

Reconfiguring Boundaries in Maryse Condé's
Crossing the Mangrove

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In a brief essay entitled "Où commence et où finit la Caraïbe?" ("Where Does the Caribbean Begin and End?") Maryse Condé responds to the question not with a map but with an itinerary. She approaches an answer by tracing her path as a Guadeloupean writer who has spent most of her adult life well beyond the physical boundaries of the West Indies. According to Condé, she set off on her career pressured by literary elders who insisted that "a writer is an inspired sage, a mentor" (112).¹ Their unanimous mandate was that she affirm her West Indian identity by means of a renewal of African roots. Thus, reports Condé, she launched her career with a backward voyage which turned her life into a "masked ball" that would end only many years later with a conflicted return to her native Guadeloupe in the mid-1980s (112).² This linking of geographical rediscovery to the act of unmasking, with its implication of an unsettling act of disclosure and exposure, captures well the disordering of prescribed gender, racial and geographical identities which has been a fundamental aspect of Condé's writing. As Christophe Lamiot has observed, her writing is both a mediated representation of history and a geography in which places are represented not as "containers for human activities" but rather as what is transformed by human contact (79). Most of Condé's fictional world is a stage of conflicting dynamics of place and space where characters resist unbearable social and historical circumstances by means of creatively forged, compen-

satory, geographical identities. Condé's 1989 novel, *Crossing the Mangrove*, corresponds to her return to a Caribbean "stage" to continue her long process of questioning mapped configurations of identity.

A lush, densely populated work, enlivened by a revolving stream of consciousness rich with creolisms and the energy of the West Indian oral tradition, *Crossing the Mangrove* presents a compelling performance of the complicated patterns of place and space inherent in the social masquerade of a small, isolated, Guadeloupean village. Avoiding neat coordinate systems in this novel, as she does in her approach to a definition of the boundaries of the Caribbean, Condé creates a complex narrative of spatial identities that brings to life the distinction made by Michel de Certeau in *The Invention of Everyday Life* between a map and an itinerary. De Certeau defines a map as "procedures of delimitation or 'marking boundaries' ('bornage') and an itinerary as "'enunciative focalizations' (that is, the indication of the body within discourse" [116]). *Crossing the Mangrove* puts a very similar geographical dynamic into play from a challenging feminine perspective. This particular challenge is a significant aspect of Condé's novel that critical responses have tended to underestimate or overlook.

Patrick Chamoiseau, for example, who was asked by Condé to be the novel's "first public reader," responded enthusiastically to the sonority of the French title, *Traversée de la mangrove*, and to its symbolic resonance with "a sensitive figure in our collective consciousness" (390).³ Observing that for West Indians the mangrove is "in our nature, a cradle, a source of life, of birth, and rebirth," he proposes that Condé's choice of this geographical symbol as the novel's organizing image "is a good sign, one that will prolong the return of Maryse Condé, by an extension of birth and rebirth, to her land of Guadeloupe and to her native culture" (390). It is important to note, however, that, as one of the novel's female characters points out, a mangrove can also be a suffocating trap. A mangrove in the French language does not represent only the tropical tree or shrub as it does in English but the dense, swarming, swampy area where this vegetation flourishes. Condé's

novel bears out Mireille Rosello's contention in *Infiltrating Culture* that "a swamp or a mangrove is more frightening than the ocean because it is lived-in rather than traversed" and "is teeming with forms of humid, shapeless, vaguely monstrous lives" (11).

Chamoiseau reacted, as others have, to *Crossing the Mangrove* as an expression of the Creole "density" that he, Bernabé and Confiant extol in their influential essay, *Éloge de la créolité*.⁴ Like Chamoiseau, critics for the most part have responded to this novel as a positive indication of Condé's "reconciliation" with her Caribbean roots.⁵ The novel has generally been treated as a saga of transformation or redemption of its male characters, particularly the mysterious Francis Sancher, whose wake serves as both frame and catalyst for the action. Even Michel Lucey's more pessimistic assessment of *Crossing the Mangrove* as "perhaps finally a novel about various kinds of failure," including "the failure to write a past for Guadeloupe which could somehow unite its present or foresee its future; the failure also of finally ever writing a novel which could be 'guadeloupéen,'" focuses almost exclusively on Sancher (132). Very little critical attention has been paid to the role of Mira Lameaulnes, Sancher's rejected mistress and the mother of his child, whose story, in fact, the novel to an important extent becomes as she effectively invades and undermines Sancher's role as the principal signifying figure. Although the educated, returning "stranger," Sancher, may seem to be the character most likely to be a *porte-parole* for Condé, a reading of *Crossing the Mangrove* that foregrounds Mira's crucial confrontation with place and space, as well as Sancher's, can do fuller justice to Condé's determinedly independent approach to invalidating static or formulaic treatments of Antillean geographies and politics.⁶ Mira's evolving role as she negotiates Condé's symbolic mangrove, perhaps even more than Sancher's, serves as a reminder that Condé's response to assignment of "sites" of identity is inevitably one of contestation.

The distinction made by de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* between the proprietary *place* of the "strategic" and the unfixed operative *space* of "tactics" is pertinent to an appraisal of Mira's positioning vis-à-vis Sancher. A strategy, according to de

Certeau, presupposes a place that can be given boundaries, “circumscribed as “propre” ‘proper,’ and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clientèles,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects’ of research)” (xix). In contrast, de Certeau defines “tactics” as “a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization) . . . always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’ ” (xix). In the chapter “Spatial Stories,” de Certeau distinguishes between place as a stable configuration of positions governed by the “law of the proper” and space as an experience of “intersections of mobile elements” (117). Space is the unfixed operative terrain of tactics.⁷ Sancher, an unhappy scion of a long line of interloping proprietors, occupies very fundamentally a place of the “proper,” his self-portrayal as a rebel notwithstanding. The illegitimate Mira’s situation is such that she must resort to the position of the weak that de Certeau defines as “tactics.” As de Certeau suggests, and as Mira’s role in the novel ultimately demonstrates, “tactics” offer a potential for a saving heterogeneity and mobility which contrasts with the pernicious realm of the “proper” that finally immobilizes Sancher.

Crossing the Mangrove opens with the death of the enigmatic Sancher, a large and “larger-than-life,” dark-skinned mulatto, whose putrescent corpse, mysteriously unmarked by blood or wounds, is found face down in sticky mud. Sancher, a self-described world traveler, had made allusions to previous medical training and experience as a revolutionary fighter in Africa. By the time of his arrival in the Guadeloupean village of Rivière au Sel, however, he harbored neither revolutionary nor externally directed therapeutic intentions. Rather, while awaiting the premature death he knew to be his legacy, this “curandero” intended to write a novel. This novel, as the reader of Condé’s novel learns at the end, was to serve as a vaguely formulated expiation for crimes perpetrated against slaves by Sancher’s white, plantation-owning ancestors. Sancher knew, however, that he would die without producing a word of his novel, precisely, as he observed, because he had already given it a name: “Crossing the Mangrove.” The title elicits an apt retort from his current young mistress:

"You don't cross a mangrove. You'd spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You'd be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud" (158). Nevertheless, as the nineteen characters, who have been cast by Condé as representatives of an entire Guadeloupean village, relive their relationships with Sancher during the night of his wake, each attempts to negotiate, by connecting to the stranger, a brackish existential mangrove.

As the wake progresses, the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel reconstruct their particular situations within the fragments of Sancher's elusive story. Their voices take over for the dead writer in a shifting narrative stream combining first- and third-person narration. Significantly, it is the women who speak in the first person. Mira, who does finally accomplish a kind of "crossing" from a paralyzing place to a more mobile space, is the only one of the characters to speak twice. This "high yellow girl," as much an object of vicious curiosity, jealousy, and desire as the dead man, takes on a parallel role to Sancher but in a necessarily minor, because "tactical," key. Her existence haunts, as it has for years, all the other mourners. Proud, savage, beautiful, and un-apologetically cruel, she is the illegitimate daughter of a rich, white Creole landowner of French descent and a poor, young Negro woman who died giving birth to her. Preoccupied by a resentful search for the place of her dead mother, Mira has been close only to her half-brother, Aristide, an incestuous bond of several years that is broken when she delivers herself to Sancher determined to become his mistress.

Mira's first encounter with Sancher takes place in a ravine. Gullies have been her refuge since childhood, offering a compensatory night world of dark, fondling waters that temper the restless anger and isolation she attributes to having been abandoned by her dead mother. Stumbling into a gully when she was five years old after running away for the first time, she believed she had found her "mother's bed" (34). However, if Mira is initially freed and refreshed by the waters of the ravine, she is also spied upon there by others in the village. She is betrayed there as well when Sancher penetrates the realm of her maternal displacement. Recalling her initial encounter with Sancher in the ravine, Mira remembers thinking:

This is my realm and mine alone. Ordinary people are afeared, believing the place to be the lair of spirits. So you never meet anyone there. So that when I stumbled on his body, invisible in the dark like a devil's darning needle, I thought here's a man like myself who has come looking for me. (32)

When Mira thrusts herself at Sancher, he responds to her sexual advances in a zombie-like, almost dutiful, manner. Sancher is persuaded that he is the victim of a familial curse; it was not Mira he expected to find but the figure of death. In Mira's eyes, the ravine appears to hold the promise of salvation through the agency of either a lost maternal connection or the long-dreamed-of, transformational advent of a stranger. She responds primarily to Sancher as someone who "came from Elsewhere. From over there. From the other side of the water. He wasn't born on our island of malice that has been left to the hurricanes and the ravages caused by the spitefulness in the heart of black folks" (43). Finally, however, the ravine offers only a renewal of the mother's betrayal: "Like Rosalie Sorane, my mother, who abandoned me to solitude from the first day I came into the world. The fruit it gave me to calm the hunger of my heart was, in fact, poisoned" (192). When Sancher shows no further interest in pursuing Mira, she gathers her belongings and runs off to his house, maddened by frustration and a wild night wind. Sancher reluctantly allows her to stay. However, after she becomes pregnant with his child, he renders her unconscious by pretending to administer therapeutic herbs and nearly succeeds in destroying the fetus. Drugged by Sancher, Mira dreams that she has returned to "live in the shady womb of my mother . . . floating, swimming with happiness in her uterine sea and I could hear far away the sad muffled sounds of a world I had made up my mind never to enter" (83). Awakening, she discovers Sancher savagely opening her legs and attempting to stick a long needle into her womb. Mira returns home and gives birth to a son. She is not seen again by the villagers until the night of Sancher's wake.

Mira's ventured place in Sancher's house is taken over by Vilma Ramsaran, the still adolescent daughter of descendants of East Indian laborers who have become wealthy enough to rival in

importance the almost white Lameaulnes. At the time of Sancher's death, Vilma is about to give birth to his child. Vilma at first appears to be a slightly younger double for Mira but ultimately serves as her negative foil. Like Mira, she stumbles into a gully and encounters Sancher, who, obsessed, as always, with the figure of death, repeats the words of his terrified initial response to Mira. Vilma, too, runs off to Sancher's house on a windy night. She is, however, less propelled by the savage spontaneity that drives Mira's flight than by a desire to escape an arranged marriage and humiliate her uncaring mother. Her evocation of the fabled transgressive power of the wind turns the force of nature into an ironic excuse. It is Vilma who taunts Sancher with the impossibility of escaping a mangrove. Her own musings during the wake bear out the pessimistic prediction. Mira alone appears to be launched by Sancher's demise beyond the symbolic mangrove.

During the course of the wake, "sucking on their memories like a hollow tooth," most of the male characters, like the "writer," Lucien Evariste, who aspires to put himself in the stranger's shoes, take Sancher as a model, and vow to compensate for mother/motherland shortcomings by conquering gestures: plans for far-flung voyages, hyper-productivity, land acquisition, attempting to write one's way to fame (12). Some of the more affluent women for whom migration (but then, equally territorial misprision) is within the realm of possibility also vow to take flight. The pregnant Vilma's suicidal fantasies essentially place her in this category. Her response to Sancher's death is to wish that like her Indian grandmother she could escape the unpromising circumstances of the present by throwing herself on a funeral pyre. Thus, repeating old spatio-behavioral models, albeit envisioned in more complex, sometimes even more generous dimensions, the villagers' responses to Sancher's death perpetuate a destructive state of deferral and the kind of existential retreat that Paolo Freire has attributed to a "culture of domination" (156). Freire's depiction of the "oppressor consciousness" as "necrophilic" vividly contextualizes the kind of repressive immobility that characterizes Sancher and his would-be acolytes (46).

Mira predicts that not even her infant son will escape the mangrove-like trap of the “proper.” She imagines him setting off like the mythical Caribbean character, Ti-Jean, “to travel the world on horseback, stamping the ground with his hooves of hatred, stopping at every cabin, every hovel and every Great House to ask: “Ou té konnet papa mwen?” (“Did you know my father?”) (191). In an earlier essay entitled *La Civilisation du Bossale*, Condé had connected the wandering Ti-Jean to “a longing for flight and a yearning to enter the world of the master . . . a universe that is closed on itself, dark, pessimistic, opportunistic” (45).⁸ Mira’s forecast for her son’s future reflects Condé’s unsparing reflections on the socio-economic complexity of ancestral origins and skin color in *Crossing the Mangrove*. The novel’s confrontation with issues of gender, race, rootedness and identity creates a broad historical fresco that extends geographically from Guadeloupe to Martinique, Dominica, St. Martin, Haiti, and Cuba, and from the West Indies to “French France,” Africa, the United States, and the East India of the indentured “coolie” laborers imported after 1850 to replace the freed slaves in the sugar cane fields. In this sweeping geography, the impact of the lesson the embittered schoolteacher claims to have learned, that “there’s no love lost between black folks,” becomes a mordant *leitmotif* (142). The position of the métis is addressed with more nuance as Condé uses her principal characters to both contest and affirm the “creatively subversive” qualities so often attributed to *métissage* in post-colonial discussion.⁹ In Sancher’s case *métissage* represents an inhibiting site of alterity within the Caribbean. The mulatto, Sancher, has determined that he cannot escape the realm of the “proper”: “One can’t lie to one’s own flesh and blood! One can’t change sides! Swap one role for another. Break the chain of misery” (24). He has changed his name from Francisco Alvarez Sanchez to no avail. Condé has explained elsewhere that Sancher “portrays the European vis-à-vis the West Indian world. The European is responsible for slavery, the slave trade, and for all sorts of wrongdoings during the colonial period. Since he belongs to the European world, Francis Sancher is answerable for this sin. The entire history of his family is an attempt to expiate and es-

cape from this sin-related guilt. But nobody can do this" (Pfaff 72). Thus, when Sancher, who establishes himself in Rivière au Sel claiming to be motivated by a desire to reconnect to ancestral roots, is faced with the prospect of fatherhood, this "healer" reveals himself to be an immolator:

That child must never open its eyes to the light of day. Never. An ill omen is upon him as it is upon me. . . . I have come here to end it all. To come full circle. To put the finishing touches. . . . Return to square one and stop everything. When the coffee tree is riddled with greenfly and only bears black, stony fruit it has to be burnt. (83)

Narcissistically obsessed with closure and enclosure, Sancher can only map a fixed route to death.

In contrast, representing a more positive vein of *métissage*, Mira refuses the dead-end position voiced by Sancher. Mira, whose final line proclaims: "My real life begins with his death," ultimately comes to represent the mobility of a personal or national identity that has been defined by neither mother nor motherland and can thus negotiate flexibly in a dynamically conceived space (193). Aware that she has been violated both in the realm of her mother's spirit and in Sancher's domain, she is poised to escape the imbricated dangers of the mangrove and the ravine "whose waters had wrapped themselves round my spurned body like a shroud" (43). Her mixed racial ancestry and economic privilege as a "Lameaulnes" might have condemned her to the paralysis that destroys Sancher. Indeed, her father's attempt to win her back from Sancher is prefaced by the claim that "we're both on the same side" (100).¹⁰ What the others see as the pregnant Mira's disgrace creates a general expectation that she will passively submit to the old, colonial-modeled order:

My father thinks that after the Good Lord has been so bountiful in dealing out misfortune, I'll keep my eyes lowered in his presence and spend my days repenting. I'll become a zombie at meal-times, putting my hand over my child's mouth to stifle his voice. Aristide imagines I'll find my way back to his bed as if nothing has happened. (193)

Instead, Mira renounces not only Sancher's place but also, more generally, having learned that the symbolic gully was a trap equivalent to the mangrove, all categorized sites of identity. At the end of the wake, resisting both the snare of an impossible maternal nexus and Aristide's incestuous bed, and determined to know another way than Sancher's, she tells herself: "From now on my life will be nothing but a quest. I shall retrace my steps along the paths of this world" (193). This "re-tracing" does not suggest a regression but rather a transgression that must be understood in both senses of the word: as a violation of a dominant code and a passing beyond a boundary. Mira's role suggests a link to Condé's reported experience of coming to writing caught up in a masquerade and to her evolving rapport with Guadeloupe. The circumstances of Mira's birth had launched her into existence as a masquerader, a figure that is not necessarily appealing but whose performance, as long as the performer does not confound the reified mask with an actual identity, has potential for productive social disturbance. Much like Condé's writing career, although obviously on a very different scale, Mira's ultimate response, an envisioning of an independent role that is rooted neither in fantasies of geographic flight and fame nor the mire of vengeance, signals a possible step in the direction of Trinh T. Minh-ha's fluid concept of identity as a "way of re-departing . . . the return of a denied heritage allowing one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals" (328).

Mira's experience of infant mother loss, her attempt to ground her identity by means of immersion in a physical place fantastically perceived as a maternal equivalent, the subsequent draw to an outsider's house as a means of deliverance, as well as her incestuous involvement—an effectively perverted representation of domination in a context of imprisoning insularity—function symbolically as a cautionary tale. Her saga replicates in significant ways the legacy imposed on Guadeloupe by French colonialism just as her subsequent substitution for the dead mother of a maternalized ravine which yields only poisoned fruits suggests a comparison to Guadeloupe's later dependence on France as one of its Overseas Departments.¹¹ Guadeloupe is compared in

Crossing the Mangrove to an unnatural mother who “no longer nurtures her children” (21). The “nature” that flourishes in Rivière au Sel is made unnatural, represented by the crayfish that are domestically bred by the Ramsaran family and destined for tourist hotels, and by the Lameaulnes Nurseries, a gated property posted with a “private” sign. Aristide Lameaulnes brings back exotic birds from the mountains to be put in cages like his hot house orchids. One of the villagers at the wake depicts Mira as someone he has seen “grow and blossom among them” like a “forbidden plant whose stems, leaves and flowers exuded a poisonous perfume” (29). She portrays herself as someone who “did nothing⁷ but shoot up joylessly like a plant going to seed” (36). Mira is, nevertheless, the one character who appears poised at the end of the novel to recuperate a positive identity from despoiled or deceptive landscapes. As she restructures elements of social disequilibrium, constraint and misapprehension into a potentially creative Caribbean connection, her response to her situation can be construed as a challenging model for the independent Guadeloupe Condé has campaigned for.

Resolution is not characteristic of Condé's fictional world. She has reiterated in multiple contexts that “the role of the novelist is not to provide solutions” (Pfaff 137). Mira's resistance to feeding one way or another on either her mother's or Sancher's legacy does not take shape as a coherent articulation of agency or belonging. Nonetheless, her unromantic appraisal of her situation and apparent acquisition of immunity to requiring affirmation through others' models introduces a promising link to a potentially shapeable future. Not being driven to “show someone” or conquer something or someone, or simply to escape from the island into a westernized mold, suggests at least a capacity to explore non-prescribed grounds of identity. Certainly Mira is geographically stuck, in part because she has stubbornly resisted formal (and therefore also French-based) education. Her resistance to the “necrophilic” space of the “proper,” to return to the terminology of Freire and de Certeau, allows her access, nonetheless, to a potentially more fertile, although not necessarily safer, ground.

In an article entitled "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer," Condé describes an African myth of origin in which, "after the creation of the earth, and the organization of everything on its surface, disorder was introduced by a woman. Disorder meant the power to create new objects and to modify the existing ones. In a word, disorder meant creativity" (130). Approaching Mira as a parallel character to Sancher, not a secondary one, highlights the importance Condé attributes to the pursuit of creative, flexible, geographical itineraries, and identities rather than fixed maps. In her account of the "dialogue" with Guadeloupe cited at the beginning of this essay, Condé emphasizes that she was not "asked" by her island to "construct an authentic Guadeloupe to the sound of exotic drum beats and the Creole language" because "tradition is everything that moves, adapts, and there is not an authentic Guadeloupe. . . . 'Without turning my back on the past, it was essential to recite the present and, if possible, to have a try at the future'" (113). *Crossing the Mangrove* is not perhaps a conspicuously political novel. However, when read with sufficient attention to Mira's story, it becomes an instance of the kind of "re-visioning" of space called for by bell hooks. Her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness, begins with a forceful reminder that "as a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision" (145). Like Condé's mobile definition of the limits of the Caribbean, Mira disorders the prescriptions of a confining geography by opening a defiant, tactical space where such a "re-visioning" might begin.

Notes

1 All translations from this essay are mine.

2 Condé left Guadeloupe at age sixteen to complete her education in Paris. She did not return for nineteen years, a period of migrations for personal, political, and professional reasons that took her from

France to the Ivory Coast and Guinea, then to Ghana, London, and Senegal. In 1970 she returned to Paris where she completed a doctorate in Caribbean literature. In 1986, she announced a definitive return to Guadeloupe. However, she continues to reside principally in New York City.

3 A translator's note explains that it is a tradition in the French Caribbean to have a newly published book introduced by a "public reader" who is often a prominent writer (Chamoiseau 395.)

4 Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (40, 46). Chamoiseau's response was percipient in that the majority of Condé's subsequent writing has been anchored in West Indian settings. Condé corroborated Chamoiseau's perception to a certain extent: "I first selected the title . . . because it referred to a beautiful image and had a sound soft to the ear. It's symbolic correlation came later" (Pfaff, 71).

5 "Reconciliation" is Condé's term. See her interview entitled "Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île" ("I Have Made Peace with My Island").

6 Condé has, for example, portrayed her novel *Desirada* (1999), which she describes as "the conclusion . . . of continual reflection on identity, origin, nationality, language," as a confrontational response to a question constantly addressed to her as a West Indian: "Where are you from?" as if to say 'Define yourself' " (McCormick 519). Her essays "Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer" and "The Role of the Writer," address this issue at length.

7 My initial connection of Mira to the realm of the "tactical" owes a debt to Mireille Rosello's discussion of de Certeau's definition of tactics in her *Infiltrating Culture* (xi).

8 The passage presages Condé's appraisal of the main character's fruitless quest in *Desirada* to learn her father's identity: "And poor Marie-Noëlle, who only wants to know the answer to some simple questions—Who is my father? Who am I? What happened?—won't ever find out. Because everyone lies. Not in a conscious and malicious way. Because, ultimately to tell a story is to embellish it, to fabricate it according to one's tastes and desires, to create fiction" (McCormick 520).

9 See Françoise Lionnet's "Logiques métisses" for an important discussion of the transformative role of hybrid identities in works by Francophone women writers, including *Crossing the Mangrove*.

10 Lameaulne's plea, rejected by Sancher, echoes the basest elements of the colonial mentality:

We're both on the same side." The history books call our ancestors the Discoverers. Okay, they soiled their blood with Negro women; in your case, it must have been Indian. And yet we've got nothing in common with theses nappy-head niggers, these peasants who have always handled a machete or driven an oxcart for us. Don't treat Mira as if she were the child of one of these good-for-nothings." (100)

11 Condé objects to continuation of Guadeloupe's dependent status as an Overseas French Department. In 1992, she ran unsuccessfully as a candidate in regional elections in Guadeloupe on the slate of a pro-independence party.

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