, 65-73.
- <sup>14</sup> Mitsch, Ruthmarie. "Maryse Condé's Mangroves." *Research in African Literatures*. 28.4 (1997): 54.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 65.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, 59.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, 59.
- <sup>18</sup> Newson, Adele S. and Linda Strong-Leek, eds. *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1998), 54.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 58.
- <sup>20</sup> Rooney, Ellen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 160.
- <sup>21</sup> Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 34.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 34.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid, 43.
- <sup>24</sup> Sarup, 13, 36.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid, 4-5.
- <sup>26</sup> Moi, Toril. *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1985), 100.
- <sup>27</sup> Moi, 99.
- <sup>28</sup> Sarup, 35.
- <sup>29</sup> Sprengnether, Madelon. *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 198.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 8.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 195.

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- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 198-9.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 195.
- <sup>34</sup> Dekoven, Marianne. "'Jouissance', Cyborgs, and Companion Species: Feminist Experiment." *Modern Language Association*. 121.5 (2006): 1691, 1694.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 1691.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 1692.
- <sup>37</sup> Moi, 100.
- <sup>38</sup> Rooney, 153.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 153.
- <sup>40</sup> Sprengnether, 160.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 157.
- <sup>42</sup> Moi, 96.
- <sup>43</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*: Trans. H.M. Parshley. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 51, 47.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 50.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 50.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid, 39-40.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 200.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, 271.
- <sup>49</sup> Rooney, 160, 156.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid, 162.
- <sup>51</sup> Colebrook, Claire. "Friendship, Seduction, and Text." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*. 13.2 (2008): 114.
- <sup>52</sup> Cixous, Hélène. *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 1.4 (1976): 880, 887.
- <sup>53</sup> Oliver, Kelly, ed. *French Feminist Reader*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 255.
- <sup>54</sup> Rooney, 165.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid, 165.
- <sup>56</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 9.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid, 146.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid, 151.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, 154.
- <sup>60</sup> Weil, 163.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid, 168.
- <sup>62</sup> Sarup, 69.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid, 79.
- <sup>64</sup> Lacan, 86.
- <sup>65</sup> De Beauvoir, 3.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid, 147.
- <sup>67</sup> Oliver, ix.
- <sup>68</sup> De Beauvoir, 148.
- <sup>69</sup> Parsons, Jim B and Kelly J. Harding. "Post-Colonial Theory and Action Research." *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*. 2.2 (2011): 2.

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- <sup>70</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.  
<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 3-5.  
<sup>72</sup> "Stealers of Fire...", 156.  
<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 157.  
<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 157.  
<sup>75</sup> "O Brave New World," 33.  
<sup>76</sup> Rabbitt, Kara M. "Suzanne Césaire's Significance for the Forging of a New Caribbean Literature." *The French Review*. 79.3 (2006): 543-4.  
<sup>77</sup> Bishop, Michael and Christopher Elson, eds. *French Prose in 2000*. (New York: Editions Rodopi, 2002), 75.  
<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 76.  
<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 79.  
<sup>80</sup> Newson and Strong-Leek, 62.  
<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 64.  
<sup>82</sup> Rabbitt, 541.  
<sup>83</sup> Newson and Strong-Leek, 64.  
<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 61.  
<sup>85</sup> Ashley, Kathleen M, ed. *Autobiography and Postmodernism*. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 84.  
<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 135.  
<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 156.  
<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 131.  
<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 56.  
<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 68.  
<sup>91</sup> Malena, Anne. "Playing with Genre in Condé's Autofiction." *Journal of West Indian Literature*. 12.1/2 (2004): 156.  
<sup>92</sup> Conway, Jill K. *When Memory Speaks: Reflection on Autobiography*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 4.  
<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 180.  
<sup>94</sup> Hargreaves, Alec G. *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*. (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 145.  
<sup>95</sup> Nesbitt, 392.  
<sup>96</sup> Hess, 91.  
<sup>97</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*,16.  
<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 13.  
<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 17.  
<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 13-4.  
<sup>101</sup> Hess, 96.  
<sup>102</sup> Hargreaves, 2.  
<sup>103</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 127.  
<sup>104</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*,49.  
<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 50.  
<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 50.  
<sup>107</sup> Hess, 98.  
<sup>108</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*,50.  
<sup>109</sup> Malena, 158.

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- <sup>110</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 65.
- <sup>111</sup> Ibid, 62.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid, 94.
- <sup>113</sup> Hess, 97.
- <sup>114</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 90.
- <sup>115</sup> Nesbitt, 392.
- <sup>116</sup> Bishop and Elson, 80.
- <sup>117</sup> Condé, Maryse. *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1999), 80.
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid, 80.
- <sup>119</sup> Fonkoué, Ramon A. "Voix de femmes et figures du male en littérature francophone: Nicole Brossard et Maryse Condé." *Nouvelles Études Francophones*. 25.1 (2010): 81.
- <sup>120</sup> *Le Cœur à rire...*, 81.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid, 79.
- <sup>122</sup> Ibid, 81.
- <sup>123</sup> Corbin, "The Return to and Beyond the Mother: Maryse Condé and Representations of Maternity." *Life Writing* 4.2 (2007): 240.
- <sup>124</sup> Ibid, 232.
- <sup>125</sup> Ibid, 243.
- <sup>126</sup> Malena, 159.
- <sup>127</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 127.
- <sup>128</sup> Pépin, 42.
- <sup>129</sup> Corbin, 233.
- <sup>130</sup> Ibid, 85.
- <sup>131</sup> Hess, 98.
- <sup>132</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*,99.
- <sup>133</sup> Ibid, 100.
- <sup>134</sup> Ibid, 97.
- <sup>135</sup> Ibid, 102.
- <sup>136</sup> Johnson, Erica L. "Departures and Arrivals: Home in Maryse Conde's *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer*." *Gender and Displacement: "Home" in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008: 15-6.
- <sup>137</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 129, 120.
- <sup>138</sup> Johnson, 16.
- <sup>139</sup> Nesbitt, 391.
- <sup>140</sup> *Le cœur à rire...*, 119.
- <sup>141</sup> Ibid, 127.
- <sup>142</sup> Johnson, 17.
- <sup>143</sup> "The Stealers of Fire...", 163.

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