Homely Strangers:
Rethinking Group Identities in Maryse Conde’s Crossing the Mangrove

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Abstract

The concepts of home, identity, and belonging have been intensely debated in contemporary postcolonial literature. In the field of contemporary West Indian fiction, writers like Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, Michelle Cliff, and Maryse Condé have all used motifs of distance and proximity in their fiction. Although most writers approach postcolonial identity through the glorification of familiar “common” grounds like gender, motherhood, color, or folk culture, they cannot escape the reiteration of Western representational frames regarding identity. By focusing on Maryse Condé’s Crossing the Mangrove, my paper addresses the issues of collective identity and belonging through the motifs of strangeness and estrangement. My aim in this paper is twofold. First, with the theoretical support of Sara Ahmed and her work on “stranger fetishism,” I will argue that Condé’s strangers reflect the inherent strangeness and estrangement of the local Guadeloupean community and undermine the fiction of the sentimentalized space of “home.” Secondly, I will argue that Condé destabilizes the fiction of “home” in order to put forward a revised definition of group identities. According to Maryse Condé, the West Indian tangled root system—and hence the futility of roots and origins—can in fact constitute the only “common/uncommon” ground for postcolonial West Indian representation. Following Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, my paper argues that although Condé distances herself from the biological character of community building—avoiding the pitfalls of race, color, history, and the past—she does not define West Indian subjectivity on the basis of missing or negative qualities either. In other words, Condé’s fiction does not prescribe a list of properties owing to or against which the West Indian subject is measured. Through this prism, I aim to show that Crossing the Mangrove interrupts the traditional categories of Western representation and creates a post-western mode of “being-together” simply by existing as a “singularly plural coexistence,” where each subject exposes their individual boundaries and limitations.

Keywords: stranger fetishism, singularly plural subjectivity, Caribbean, community, belonging, estrangement, collective identities.

Introduction: Condé’s (Un)Homely Strangers

The permeability of national borders and the identity predicaments that refugees and ex-colonized populations have been posing to Western societies after the fall of colonialism highlight the need to rethink the question of community, as well as the terms and conditions of what constitutes collective identity. The failure of popular cultural discourses, such as binarism, cultural assimilation, transatlanticism, or diaspora, to explain the identity predicaments of postcolonial populations highlight the need to revise our theoretical arsenal, in order to explore alternative ways of re-presenting the postcolonial subject as well as postcolonial communities. In the field of Caribbean literature, authors such as Erna Brodber, Edwidge Danticat, Patrick Chamoiseau, Michelle Cliff, and Maryse Condé revise the notion of “community-building”
through the production of narratives that favour the creation of essence-less, open-ended collective formations, where the individual both unworks and reworks conditions of group belonging.

Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé offers a heretic representation of Caribbean communities, refraining from the nostalgic representation of pan-African loyalties. Although Condé lived more than ten years in Africa, her African experience proved to be rather distressing. Her “feeling of malaise in Africa” was associated with her “expectation as a Caribbean woman that the African people would embrace her as one of their own given the Caribbean’s genealogical link to Africa through the slave trade” (Thomas 80); yet, Condé asserts that she was excluded on the very grounds of her Caribbean descent. Her cultural shock caused a break from the doctrines of Negritude and the representation of Africa as archetypal motherland, and prefigured her literary preoccupation with notions of “home” and belonging. As she shuns away from Negritude premises, she equally rejects Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic and challenges conventional identity building based on essential commonalities of race, gender, or the creation of cultural “transatlantic” continuums. As a result, in Crossing the Mangrove, Condé uses the effects of cultural alienation and disenchantment to give expression to individual stories that renegotiate Antillean identity.

Condé’s theoretical interrogation of the notion of community has been a shared project among many Caribbean theorists. Like Édouard Glissant, in his Poetics of Relation, Condé portrays the chaotic dynamism of Caribbean communities and the impossibility of any cultural or racial legitimacy or synthesis. The ideas of “errantry” and rhizomatic identity (Glissant 19), instead of fixed roots, are prevalent in Crossing the Mangrove through the main character Francis Sancher—the stranger vagabond. Moreover, Sylvia Wynter and Joan Anim-Addo’s retheorization of Antillean ontology through a gendered perspective is also prevalent in Maryse Condé’s work, in the sense that she also raises the question of social reality, especially gender and ethnicity, in demystifying collective identities in the Caribbean. Through the inclusion of female subaltern stories and a confusion of the boundaries of inclusion-exclusion, Crossing the Mangrove makes a statement that new formations can arise “‘without a familial bond, without proximity, without oikeiotites [familiarity]’ . . . and without any preconditioning truth, other than the fate of being thrown together” (Karavanta and Morgan, “Humanism and the Aporia of Community” 336-37).

Condé’s attempt to explore the limitations and problems of group identities also ties in with a wider philosophical retheorization of collective representation. Works such as Giorgio Agamben’s The Coming Community, Jean-Luc Nancy’s Being Singular Plural and Inoperative Community, Roberto Esposito’s Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community question the biological character of community building and emphasize the role of the individual in the reconstruction of flexible collective formations tied to contingency. Roberto Esposito argues that community is not a body “in which individuals are reflected in each other so as to confirm their initial identity” (7). Instead, community is a “singularly plural constitution” that “doesn’t belong to either our past or to our future but that which we are now” (92). Moreover, Jean-Luc Nancy
underlines that being “cannot be anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the with and as the with of this singularly plural coexistence” (*Being Singular Plural* 3). Agamben further adds to this notion of a “singularly plural” coexistence by putting forward the idea of “whatever being” (1). In Agamben, the “whatever” relates “to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property... but only in its being such as it is” (1). In this respect then, “such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class... and it is reclaimed not for another class... but for its being-such, for belonging itself... The singularity exposed as such is whatever you want” (1-2).

*Crossing the Mangrove* takes up questions of identity and community-building through the inclusion of conflicting stories, voices, and texts that undo the myth of imagined communities and allow for more flexible, often conflicting, subject positions tied to the present moment. I will argue that the systematic overrepresentation of the stranger in *Crossing the Mangrove*, as well as of the female and ethnic others showcases that community is, in fact, an essential lack of common properties, but that it is this negative co-belonging that eventually deconstructs the foundational character of community-building. In this way, subject and group can stand as mutually transformative to one another. To prove my point, this article will be separated into three sections. First, I intend to briefly comment on the structure of *Crossing the Mangrove* and how it contributes to the creation of an open-ended narrative. Next, through a discussion of gender followed by a brief analysis of the novel’s class and ethnic rivalries, I will underline that women’s stories as well as the novel’s ethnic clashes testify to an unworking of the space of community as a uniform construct. Most importantly, this article will stress that estrangement can be a positive force in the revising of collective identities for the West Indian subject. Since Condé frees ontology from any precondition of being, her subjects can exist as “whatever” and belong “as such,” in a way that it always matters. It is by means of this mechanism of inverting representation that *Crossing the Mangrove* revises group identity formation through a more ethical prism.

I. Framing the Narrative: Strange Beginnings

Condé privileges the creation of an open narrative that emphasizes the dispersal of perspectives. This multiplicity of voices surfaces as the main feature of a heterogeneous Guadeloupean community. Directing her attention to the racially mixed, class-segregated, and gender-prejudiced Guadeloupean town of Rivière au Sel, Condé’s narrators gather to attend the wake of the town’s most mysterious and infamous character, Francis Sancher. Although the novel is structured around Sancher’s wake, following a linear temporal cycle of dusk, night, and first light, “[t]his outer unity of time does not correspond... to a unity of voice or interpretation,” as “the narrative winds through several tales, constantly reversing and diverting its direction” (Fulton 306). *Crossing the Mangrove* consists of nineteen monologues, each under the name of an inhabitant. Through this kaleidoscopic prism, Condé forces the reader “to adapt his/her reading from a referential mode (a given representation of the universe) to a cognitive mode (the subjective or objective perception of the represented universe)” (Crosta 147). In this way, the
author explores the denigration of Sancher, as the community’s “other” through the inhabitants’ divergent perspectives. The discursive appropriation of the stranger by each of the town’s inhabitants suggests the absence of a cohesive unified point of view. In Condé’s novel “the community does not work together across differences” (Smyth 19). The author appears more inclined to express scepticism vis-à-vis any form of collective thinking. Embracing partiality and ambivalence as the foundations of her narrative technique, Condé undermines the traditional presentation of Caribbean culture as a confluence of cultures and ethnicities.

To rethink the notion of Caribbean community, Condé questions the fiction of “home.” The notion of “home” operates on two levels. On the one hand, it signifies the known, familiar, comforting space that ties one to both past and present. It is a matrix of security against threat, a shelter or, in Sara Ahmed’s words, the “sentimentalized space of belonging” (89) that frames our beliefs and understanding of the world. “Home” also holds a social/national dimension. “Home” as homeland, nation, or community encapsulates the history of a group of people. It is a history that needs to sacrifice individual memory in order to create a unified collective memory and a collective identity. “Home,” therefore, is based on the existence of clear-cut boundaries. While “home” obviously raises questions concerning the relationship between individual identity and belonging, Condé’s use of the figure of the stranger—Sancher’s intrusion within both the town’s private and public spaces—upsets the “fantastic ‘we’ of [the] nation, city and house” (Ahmed 78), and turns him into a “presence that questions our present” (Ahmed 78). The stranger, as a sign of displacement per se, mirrors the discomfort that structures all social and family relations in Rivière au Sel. The use of the figure of the stranger thus underscores the author’s point that estrangement is a defining feature of “home” or community.

Sancher’s life and his sudden unnatural death—for “there were no blood or wounds on the corpse” (Crossing the Mangrove 10)—excite the community’s curiosity. Sancher is overrepresented as a “strange” body. Roberto Esposito argues that, if “the subject of community is no longer the ‘same,’ it will by necessity be an ‘other’; not another subject but a chain of alterations that cannot ever be fixed in a new identity” (138). During his wake, in which Condé’s nineteen male and female narrators participate, Sancher is described as a “burly, heavy-built man as tall as a mahogany tree crowned with a mass of curly, greying hair” (Crossing the Mangrove 15). He had “giant, ogre’s feet” (72) and his arms “were bicolored. Almost black to the elbow, then golden above” (80). His grotesque physical description alludes to the concept of the “body as seen/scene” (Pratt 139); namely, to the representation of the “other” body according to a culturally normative frame. Arguing over the social dimension of the human body, Judith Butler notes that it is this public dimension of the human body that exposes it to the violence of the social body. In Butler’s words, “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (Precarious Life 26).

Sancher’s unwelcome arrival, his grotesque body, his distinctive speech “spiking each word with a strong foreign accent” (Crossing the Mangrove 17), and even his “rare and unusual name, Francisco Alvarez-Sancher, so different from those in Rivière au Sel” (41) create an aura of
mystery around him and plant “the poisonous plant of mischief” (20) in the village. People “don’t even know whether he was white, black or Indian. He had every blood in his body” (192). While being generally avoided, as people “[ran] from [him] like the plague” (37), Sancher remains under the town’s scrutiny while he is alive. He is implicated in discursive violence that gives rise to “[t]he most outlandish stories” (21). Exposed to town talk, he “was said to have killed a man back in his own country and run off with his money. They said he was a dealer of hard drugs... [or an] arms runner supplying the guerrillas of Latin America” (21-22). Marginalized as a potentially dangerous individual, Sancher is depicted as someone who threatens to undo the imaginary equilibrium of the local social body.

The encounter with the stranger and his perception as a threat brings to the fore Julia Kristeva’s theory on abjection, a psychoanalytic model that looks into human reactions to a threatening breakdown of boundaries. The production of a negative reaction towards a strange body reveals a concern with boundaries as well. The feeling of discomfort caused by a body that is out of place “threaten[s] to traverse the border that establishes the ‘clean body’” (Ahmed 52) of the community. According to Kristeva, the abject determines the border between the outside and the inside. For this reason, “[t]here looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside; ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (1). As an object of fear, Sancher is isolated from the local community. In his first evening at the town’s bar, “the locals felt like shoving [him] out” ([Crossing the Mangrove] 18). The emotional responses of hatred and fear lead to his presentation as distinct from the social body. Seen as an intruder, Francis appears as a danger precisely because he does not belong, because he threatens to undo the “we” of the community.

The stranger, however, is doubly appropriated by the local community as both a subject of fear and a community fetish. Following Kristeva’s approach to abjection, the abject holds a double role, signalling both horror and fascination. Condé records Sancher’s transformation into a community fetish, especially by the town’s female population. Because “curiosity got the better of [them]” ([Crossing the Mangrove] 80), the women were “nailed to the spot” (80) by Francis’s “face [which] was of a rich, roasted corn color [and by his] eyes [which] held the promise of long journeys” (80). According to Steven Winspur, “[t]o some villagers Sancher serves as a mirror of their unhappiness... while for others he intensifies their sense of purpose or a feeling of hope” (96). As fetish, Francis converts into a mirror image of the women’s alienated lives. Having engaged in a series of affairs with some of the town’s high class and ethnically diverse women, he infests Rivière au Sel’s private spaces by means of laying claim to female bodies. Because the female body is traditionally associated with the reinforcement of dominant power structures, Sancher’s appropriation of the town women threatens the town’s social hierarchy. Rivière au Sel’s women become infatuated with the town’s stranger because he remains an outsider to the power structure that restrains their actions and emotions. In fact, women place their hopes on Francis “[p]robably because he came from Elsewhere. From over there. From the other side of the water. He wasn’t born on [their] island of malice that has been left to... the
ravages caused by the spitefulness in the hearts of black folks” (*Crossing the Mangrove* 43). Francis serves as a springboard for the exposure of the xenophobic and sexist elements persisting within Guadeloupean society.

### II. Deconstructing Home: Gender Prejudice and Relationships in Crisis

In order to highlight the homogenizing force of communities in the production of “other” subjectivities, Maryse Condé focuses on the importance of women’s stories to reveal the gender inconsistencies in the formation of the myth of homogenous community ties. In post-plantation Guadeloupe, a series of women’s stories reflect everyday relationships of violence that were part of postcolonial island communities, even prior to Sancher’s advent. His relationships with Vilma Ramsaran—the daughter of former indentured Indian workers that rose to the island’s landed middle class—and Mira Lameaulnes—the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy landed white Creole—as well as with Dinah Lameaulnes—Mira’s stepmother—become means of revealing the town’s marginalizing and homogenizing understructure. Although Sancher is blamed for undoing social cohesion, he simply mirrors the fiction of unity and coherence in a post-plantation context. The representation, within the women’s stories, of the continuum of power relations, as well as of ethnic and class divisions, reframes Caribbean communities as essentially heterogeneous constructs. As Heather Smyth observes,

> [T]he women’s first-person narration does have the effect of drawing attention to their monologues as testimonies of women’s enclosure in domestic spaces, as daughters or wives, in Rivière au Sel, and of the changes they will begin after the wake. The switch back and forth from first-person “women’s” to third-person “men’s” narration in the novel indicates that gender is a constituent part of the community’s many differences. (20)

By interrupting the dichotomy between objective and subjective reality, the author opts for a materially grounded look at black communities as an alternative approach to the analysis of black collectivities. Through their rebellious acts, Condé’s women actively engage in the “de-structuring of the principle of Sameness and Difference which ontologizes us as specific modes of the I/We” (Wynter 22). In light of the problematic gender relationships in Rivière au Sel, Condé invites us to reflect upon the question of identity as a cultural as well as a historical construct. Through women’s stories, Condé questions rule-governed modes of imagining both the self and the group.

Condé presents a series of “unhappy homes” delineating the patriarchal structure of Rivière au Sel. Dinah faces the consequences of a marriage of interest. Brought in Rivière au Sel from the island of Saint Martin, Dinah is “marr[ied]... off to [Loulou Lameaulnes], a prosperous businessman, but a widower, burdened with five children, who made her suffer enormously” (*Crossing the Mangrove* 77). Exchanged between men, Dinah depicts the condition of the woman in the Antilles not as a subject but as a means for the reinforcement of an entire
patriarchal social order. Following Levi-Strauss, Judith Butler emphasizes, “the bride functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not have identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She reflects masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence” (Gender Trouble 39). Similarly, Luce Irigaray notes that all economic, social, and cultural structures are based on the exploitation of women for, “[a]s commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value” (175). In fact, sharing a Marxist orientation, Irigaray argues that women are the most exploited “class of producers.” In her own words, “all social regimes of ‘History’ are based upon the exploitation of one ‘class’ of producers, namely, women whose reproductive use value (reproductive of children and of the labour force) and whose constitution as exchange value underwrite the symbolic order as such, without any compensation in kind going to them for that ‘work’” (Irigaray 173). In Crossing the Mangrove, Dinah merely qualifies as “a servant to take care of them” all (77). As Dinah herself admits, the “house became [her] prison, [her] tomb. [Her] youth flew away. At times, it seemed [she] was already dead and [her] blood had already frozen in [her] veins” (78-79). What Condé thus highlights is women’s both “private use and social use” (Irigaray 176), which upholds the local patriarchal structure and, at the same time, emphasizes the exclusionary basis of community building itself.

The intrusion of the erotic element, however, estranges social and cultural demands for the role of women and dehomogenizes gender and social stereotypes. Dinah’s desire for Francis Sancher shocks the local community and upsets the social demands regarding accepted female conduct. Nonetheless, it is her affair with Francis and her repressed sexuality that transform Dinah into a self-assertive individual. According to bell hooks, yearning “cut[s] across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice”. hooks highlights, in particular, “the yearning that wells in the hearts and minds of those whose [master] narratives have silenced . . . the longing for critical voice,” or, in this case, for an independent female self (Crossing the Mangrove 27). Condé, similarly, uses female eroticism as a “critical voice,” a way out of predetermined places for the Caribbean woman in an oppressive and judgmental context. Although Dinah “was frightened of the desires that were flaring up inside of [her]” (Crossing the Mangrove 80), yearning re-arranges her relationship to her marriage and, by extension, to the entire community, in relation to the prescribed places of female propriety. She decides “to leave Loulou and Rivière au Sel... [and] look for the sun and the air and the light for what’s left of the years to live” (84). By embracing her female desire, Dinah re-discovers herself as a body, as a voice, and as a woman. In effect, the return to the female body and female desire signify an empowerment of the female self-irrespective of the socially ascribed roles of womanhood, as wives and mothers.

Mira Lameaulnes, Loulou’s illegitimate daughter, is also socially marginalized as the outcome of a forced illegitimate relationship. Suffering the trauma of her mother’s death during childbirth, she accuses her father of her sad life. For Mira, living in her father’s home constitutes a form of incarceration. Not only does she have to live with the trauma of her mother’s loss, but she is also forced to live under the demands of an authoritarian father and the scrutiny of the
community for being an “illegitimate” child. Mira experiences the inhabitants’ resentment as they “sharpen[n] their knives of malicious words” (Crossing the Mangrove 34). She is the stranger at home per se. For her, as Susan Stanford Friedman’s analysis claims in a different context, home is a site of dislocation. Associating home with the feeling of estrangement, Friedman remarks, “To inhabit the body of the stranger is to never be at home. But what if home itself is the site of violence to the body? Home may in fact be constituted upon an act of violence against the body, even as that body travels, migrates, or goes into exile” (199-200). Mira secludes herself both from the local community and from her father, and asserts her own female desire as her sole recourse. The news of Mira’s impregnation by the town’s stranger causes public commotion and her father’s rage as “vengeful thoughts, murderous thoughts [took over him] regarding [Sancher] who... had poisoned his life” (Crossing the Mangrove 96). Mira’s overt sexuality defies the community’s prescribed female positions while, simultaneously, it discloses the discriminatory basis of identity-production. What is more, Mira’s transgressive female behaviour suggests the attainment of a different kind of self-knowledge without yielding to community demands or dominant ideology.

Similarly, Indo-Caribbean Vilma Ramsaran also speaks a story of detachment and discontinuity. In her own monologue, Vilma describes the lack of affection in her family, explaining that the reason why she took refuge with Francis Sancher, “a disreputable man, who one wretched morning loomed up in the middle of Rivière au Sel,” can be traced back into her family past (Crossing the Mangrove 153). Vilma is beset by both an unloving mother and an indifferent father. Her father “had always considered Vilma as belonging to Rosa and had kept himself at a discrete distance from the circle of women” (108); yet, Vilma recalls that “[t]here was never any room for [her] in [her mother’s] heart. Not for the boys either... [She] had nothing. Only [her] books” (153). Her father’s decision to take Vilma out of school and marry her off was for her “tantamount to dying” (155). Eudine Barriteau underlines that “the rigidity of Asian cultural traditions compounded the inequalities in gender systems” (200); hence, practices such as denying schooling for women and arranged same-caste marriages posed a surplus burden for the cultural expectations of Indo-Caribbean women as wives and mothers, favouring community demands over individual welfare (200). Despite her father’s having “made an arrangement” (Crossing the Mangrove 155), Vilma is unwilling to comply with their ancestral country’s traditions.

The restrictive patriarchal context in which Vilma lives leads her to Francis Sancher as a sign of both rebellion and revenge. These kinds of discontinuous social relationships not only criticize hegemonic identity formations, but they can also engender a new kind of subject consciousness. Vilma’s urge to “exercise a self-affirming freedom—to risk the body” (Dash 314) is the statement of a discontinuous gendered subject. According to Judith Butler’s study of gender, “the body is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history” (Gender Trouble 130). Yet, subversive acts such as “an erotic struggle [help] to create new categories from the ruins of the old, new ways of being a body within the cultural field, and whole new languages of description” (127). Vilma’s pregnancy is a self-defining act within a repressive context. Condé’s
rebellious women deconstruct patriarchal discourses of collectivizing by means of the “free use of the self” (Agamben 28-9). Moreover, the subversion of the foundational violence of collectivizing women allows the creation of unconventional communities of “whatever” beings (1); namely, of individuals who can actively rework the space of the group through the sharing of their individual tales. This “singularly plural coexistence” (Nancy, Being Singular Plural 3) can, in fact, serve as the new signifying ground of collective representation.

III. Deconstructing the Myth of Fraternity and Social Equality: Ethnic and Class Rivalry in Rivière au Sel

Rivière au Sel constitutes a microcosm of mixed ethnicities that generate class divisions among its inhabitants. The greatest degree of antagonism appears between the town’s two most powerful families, the Lameaulnes and the Ramsarans, and dates back to colonial times. From the novel’s opening pages the reader learns that “people had come [to Francis’s wake] mainly out of respect for... the Ramsarans, one of the most esteemed families in Rivière au Sel” (Crossing the Mangrove 7). Going into greater detail, the narrator explains that

Ti-Tor Ramsaran, Vilma’s great-grandfather... had settled in this region of the island—an unusual spot for an East Indian—the same year as Gabriel, the first of the Lameaulnes, a white Creole from Martinique, who had been hounded out by his family because he married a Negress. This must have been in 1904 or 1905. In any case before the 1914-1918 war and well before the hurricane of 1928. (7)

The history of Guadeloupe and Rivière au Sel runs parallel to the history of the families and the various ethnicities of the island. From the beginning of the narrative, Condé identifies diversity as a key element in the development of the Caribbean islands and Caribbean communities. This idea of inner diversity and conflict ties in with Joan Anim-Addo’s notion of rewriting community as “a process and product of different and often repelled or antagonistic cultures, a shared ground of possible alliances and affiliations and an envisioned and yet-to-come togetherness of irreconcilable differences” (Karavanta and Morgan, “Interculturality as the Imaginative Genealogy of an Undecidable Present” 69). The rivalry of the novel’s most prominent families is mainly a dispute over the social and economic standing between the two ethnically diverse families. Ti-Tor Ramsaran’s arrival in Rivière au Sel and his gradual elevation to the town’s landed middle class generates the inhabitants’ commotion as “quite a few people took offence and chanted spitefully: ‘Kouli malaba isi dan pa peyiw!’ (Coolie Malabar, this country’s not yours!)” (Crossing the Mangrove 7-8). Unable to shake off the stereotype of the indentured East Indian worker, the inhabitants are frustrated by the Ramsarans’ land purchase, the building of a concrete villa, and their profitable export business of fruit and crayfish. In fact, the townspeople wonder, “Since when do the Indians lay down the law around here?” (8), concluding that “[p]eople don’t know their place!” (8). The town’s comments undo the myth of harmonious rural relations as, in the context of the islands, the creation of a landed middle
class—succeeding the collapse of the plantation system—widens the gap between ethnically diverse populations.

The rivalry between the East Indian Ramsarans and the Lameaulnes, with the white Creole past, represents a collision between old and new power structures. Envious of the Ramsarans’ commercial success, the person who was mostly irritated was Loulou Lameaulnes, who, “like his parents and grandparents before him, played the aristocrat behind the [flower] nurseries’ iron gate” (Crossing the Mangrove 9). Involved in an export business himself, Lameaulnes resents the advent of foreigners on the island; he declares that “there were too many foreigners in Guadeloupe” and that they “should be deported with all those Dominicans and Haitians” (71). At the same time, Lameaulnes reinforces his economic/social power by employing illegal Haitian workers for his nurseries, despite the fines and penalties that this practice costs him (98). In the context of power relations, Marie-Denise Shelton argues that Condé’s discourse also features a critique of power. According to Shelton, Condé does not dissociate “culture and collective consciousness from the socioeconomic context. She examines the formation of Caribbean identity in terms of chains of relations rooted in the slave/(neo)colonial system and the interplay of strategies of assimilation and subversion, submission and revolt” (717-18). As appears from the Lameaulnes case, Loulou wishes to retain a stricter labour division model like his forebears. In fact, he is proud to trace his ancestry back to the

first of the Lameaulnes, Dieudonné Désiré, the owner of a sugar plantation near Marin in Martinique, [who] used to take aim at his slaves’ heads and fire bullets into them, doubling up with laughter at their final grimace. Loulou should have been born in those days when might was right. Not in the days of Social Security and Family Allowances. (97)

Loulou bemoans the passing of the old days of slavery and plantation life. Although he participates in a diversified globalized Caribbean economy, he represents the continuum of power relations that enjoin land acquisition with wealth and power. Moreover, this also proves that, in a globalized world, social and ethnic divisions have been far from superseded.

Even though the dichotomy between ethnic difference and social mobility lingers within community relations, Sylvestre Ramsaran bears significant similarities to Loulou Lameaulnes. The Lameaulnes are respected “because they were almost white, because they lived in a house with ‘Private’ written on the gate” (Crossing the Mangrove 144); yet, as Sylvestre Ramsaran declares, “what matters in today’s Guadeloupe is no longer the color of your skin—well, not entirely—nor an education... Nowadays, the high school graduates, [...] sit on their doorsteps waiting for their unemployment checks. No, what matters is money” (108). Despite being the descendant of indentured immigrant workers, Sylvestre Ramsaran “[k]now[s] nothing about his people’s past” (106) and is said to be “completely spoiled by money” (105). Not only is he and Loulou Lameaulnes joined by the common misfortune of their daughters’ affairs with Francis
Sancher, but also by their participation in a diversified and globalized economy that enforces a social hierarchy upon the people of Rivière au Sel.

In his discussion of Condé’s *Crossing the Mangrove*, Pascale De Souza argues that the spirit of plantation economy still lingers in Rivière au Sel, having been modified “with new products and new masters” (364). Both the Ramsarans and the Lameaulnes hire imported labour, their businesses depend on the exportation of goods, and they lead alienated lives in relation to the rest of the community. In fact, both their estates are located outside Rivière au Sel, contributing to the two families’ isolation from the rest of the inhabitants. As Pascale De Souza notes further, during the times of slavery, “the prison to escape from was the plantation system. In Rivière au Sel, the houses of the middle-class are all somehow related to this past—to the plantation system that ruled the island’s economy, politics, and social stratification” (368). It seems that Condé portrays the existence of unequal relations as the basis of contemporary Caribbean communities. To this end, the author historicizes the relations developed in Rivière au Sel’s community in terms of social, cultural, and economic encounters.

Maryse Condé places the immigrant perspective at the extreme edge of the local social hierarchy. Illegal Haitian immigrants are used as cheap workforce in the town’s fields, yet their descriptions by their powerful employers are invariably mediated by the stereotype of laziness and languor. For instance, Aristide Lameaulnes insists on being “on [the Haitians’] backs at every hour of the day and night, [as] the Haitian workers spent their time glued to the transistor radio, trying to understand the events surrounding the return to democracy in their country” (*Crossing the Mangrove* 55). The prejudice against migrant workers becomes most evident in the character of Désinor the Haitian. By incorporating Désinor in her group of narrators, Condé aims at creating a diversified narrative that privileges the representation of black communities as essentially heterogeneous. Stripping the community of their hypocrisy regarding Sancher’s death, Désinor declares:

I don’t know why everyone is pretending to have a heavy heart... The people in Rivière au Sel [have] got no feelings, and what’s more, they’re hypocrites. There’s no use me lying. I didn’t care a damn for Francis Sancher. I’m not going to take to mourning for the two hundred francs a week he gave me to fork over his garden! I’m here because I haven’t smelled such delicious food or wet my throat with a shot of rum for ages. (162)

Désinor does not reflect upon Francis’s life or upon his meeting with the deceased. Instead, he ponders upon his own life; a life of cane field work and flight. Condé illustrates the social prejudice against Désinor by highlighting his non-normative sexual orientation. The incorporation of a homosexual character in the novel thus “functions as a resistant form of heterogeneity” (Fulton 21).

Condé’s gesture seems to coincide with Homi Bhabha’s notion of “interstices.” Bhabha questions fixed identity categories focusing instead on the “interstitial moments” of the articulation of one’s difference and on how “subjects [are] formed ‘in-between,’ or in excess of,
the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference” (269). It is these “in-between” spaces, according to Bhabha, that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that generate new signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (269). Désinor’s social difference—as a lower class black—as well as his sexual “aberration” challenge Rivière au Sel’s community. In defiance of “the looks of contempt from his neighbours” (Crossing the Mangrove 163), Désinor attends Sancher’s wake only to “[eat] voraciously” and “behave[e] so uncouthly on purpose” (163), in order to “hurl a silent defiance at these petit-bourgeois. To shock them with [his] blackness. To shock them with [his] smell of poverty and destitution” (164). In sum, Condé’s post-plantation community is caught in a complex web of power relations where the past still influences the present. The notion of community is ultimately re-interpreted as an essentially heterogeneous formation where unequal social, ethnic, and class relations determine both public and private life.

Conclusion: Condé’s Community of Strangers

The problem posed by West Indian identity constitutes for Maryse Condé one of the most significant issues that West Indian authors, especially female authors, are set up against. Finding her way out of mainstream concepts of identity-formation in the Caribbean, Condé distances herself from prefabricated discourses of belonging. More specifically, Crossing the Mangrove reflects “Maryse Condé’s own plight as a French Caribbean woman writer,” in that she “rejects any exploration of Guadeloupean village life as an opportunity to seek out beginnings—either her characters’ or her own as a Guadeloupean-born writer” (Souza 374). To this aim, Condé leaves the mystery of Sancher’s origins—as well as of the rest of the characters—unresolved. What she is more interested in is the exploration of the relationships within an ethnically heterogeneous and racially varied community. Absent though he may be from the novel, Francis Sancher serves as a catalyst that brings to light the inhabitants’ mutual estrangement and alienation.

Arguably, Crossing the Mangrove is a self-conscious text regarding questions of origin and belonging. The use of the image of the mangrove in the title is largely symbolic of such questioning; its complicated roots allude to the complexity of collective identities. Condé confuses “associations among the mangrove swamp and cultural roots, genealogy, and access to authentic Creole culture” (Smyth 18). As Francis dies before he is able to finally elucidate the mystery of his own origins, Condé seems to suggest that “[n]ot only are Sancher’s roots tangled and hard to discern among the gossip about his past but the roots of the community also come from multiple, crisscrossed sources” (19). Overall, Condé’s community of Rivière au Sel does not seem to work together across differences, but social harmony has never been the author’s goal.

As analysed, Crossing the Mangrove works on two levels. On the first level, Condé uses the motif of estrangement in order to challenge the traditional associations of “home” with security, affection, and uniformity. What the author seems to suggest is that estrangement can, in fact, constitute a radical force in the redefinition of both Caribbean subjectivity and Caribbean group
identities. Estrangement does not signify dissolution for Condé. Instead, it is a trope that renegotiates power relationships and re-articulates postcolonial communities, irrespective of essential commonalities of race, ethnicity, class, or gender. As a result, the redefinition of “home” is also a redefinition of the way we conceptualize difference and similarity. As bell hooks puts it, home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become. (148)

Because each character’s story reflects a different point of view, the singularity of each speaker is the issue for the author. Through the use of multiple and contradictory points of view, Condé refrains from providing a single explanation to the predicament of West Indian identity, rediverting interest to a changing definition of Caribbean communities as communities defined through contradiction.

On a deeper level, because the narrative is open to different voices and interpretations, it cannot signify fullness or completeness. This exposition of everyone’s identity creates a community of “being for others and through others” (Nancy, The Inoperative Community 66). All the different origins, bloods, races, histories that participate in Crossing the Mangrove, and the coexistence of divided interpretations re-work the horizon of collective representation as a singular-plural mode of coexistence and unframe being and belonging from any ethnic or national foreclosure. By means of emphasizing the lived aspect of community building, and through the portrayal of Rivière au Sel as “a site of permeable boundaries and multiple identities” (Addo 261), Condé allocates a more active role on the individual as both a subject of history and a subject in history.

Works Cited


Crosta, Suzanne. “Narrative and Discursive Strategies in Maryse Condé’s Traversée de la Mangrove.” *Callaloo*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1992, pp. 147-55.


