

Françoise Pfaff, *Conversations with Maryse Condé* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) pp. 178.

In the opening pages of Maryse Condé's novel *Segu*, the editor provides the reader several maps, two of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Bambara kingdom of Segu in Mali, and a map of the journey taken by one of the novel's protagonists, Malobali. The maps are followed by a family tree of the Traore family, in which Malobali is in the third generation. The inclusion of such aids suggests the complexity of Condé's depiction of the family and culture from which Malobali emerges, as well as the sweep of space and time covered in this historical saga and its sequel. As in *Segu*, Condé's other fictional works often cross generations and geographical regions in their exploration of communal or familial dynamics and histories. Her novels are unique in their sensitive, complex rendering of the ways in which such dynamics work under the conditions of exile, migration, coloniality and postcoloniality. These conditions are given profound critical reflection in these collected "conversations" between Françoise Pfaff, a scholar of African film and literature and a professor of French at Howard University, and Condé, herself a noted scholar of Caribbean literature currently teaching at Columbia University. Their discussions range from their perceived distinctions from and relationship to African Americans, the reception of Condé's work in various parts of the world, generational differences felt between themselves and other African and Caribbean writers, and the processes of writing historical fiction, among other topics. The results are a compelling and valuable resource not only for scholars and readers of Caribbean or African literature, but also for those seeking insight into the conditions from which "post-colonial" literature emerges and under which it is received.

Long and widely acclaimed in the Caribbean, Africa, and France, Condé's work is reaching a growing audience in the United States and elsewhere. While best known for her fiction, Condé has published many scholarly works on Caribbean literature, among them a critical study of the Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* [Notebook of a return to the native land], and several books on Antillean poetry, novels and oral literature. She is an editor of *L'Heritage de Caliban*, published in 1992, and the 1995 publication

*Penser la créolité*, no doubt a response to the controversial manifesto of Raphael Confiant, Jean Bernabé, and Patrick Chamoiseau, *Eloge de la créolité*. Her first novel, *Heremakhonon*, was published in 1976 and was first translated into English in 1982. After that, her best-selling works *Segu*, and *The Children of Segu*, which were published and translated in the mid-to-late eighties, established her reputation as an adept historical novelist and a captivating storyteller. While the former novels were all set in West Africa, her more recent work moves to the Caribbean and the United States. Her 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba, Sorcière Noire de Salem* (published in English as *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* in 1992) takes another historical figure as its point of departure, elaborating on the story of Tituba, a West Indian slave accused of witchcraft and arrested in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts. Condé takes a more self-consciously literary spin on "History" in this novel, incorporating an encounter between Tituba and Hester Prynne, of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. *Tituba*, was followed by *La vie Scélérate* in 1987 (*Tree of Life*, 1992), *Traversé de la Mangrove* in 1989 (*Crossing the Mangrove*, 1995), *Les derniers rois mages* in 1992 (*The Last of the African Kings*, just published), and two more as yet untranslated novels, *La colonie du nouveau monde*, and *La migration des coeurs*. In each of these novels, Condé demonstrates a remarkable talent for weaving the personal and intimate self-discoveries of her characters within the broader historical and cultural fabric of their worlds. At once far-reaching and relentlessly questioning, Condé's works juxtapose the epic and the quotidian aspects of her characters' individual and collective lives.

In conversation, Condé is as eclectic and engaging as her works, and equally able to unsettle one's ethical and intellectual presumptions. In her introduction to these eight extended interviews with Condé, Pfaff stresses that they are the product of their informal conversations, or "stopping points on a journey through space and time reflecting Maryse Condé's own itinerary." And what an itinerary it is. From her self-described conventional middle-class childhood in Guadeloupe to her current life as an academic and writer living in New York, Condé has crossed oceans and disciplines, balancing work and family life and a prolific turnout of published works. After university studies in Paris, and working and teaching in Guinea, Ghana, Ivory

Coast, England, and Senegal, Condé has spent approximately the past fifteen years splitting her year between teaching at various universities in the United States and working in her home in Guadeloupe.

Pfaff's itinerary is varied as well, as the two scholar-writers reconvene in various sites, from Washington, D.C. to Paris to Guadeloupe and back to Washington. Their dialogues span a number of years as well, from their initial meeting in 1982, when they discuss Condé's earliest novels, to the most recent one, held in 1994. The passage of time seems to have allowed the two women to build a rapport that results in a remarkably intimate and rigorous series of dialogues. Pfaff's questioning indicates an impressive degree of familiarity with the details of Condé's work and life, as well as an astonishing insight into their potential implications for the broader aesthetic, philosophical, and social issues of deep concern to their fellow writers and their readers.

The most biographical conversation, held in 1991, is placed first in the collection, foregrounding the cultural and psychological aspects of Condé's childhood and education, and of her work and life in several newly independent countries in West Africa. After leaving Guinea in 1964, following the breakup of her first marriage, Condé took her children to Ghana, where she taught at Winneba, Nkrumah's Institute for Ideological Training. Her work and life in Ghana during this transformative time, with her exposure to such leaders as Malcolm X, Che Guevara and Amilcar Cabral, enabled her to begin, in her words, "...to grasp the interplay of power and conflicts in a newly independent country." Shortly after Nkrumah's overthrow, Condé was forced to leave Ghana, and left for England, where she went to work for the BBC foreign desk briefly, then moved to Senegal where she worked as a translator and taught. It was in Senegal that she met her current husband and the English translator of many of her novels, Richard Philcox. In 1970, she moved to Paris to pursue an academic and publishing career, working at *Présence Africaine* and co-editing the *Présence Africaine* journal, while completing her studies at the university. At this point, while teaching at the University of Paris X, she begins to publish fiction as well as her scholarly studies of oral literature in Martinique and Guadeloupe and of Césaire's *Cahier*. In the early eighties, Condé was invited to the United States to teach at the

University of California, Santa Barbara, after which she returned to France. In the mid-eighties, Condé moved to the United States. While questioning her on this basic itinerary, Pfaff elicits quite candid and personal revelations about Condé's life and its relationship to her work. Condé, however, quite adeptly resists most efforts to link her personal experience to her work in direct or facile ways, preferring instead to discuss in detail the ideas that led to a given work. Her experiences, nonetheless, do seem to inform the scope and thematic content of her novels, if not actually corresponding to their particularities in a direct sense. Moving through these conversations, Pfaff's multiple lines of questioning seem to gain clarity and depth, as certain issues resurface and are examined from the vantage point of a different work or stage of Condé's life.

The subsequent interviews treat the works largely sequentially, with the first chapter covering her early fiction, including *Heremakhonon* and *A Season in Rihata*, and her literary criticism, and the next conversation focusing on the two volumes of *Segu*. The next few conversations cover the fictional works set in the Caribbean and the United States, moving away from the African settings of her early fiction. Here Pfaff and Condé investigate the issues raised by Condé's return to Guadeloupe after her years abroad, and her choices of setting for each of her works, as well as by the lives and actions of the characters in her novels. Condé's approaches to many of the historical events to which her novels allude are here unpacked and explored for their implications for her writing and teaching, and for their reception. The following two dialogues focus on her plays and her short stories, as well as her experiences in political activism in Guadeloupe. The last two dialogues focus on her more recent novels, and particularly on Condé's vision of Caribbean cultural identity. In the most recent novel, *La colonie du nouveau monde*, Condé sets part of the story in Colombia, which fact triggers a discussion between her and Pfaff over the multiple lines of affiliation that define and connect the Caribbean as a region. These conversations, as others which delve into Condé's perspectives on cultural politics in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean, are reason enough to pick up this book. Also useful to scholars in particular is the extensive bibliography of work published by and about Condé. On the whole, this book is impressive in both its

range and its depth. It is provocative at points, deeply reflective at others, but always engaging and thoughtful.

Victoria Sams

