Deconstructing History in Maryse Condé’s *The Last of the African Kings*

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Today, I would like to discuss the complex role of History in Maryse Condé’s writings and more precisely the role that individual and collective history play in the identity quest of Condé’s characters in *The Last of the African Kings*. First, I would like to make a disclaimer. I am not a historian and my comments might be perceived by some as more imaginary than real, but fiction and History are so closely intertwined in Condé’s writings that I have decided to examine how Condé’s fiction questions History. I must also add that in French the word for story (or fiction) and for history is one and the same word: *histoire*.

Before I get to the heart of the matter, I would like to give you a brief background of the iconoclast writer Maryse Condé. She is a novelist from Guadeloupe who has lived in the French Caribbean islands; in several African countries, including Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal; in several European countries, including France and Great Britain; and who now lives in New York and Guadeloupe. She was married for ten years to an actor from Guinea, and her second husband, Richard Philcox, is British. Philcox is also the talented translator of the majority of her novels, including *The Last of the African Kings*. Maryse Condé’s works deal in particular with the difficult relationship of the African Diaspora with its brothers and sisters of African descent. Her interest in History is not recent since she devoted her first years of college studies to it and became famous as a novelist with the publication of *Segu*, an epic describing the tormented times of the Bambara tribe in Mali during the 19th century. As a student, she switched the focus of her studies from history to literature because she found literature, according to her own words,
“easier.” She didn’t like the fact that history required her to memorize lots of names, dates, and places, and that events were presented in a linear fashion. But like her colleagues writers from the West-Indies, Maryse Condé cannot forget the painful memory of its people and of her own ancestors:

[T]here is one journey that comes to my mind in particular, one that I didn’t choose to make, long before I was born. It has scarred my memory, despite all the centuries that have gone by. After lying several days in a shifting, gloomy fort, I was thrown into the hold of a ship that pitched and rolled to an unknown destination. . . . The voyage seemed never ending. Finally, one morning, we accosted a pleasant, colorful land which as soon as I set eyes on it made up for all my recent suffering and humiliation.

I know I only dreamed this particular voyage. It is nevertheless the reason behind most of my travels, this time no longer imaginary but very real. It weighs heavily on my unconscious and impacts my imagination and my creativity. 3

In his excellent essay entitled Les Antilles françaises, lieu d’émergence d’une parole vers demain ? or “The French West Indies: the birthplace of a discourse turned toward the future?”, Philippe Chanson, specialist in cultural anthropo-theology in creole communities, admirably summarizes the difficult quest for identity of the Caribbean people in four dominant periods:
- First: the experiment of the abyss which corresponds to the Atlantic crossing of the slaves; phase characterized by the cry;
- Second: the new birth or the life of the slaves in the West Indies, in total rupture with their origins; phase characterized by silence;
- Third: the quest for identity characterized by an awakening of the West-Indian identity crisis. This awakening can be followed through the evolution of the various literary and political movements that go from négritude to créolité; phase characterized by speech;

- Fourth: the period known as the phase of maturity, illustrated by the thought of the great philosopher-poet-writer from Martinique, Édouard Glissant, and which is characterized by “the thought of the Relation” (19-20).

If the works of the male writers of the French West Indies fit well within this identity framework, we will explore in The Last of the African Kings the way in which Maryse Condé presents us the particular case of an Inhabitant of Guadeloupe for whom the identity crisis does not result from the absence of origins, but from his other troubles with History.

In The Last of the African Kings, novel published in French in 1992 and in English in 1997, Maryse Condé introduces two protagonists: Spéro, a Guadeloupian, descendant of a king of an African country sent into exile to Martinique by the French at the end of the 19th century, and Debbie, an African American of South Carolina, professor of history, who falls in love with Spéro as well as with his African ancestor of royal blood. Let us specify here that Spéro’s ancestor who resembles Béhanzin, the last king of Dahomey, a country now called Benin, spent only a few years in Martinique because the French government sent him to finish his life in a second exile in the Algerian desert. During his stay in Martinique, this deposed king conceived Djéré, an illegitimate son that he will abandon at the time of his transfer to Algeria. When Djéré’s mother, Hosannah, marries a Guadeloupian, Romulus, Djéré moves there with his mother and it is in Guadeloupe that Djéré’s son, Justin, and Djéré’s grand-son, Spéro, will grow-up. When Hosannah learns four years after the fact that Djéré’s father has died, she decides to
create a ritual commemorating his passing which is celebrated on December 10, ritual which will be then transmitted from father to son until Spéro, and that will be adopted by Debbie and transmitted to her daughter, Anita.

The novel opens with a scene between Spéro and Debbie, on a December 10, approximately twenty-five years after their marriage. Debbie is asking Spéro whether he has forgotten the anniversary of his ancestor’s death. Spéro’s lapse of memory is highly symbolic since it indicates his will to be cut off from his past which has represented a heavy burden. It is indeed necessary to note here that his relatives and friends, whether it is in Guadeloupe or in Charleston, never recognized him as being an important character, except for Debbie at the time of their encounter. Contrary to the majority of the West-Indians who lost their identity during the crossing, which Chanson calls the time of the abyss, Spéro has a royal ancestor, but his nobility is without any value because it is not recognized by others.

Spéro’s grandfather, and after him his father, endeavored to put forward their origin, but in vain, which led to their nickname the Wise Kings, an epithet used by their neighbors to make fun of them. Following the accidental death of his adoptive father, Romulus, who was interested in the origins of his son, Djéré decided to leave school and to devote himself to the writing of the "Notebooks of Djéré":

It was at this point he began to write in his notebooks, based on his real and imagined memories and on what Romulus had told him. One October morning, the neighbor on the Morne Verdol saw him leave home looking like death warmed over and head for the Fessoneau Bookstore and stationary shop and return with some ink, some paper, and some Sergeant-Major pens. From that day...
onwards, locked up from morning to night, he scribbled in his school exercise books. He was driven by no particular ambition, no exact desire. But when he delved back into the short period he had lived with his father and put it in writing, he simply felt better, free from those impulses that one day, if he wasn’t careful, would make him do somebody in, man or woman, who knows, and land him in jail. By writing he gradually attained a great serenity and a perfect detachment. At the same time he made daily visits to the Lambrianne library. Here he read books whose pages still remain uncut and browsed carefully through rare journals and magazines wherever Africa was mentioned. But he saw nothing concerning his father. 50-51

Djéré’s use of history as well as his imagination to write his notebooks curiously resembles Maryse Condé’s attitude towards fiction. This passage also stresses the absence of historical documents regarding his father’s life and kingdom as if historians had deliberately decided to erase Djéré’s father’s past and with him his society. To counteract this erasure, the novel contains several excerpts of the “Notebooks of Djéré,” and, in particular, one which describes the founding myth of the first village of the Aladahonou people as well as the magical conception of the first ancestor, Tengisu, by the panther Agasu and the beautiful woman Posu Adowene (57-60). As Hervé Fischer brilliantly explains in his *Mythanalyse du futur* (or *Mythanalysis of the future*), every society is built on a founding myth. Here, Djéré tries to reaffirm his past, to create an identity by reconstituting the threads which connect him to this founding myth and to his ancestor. This act of writing affirming one’s origins corresponds to Chanson’s third stage of identity development. Myth and reality. Fiction and History. Where does one start, where finishes the other? It is important to note that the writing exercise is liberating and one could imagine Djéré, at the end of the re-creation of his origins, accepting who
he is and being integrated into the variegated West-Indian culture. However, Djéré does not share his books with anybody and his origins are not recognized by anyone.

Djéré spends a lot of time and energy to hang on to his past, to establish the historical evidence of his origins, but all his efforts fail:

Instead of forgetting all this past and quite simply looking the present straight in the eyes, Djéré and Justin alike had clung to the remnants of a bygone age. As soon as he was old enough to understand what he was reading Djéré laid hands on everything he could concerning the history of Africa, especially Dahomey, which today they call Benin. He was not content with reading the worm-eaten books that lay dormant on the shelves of the Lambrianne library. No! He cut out coupons in catalogs and mailed orders to France. All with the money from his money and the worthy Romulus, a nurse, who to make ends meet climbed up and down the Morne Verdol four times a day before climbing up and down the Morne Vert on which the hospital was perched.

Djéré thus built up a magnificent collection of leather-bound books and illustrated magazines. Unfortunately, the hurricane of 1928 carried everything off, scattering them over the coolie plum trees, and on his death just before the Second World War, his legacy was nothing but a series of notebooks numbered one to ten that were found at the bottom of a wardrobe. “The Notebooks of Djéré.” In them he had attempted to recount who is father was and who his mother was as well. 8-9

The narrator adopts an ambivalent attitude with respect to History and memory. The novel is completely anchored in History and at the same time it reproaches Djéré and Justin’s
clinging to their past. In fact, Djéré and Justin relive the painful experience of the African Diaspora by hanging on to a past which does not exist any more. To the contrary of the West-Indians who lost their origins, though, Maryse Condé introduces characters who cling to a world that no longer exists. Djéré and Justin are prisoners of what Marthe Robert calls, after Freud, a family romance. In her Origins of the Novel, Robert explains that any child, during his daydreams, builds a fantastic family romance which idealizes his/her parents. Usually, this family romance is abandoned when, growing up, the child realizes that the idealization of his parents doesn’t not match reality. The creation of a family romance does not constitute a play, but a response to the anguish caused by the realization that the family paradise in which the child believed does not exist. This explains the importance for the child of creating an imaginary world, a fantastic genealogy which makes it possible to correct the troubled spots which exist on the family tree, to mask the complex of the found child, or to erase the illegitimate one. In the case of the grandfather and the father of Spééro, it seems that this family romance lasted well after adolescence, a time when the child usually reconciles his genealogy with reality.

The fact that Djéré was able to assemble an impressive collection of books and magazines about his father’s kingdom and his life affirms Djéré’s origins, but another historical event, the great hurricane of 1928, destroyed all evidence of it. Justin continued to worship his ancestor in his father’s footsteps and it will be necessary to wait until Spééro’s generation to see a change of attitude towards the ancestor and an attempt to separate oneself from one’s past. It is not that Spéreo did not try to nurture the family memory, in particular at the time of his stay in France at the art school in Lille, period during which he spent more time in the libraries to research any sign of the true existence of his ancestor than to study drawing or painting. However, his meeting with Jean
Bodriol in Paris, an expert on colonial history in Dahomey, during which he is told that he cannot pretend to be the great-grant-son of the king Béhanzin since no official document mentions the existence of an illegitimate son of the king in Martinique, puts an end to his attempt to be recognized as a member of the royal family (83-85). I must question here the role of the historian who dismisses the possible relationship between Spéro and the royal ancestor because the former cannot provide any written document to prove his claim. How are we to establish the facts of History if we only refer to official documents? What about the authenticity of official documents? Don't those who hold power today, just as colonial powers yesterday, often find it beneficial to mask reality?

To be an historian is indeed a difficult job and one can easily understand that Maryse Condé decided to turn then to literature because it is “easier.” Literature may be easier, but more importantly it allows for more freedom. However, the work of an artist is not without difficulties. It is interesting to note here that Maryse Condé, a very successful writer who has been rewarded by many literary prices, often includes failed artists in her novels. Just to speak of The Last of the African Kings, we find Djéré who spent several years of his life writing his memoirs which he kept in a wardrobe. Djéré’s descendants will try in vain to publish his work. We also have Spéro who is a failed painter who will never manage to be recognized for his royal blood line, or for his creative work. Spéro’s talents as a painter will enable him to provide for his needs when he lives with his family in Guadeloupe, thanks to tourists’ enthusiasm for exoticism, but his arrival in South Carolina marks the beginning of his failures.

By leaving Guadeloupe for South Carolina, Spéro thought that he had broken away from his past and the history of his ancestors, but Debbie will try by all means to bring him back to his origins. Her worship of the ancestor can be compared to her worship of African-American
celebrities and all that is African. As stated by the narrator, the room of Debbie “resembled a museum dedicated to the goddess ‘Black Americana’” (21). Whereas the birth of their daughter Anita could have brought the couple closer together, Debbie decides to have her own bedroom where she spends most of her time with Anita, telling her the story of the ancestor as she sees it:

[Spéro] could do nothing about Debbie filling the child’s head with these old stories that were better left forgotten. She embroidered on them as she pleased. Djéré was no longer the illegitimate son abandoned with his servant mother like a bundle of dirty linen in a villa on the outskirts of Fort-de-France, but the son of a young lady, a proud example of Martinique’s upper class who had not had the heart to leave Papa, Maman, and her island. During his exile in Algeria that followed his exile in Martinique, the ancestor had not let a single day go by without mentioning the names of Djéré and Hosannah. After her death, the Caribbean lineage had been constantly urged to return to the motherland and take its rightful place. 18

I do not know if it is common for historians to embellish history as they please, but we should note that if Debbie is a respected historian in her area of expertise—the rebuilding of the South after the American Civil War—she is totally unable to maintain the slightest degree of objectivity when she tackles subjects that are close to her heart. In her novel, Maryse Condé stresses further the major faults of the historian when she describes in detail Debbie’s research project on oral history. Debbie obtained a large grant from a major foundation to write the life of Agnès Jackson, a nonagenarian who had been in close contact with many great African American artists. In spite of her weekly recorded meetings with Agnès Jackson over a period of several years, Debbie hardly makes any progress on her project because Agnès is losing her mind and she mixes names of places, names of people, as well as the dates when she met those people.
Moreover, we are told that Spéro does not believe a word of the stories that Agnès tells Debbie and he thinks that Debbie continues her conversation in order to “let her relive the past the way she wanted it to be” (63). In addition, Debbie was also interested in the story of her own father, George Middleton; a man she had always thought died a martyr during the violent march in Stokane for his engagement in the civil right’s movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King. She then discovered that George was a tough and, at times, mean school teacher who didn’t hesitate to beat the little black children of his class and that he only joined the cause of Martin Luther King after having been kicked in public by whites for having used the toilets for whites in a department store (63-64). In fact, Debbie’s greatest problem is her idealization of the black race, and with it of every thing that is African, which is also an attitude that can be associated with Chanson’s third stage of identity development. The admiration—I should say adoration—of Spéro’s ancestor is indeed unacceptable, especially for an historian, when it is known that king Béhanzin had many women, that he conceived Djéré during the rape of Hosannah—rape I must add that was orchestrated by one of Béhanzin’s wives—, that he abandoned his own son and, not the least, that his greatest regret in life was to have had to interrupt the ritual funeral of his own father after the sacrifice of 40 men and 40 women.

In an essay devoted to the writing of History in Maryse Condé’s works, Priska Degras shows how Debbie tries to substitute “the glory of a family for the unhappy destiny of a community”\textsuperscript{7}, that is to say the African American community whose past goes back to slavery. Debbie’s defense of the race also explains her attitude towards her husband’s many affairs. Debbie is not shocked by Spéro’s lack of marital fidelity until the day when he has a relation with Tamara Barnes, a white woman whose grandfather had been a strong advocate for slavery. Debbie and the black community of Charleston consider this affair as treason of race, and the
uneasiness in their relationship that grew over the years reaches a point of no return. Condé disagrees with Debbie on the need to idealize the African American community and to keep the races separated. In an interview, Condé declared: “[R]ace, in fact, is not the essential factor. What is important is culture.”

Maryse Condé’s position echoes the one of her neighbor from Martinique, Édouard Glissant, who is opposed to any idea of race and preaches on the contrary the interbreeding of people and especially the métissage of cultures in what he names “une pensée de la relation”—“a thought of the Relation” where people refuse the very notion of dominant culture to create their own culture, a culture in motion that borrows from the many cultures that surround them.

Glissant develops his philosophy within the Caribbean region and we often refer to him as the father of Antillanité, a term that can be translated as Caribbean Identity, one that embraces the great diversity of its people and its cultures, without one being superior to the other, without forgetting history but looking forward to a better future when each person can feel connected to the people and the cultures surrounding him or her. Maryse Condé’s works are often on the frontier between Antillanité and non-Antillanité, as illustrated with The Last of the African Kings where Spéro, a character who tries to free himself from his past, gets caught up in another History, the one of the African-American community who is having difficulties creating its new identity away from its own past.

To conclude, Maryse Condé is not the first author to include historical references in her fictions, but she does it in a subversive way that forces the reader to question history itself. Whereas an author like Ahmadou Kourouma presents in Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote a remarkable historical account of post independence Africa by using a traditional African tale, the
donsa, which gives the story teller entire freedom to recount the great achievements and mistakes of a leader and more, Condé refuses to write the history of a people, but rather describes how people are affected by many historical events without pretending to reconstruct history. In addition, she often presents in her works characters who are failed historians such as Debbie in The Last of the African Kings or Émile Étienne in Crossing of the Mangrove. Whereas History unquestionably plays a creative role in Maryse Condé’s novels, paradoxically, historians seem to play, for her, an inhibiting part, preventing creative freedom from affirming itself. Maryse Condé, like many Caribbeans, does not recognize herself in the traditional version of accepted History that has favored the whites and the colonial power. One should remember that until the 1980’, history textbooks in Guadeloupe taught kids that they were the children of the Gaulois, French ancestor of antiquity. But unlike Glissant who focuses on the Caribbean region, for Condé, History of the Caribbeans not only goes well beyond the Caribbean, but it constitutes a History that cannot be written, a History that can only be approached through the telling of many stories. It is a work never finished, which must be created again and again. In the same way that fiction can help us understand the complexity of human existence without being able to fully uncover the inner mysteries of human beings, so too can fiction help us understand history without pretending explaining everything. Whereas historians speak from the intellect, the mind, authors like Maryse Condé speak from the heart and in doing so bring us closer to the experience lived by her characters and in many instances her imagination brings us closer to reality than historical accounts.

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Works Cited


