Beginnings, Origins, and the Location of Identity in Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon*

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Criticism of Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* has focused mainly on two things: the negativity of the Black female main character unable to solve her personal crisis and the status of this work as either fiction or autobiography. The story begins as Veronica leaves her white boyfriend, Jean-Michel in Paris to teach philosophy as a *coopérante* in an un-named country in Africa. An upper middle-class, educated Black woman from Guadeloupe, her family exiled her to France after an illicit affair with a mulatto, Jean-Marie de Roseval. The plot centers on Veronica's obsession with finding her roots and healing herself. She concentrates her efforts on one person in particular, Ibrahima Sory, the politically powerful Minister of the Defense and the Interior, whose royal ancestry fascinates Veronica and who exemplifies the economy of privilege still in force in a post-colonial African nation. The Caribbean literary tradition of the identity quest is enacted here both geographically and psychologically. Beginning and ending in an airport, this narrative of travel displaces the journey of the Middle Passage as the protagonist travels from Guadeloupe to Paris to West Africa. At the same time, she searches her psyche for a way to locate and understand the fracture of her identity and the means to repair it.

In his introduction to the English translation of Edouard Glissant's *Le discours antillais* (Caribbean Discourse), J. Michael Dash writes, "The point of departure of Caribbean literature has been the effort to write the subject into existence" (xiii). As post-modern, feminist, and post-colonial theories have joined to show us, however, subjectivity is not fixed, coherent, or reducible to an objective definition. From this perspective, the subject, constituted within language, has no immutable essence outside of discourse. While the deconstruction of Western subjectivity understood as white and male is undoubtedly a useful move, for the contemporary feminist post-colonial writer and critic, the recuperation of a valorized subjectivity for the non-white, non-male remains both a theoretical and a practical exigency. For the purposes of this study, Edward Said provides a useful theoretical basis for examining Dash's "point of departure" in his formulation "beginning is *making* or *producing difference*" (xvii). In her first novel, *Heremakhonon*, Maryse Condé adopts the trope of beginning in a narratological as well as a genealogical sense and inscribes a Caribbean subject whose difference produces ambiguity rather than affirming the eurocentric discourse of oneness. Sometimes called "autobiographical fiction," a "semi-autobiographical novel," or a "veiled autobiography," in defying definition, this work also produces generic difference.

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From the outset, Veronica distances herself from "typical" travelers to Africa. Her first words, and the first words of the book, are, "Honestly! You'd think

I'm going because it is the in thing to do. Africa is very much the thing to do lately" (3). But she immediately questions her motives, "Why am I doing this? At the moment, everything is a mess, and this whole idea seems absurd" (3). The reader quickly discovers a main character at odds with herself who appears either fiercely independent or hopelessly isolated. At her arrival, the customs officer asks her, "Purpose of visit?" She claims she is not a tourist, "but one of a new breed, searching out herself, not landscapes" (3). In situating her main character as an outsider, Condé presents Veronica's identity quest in an ironic light and offers a critique of the search for "roots" in Africa. In the second paragraph, Veronica imagines her parents' judgement, "I can see them now. My mother, sighing as usual. My father pinching his thin lips… "She's insane! So headstrong! All those brains and nothing but foolish ideas" (3). The Father's words place her in the category of unruly, outspoken women; unable to fit into a society that offers them only a silenced, objectified position, like the mother whose response is only (can only be) a sigh. A marginalized subject in an already doubly colonized position as both Black and a woman, Veronica's search is articulated in the beginning moments of the text with her journey to Africa as well as within the space of her mind.

After Veronica's arrival in Africa and the imagined scene of her parents' judgmental reaction, the narrative turns to a flashback of another departure, "the first goodbye." When the hotel keeper asks where she is from, in lieu of an answer, Veronica recalls her exile from Guadeloupe nine years earlier, "Misunderstandings all the way. Tons of them, right up to the first goodbye. They, standing behind the glass doors at the airport. Me, climbing the gangway with wobbly legs and misty eyes" (4). Her banishment from Guadeloupe is the result of a dual transgression, a combination of boundary crossings, sexual and racial. In sleeping with a mulatto, Veronica brings shame on her family both for losing her virginity and for seemingly committing the sin of attempting to "lactify" her color. A critique of both the *négritude* movement and the misogyny of Fanon's theoretical formulation, Condé's representation of a sexually active Black woman shows that the question Awhich comes first, gender or race?" (Suleri 273) is moot in this instance where the two work together to prevent her sexual freedom and exclude her agency.

From questions of her motives in the present, "Why am I doing this?" (3), "Why am I here?" (4), "What the hell am I doing here?" (6), Veronica turns to her past, "I need to be alone. Put my thoughts in order, as they say. Start all over again from the beginning." Though here, too, she finds questions, "But where did it all begin?" (6). Her equivocation exposes her uncertainty and inability to understand herself and also reveals the entanglement of the many aspects of her life contributing to her identity crisis. She answers her own question at first by stating that it all began when she first met Jean-Marie, at a doll's christening party. She takes it back though, "But that's a false start. It must have started before that. The beginning was lost in the mists of time" (6), and goes on to discuss the de Roseval

family history, grounding her "story" not just in her own past, but in the more distant past of her island and its social fabric. Returning to her first meeting with Jean-Marie, she explains why it was so important to her, "For years I remained bowled over that he noticed me" (6). The gaze of the Other here provides Veronica with a sense of identity, of existence. Not a mere objectification of woman, this is a sign of a deeper anxiety combining gender and racial insecurities.

As Veronica continues to consider aspects of her past throughout the narrative, she finally settles on an originary moment, places her finger on the event when "everything began." She relates a family trip eighty miles away from her hometown, where her father "was a complete unknown" and no one even deigned to look at them. "We were not intruders at Saint Claude," Veronica states, "We simply did not exist…you just could not hear our footsteps. Nor our voices" (129). Even when the local parish priest invites her sisters to play the piano at the local *fête*, the eight-year old Veronica understands that they are not accepted. This is the moment of her initiation into the ideology of race and gender, the point at which Veronica's mind is colonized. She looks around her and sees women more beautiful than her mother "because of their slightly coppery, slightly tanned skin, their soft wavy hair spared by the straightener…They seemed more attractive because they were light-skinned, possessing therefore what my mother lacked to be perfectly beautiful" (129-130). Veronica herself envies another girl reciting a poem on the stage "her light-brown ringlets glinted in the sun and I desperately wanted to resemble her." Not only an instant of envy, Veronica sees in this other girl's life a possibility of being that she does not see for herself, "To be this little girl. To be. To be." At the same time she recognizes that her feelings run counter to how she has been told she should feel, "I was ashamed. Ashamed of this desire that my whole education claimed to demolish" (130). To use de Lauretis's terms, albeit with a difference, Veronica is represented as both "inside and outside the ideology of gender [and, I would add, race] and conscious of being so…" (10). It is thus at the moment of the heart-breaking *denial* of her subjectivity that Veronica locates her "point of departure."

Positing her "search for a cure" in terms of a need for confession, Veronica looks at first to Saliou, her boss and first friend in Africa, as a possible confessor, "One could always begin with the classic confession, lonely hearts style…" (5). Searching for a means to tell her story, she imagines pouring out her soul, "Possibly this makes a beginning. Why do I feel like telling it to the bean pole, my boss, in his frayed boubou? Is it affection? Or rather like choosing a perfect stranger to tell one's troubles to?" (7). She transfers her desire to confess to Ibrahima Sory once their relationship begins. When he finally asks her, "Why did you come to Africa?" Veronica believes she will at last have the chance to tell her story, but as she starts to explain herself, Sory asks her, "In other words, you have an identity problem?" (52). His cursory dismissal points to a disjuncture that Veronica had not expected, an instance of Condé's use of irony to demonstrate the

cultural divide between Africa and the African diaspora. This irony is amplified and turned back onto the protagonist when she laments, "O for the Westernized with their long psychological explanations their childhood through a toothcomb and their hairsplitting. I've been told there's no room for personal problems here," thus calling into question the whole endeavor (93). Just as Veronica tries to find someone to whom she can tell her story within the narrative, her direct address to the reader turns the work into a confessional as in this instance, "Let's get back to the first affair. Get it over with once and for all. Before going on to the second" (18). Though, as Françoise Lionnet points out, the confession within the narrative is always either directed at the wrong person or meets with indifference (174). However, while within the story the protagonist tries to explain her identity problems to others, on a meta-level, the story of trying to find herself becomes the narrator's confession.

Just as within the story she claims to be unlike others who go to Africa, this "new breed" of traveler from the African diaspora is a displaced, exiled subject who sees no space for herself in Caribbean society and no image of herself in its literary tradition. Indeed, Veronica declares she is Ano Mayotte Capécia" (30) and does not wish to continue to bear the slave/whore reputation of "Marilisse." In her search for a beginning to her "story" and her attempt to articulate the source of her alienation, Veronica also explores the past B in relation to her people, her family, and her own life.

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As mentioned earlier, Veronica's trip to Africa to resolve her identity problems is not presented as an unproblematized answer and indeed, Condé takes a critical stance in relation to the idea of a mythical return to Africa. When Veronica first meets Saliou, who is to be her boss, he welcomes her and says, "Consider yourself home." Veronica's reaction highlights the difficulty and complexity of the situation of the African diaspora, "With one word, he has wiped out three centuries and a half" (4). Post-colonial debates about History affirm the need to get beyond the Eurocentric totalizing "grand narrative" paradigm and move toward what Glissant calls the "cross-fertilization of histories" (93). Questions of history and identity are particularly pertinent in the context of Martinique and Guadeloupe because they are not places where the prefix 'post-' can be applied. These islands are still a part of France and their inhabitants' identity thus remains in limbo. Condé's heroine evokes the identity crisis felt by peoples whose history has been (sometimes violently) imposed on them and whose present position remains complicated. At the same time, as Condé shows with Veronica's reaction, to "wipe out" that history is no solution. Glissant calls the desire for a history upon which to ground one's identity a "longing for the primordial source" (79) while Derrida points to the discursive and collective nature of this desire with his term "genealogical anxiety" (124). In this section of my analysis, I turn to history,

genealogy, and origins, and the identity politics involved in these notions as Condé uses them in *Heremakhonon*.

Condé first stages the importance of history to identity and the alienation felt by the colonized with Veronica's questions at an early age about the history of her people. In response to her father's exclamation, "What wonderful things the whites have accomplished," Veronica asks, "What about us?" (9). Subsequently, in a conversation with her friend and student Birame III, she reacts to his mention of history by saying, "Don't you know that history never bothered about niggers? It's been proven they weren't worth the fuss" (11). On this page and the next, the narrative jumps from Veronica's conversation with Birame III to an interior monologue and another flashback to Veronica's childhood interrogations of history. The following sentences seem to continue Veronica's response to Birame III, "It's with the lash they had to be civilized, given not just a history they needn't be ashamed of, but a *history*, period! You might think that everybody has a history. Well, no. These people had none." However, with what follows, one can also understand the preceding few phrases as something that Veronica was told when she was a child, she states, "But I refused to believe it. I insisted: "But before?" The chapter finishes with Veronica addressing her friend once again, but as there are no quotation marks to delineate the dialogue, there is no way for the reader to know if she is talking to her friend, or merely thinking, "Birame III that's mainly why I'm here. To try and find out what was before" (12). Condé's uses of multiple address and interior monologue have been signaled by critics as a way to maintain an ironic distance in her narrative (Miller 176), as a symptom of the protagonist's alienation (Murdoch 580), and as a way to create ambivalence that is distinctive to the female francophone writer (Ramsey 81). Indeed, her discursive strategy introduces humor and irony and offers multiple meanings that ultimately lead the reader to recognize and question the very same received ideas that trouble the narrator/protagonist.

Condé also represents the family as an element of identity. Veronica relates that her grandmother "was the daughter, illegitimate of course, of a *bakra* by the name of Sainte-Croix de la Ronseraie" (13). Along with narration of her family genealogy, she muses on her present situation in Africa and wonders how things could have been different:

> *So it was from here, right here where we came from. I might have been called Mariama or Salamata and worn my hair in corn rows. I could have vibrated to the word of the griot. Listen, listen children of the black country. I'm going to speak of Malikoma. Malikoma, son of Sirriman, son of Fania, son of…up to the very beginning*… (17)

In contrasting her family's illegitimacy with the genealogical recitations of the griot, Veronica imagines for herself the possibility of a "pure" ancestry, what "might have been." Along with her personal search for identity, she formulates an interrogation of the situation of the African diaspora in general: "Instead, I have in my family tree a white man's sperm gone astray in some black woman's womb. It didn't seem to disgust the sailors on the slave ships and they had made a number of them pregnant by the time they reached land. In fact, that's how it all began" (17). Once again pointing her finger at an originary moment, Condé's protagonist looks beyond her own life and places her identity trauma in a Caribbean context.

Veronica's narration of her birth also reveals marginalization and alienation from the very beginning of her life:

> *They were not very happy. They had wanted a boy. My mother, in a lace-embroidered nightdress, sighed. Friends leaned over: "She's more…" "She's less…""She doesn't look like the others." The others, thank God!...* (18)

Her parents' disappointment over their child's gender and their friends' judgements imply the identity expectations imposed on a newborn baby. At the same time, her "first cry of terror and revolt" indicates an individual who will not be complacent and the exclamation, "thank God!" shows not only a critical interrogation of patriarchal insistence on sons, but also emphasizes the constraints of social conformity in the application of ideologies. The anxiety over identity demonstrated by the narrator/protagonist as an adult is thus connected to the very beginning of her life.

Twice she imagines different possibilities for herself through different beginnings, births in other circumstances. The first stages her birth in the northern part (the less developed area) of the country she is visiting: "What wouldn't I give to be born in the North? My father sitting on his sheepskin receiving homage from his vassals. He never talks of Race" (43). The second imagined alternate birth is set in Guadeloupe, but under different circumstances:

> *To start from the very beginning. To emerge from my mother's womb. Not in the vast mahogany bed with Mme Aristide, the midwife, wiping me with a soft toweling, slipping me into a very fine linen dress…Perhaps on the ground in a hut brought forth by Cherubine who, despite the starting pains, finished her day's work…* (166-167)

Both of these instances enact fantasies of having a different mother and father, a different life. In the first, Veronica wishes for African origins where Race would not (she believes) be an issue in her life. In the second, she imagines a different class status, where the constraints of gender would not be the same (her mother would

work, not just sigh). The presentation of alternate life possibilities here show the narrator/protagonist struggling with the painful circumstances of her upbringing in terms of race, class, and gender and the return to the womb and the dream of a better life are presented literally.

A return to the "beginning" or to her "origins" is also staged figuratively through the trip to Africa in search of roots and through her relationship with Ibrahima Sory who is a synechdotal figure of Africa, and a symbol for Veronica of an untainted subject. Indeed, in the three relationships she has with men, she looks for salvation through the freedom that she attributes to them. She was first attracted to what she saw as a greater freedom with Jean-Marie, because he was a mulatto, "They do have something over us…They are free. Anyway, that's how I saw them" (17). The last statement, however, "that's how I saw them," shows narratorial distance and points to an ambiguous perspective. In her second relationship, with Jean-Michel, she seeks freedom once again, this time through a white man, whom she also views as free. Ibrahima Sory represents a third solution. The first Black man that she has slept with, Veronica is portrayed as a "virgin of sorts." Her moment of recognition and self-understanding happens only just before she is about to sleep with Sory for the first time, "…I now realize why he fascinates me. He hasn't been branded" (37). When Saliou's family speaks of her getting married to one of them, she thinks, "It might be a solution. The solution. The real return" (20). But once she starts to realize that Sory, whom she calls her "nigger with ancestors" (30), may not be the solution, she asks herself, "If he doesn't love me, if he doesn't let me love him, how can I return to my womb? How can I be born again?" (66). Deprived of a sense of subjectivity, which she articulates as a lack of freedom, Veronica looks to Sory to give her not only love, but to allow her the agency to love him as a means of re-starting her life. The use of the womb as a metaphor for her desire to begin her life anew is also used to represent the trip to Africa as a gestational period. To her students, she says, "So we have nine months together, a pregnancy…" (20). In Malinké, the title, *Heremakhonon*, means literally "welcome house" and figuratively "wait for happiness." Ibrahima Sory's house, where Veronica seems to spend endless hours waiting for him, is also called *Heremakhonon*. While the house itself is a space where Veronica expects her re-birth to occur, the space of the narrative also figures her gestation.

With her obsessive search for origins and her emphasis on the negative aspects of creolization, the character of Veronica presents an apparently pessimistic view of Caribbean identity and the possibility of recuperation does not appear likely. At the end of the novel, in a Proustian move, she claims that one day she will "break her silence" and tell her story, "I'll have to explain. What? This mistake, this tragic mistake I couldn't help making, being what I am. My ancestors led me on. What more can I say? I looked for myself in the wrong place" (176). While she may have realized that she was mistaken to look for herself in Africa, she also ends her trip there with greater self-understanding. At the beginning of the

text, she compares her life to that of her sisters, "Had the mandigo marabout bounced me more often on his knee and called me his little pearl, like Aida and Jalla, I would most likely not be here today" (24). Toward the end, she claims it is too late to start over again (167). Turning once again to the comparison with her sister, however, one can see their difference in another light, "Aida had married a doctor, the son of a doctor friend of the marabout. A success story" (5). While her sister's life, unlike Veronica's, conforms to ideological expectations, her "success story" not only gives her no subjectivity, it gives her no story to tell.

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Critics of autobiography point out that the genre has a major flaw; autobiography cannot be a complete and truthful account of a person's life because it is impossible to write accurately about the beginning of one's life. Yet one can also see the impossibility of writing the beginning in autobiography as proof of the always already representational character of discourse, autobiographical or otherwise. As Crystal Herndon has pointed out, much of the critical attention paid to Condé's work focuses on biographical details (88) and, I would add, attempts to make autobiographical and cultural sense out of it. In this section, I question critical attempts at trying to make this work fit in a specific generic category and find that the willful break with traditional categories is staged discursively by the author outside of the work as well as being an intrinsic part of it.

In an interview with Françoise Pfaff, Condé remains ambiguous about the status of this work. She first states, "*Heremakhonon* was not fictionalized autobiography at all. It was a novel of protest." When Pfaff presses her by saying, "But it does contain some autobiographical elements," Condé admits:

> *The whole section on childhood and the family milieu is true to life. These are things you don't invent. Also autobiographical is the portrayal of West Indian society in terms of the important Blacks, the ones who see themselves as a high-class Black bourgeoisie but who are, on the whole, terribly alienated. These are the only people I saw during my childhood. They are proud to be Black, but they don't even know what it is. In the final analysis, to be Black, for them, is to act like a White person, to become "whitened." This whole section is truly autobiographical, whereas the rest of the novel contains little autobiographical material…"* (Pfaff 40)

Implying that the novel is a mixture of "real" and "imagined" material, Condé's answer affirms the importance of the events that marked her in her childhood and those having to do with her family. When Pfaff questions, "The novel is written in the first person. I am tempted to ask whether you are Veronica" Condé replies:

> *I first wrote Heremakhonon entirely in the third person. But when I read it over, something didn't click. I had not succeeded in giving it the impact I wanted it to have. It was both a forged confession and false evidence. So I rewrote it entirely in the first person. I think this proves Veronica is not me. (Or is it the other way around?) But it would also be wrong to assert that she is not me at all.* (Pfaff 40-41)

While Condé does not admit to an actual identification between the author/narrator/protagonist, she does affirm the importance of the first-person narrative. In her view, the confession in the third person would have appeared "forged." Just as critics often assert the importance of truth in autobiography, Condé, while remaining ambiguous about genre, affirms the necessity of verisimilitude.

In response to Pfaff's question, "The heroines in *Heremakhonon* and *A Season in Rihata* are seeking their identity. Is Maryse Condé to be found in these two alienated West Indian women?" Condé replies, "Certainly. I assume my alienation" (Pfaff 45). Refusing to allow a conflation of herself with her heroines, Condé nonetheless allows for a reading of them as literary counterparts, having the same experience of alienation.

As Jennifer Sparrow notes for Francophone Caribbean women's novels written "as autobiographies" there is an Aobvious artistic attempt by the authors to present their heroines as authoritative, speaking *selves* who achieve the status of autonomous subjectivity through writing" (Sparrow 179). However, as Leah Hewitt illustrates in her analysis of the status of the speaking subject of *Heremakhonon*'s narrator/protagonist, the very ambiguity of Veronica's voice, "portrayed as multiple shifts and even an incorporation of the other's (negative) voice," denotes a "fundamental ambivalence about herself in relation to the world," and "a part of the doubled subject's ongoing battle with herself as well as with others" (187). This idea of the "ongoing battle" is particularly pertinent in discussions of identity, post-colonial or otherwise. As Condé states about a character in a more recent novel:

> *…the girl Marie-Noëlle who was born in Guadeloupe, grew up in France and then ends up in the United States, spends her time wondering where she is from because she is thinking in terms of geneology, whereas identity is an essentially subjective idea. One defines oneself in the course of one's personal and individual experience.* (Sourieau 1092, translation mine)

The identity-in-process model espoused by Condé obviates and even negates the idea that one must look for "progress" in the narrative of Veronica's identity quest and/or resolution (implied as necessarily positive) at the novel's end.

What, then, to make of those who fault the novel for the heroine's apparent failure to resolve her identity conflicts? In an interview with Marie-Agnès Sourieau, Condé claims that her novels that present the identity quest are not meant as positive examples, but that she wishes to show the dangers of this type of endeavor (1095). The very end of the book, however, does represent a certain amount of hope. Sory tells Veronica, "It's Spring now in Paris," and she repeats and affirms his statement, "Spring? Yes, it's Spring in Paris" (176). Veronica's plane ride out of Africa, away from Heremakhonon thus brings her the symbolic rebirth she was waiting for.

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Post-*négritude* discussions of the desirability and even the possibility of representing the "post-"colonial subject offer new discursive formulae for understanding the transculturated identities produced by the colonial encounter. Métissage, créolité, hybridity all infer a mixing or interweaving of a disparate conglomeration of identity positions. In the introduction to *De/Colonizing the Subject*, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith argue that:

> *Participation in, through re/presentation of, privileged narratives can secure cultural recognition for the subject. On the other hand, entry into the territory of traditional autobiography implicates the speaker in a potentially recuperative performance, one that might reproduce and re/present the colonizer's figure in negation. For to write "autobiography" is partially to enter into the contractual and discursive domain of universal "Man", whom Rey Chow calls the "dominating subject".* (xix)

For Condé, the refusal to make the autobiographical pact, either inside or outside of the work, allows her to write her "new breed" of subject into existence. Rather than look for the dividing line between fiction and autobiography in this work, I believe it is preferable to opt for an understanding of *Heremakhonon* that affirms the ambiguity and the struggle against conformity that this text demands. What Veronica says of herself, "I'm an ambiguous animal, half fish, half bird, a new style of bat" (137), one can also apply to the text. Even if "the point of departure" for this author is an inscription of a subject at odds with herself and with her Caribbean heritage, as Leah Hewitt writes, "For Condé, *Heremakhonon*'s written adventure signals the beginning of a novelistic career that pursues the issues of origins and Antillean feminine identity" (188). The trope of beginning in the narration of Veronica's identity quest bespeaks not simply a deft narratological trick, but an

awareness of the complex issues surrounding the formation of identity and the articulation of subjectivity at the level of the narrative and beyond.

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