Maryse Condé’s
Mangroves

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In Maryse Condé’s Segu (1984), the dūbaḷe tree, while it stands, is a steadfast symbol of the tenacious roots of Bambara identity for generations of the Traore family. A different tree assumes primacy in her Crossing the Mangrove (1989), a tale set in the Caribbean. While both trees are linked to concepts of identity within the works, the mangrove’s rhizomatic character is reflected in the themes and the structure of the later novel that confirm Condé’s movement outside and beyond homogenization or essentializing, and beyond the widely accepted identification of culture and stable terrain to a position reflecting the “rhizomatic,” a botanical concept brought to the attention of literary criticism by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Crossing the Mangrove may be read as a positive illustration of multiculturallism, where the rhizomatic overtakes the singular, essential root.

When the mysterious outsider Francis Sancher (Francisco Sanchez) meets his death in Rivière au Sel, in Guadeloupe, the community that gathers at his wake reflects on his impact on their various lives. To some, he was a hated intruder; to others, he was a lost soul who inspired sympathy; to others still, he held out the promise of breaking out of an isolated, lonely existence. Some think he was a foreigner who came to forget his past; others believe he had returned to the land of his heritage. Everyone, however, sensed that he carried the burden of past sin, and that for that reason he had withdrawn from another world to the universe of Rivière au Sel. This was a man of multiple identities—or no identity. Citizens of all ages and all social strata—that is, of various identities—come together in one space for one night, bringing their memories of the past as well as their hopes for their own future lives, all of which devolve from their association with this one man. Like the mangrove of the novel’s title, Francis Sancher’s activities spread out in many directions, intersecting, crossing, setting roots in the lives of many others. An apparently rootless man himself, he became entangled in the lives of others and created an intricate web of relationships with and among the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel. Among his most unsettling actions, from the community’s perspective, are his having kept and impregnated Mira, the wild and beautiful daughter of the plantation owner Loulou and the Nègresse Rosalie, even as he made love to Loulou’s second wife, Dinah, and then kept with him Vilma, the sorrowful, lonely daughter of the Indian Sylvestre Ramsaran, thus incurring the wrath, jealousy, and loathing of the families and of so many men of the community.

Especially since the success of African American novelist Alex Haley, roots have been easily imagined as source and conduit of an essential
identity, and for blacks in the Diaspora this concept has for the most part meant establishing ties with Africa. But in Conde’s return to her native island for the setting of her writings, both the writer and her critics have seen a commitment to the Caribbean reality. In *Hérimakhonon* (1982), for example, Veronica, did not find her roots during her journey to Mother Africa (for related discussion, see, among others, Pfaff). Conde has maintained, too, that “[i]t is totally passé to divide the world constantly into black and white: ‘Blacks are good and Whites are evil; Blacks are victims and Whites are henchmen.’ There are victims and oppressors in both camps. People must develop a new approach to the world and look at it in a new way. Race and color questions have become secondary for me” (Pfaff 20).

But what kind of approach to identity is viable and what kind of “roots” can be found in the Caribbean? The Caribbean has been a Bermuda triangle for identities, of both colonizer and colonized. Conde has explored beyond arborescent roots in her shift of focus onto her own multifaceted Caribbean reality, and that is a world in which the mangrove is a significant marker. In fact, the mangrove’s distinctive rhizomatic system is behind the project mapped out by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

The mangrove forest is a mesh of both land and water, and in that sense it is fluid, borderless, open to influence and change—and might it not be called a *métissage*? Yet because of its rhizomatic lateral growth patterns, which prominently feature prop roots and pneumatophores, it can also contain, entangle, strangle, bind, thus acting much like a border. As Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg assert, “Borders are zones of loss, alienation, pain, death . . . . Living in the border is frequently to experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between . . . .” (15). But as the two scholars also suggest, border zones are sites of creation and challenge. They remind us that the postmodern world has altered in many ways and places what was assumed to be a “seamless join” between place and identity:

> Identity and place perpetually create both new outer borders, where no imbrication has occurred, and inner borders, between the areas of overlay and the vestigial spaces of nonoverlay. The granting that results from their forced combination sparks inchoate energies that mobilize and activate the agency of coalition politics. (17)

Their call for “capturing the fragmented, rapidly shifting registers and modalities of the forces that shape everyday life in third time-spaces . . . requires writing that mixes and juxtaposes genres” (17), a writing that emphasizes polyphonies. Whereas their focus is anthropological, and aspiring to the scientific, Conde, who has said she is not “political” (see Pfaff), offers that effort in her art.

Mangroves are basically of two categories, those of the so-called Old World and those of the so-called New World and West Africa. The mangrove forest would of course have offered a familiar terrain to those slaves brought from coastal West Africa, while to many European colonizers it would have instanced another exoticism. While “infamous for its impenetrable maze” and still considered by some as “a wasteland of little or no
value" (reported by Lugo and Snedaker in Mitsch, Wetlands 231), the mangrove is in fact highly valued by natural scientists for its hardiness and great adaptability to the physical stresses on the system as well as for offering stability and protection to island and coastal regions against erosion and storm damage, among other benefits. These plants have developed physiologically and morphologically in order to survive environments of high salinity, occasional harsh weather, and poor soils. One of the most visible adaptations by mangroves is their prop roots and pneumatophores, obviously the physical characteristics that tie them to the Deleuze and Guattari paradigm. Often growing up to eighty feet, the mangrove is recognized as one of Nature's most productive ecosystems, sheltering and providing food for a wide diversity of creatures. Therefore, while the first response of many literary critics has been to seize upon the message of doom conveyed by the impenetrability of the mangrove forest, as Vilma does with a certain fear, there could well be other, more positive lessons held in the image of the mangrove in Condé's story.

The Caribbean landscape has of course long been a central feature of the Caribbean writer's project of exploring identity—from Roumain to Césaire to Glissant to Chamoiseau. Césaire, whose significance has always been extolled by Condé, and whom Edouard Glissant has followed in delving, before Condé, into Caribbean topography for "images that evoke various mental states," has written from "a rich residue of past accretions and the possibilities of ceaseless renewal" that are found in the geography of the islands (Dash 6-7). Michael Dash's introduction to Glissant's The Répétition credits Glissant with presenting trees in particular as "symbols of the dynamic interplay between past and present . . ." (15). In that novel, trees "are presented . . . as models of an open consciousness in their upward surge from the cramped space of the island and the subterranean flowering of their roots" (15). It is certainly worth recalling the friendship between Glissant and Guattari, acknowledged in Poétique de la Relation. For Glissant, the Antilles are not "lands," that is, not lands "mais des archipels complexes qui nécessitent un autre type de discours et un autre langage" 'but complex archipelagos that require another kind of discourse and another language' (Fonkoua 41). Archipelagos themselves, it should be emphasized, are the image of the rhizome—fractured, reaching outward, and as we read in a recent (1996) special number of Notre Librairie dedicated to Caribbean literature of the period 1991-95, "le rhizome présente l'avantage de lier en un seul lieu l'être et le monde, l'espace singulier et l'univers, l'errance et l'enracinement . . ." "The rhizome presents the advantage of linking in a single locus the human being and the world, the singular space and the universe, movement and rootedness . . ." (Fonkoua 43). The language to which it gives birth is "non pas une parole d'enracinement mais plutôt une parole archipélique qui se situe à mi-chemin entre l'enracinement et l'errance, qui va de l'enracinement à l'errance, refusant à chaque instant l'emprisonnement dans des concepts réducteurs" 'not a speech of implantation but rather an archipelagic word that is situated at the crossroads of rootedness and nomadism, ever refusing to be imprisoned in reductionist concepts' (43). As Glissant says, the image of the rhizome conveys the notion that
identity can no longer be found in the root, but instead in Relation, thus offering a rejection of a unique identity, of exclusive roots, and or a hierarchy of cultures (Degas, "Tout-monde" 49). What we find in Conde’s work is more a sense of the creolization of the entire world, a notion that Daniel Delas attributes to Glissant (69).

Patrick Chamoiseau, too, has looked to the metaphor of the rhizome as a means of escaping

d’un côté à une unité totalisante et monolithique et de l’autre à un désordre dépourvu de sens et ignorant la force du lien social. C’est une troisième voie qui est ouverte, celle où sont réunies de façon hautement positive, les qualités intrinsèques de l’unité: le peuple qui résiste à la dispersion et se reconnaît dans le partage d’un destin; et les vertus de l’errance: la fluidité ou le chaos qui n’offre pas d’aspérités à la tyrannie de l’ordre.

on the one hand, a totalizing and monolithic unity, and on the other, a disorder devoid of meaning and ignorant of the strength of the social bond. It is a third way that is open, the one that brings together in a highly positive fashion the intrinsic qualities of unity: the people who resist dispersal and acknowledge a shared destiny; and the virtues of wandering: the fluidity or the chaos that does not offer asperities to the tyranny of order. (Chivallon, “Texaco” 105)

In Chamoiseau’s Texaco, the urbanist elaborates on the significance of the mangroves as symbol of identity:

Je compris soudain que Texaco n’était pas ce que les Occidentaux appellent un bidonville, mais une mangrove, une *mangrove urbaine*. La mangrove semble de prime abord hostile aux existences. Il est difficile d’admettre que, dans ses angoisses de racines, d’ombres moussues, d’eaux voilées, la mangrove puisse être un tel berceau de vie pour les crabes, les poissons, les langoustes, l’écosystème marin. Elle ne semble appartenir ni à la terre, ni à la mer . . . . Pourtant la ville se renforce en puisant dans la mangrove urbaine de Texaco . . . exactement comme la mer se repue par cette langue vitale qui la relie aux chimies des mangroves.

I suddenly understood that Texaco wasn’t what Westerners call a shantytown, but a mangrove, an urban mangrove. At first glance, the mangrove appears hostile to life forms. It is hard to admit that, in its choke-roots, its foamy shadows, its murky waters, the mangrove might be such a cradle of life for the crabs, the fish, the crayfish, the marine ecosystem. It doesn’t seem to belong either to the land or to the sea . . . . Yet the city is strengthened through reaching down into Texaco’s urban mangrove . . . in the exact way that the sea is repopulated by that vital tongue linking it to the chemistries of the mangrove. (289)
Christopher Miller has exhorted that “an antillanité must emerge from la prise en compte de la terre nouvellement” (qtd. in Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices 174). Therefore, the mangrove, essential vegetation, essential biological system in the Caribbean, may well hold positive lessons for the multicultural reality experienced in the Caribbean. This notion of the need for a prise en compte of the Caribbean landscape is evidenced in Condé’s leaving the dubale of West Africa and returning to the native vegetation of her homeland, a coming to terms with its natural setting and its social culture.

It is precisely multiplicity that is so well conveyed in the image of the mangrove, with its multiple roots, multiple ramifications, horizontalness, lateral linkages rather than vertical roots. And indeed those are features we find in Condé’s Crossing the Mangrove. For example, her choice of the wake as the setting for her novel, as Chamoiseau emphasizes in Callaloo, certainly bears a Caribbean specificity. Yet Condé has spoken many times of the significance of US-American author William Faulkner as a favorite writer; thus we cannot dismiss a link with As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury, or other of his works. Nor can we fail to be reminded of links with other world masterpieces, such as the Japanese tale Rashomon, with its weaving of multiple reports on the death of the husband. Like As I Lay Dying and much like the Japanese tale written by Akutagawa and its masterly filmic interpretation directed by Kurosawa, Condé’s novel is structured around a death and then draws linkages between the memories and reflections of those at the veillée who had associated with the dead person. We might even add that the work is carnivalesque in structure and spirit. While we fail to learn the precise identity of the dead man or the truth about his activities on the island, we do experience parts of the lives of those who are relating events linked to the dead person. Condé has told Françoise Pfaff that that is specifically why she chose the wake for her novel.

Carole Boyce Davies has written that the rejection of the linear, which she qualifies as a “phallocentric form of text” (6), is a hallmark of Caribbean women’s writing, and as Maryse Condé herself has related to Pfaff, Crossing the Mangrove was an experiment with “circular structure, a narrative with no true beginning or end” (72). According to Deleuze and Guattari, rhizomes are equated with mapping, not with tracing. As they see it, “writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping…” (5). These critics describe types of books: the root-book, which is the classical book, but one that is confined to binary logic; the radicle-book, a fragmented unity-multiplicity. Tracing lineage, feeling the pull of Bambara roots, is a major concern in Segu. With that novel’s emphasis on rootedness in the Bambara life, we can see Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the arborescent, the genealogical tree root. Rhizomes, on the other hand, emphasize the “more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification” that Nature in fact is. Indeed, as we have seen, it is this multiplicity in structure that is so well conveyed by the image of the mangrove, and that Condé herself has said was at the heart of her writing project. Now Condé has told Pfaff that she chose the title first for its “beautiful image” and its sound that was “soft to the ear”; the symbolism did not come first. In fact, she refers to the Dictionnaire Robert definition of
mangrove as "a plant of formation commonly found on tropical shores where buttonwood and mangrove trees are intermingled" (71). So, already the movement toward polyculture was at work before the symbolism interpreted later by others, and instead of the move deep down to essential, essentialist roots, we have the outward expansive thrust.

Lionnet calls upon Glissant, James Clifford, and even Edward Said in her description of Condé's structuration of the novel, emphasizing that Condé's piece-meal, fragmented presentation reflects the thought that to seek out filiation or origins, which is the task of the classical hero, or his quest, presents as impasse for the Antillean subject precisely because the linear is not a possible framework. The novel cannot come to a close, so to speak, because it reflects a world still in the making, "rich in the plurality of possibilities that give a multiplicity of meanings to the community" ("Traversée" 480; my trans.). As Lionnet says, this is a world that the reader must learn to accept.

Not only is the structure of the novel "rhizomatic," but so is the theme, or themes, in that the work stresses multiple relations to the land and its inhabitants rather than awareness of and possession of a land by a single, rooted people. Everyone is linked to the land in some way and—even when not related by blood—to everyone else in the mangrove milieu of Rivière au Sel in Gaudeloupe. The setting, the veillée, illustrates how the work's principle of organization is itself rhizomatic, for the veillée is a collective, community experience wherein nineteen voices interweave as in a baroque musical exercise. (In fact, Deleuze and Guattari illustrate the rhizomatic through excerpts from musical scores.) The figure around whom the novel is built further adds to the rhizome paradigm because we never arrive at the root of his angst, nor do we ever get past various personal entanglements to determine his family roots or the exact itinerary of his travels in order to say exactly where he comes from, exactly where he has been, exactly what he has done, exactly who he is. We may wonder about the origins of this man, but by not knowing for certain, we cannot stereotype him by linking the different sides of him that we are shown to those same qualities as revealed in the novel's other characters. In fact, he appears calculating like the landowner Loulou; fatally drawn to beauty like Aristide, the son languishing in the father's shadow; attracted to the magic of the natural world like Mama Sonson; interested in writing history like Emile the "historian"; and so on. Those he comes in contact with are a rainbow world, representing a diversity of backgrounds, qualities, capabilities, temperaments. In other words, Condé does not lead or even join the vanguard of Caribbean ethnocentrism, nor of any essentialism, but offers, beyond her beautiful lyricism, a reality-based portrait of a society that reflects the convergencies and exchanges—the symbioses—in the natural world, and challenges that society to flourish as a multicultural society.

Crossing the Mangrove gives life to many of those same ideas, that is, of promoting Antillean culture but not asserting its superiority against other, alien cultures or asserting the supremacy of one Antillean group over another. Reflecting on the structure of the novel, Arlette M. Smith focuses on the "frequent instances of duplications, parallels, echoes, and mirror
effects” that we find in Condé’s writing: “Characters, segments, situations, and of course metaphors are parts of this echoing process” (385). These strategies could also be called rhizomatic processes, branching out as they do from a first incident, ramifying, prop-rooting, intertwining to create a maze of memories rather than a singular stem. Crossing the Mangrove is above all about connections, even if it does not clarify them and sort them out—it does bring them to light.

Francis Sancher himself is the very model of the rhizomatic, “with his multiple attachments, from the geographical, romantic, and sexual perspectives, his nomadism of the rebellious adventurer, his fragility of the unsatisfied intellectual” (Lionnet, “Traversée” 481; my trans.). Francis Sancher’s connections extend from the very young child Joby to the elderly of the community, Mama Sonson and Cyrille. They include male and female, human, animal, and plant. Francis enters the lives of the rich (Loulou) and the poorest of the poor (Désinor), the blackest and the whitest among the citizenry. These connections illustrate the multiple, the real, the dynamic (see Lionnet, “Traversée” 481). While there is animosity and a sense of estrangement felt by many of the citizens of Rivière au Sel toward Francis Sancher, actual violence is muted because it occurs “off stage”: we “meet” this shadowy figure through the reminiscences of local community members at the wake, where he can no longer threaten or harm anyone. In fact, because we, like the citizens of Rivière au Sel, can know for certain so very little about him, and because he guards himself so cautiously from revealing anything about himself to them, he is an Other to them, with all the attractions (as experienced by Mira) and revulsions (as felt by Loulou, for example) of Otherness. On the other hand, the community remains an Other to Francis Sancher, for he too has intense fears of entering into complete communion with others.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite speaks of four “inter-related but significantly different orientations” of the Caribbean reality (29). His first category is the Euro-centered elite. These can be metropolitan officials, technical experts, and the like. Such a character shatters the life of Dodose. Pierre, who ingratiated himself with Dodose’s African husband and who became Dodose’s own lover, quietly and quickly returned to Paris at the very time that Dodose’s husband was jailed for ambiguous reasons, although possibly for political activism. A second category outlined by Brathwaite is what he calls “the Euro-orientated creole upper class,” that is, the resident planters. The fathers of the two young women carrying the children of Francis Sancher best represent this group. Both Loulou and Sylvestre own land. While it is clear that Loulou’s position in society is clearly superior (because despite any business success, Sylvestre’s Asian Indian origins are always a factor), Loulou looks over his shoulder at any possible encroachments or advantage that could be gained by Sylvestre, the Asian. Also included in this group would be the younger men and women Aristide, Dinah, Rosa, Joby. The third group delineated by Brathwaite is a small Creole intellectual elite who represent a Caribbean substitute for Europe, but who remain a group with no concept of “Caribbean.” One might say that Emile has been this kind of person; one might even say that Lucien has stagnated in this grouping,
With Francis Sancher’s death, both are poised to move beyond this classification. While Léocadie has a strong sense of what her Caribbeaness is not, she is so overwhelmed by her disillusionment with life that she seems lifeless; certainly she is not proactively “Caribbean.” Nevertheless, with the death of Francis Sancher, she is ready to drop pretenses, and perhaps she will start up once again to teach about “nos ancêtres” who were not “gauloises.” Also among this group we could place Carmélien. The fourth segment of Caribbean society described by Brathwaite is the Afro-Caribbean population of peasants, laborers, and illiterates. This group would be comprised of Mama Sonson, Sonny, Cyrille. Thus we see the ramifications—the rhizomes—of Caribbean society portrayed in their fullness in Crossing the Mangrove.

While Ellen W. Munley chooses to dwell on the negative interpretation of the mangrove (“Mapping the Mangrove: Empathy and Survival”) as a metaphor for present-day Guadeloupe in Condé’s novel, Condé herself seems much more positive about contemporary social interaction in discourse. Her interview with Pfaff reveals her deep “disenchantment” with political movements, yet shows how her upbringing in a well-known middle-class Guadeloupian family, where the parents encouraged a sense of separateness—from Asian Indians, from mulattoes, and of course from whites—has led her by reaction to be quite positive about today’s Caribbean society where, she finds, such demarcations are a thing of the past. In another interview, with Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar in Callaloo in 1990, Condé speaks of how the environment of inequality and extreme separation between races that she had known while growing up in Guadeloupe had disappeared by the time she returned: “... [I]n Guadeloupe and Martinique, the division of society according to ethnic origin is slowing disappearing...[W]e believe in the West Indies that we have a culture that Blacks, Mulattoes, and Indians share” (355). She also says that writers, especially, should strive to “produce a communication between people based not only on color but maybe on ethics, knowledge, sympathy...” (353).

Other critics, in training their eyes toward the past, find no traces of nostalgia or discontent about the island’s precocolial past (Lionnet, “Logiques métisses” 334) and can focus on the positive. Chamoiseau states that “in Traversée de la mangrove, Maryse Condé foresees that, in our countries, the ‘we’ takes precedence over the ‘I’ and...the protagonist is an entire people who has managed to survive...[and that] heroism is a collective, silent, patient, indirect resistance that will take...long time to decipher (“Reflections” 395). In speaking about writers of the Caribbean, Chamoiseau has said that mangroves “are in our nature, a cradle, a source of life, of birth and rebirth” (390). He speaks, too, of the “mangrove of Creolity” and its “opaqueness” (395), and he emphasizes Vilma’s declaration in the novel that one cannot cross the mangrove (395). Vilma expresses with quiet horror the idea that one becomes impaled on the mangrove’s sharp roots: “[O]n s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers,” she says—“you impale yourself on the mangrove roots.” Interestingly, some of the most “lost” characters presented to us are Léocadie and Vilma. Perhaps it is not surprising to learn that these two are “bookish,” with little direct experience
with the natural world, characters for whom contact with the “real” world is frightening, characters who have not learned through their books to meet and deal with the natural world.

Munley refers to the “death-inducing traps in the mangrove thicket” (156), pointing out that “all the characters struggling to cross the mangrove are drowning in loneliness” (165). She rightly states, however, that “the continuous flow of inner experiences and the fluidity of intersubjective experiences in the novel reproduces in all its complexity the process that happens constantly in human interaction” (165-66). I would add, however, that it is precisely this constant flow—in the natural world, the intake (uptake) of nutrients, excretion, that is, the biological activity—that makes the mangrove one of the most vital, successful of all ecosystems, and thus an excellent metaphor and model for Caribbean society. While Munley’s description and analysis of the novel as a mapping out of the means of crossing the mangrove, which she reads as strangling, to the road to light, which she reads as the only “salutary” environment, is one possible reading, I would like to suggest that we read the mangrove as a realistic but positive paradigm, not only for Caribbean society but for societies dealing with multiculturalism. As opposed to sharing Vilma’s fear of the mangrove, perhaps we should take a lesson from the mangrove and not look to roots, singular roots, but follow where their multiplicities (their ramifications, their knottings) lead. Vilma’s fear of being impaled on the mangrove stems from her fear of being enclosed within the social community which, unlike the natural community, does not accept diversity outright. As a member of a historically marginalized ethnic group in the Antilles, Vilma has experienced exclusion. The overwhelming effect of the natural world in Crossing the Mangrove is the sense of being in a land of exile: those of European heritage feel the attractions of the “real” Western world drawing them away from the quiet of their island lives, while those of Asian heritage pine for the traditions and customs of their ancestors at the same time that many of them are attracted to the privileges of the capitalist European tradition, and the blacks and mulattoes live close to the natural world but must eke out their living from it, resentful of or resigned to this lot. There is a stagnation, a sense of waiting for life to begin: Aristide plans for a future business in horticulture, but does not act upon it at present; Mira has used her energies sexually but not wisely, mostly propelled by an anger toward her father; Léocadie laments her lost youth; Rosa laments her lost baby daughter Shireen and is embittered toward the daughter, Vilma, she has lost through inattention; Loulou still harbors resentment that he was not his mother’s favorite son, and passes along that resentment through extreme callousness toward his own sons. It is Francis Sancher who ignites in some—though not all—of these characters the desire for renewal, for new growth: Mira speaks of renewal, Dinah vows to leave Loulou to seek out the sun and a new life with her boys, Rosa recognizes the wrong she has done to Vilma and hopes to repair the relationship; Dodose recalls the words of Ecclesiastes and recognizes that now is the time for her own renewal.

Chamoiseau says that “all the countries of the world meet in [Caribbean] flesh and spirits” ("Reflections" 392). The mangrove more
than any other image conveys this complexity of the composition of the people of the Caribbean. The strength of the mangrove is in fact in its knotted structure. Instead of trying to untangle the crossed, twisted roots of the mangrove, and of mangrove cultures, perhaps it is time to celebrate the mangrove’s power of resistance—not just in political terms, as most will likely read the word, but in terms of the adaptability, the survival that is figured by mangrove communities. By reading the mangrove from the optic of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizomatic, we can see that Crossing the Mangrove stands out as a celebration of the importance of diversity, against any notion of the hegemony of any one group, against the notion of root-identity.

Suzanne Crosta, also in Callaloo, does tell us that “the crossing of the mangrove, the understanding of the text as language, is meaningful only if the reader is willing to relinquish the notion of a single perspective or a unified perception of reality as the sole basis of knowledge and truth” (155). Her notion might well be extended beyond the language of the text to the idea of communication in general. In that case, crossing the mangrove becomes impossible not because the mangrove forest is perceived as a threatening, grim symbol of the loss of individual potential or agency, but because it is instead a rich, diverse environment where the tangle of abundant growth is actually the reason for the health of the system.

Conde’s emphasis on the multiplicity of perspectives gives her novel a half-of-mirrors feeling. For example, if we think of her predilection for wordsmith characters, we have from her both a writer and a teller, Emile who wants to write History and Cyrille whose telling of stories is History. We have two fathers from two different backgrounds, but sharing the experience of the loss of a daughter to Francis Sancher, both of whom will be grandfathers to his progeny. We see Léocadie, Rosa, Dinah, Vilma, Mira, all from different backgrounds and all examples of unhappy love. We see the love of Nature manifested variously by Aristide, Loulou, Mira, Joby, Mama Sonson. In fact, no one living in or around Rivière au Sel seems oblivious of the beauty of the landscape and the powers of Nature. Thus, despite the claustrophobic ambience of the veillée in the novel, there is a contrasting, and balancing, sense of the wide open. To counter the sense of defeat and pessimism that acts to weigh the novel down, Condé lets us wander through her characters’ minds to their favorite outdoor haunts, with the sights and smells of Caribbean nature. Indeed, some of the novel’s richest and most lyrical passages are set in the mangrove forest.

Loulou and Aristide are the landowners with European backgrounds whose lives have been dependent on the European tradition of developing the land, changing and “improving” nature. Although the plantation flourished, naturally, for a time, and at the expense of the non-European population, Aristide seems aware of but unable to put into effect new ideas and methods to replace those of his father, Loulou, and his father before him. The plantation seems sterile and weak when compared to the lushness and variety that Nature provides, unimpeded by the planter’s designs. One might even map the greater movements within the novel as repeated dislocations from the plantation and town—human constructions and
restrictions—to the forest and sea, a movement that sets Nature, and by inclusion the mangrove, once again in a positive light.

The power of Nature and its effects upon the entangled lives of those who inhabit a same space are not new themes in Condé, of course. Parallels with Charlotte Brontë’s Wuthering Heights are especially evident in a comparison of protagonists. Like Heathcliff, Francis Sancher is looked upon with suspicion and disdain for his person, for he is the “shady” outsider whose origins are never fully disclosed. Like Heathcliff, Francis Sancher is the object of curiosity for his possessions, in the case of Heathcliff his new money, in the case of Sancher his trunkload rumored to be full of important documents and money. Like Heathcliff, Francis Sancher becomes enmeshed in a web of passion involving more than one woman, more than one generation. Like Heathcliff, too, Francis Sancher is a moody, embittered man, often brutish, but one whose keen intelligence attracts and whose passions run deep. As with Heathcliff, readers sense that death is in the air wherever Francis Sancher goes. Despite the air of evil that surrounds Heathcliff, Wuthering Heights also ends on a note of promise and renewal, with its emphasis on the vegetation planted by the young couple, Cathy and Hareton. Crossing the Mangrove evinces a similar sensation. It is not surprising, given Maryse Condé’s interest in her native region and in her interest in tracing the webs of human lives and human passions, that her new novel, La migration des cœurs (1996) is, by way of Jean Rhys as well as Brontë, her retelling of Wuthering Heights, as the back cover of the new novel explains: “Maryse Condé avait toujours rêvé d’adapter à l’univers caraïbe le roman d’Emily Brontë Les Hauts de Hurlevent” “Maryse Condé had always dreamed of adapting to the Caribbean universe Emily Brontë’s novel Wuthering Heights.” In many ways, Crossing the Mangrove was preparatory to this work (see Cloonan and Postel).

While Segu explores a variety of cultures and cultural experience in a variety of times and spaces, the overriding feeling is the pull from the Bambara roots and the importance of being a Traore. Segu, of course, has an epic feel to it because it is the story of multiple generations, brothers and their families. Yet it remains foremost the story of a people with a direct link to a specific place. However many characters enter into the narrative, they do so by virtue of their relationship with the Traore family and the family compound. The author’s mix of history into the fiction lends a realism to the tale, and the weaving of plots and the pulsing of time leads to a sense of purpuristic “furthering” of the story. In Crossing the Mangrove, we are a-centered because while we learn about Francis Sancher from a variety of sources, some of the information is hearsay and speculative, other pieces are contradictory, and none of it is complete or completing. There is a sense of dreamy inertia, a timelessness that must be overcome and be made to enter into history. At the break of dawn after the wake, the dead man remains as shadowy and elusive as he did in life. The detective story has not ended, because the detective work has not put the pieces of the puzzle together in a whole picture.

Thus, because the novel tells a story whose linkages can never be unraveled, uncrossed, opacity is seen by some (Degras in L’Esprit Créateur
and Dix ans) as pejorative—the opacity of History seen as depriving the Caribbean population of an identity. Still, the novel itself ends in a certain illumination, the dawn of a new day, radiating a sense of hope with its new light, not a sense of drowning in brackish, opaque, strangulating waters. In fact, just as the opacity of the waters from which the mangroves draws its nutrients represents richness, so does the disparate group of friends and acquaintances who come to witness the death of this man whose presence created a stress of their own system. Many of those reflecting on their relationship with Francis Sancher have a renewed sense of the value of their lives and hope to act upon their thoughts. Some remain bitter or disillusioned; some remain as mercenary as ever. But this is a mosaic of many lives, and many lives do not have happy endings. The mangrove can continue to thrive as long as it can both absorb and excrete. Without the tangle of roots, it could do neither.

While there are clues to the identity of Francis Sancher, no single strand or root can be untangled or isolated; there are deflecting, deceiving hints and leads, too. Francis Sancher is a stranger who cannot be linked to a specific country of origin—he may be Cuban, he may be Colombian, he may be French. Like Heathcliff, Francis Sancher has been “away.” He may have traveled to Africa and elsewhere, and he seems rootless, a drifter. Interestingly, several characters encounter him for the first time “sitting on the root of a tree” (Joby, Cyrille, and Léocadie: 72, 121, etc.), and he is repeatedly associated with tree life, whether in a physical description—in being described as tall as a mahogany (by Moïse) and having an arm that “weighed as heavy as a dead branch” (74)—or a character description (“Not at all the tree under whose shade [Moïse] could blossom.” 23). Francis Sancher himself babbles about “the fairy tale where the flowers grow roots up” (24) and refers to himself to some characters as a curandero. He uses local flora in mysterious ways to change people’s physical conditions, as he does in making teas for Dinah or possibly preparing a “natural” abortion agent for Mira.

Almost all the characters in the novel are attracted to Francis Sancher. He has called forth the sense of rebellion and desire for self-fulfillment in women. Mira, the beautiful blond black born of her white father’s union with a young black woman from the other side of town, runs away from the family home to spite her philandering aristocratic father Loulou, also tormenting her stepbrother Aristide, whose jealousy is related to their incestuous relationship. One senses that Mira may be closest in spirit to Francis Sancher, a figure who seems to have few worries about whether he is transgressing society’s established norms. One also senses that the two are kindred spirits in their closeness to nature—Francis Sancher the curandero, Mira the nereid, the sprite who is most alive when she is immersed in the mothering waters within the forest. It was first to the mountains that Mira ran searching for her dead mother, believing her to be “guarded by the giants of the dense forest and sleeping between the huge toes of their roots” (34). It was in the gully into which she had stumbled and fallen, there, “hidden under the mass of vegetation,” that she found her mother’s spirit, with the “scarcely audible babble and smell of rotting humus” (34).
Certainly the rotting humus can be taken for the soil that mothers the islanders, composed of the detritus of the variety of vegetation and animal life. This is a smell that gardeners and biologists would mark with approval, for—decomposed and recomposed—it will become the source of new life. As Mira grew, “like a plant going to seed,” she felt imprisoned and dreamed of trying to find an exit; that seemed to happen when she came “face to face with a stranger, as solid as a tree” as she stumbled this time upon a “body hidden by the philodendron leaves” (36). The philodendron, of course, is, according to its Greek etymology, the “loving tree,” and here we have one further symbol of the promises in Nature.

The novel is nonhierarchical in its presentation of lived lives. Condé has captured the concept of multiplicity through multiple voices—nineteen—that speak in this work, ranging from the unschooled to the university-educated, some presented in the first person, some (male, as Crosta points out) in the third. These voices crisscross in a lateral narration. Reflecting the lateral linkages of the mangrove, Condé presents characters of a multiplicity of ages (from the youngster Joby to the elders Cyrille the griot to Mama Sonson the herbalist), of both genders, of the many classes in Caribbean society, from Désinor the Haitian to upper-class blacks like Dodose, to Creoles like Loulou. The nonlinear is patterned by the diurnal: dusk, night, dawn of the “first light” of the new day. The story is told in fragments, just as Francis Sancher parcelled himself out to people, held himself back from people. We do not have a clear, linear vision of his existence: we have multiple perspectives on his life, and on the lives of the many characters we meet.

Lionnet writes of Crossing the Mangrove as belonging to the peasant novel tradition, which traces and develops a people’s ties to the land (see her “Traversée”). Yet it is fair to say that in this work ties are not so much to the land as to the flora—and flora that may be more present by their absence—and the waters of the island. The mangrove, while representing “land” (for it forms a forest) also represents sea: the mangrove’s interaction between water from the sea with the tree captures the immigrations and emigrations that we associate with the Caribbean islands. It can indeed be considered a “border.” Lionnet sees Condé’s Caribbean community as “self-sufficient” and “unburdened by crises of identity” (“Logiques métissées” 336) and sees her as differing from Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant in their “heroic, prophetic” roles as voices for the people. This position may be debatable, for the setting itself, the wake, may be seen as a pretext to consider the value and importance of one individual, his relationship with other individuals and a community, and conversely, the wake attendees question their own lives. Condé, says Lionnet, is humble. The humility she perceives may be related to the acceptance, indeed the embracing of the multiplicity she sees and presents in this novel. It may be arguable that her characters are “self-sufficient,” for we are filled with the languor and languishing of a Dinah or Rosa, the impotent stalling of an Aristide. Yet through their contact with Francis Sancher, all of the characters have experienced a motivating spark of some kind, a burgeoning within themselves.
What we might say is that they have adapted in their various ways: they have developed strategies of survival.

Francis Sancher’s effect on others is also often related in terms of tree imagery. In their first encounter, Joby, for example, says, “I didn’t stumble over the buttress roots . . .,” but then relates that “at one point I missed my footing and rolled on the moss . . .” (74). In some cases, “dreams tak[e] root again” (18), but in others, “[t]he trees of Rivière au Sel had once again tightened their hold . . . like the walls of a jail” (29). Life’s problems are likened by Francis Sancher himself to trees (139)—we cannot see the roots, we are told. But we need to know their shape and nature, and how far down they reach into the “slimy humus” in search of water (139). (Yet for the trees of the work’s title, mangroves, the roots are in fact partially visible. Though visible, they are tangled.) Trees are ageless creatures, pointing their forked tongues at face level (174).

While one could say that the novel observes the traditional unities—after all, the characters gather together in one location during the space of one nighttime from dusk to dawn to observe one event, the death of one man—one could also remark on the absence of unity—there is no consensus of opinion about this one man. No two people have had the same experiences with this man, and when they have, the experiences are felt in differing ways. Just as Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the rhizome is not overcoded, neither is Francis Sancher. Deleuze and Guattari tell us that if the rhizome is broken, shattered, it may start up again. We observe the same phenomenon in the details that come to us concerning Francis Sancher. Was he a soldier in Angola? A profiteer in Colombia? How and why did he make his appearances in such varied places? The point is that there is rupture between his possible adventures in South America, North America, Africa, and now Guadeloupe. There is a sense of death about the activities he supposedly experienced in Angola, an abrupt break in time, for the events are made to seem distant in time and place even to him. And yet the fact that there are reports of his activities in such disparate, discrete locations is also reminiscent of the drive for renewal illustrated by the rhizome as it seeks out an existence in a variety of directions. Renewal is, of course, an old theme in literature, especially in nature poetry.

Sancher also has this double effect on the members of the community of Rivière au Sel. One senses that while there has been a certain period of mourning for what Mira has done and for the child she is bearing, which was unwanted by Sancher, although her life has been shattered by these events it will start up again. Indeed, she leads us to believe along with her that her life begins with his death. Something has been extinguished, but a new flame is glowing. Whereas Vilma appears to want death—“death is a footbridge between humans” (161), she tells us—even her desire for death reflects the rhizomatic in emphasizing an image of connectivity, a footbridge between humans and those in another world. Dodose, whose life was shattered by the departure of her French lover Pierre at the same time as the imprisonment of her upward-bound, activist husband, vows to start over with Sonny, her intellectually impaired child. Lucien dreams of publishing his novel “in Guadeloupean” in Paris, while Emile the historian, dreaming
of a land with no limits, searches for a new approach to history, a situation
that calls to mind Maryse Condé’s reference to Pierre Nora’s distinction
between writing history to impose order and meaning on events, and writ-
ing memory, a necessarily disorganized effort (see Pfaff).

As Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, the rhizomatic is not amenable to
a structural model, and is a map rather than a tracing: “To be rhizomor-
phous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet
connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new
uses” (11). Condé seems to implement in her narrative the strategy
suggested by the two scholars: “. . . [Y]ou start by delimiting a first line con-
sisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you
see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish them-

Write, form a rhizome, increase your territory by territorialis-

Deleuze and Guattari tell us in theoretical studies, as Glissant
and Chamoiseau tell us in their creative works, that there is a need for looking
beyond roots, the arborescent. When Veronica tried in Héremakhonom to
return to the land of her ancestors, she found that she no longer belonged
there, nor did she want to claim that land as her own. There is a need for
focusing on branching out, or intertwining roots, to achieve a stronger
ability to bear the stresses of Nature, of life. “Only connect” is the axiom
handied about, and it certainly goes arm in arm with the rhizomatic para-
digm, as well as with the “biodiversity” touted in the natural science fields.
Nature loves diversity; it is necessary to a living system. The mangrove, as we
see in Crossing the Mangrove, stands for a lateral ethic, a reaching out, a cross-
ing over, resistance and adaptation together.

What we find in Crossing the Mangrove is perhaps a failure to commu-
nicate, for the veillée has brought people together who have been voiceless—
locked in monologue, rather than released and relieved by dialogue. Even
in the face of death, they do not appear to join together. Unlike the
medieval danse macabre that portrays the peasant and prince with joined
hands and bodies moving to the same rhythm and in the same direction as
they follow Death, Condé’s characters appear to remain stationary, immo-
bilized in their chairs or standing against the wall at the veillée; they present
a fragmented appearance. Some harbor anger, others fear, still others sad-
ness that seems inexpressible, as they keep vigil for another who has lost his
life. Yet all understand that death comes for all. They seem to understand
too, in their various ways, that their varied lives form a nexus, as this veillée
is a nexus. As Lionnet points out, Condé’s novel is somewhat revolutionary
in Caribbean literature in putting forth a message of egalitarianism among
so many literary works that distinguish between master and victim
(“Traversée” 482). While the characters are all aware that death will come to
all, the novel nevertheless goes beyond the register of a memento mori, for the veillée ends just as the day begins.

The words of Ecclesiastes, calling for a time to be born and a time to die, a time to reap and a time to sow, do resonate. There has been a death, and now it is time for birth. While keeping vigil and recalling past events, each one anticipates the future. We recognize, too, that Vilma’s baby and Mira’s baby will knot more roots and branches within the community, creating new growth for the community, new branches. Aristide may be on the verge of taking a new economic and personal direction. Emile may begin at last to put his thoughts in writing. Loulou may try a new horticultural venture, planting grapefruit. Rosa may embrace and mother Vilma. Dinah may set out from the plantation home for a new, light-filled, independent life. It may be, as Vilma said, that you cannot cross the mangrove. But it may be that there is no need to cross the mangrove, for—just as it does for animal and plant life—the world of the mangrove can offer safe and thriving shelter to a diversity of human beings. Mira, Mama Sonson, Joby, Aristide, even Loulou—these people have all felt safest and happiest within the embrace of Nature in the world of the mangrove, even while experiencing Nature in solitary ways. A clearer look at the world of the mangrove would focus on the rhizomatic, and thus focus attention on community, a communion of diversity. This veillée has been spent in solitary meditation and recollection; the citizens of Rivière au Sel have not yet learned the lessons offered in Nature, to branch out, like the mangrove. But the day is just dawning.

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