

Gender and Displacement

Gender and Displacement:
"Home" in Contemporary
Francophone Women's Autobiography

Edited by

Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Writing Home	viii
Margot Miller	
Introduction	1
Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth	
Chapter One.....	15
Departures and Arrivals: Home in Maryse Condé’s <i>Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer</i> Erica L. Johnson	
Chapter Two	34
Slipping Home in Marie Cardinal’s <i>Écoutez la Mer</i> Amy. K. Hubbell	
Chapter Three	46
Writing Home: Malika Mokeddem and Hélène Grimaud, Witnesses on the Journey in Search of Home Margot Miller	
Chapter Four.....	55
Searching for Home and Self in Novels by Soraya Nini and Faïza Guène Beth W. Gale	
Chapter Five	67
Representations of Migrant “Homes” in France Through Senegalese Literature Christopher Hogarth	
Chapter Six	84
In Search of Lost Home: Ken Bugul’s <i>Le Baobab Fou</i> and Buchi Emecheta’s <i>Second Class Citizen</i> Natalie Edwards	

Chapter Seven.....	99
The House, The Car and The Child: Worlds of Duras, Duras in the World Maria-Luisa Ruiz	
Chapter Eight.....	108
A New Geography of “Home:” The Letters of Ella Maillart and Alexandra David-Neel Margaret M. McColley	
Contributors.....	135
Index.....	138

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WRITING HOME¹

MARGOT MILLER

The journey away from home,
to some unintended place,
can only be witnessed by writing
out the silent lies that take up space,
small fragments of the self,
unspoken hearts, undelivered letters of hope.

It's sufficient to imagine hope,
to take the first steps toward home,
stepping outside the self,
learning courage in every place
we visit, every open space
we inhabit by writing.

Perfection has no place in writing
except as absence; it drains hope
buries itself in an underground space
where there can be no home,
no growing perception of place,
nothing but emptiness beyond the self.

Each of us must choose the self
struggle there, transform it in writing,
in a letter so long it will remain in place
until it becomes a source of hope,
the place we create as home,
inside our own small space.

Language alone builds this space,
clears the charred forest of the self,

¹ First published in *The Delaware Poetry Review*, 1 (2007).

replants on the barren hillside a home;
What other path but writing
admits into imagination a sense of hope,
weaves mobility into that place?

Writing home is the act and the place
we write from and to, that ideal space
inside the heart, source of being and hope;
it builds the involuntary muscle of the self;
it pushes toward freedom, and relaxes. Writing
identity into life, we *imigrate* toward home.

A rumor of hope takes us out to the place
in which we create home, an inner space
of the self to which we bear witness in writing.

INTRODUCTION

GENDER AND DISPLACEMENT: “HOME” IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCOPHONE WOMEN’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

NATALIE EDWARDS
AND CHRISTOPHER HOGARTH

At times home is nowhere. At times one knows extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. 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, fragmentation as part of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.
—bell hooks

This book studies representations of the notion of “home” in twentieth-century women’s life-writing from diverse areas of the Francophone world. It is comprised of eight chapters that discuss works of female writers from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Indo-China, in addition to that of migrant and immigrant writers hailing from within France. The notion of “home” is currently attracting widespread interest in the allied fields of postcolonial studies and Francophone studies, as critics assess the impact of empire, independence, migration and globalization upon colonial and postcolonial subjects. Although home has sometimes been viewed as a false or outdated notion, such as “a place for those who come after,” by Homi Bhabha, or communities that were imagined for others by Europeans by Christopher L. Miller, the urge to narrate “home” has nevertheless remained strong for Francophone women writers.¹ Rather than viewing “home” as an outdated source of reference, a

¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

construct that should be transcended by the worldly, cosmopolitan, postcolonial subject, many female autobiographers represent “home” as a site of struggle—mental, physical, or both—within their self-narratives. These voices represent “home” as a significant and troubling aspect of identity that the subject overlooks at her peril; the need for an understanding of this notion is thus, to her, more important than ever.

It is for this reason that we chose to make gender, self and displacement the prime foci of this book. We analyze specifically autobiographical texts, thus examining how women represent “home” as a crucial factor in their construction of identity in narrative. Displacement is foregrounded since, in the globalizing era, a fixed sense of belonging to a place is becoming gradually more destabilized. All of the women writers studied here have been displaced in some manner; some by migration, some by an education that idealizes a European other, and some by their status as second-generation immigrants that renders them more disqualified from feeling a true sense of belonging to a place. The chapters address questions such as: how is the experience of home affected by gender? How does migration impact upon women’s self-narrative? How do women represent their origins in writing? How does a postcolonial female subject negotiate borders? How are border crossings and their psychological effects represented in women’s writing? How does gender determine success or failure in the (re)creation of a “home” in narrative? In this introduction, we firstly chart some of the theoretical notions of “home” that critics have articulated, and then we explain how this volume contributes to this debate.

Locating “Home:” Critical Interventions

“Home,” it has often been pointed out, was once the place that best represented calm and security from a potentially hostile outside world. The proverb “An Englishman’s home is his castle” emanates from such a notion, one perhaps best represented in this passage from John Ruskin’s nineteenth century work *Sesame and Lilies*, where he affirms that “this is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.”² However, critics in the late twentieth and twenty-first century worlds would often seem to have dispelled with Ruskin’s version of comfortable domesticity. As postcolonial criticism affirms its “home” in academe, investigations into

² Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, 71.

the significance of the “home” space in colonial and postcolonial situations is continually expanding.

Particularly since Benedict Anderson’s landmark 1991 work *Imagined Communities* on the construction of the nation and his idea that it was the publishing of books that led to the writing of the home-nation, the construction of “home” has been a much-contested subject in the field. Furthermore, critics have been quick to challenge the concept of “home” amidst the advancement of globalization. For the theorist of immigrant literature Homi Bhabha, the expression “unhomely” is a powerful means for describing the condition of in-between subjects described in immigrant texts. Bhabha sees such “unhomeliness” expressed especially in the literary “halfway house,” a space which he finds present in many novels by immigrants or writers from marginalized communities. For Bhabha the metaphor of the “halfway house” sums up the condition of the literature of immigrants and their successors, who do not identify with single or simple national, sexual or racial units. Thus, characters of unhomely texts express a “performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel.”³ As characters seek to “survive the fathomless waters” of displacement, their unhomely position becomes a “bridge” which enables an act of inventive “presencing,” where cultural expression “captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.”⁴ Bhabha thus attempts to dispel the notion that writing “home” is akin to writing the nation, and even hints that home has little significance to these writers; Bhabha’s theorizing thus shows a discomfort with the idea of “home” in a postcolonial, global society.

Timothy Brennan’s approach to “home” is quite the opposite: an avowal that “home” is an undeniably significant, culturally specific construction. His polemical 1997 work *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* is a wide-ranging critique of what Brennan sees as arrogant claims that we currently live in such a standardized cosmopolitan global culture that most people can comfortably call the whole world their “home.” Brennan demonstrates that local interests and local differences persist across the world and thus the “home” community and the idea of “home” remains largely culturally specific. Brennan suggests that certain debates over world culture which tend to lessen the importance of local cultures that many people would refer to as specific “home” cultures are

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

“an often surreptitious imaging of American values.”⁵ He also comments that “what is variously being called multiculturalism, the rainbow curriculum, or postcolonial theory, benefits from taking a privileged sort of US experience as one of its points of departure.”⁶

Doreen Massey had a similar vision in her more geographically-based 1994 work *Space, Place and Gender*. Massey argues that “home” is localized and specific and, furthermore, that our perception of it is altered by the constraints of gender. She argues that it is erroneous to imagine home as a static entity, as a series of “sites of nostalgia of the opting-out from progress and history”⁷ and that “home” —or indeed any space discussed—should be interrogated through the lens of how it “directly relates... to the social and to power;”⁸ for Massey, the spatial is “an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.”⁹ Massey points to the multitude of positions regarding “home” that are available in contemporary cultures, reminding us that “there is reference to *the* condition of postmodernity but in fact there are many such conditions”¹⁰ and that there are thus many conditions of being “at home.” Her arguments downplay celebration of global culture and a corresponding absence of home, and indeed her very references are to specific places in the UK that outsiders would not necessarily know. She points out that:

amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudillard visions of hyperspace... most people actually still live in places like Harlesden or West Brom. Much of life for many people even in the heart of the first world still consists of waiting in a bus shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes. Hardly a graphic illustration of time-space compression... So, quite simply, a preliminary word of caution. We must not get too carried away in our own excitement.¹¹

While she acknowledges that through economic trade agreements and the internet, international awareness and cultural overlapping has significantly increased, Massey holds to the persistence of divided space in our lived reality; “home” thus does still exist in a variety of forms, and we should not be so quick to denigrate the idea.

⁵ Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

While critics like Brennan and Massey point to the persistence of culturally specific sites of "home" despite globalization and the postcolonial condition, other theorists have interrogated the idea of writing "home," and specifically of writing the national "home," in specific areas of the world. Writing in the wake of colonialism and at the dawn of the postcolonial period, for example, Léonard Sainville declared in his article, "Le roman et ses responsabilités" ["The Novel and its Responsibilities"] that the objective of the African novel should be the working towards the construction of a cultural world, elaborating the thoughts and feelings of African peoples. For Sainville the postcolonial African novel should "vouloir œuvrer en toute clarté la conscience à *la construction d'un monde culturel*, expression élaborée de la pensée et de la sensibilité des peuples" ["want to shape in full clarity consciousness of *construction of a cultural world*, the elaborate expression of a people's thought and sensibility"].¹² When migration was portrayed, this was to take place within the "home" country, and intended to provide a sort of constructive ethnography of the country in question. "Home" is thus created when one moves out of the local and describes the everyday activities of those across the African nation so that people can feel "at home" with this construction.

However, other theorists have viewed as spurious this call for "third world" literature to be interpreted as an attempt by writers to create a postcolonial domesticity. In her 1996 work *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Rosemary Marangoly George investigates what she considers the (Western) elitist and masculinist discourses functioning in this demand that "third world" literature represent "domestic postcoloniality."¹³ Western writers, it seems, have decided to move beyond the idea of "home" at exactly the same time as critics have tried to locate explorations in third-world literary texts; as a result, these third-world texts seem tardy and undeveloped, emanating from cultures that lag behind the modern West. George's suspicions regarding this convenient "domesticization" of apparently less-than-modern "third world" works have been aired elsewhere, as other critics have pointed out that, for example, African literature never went in the direction that Sainville had hoped for. Indeed, much African literature deals not with the construction of a national or ethnic "home" space but with the subject of migration to and survival within the eternally foreign

¹² Sainville, "Le roman et ses responsabilités" ["The Novel and its Responsibilities"], 27. Our translation and italics.

¹³ Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 22.

space of Europe. Christopher L. Miller, in his 1998 essay collection *Nationalists and Nomads*, analyzes in great detail the complexity and unfinished nature of the debate over how to appreciate African literature given this unexpected postcolonial “unhomely” development. Many texts from Francophone West Africa, for example, are published in Paris and deal with the Afro-French experience. Accordingly, in her aptly titled 2004 work *Afrique sur Seine*, Odile Cazenave discusses the works of what she believes to be “a new generation of African writers in Paris” (the book’s subtitle) who discuss the negotiation of space and identity in their works. Indeed, Miller feels that the very idea of Africans writing a national home space was absurd from its inception. Miller points out in an earlier work that Africans did not originally decide on the borders of the countries they inherited:

Far from being ‘natural national entities’ or cohesive nation-states, the modern nations of black Africa must make do with borders created to satisfy European power brokering in the ‘scramble for Africa,’ borders that often violate rather than reinforce units of culture. They are, for the most part, communities that were ‘imagined’ on the conference tables of Europe, inherited by Africans, who must deal with their contradictions.¹⁴

In a tradition where describing national culture already suggested the transgression of one’s “home” culture (since African countries were often composed of randomly-thrown together groups of ethnicities), it is perhaps not surprising that writers chose to go beyond descriptions of their ethnic cultures to portrayals of as much as the world that they had experienced and attempted to negotiate, including Europe.

Home as a space is also a fast-changing construction due to the effects of postmodernism. Elizabeth Jones points out that “the transgression of boundaries and the erosion of homogenous cultural spaces” that is a characteristic element of the postmodern era has a profound impact on our conception of “home.”¹⁵ An emotional attachment to a space may be considered the basis of the concept of “home,” but with increasing changes in the way space is divided, this emotional attachment may be impeded by a feeling of lack of belonging. As Jones writes, “the prevalence of movement and the extent of cultural mixing in the contemporary world mean that our traditional perceptions of how to root ourselves into a wider sense of community may need to be refigured.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Miller, *Theories of Africans*, 48.

¹⁵ Jones, *Spaces of Belonging*, 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

Given the multitude of uses to which the home is now put, such as for work, for recreation and communications, "home" is now a complex web of interrelated networks that move far beyond the simple understanding of it as an emotional attachment to a space.¹⁷

Thus the concept of "home" in colonial and postcolonial literature is something that critics have variously dispelled and celebrated, rebuffed and embraced. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, we concur with Massey's word of caution, and are reluctant to disparage the construction of "home" at a time in which many women writers are struggling to represent it. However, as the last few paragraphs have shown, writers from the "developing world" have not necessarily belatedly embraced an already outdated *Western* notion of the "home" in the postcolonial world. The ideal or notion of "home" therefore persists but not in anachronistic mimicry of a once popular Western notion. The writers studied in this book mark out various modes of understandings of territory and its bearing on identity, creating vehicles for their self-expression. Thus the "home" persists even if in a somewhat "unheimlich" (which here translates as unfamiliar, more than unhomely) manner.

Our analyses begin with the premise that due to the traditional separation of public and private space across the lines of gender, women have long been associated with the "home" and hearth while men have been assigned space, place and authority beyond it. This is clearly dependent upon class and race, however, since poor women and slave women were often consigned working roles outside the private space.¹⁸ This distinction has, in and of itself, given rise to much discussion of the conflation between home and the feminine in women's studies. Rosemary George, for example, in her analysis of the colonial period, points to the irony of men manipulating the concept of home in order to recreate the notion that a woman should be running the home without becoming involved in paid labor; a white, middle class woman's place was in the home, but she was still a servant inside it.¹⁹ Massey also points out how in past generations the "home" was viewed as a female domain, but one that many women have not chosen or constructed for themselves, living necessarily in "a culture of the man being the breadwinner and of the woman being the homemaker" (188). It would indeed be simple to dispel

¹⁷ For more on this notion of the usage of the home, see Massey, 1996.

¹⁸ See for example Lancaster and Di Leonardo (eds.) *The Gender Sexuality Reader*, which explores the configuration of race, sexuality and class in understandings of gender.

¹⁹ George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, 199.

the notion of something that is so clearly gendered as “home;” to overlook “home” as a category is also to overlook the subservience to which women have been subjected within it. The writers whom we study here view gender and the “home” as inseparable, and furthermore present “home” as equally relevant to the construction of their identity as is gender.

Writing “Home:” Literary Representations

As Françoise Lionnet reminds us in the opening phrase to *Autobiographical Voices*, “we women are so diverse.”²⁰ The women who form the basis of this study, the writers who have struggled to represent their concept of home in self-narrative, are diverse indeed. They come from a variety of different parts of the Francophone world and thus view subjectivity, identity, nation and home in various ways. They are from widely divergent social backgrounds and ethnicities. Some are from postcolonial nations, some are migrants and others are second-generation immigrants. Some are older and more experienced and others are young voices. Some are established writers and others are recent names. Taken together, however, they are united by their desire to represent the complexity of their experience of “home” in writing and they weave an intricate tapestry of the politics of location across the Francophone world. Assembling these examinations of their writing presents a step forward in our understanding of modes of addressing this issue. To date, Erica Johnson, a contributor to this volume, has compared the representation of home in women’s writing across cultures (focusing upon one Italian, one French and one Caribbean writer), but no extended work exists on the expression of home by women writers across the Francophone world. Furthermore, Johnson focused on a particularly unusual set of views on the idea of home as expressed by European writers born to families of colonizers in colonies, who were then repatriated to European homelands unfamiliar to them. Our focus is slightly different insofar as our range of conditions is less specific; we compare writers from a range of areas of *la Francophonie* in order to point out the differences between them on this most divisive, most culturally specific and most subjective issue. It is for this reason that we narrow the focus of this volume to largely autobiographical texts, as we study the ways in which women formulate their idea of “home” as they formulate their idea of identity.

²⁰ Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, x.

We conceive of autobiography in the loosest way; to us there are as many definitions of autobiography as there are autobiographers, so our texts belong to different categories of what could be bracketed “life-writing.” Since the work of early theorists of autobiography, such as George Gusdorf and Philippe Lejeune, critical enquiry in this field has moved away from establishing definitions of the genre and embraced the multiplicity of first-person narratives. Feminist criticism of the genre has examined the ways in which female authors challenge the traditional male, unified subject who is in some way symbolic of his age and broadened women’s autobiography to a vibrant, and certainly no longer a second-rate, field of enquiry. A well-established critical branch, begun with Sidonie Smith’s study of the centrality of the body in autobiography, Patricia Waugh’s theories of relationality and Françoise Lionnet’s evocation of plurivocal life-writing, among others, women’s autobiography is now understood to possess what Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield label “a disruptive interdisciplinarity.”²¹ In this book, we follow this line of enquiry by being as inclusive as possible to the range of life-writing currently produced; we likewise bear in mind that autobiography has traditionally been precluded to women and minorities, who were not generally considered to have led public lives that deserved a readership. The chapters that follow study epistolary autobiography (McColley), autobiographies that include third-person and first-person narrative (Edwards, Johnson, Ruiz), elements of *autofiction* (Hubbell, Miller, Ruiz) and texts whose narrators resemble their authors with little explicit claim to referentiality (Hogarth).

In the opening chapter, Erica Johnson studies Maryse Condé’s autobiography, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance*, which has received relatively little attention in spite of what it tells us about Condé’s proverbial return to her native land. Johnson argues that far from consolidating an original site of belonging through writing and memory, *Le Cœur* portrays home as an originally displaced concept: the text opens with her Guadeloupian parents’ conviction that France is home—a conviction that Condé cloaks darkly in the observation that they view their enforced separation from France during the Second World War as a trauma on par with those suffered by the war’s millions of victims in Europe. In light of Guadeloupe’s provisional status as home for the Boucolon family, Condé does not “reclaim” or mourn a lost home in either her autobiography or in her fiction set in Guadeloupe, and she thus

²¹ Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield, *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, 2.

resists the temptation to reconstruct the past nostalgically. Through her reading of *Le Cœur* and occasional forays into Condé's fiction, Johnson shows how Condé dispels the notion of home as something fixed in either the past or in geography and advances instead a dynamic portrayal of home as a stage on which to play out a wide array of themes central to her Guadeloupian childhood. These themes, each of which is portrayed in a vignette, include the mother-daughter relationship, race and class relations in both Guadeloupe and in France, colonial history, and coming to writing. As is the case with her body of work, Condé thus produces a relational concept of home amongst her *contes vrais*.

In chapter two, "Slipping Home in Marie Cardinal's *Écoutez la Mer*," Amy Hubbell analyzes the representation of "home" in the work of this renowned Algerian novelist. Although Cardinal left Algeria before the end of the war, the separation from her country was traumatic and this trauma resurfaces in her autobiographical work. Hubbell concentrates her analysis on one text, *Ecoutez la mer* (1967). This autobiography is situated in France and the narrator remembers her Algerian homeland and the people who lived there as peaceful. Yet the present experience of the narrator is tense, uncomfortable and traumatic. Hubbell argues that Cardinal's idea of home refers to a largely idealized past in Algeria, nostalgically recreated to provide unity in the chaotic and fragmented present from which she writes. This chapter demonstrates that in spite of Cardinal's nostalgia, there are always two "homes" at play in her work: the one she neglects and in which she actually lives, and the fictionalized one for which she longs. Thus Hubbell's chapter represents home as a psychological construction that blurs the boundary between reality and fiction and points to "home" as an idealized, dreamlike notion that may never be fully realized.

The third chapter, "Writing Home: Mokeddem and Grimaud, Witnesses on the Journey in Search of Home," compares works by Algerian writer Malika Mokeddem and French author Hélène Grimaud. Margot Miller compares Mokeddem's *N'zid* (1995), to Grimaud's *Leçons particulières* (2006) in terms of Homi Bhabha's notion of "homeliness." Miller shows that both texts are predicated on the motif of the outward journey, from a home to a distant, foreign land in search of the familiarity, comfort and stability of "homeliness." By comparing the journeys of both narrators, Miller argues that both use the outward journey as a metaphor for the interior search for peace; she concludes that both women have to make peace with themselves in order to find themselves at home in the world. Since one author is a postcolonial subject and the other is not, Miller

highlights the differences in their respective journeys in terms of the obstacles of race, prejudice and hierarchy.

In the fourth chapter, "Self and Story: Home in Soraya Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* and Faïza Guène's *Kiffe kiffe demain*," Beth Gale compares two very recent autobiographical novels by second-generation North African immigrants living in impoverished neighborhoods of Paris. Gale shows that home in these two novels is a place where things often remain unspoken, where traditional structures are tested against new possibilities, and where the two young narrators search for their place as they head toward an uncertain future. In both novels, the relationship with the mother in particular becomes a central part of the narrator's search for herself. Gale traces the theme of home in the two novels, linking it to family and the immediate Arab community as well as to the larger French community in which both protagonists live. She highlights the strategies of resistance that the two narrators develop as they struggle to find their position between two cultures, and shows how this struggle gives rise to contrasting conceptions of home.

In Chapter five, "Representations of Migrant 'Homes' in France Through Senegalese Literature," Christopher Hogarth contrasts male and female narratives of migration. Hogarth begins with a study of the place of France as a temporary "home" for many migrant communities, before moving on to an introduction to the Senegalese novel, since migration to France, often in search of a new home, is a recurring motif in this country's literature. He discusses several examples of texts of migration, contrasting the representation of male migrants to that of female migrants. He points to the strategies that fictional characters develop in order to cope with the trauma of leaving home, arguing that female migrant protagonists are presented more and more often than their male counterparts in the recent decades of Senegalese literature. Hogarth then turns to Fatou Diome's work *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003). After charting the main character's journey from Senegal to France, Hogarth argues that the author presents herself as able to adapt far more easily to life away from home than the male characters, primarily due to her habit of living in the stifled, repressed lifestyle she ascribes to Senegalese women and has partially internalized, and her rejection of the traditional Senegalese female tasks of building and nurturing a "home" in the mother country. For Hogarth, Diome's characterization of male migrants as unable to make the sacrifices that females are compelled to make at home and away from it could be a symptom of a trend in Senegalese female writing on migration and nation-building.

Chapter six discusses the works of two Sub-Saharan writers who travel to Europe in search of a “home.” In “In Search of Lost Home: Ken Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou* and Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*,” Natalie Edwards compares the work of a Francophone Senegalese author with that of an Anglophone Nigerian writer. Edwards argues that both autobiographers are deprived of a sense of home while in Africa, and so travel to Europe in search of this missing entity. Edwards charts the successive stages of the two women’s journeys, arguing that their stereotypes of and prejudices about the West combine with the Europeans’ stereotypes of them to produce negative consequences for their identities. Both women suffer emotional breakdowns as a result of their lack of a home, but they respond in very different ways. Edwards argues that Emecheta is able to overcome her trauma and find a sense of home in literature and writing, but Bugul is not, since her story may be interpreted as a metaphor for the perpetual homelessness of postcolonial subjects.

The seventh chapter of the volume, “The Home, the Car and the Child: the Worlds of Marguerite Duras,” originally penned as “La Maison, la voiture et l’enfant: mondes de Duras, Duras de tous les mondes” and translated by the editors, turns to the experiences of a writer from Francophone Indo-China. Maria-Luisa Ruiz analyzes the way in which well-known author Duras struggles to represent home through a series of recurring metaphors, beginning with those in evidence in *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (1955). Ruiz reads Duras’s autobiographical novel through the lens of “Créolité,” given that Duras once commented that “Je suis créole, je suis née là-bas” [“I am Creole, I was born over there”]. Ruiz argues that Duras writes her home not as a place with roots that hold her in one geographical location, but rather as an interweaving of surface elements, such as the concept of the rhizome used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

We close the volume with a discussion of the ways in which home is articulated as an interior construction in the travel letters of two women travellers. In “Leaving Home: Epistolary (Re)Construction in the Travel Letters of Alexandra David-Neel and Ella Maillart,” Margaret McColley compares the ways that these two writers find a new sense of home along the path of travel. This chapter provides an interesting contrast to the other essays in the book since it analyzes epistolary writing. McColley examines letters written by Algerian David-Neel and Swiss Maillart as these two women travel to Tibet and India respectively. She discusses the ways in which the writers represent their respective points of departure, and traces the evolution of “home” across the authors’ personal encounters with new geographies and new peoples. She examines finally the varying

ways in which these women rebuild “home” upon their return from their travels.

Finally, while we have arranged this book around writing by women from different parts of the Francophone world, this category both expands and limits its scope. While this work contains analyses of women’s writing from many different areas, it would be almost impossible to represent the variety and complexity of *l’écriture d’expression française* in one volume, and it thus contains omissions. Furthermore, this collection concurs with current debate over the term “Francophone” itself. Critics have highlighted the prejudice involved in opposing the categories “French” and “Francophone,” since these terms correspond to “French within France” and “French from everywhere else.” As Alison Rice suggests, since the term *Francophonie* is a blanket term that has been used to describe writing from such disparate places, we should perhaps pronounce it to rhyme with *cacophonie*.²² The manifesto “pour une littérature-monde en français” [“for a world literature in French”] published in the literary section of *Le Monde* in March 2007 and signed by 46 multinational authors who write in French, aimed to consign the word *Francophonie* to history, given the variety of non-French writing in French. Our use of the term “Francophone” in the title of this book is thus an attempt at establishing limitations for its contents while bearing in mind the gaps to which it necessarily gives rise.

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CHAPTER ONE

DEPARTURES AND ARRIVALS: HOME IN MARYSE CONDÉ'S *LE CŒUR* *À RIRE ET À PLEURER*

ERICA L. JOHNSON

Critics are often quick to trace a geographical and personal trajectory in Maryse Condé's œuvre, from her Afro-centric first novels (*Heremakhonon*, *Ségou*) to her novels centred in the Americas (*Moi, Tiuba, sorcière... noire de Salem*, *La Colonie du nouveau monde*) to an implicitly triumphant return "home" to Condé's native Guadeloupe in her recent fiction (*Traversée de la mangrove*, *La Vie scélérate*). Even a quick glance at this mapping reveals the underlying irony of charting "home" as a point of arrival rather than a point of departure, however. As Mireille Rosello says of this narrative of Condé's works, what is established is not so much a trajectory as a relational praxis within which points on the map exist *vis-à-vis* other geographies. This is certainly the case, whether Condé's work engages the dialectic of metropole/colony or the dialogics of diaspora. Moreover, attempts to articulate a larger narrative of Condé's work draw heavily on the author's biography, although her actual autobiography, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Souvenirs de mon enfance* (which bears on the title page the intriguingly altered subtitle of *Contes vrais de mon enfance*), has received relatively little attention in spite of what it tells us about Condé's proverbial return to her native land.¹ Far from consolidating an original site of belonging through writing and memory, *Le Cœur* portrays

¹ In two of the most sustained analyses of Condé's autobiographical writing, Françoise Lionnet in *Autobiographical Voices* and Leah Hewitt in *Autobiographical Tightropes* both focus on her first novel, *Heremakhonon*. This emphasis is due in part to timing (*Le Cœur* did not come out until 1998), but it is interesting that Condé's first novel is so comfortably grouped with nonfictional autobiographical texts in both critics' studies.

home as an originally displaced concept: the text opens with her Guadeloupian parents' conviction that France is home—a conviction that Condé cloaks darkly in the observation that they view their enforced separation from France during the Second World War as a trauma on par with those suffered by the war's millions of victims in Europe. In light of Guadeloupe's provisional status as home for the Boucolon family, Condé does not "reclaim" or mourn a lost home in either her autobiography or in her fiction set in Guadeloupe, and she thus resists the temptation to reconstruct the past nostalgically. Indeed, although she refutes Proustian longing, she prefaces *Le Cœur* with a phrase of his from *Contre Sainte-Beuve*: "Ce que l'intelligence nous rend sous le nom de passé n'est pas lui" ["Remembrance of things past is not what we retrieve from the mind"] as though to draw attention to the Proustian as well as Césairian traditions of situating home at the condensation of past time in present space.² Condé dispels the notion of home as something fixed in either the past or in geography and advances instead a dynamic portrayal of home as a stage on which to play out a wide array of themes central to her Guadeloupian childhood. These themes, each of which is portrayed in a vignette, produce a relational concept of home amongst her *contes vrais*.

The vignette structure through which I will arrive at Condé's central themes is characteristic of women's autobiographies and of Caribbean literature, and can be attributed to the plural, decentered "I" of women's autobiographical writing (Benstock, Smith and Watson) or the polyphonic nature of Caribbean experience (Glissant, Brathwaite, Paquet). One can apply Benstock's observation that "if the linguistic defense networks of male autobiographers more successfully keep at bay the discordant *je*, it may be because female autobiographers are more aware of their 'otherness'"³ to both women's and postcolonial texts—and hence to *Le Cœur*. On one level Condé's relational *je* is an oppositional pronoun designed to mitigate against the colonial alterity she senses both in Guadeloupe and during her frequent childhood visits to France. The politics of the relational *je* can therefore also be understood as a Caribbean mode of expression given Paquet's point that "the Caribbean has the added dimension of mediating competing ethnic inscriptions of lineage in any given territory."⁴ Whether one regards these competing inscriptions as a mosaic (Glissant), creolization (Brathwaite, Chamoiseau), or repeating

² All English translations of quotes from *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* are taken from Richard Philcox's translation. All English translations accompanying other quotes in French are mine.

³ Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical," 149.

⁴ Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*, 6.

discontinuities (Benitez-Rojo), it follows that it is the *relations* between fragments—as opposed to a projection of wholeness, or unity—that signify. Condé's complex representation of her childhood and of Guadeloupe portrays not a singular place called home, but a series of Guadeloupian spaces that Condé herself describes as “marqués par l'exil et la migration des plus défavorisés” [“marked by the harshest forms of exile and migration”].⁵ The exilic history of the Caribbean informs Condé's understanding that “une culture se vit dans le rapport à soi-même, au monde qui nous entoure, aux autres” [“culture exists in the relationships between oneself, others, and the world around us”].⁶ It is not surprising, then, that she fashions her autobiographical subjectivity along similarly relational lines.

This strategy is one that Michel Beaujour has identified as the distinct genre of self-portraiture, as opposed to autobiography. In response to Philippe Lejeune's stance that autobiography plays out as a shared endeavor, or “autobiographical pact,” between writer and reader to assemble a cohesive, retrospective narrative of the autobiographical subject, Beaujour emphasizes the fragmentary, disconnected nature of the rhetoric of self-representation and the ways in which this rhetorical structure attaches itself to cultural phenomena. Beaujour explains that “[t]he *absence* of a continuous narrative in the self-portrait distinguishes it from autobiography. So does its subordination of narration to a *logical* deployment, a collation or patching together, or elements under heads that... we shall call thematic.”⁷ This non-narrative, thematic structure results, he argues in a “genre [which] attempts to create coherence through a system of cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements” in defiance of any narrative the writer or reader may wish to impose on the text.⁸ This idea, that the fragmented memoir coheres around collective themes rather than a single subjectivity, plays out with representative implications in what we must now term Caribbean self-portraiture. More importantly, the “correspondences” of these memoirs resonate extra-textually as well as intra-textually in such a way that we can apply a writer-critic model of reading to *Le Cœur*. Barbara Christian introduces the concept of the writer-critic in her use of African American literature to theorize African American literature, an approach that brings out enmeshed dialogues and

⁵ Crosta, *Récits de vie de l'Afrique et des Antilles*, 122. Condé refers to the Caribbean as a region in this remark.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

points of view. By drawing on Caribbean literature to understand Caribbean literature, I enrich my reading of Condé's thematized and fragmented self-portrait by applying first Condé's fiction to her self-portrait and then by examining the ways in which two other examples of fragmented, thematized Caribbean self-portraiture illuminate *Le Cœur*.

In all of the Caribbean works I will consider, a decentred autobiographical subject emerges from vignettes that function as markers of a relational autobiographical "I," a concept that Condé depicts paradigmatically in her fiction. Indeed, a clear model of decentred narrative and identity is on display in the novel that marks Condé's "return" to Guadeloupe, *Traversée de la mangrove*, and thus Condé's texts illuminate one another relationally. A quick foray into this work reveals a conceptual framework through which to understand the relational subject. Fragmented into nineteen multiple narrative points of view, the novel ostensibly recounts the story of Francis Sancher, whose wake provides for a narrative gathering place. An ultimately unknown and unknowable presence in the remote town of Rivière au Sel, Francis figures as a missing centre to this rhizomatic narrative. In spite of the fact that he produces each of the narratives, Francis' own narrative is absent with the implication that every story told about him—including his own contradictory versions of events—is non-mimetic. Rather, his biography can only be approached as an assemblage of *others'* stories. Francis's biography is, by extension, *absent*. Even his own attempts to narrate his story are contested within the conflicting accounts he gives of himself and between the disparate narratives others tell about him. His auto/biography is thus the quintessence of the public/private dissolution that occurs in any form of life-writing.

Not only does Condé splinter the concept of a central, verifiable identity for Francis, but the splinters of his story are narrated by people from distinctly different backgrounds, all of which Condé historicizes and places within the class and race-based hierarchy of Guadeloupe. What is interesting about this technique is that, of the myriad backgrounds her characters represent, none of them correspond to Condé's own. If she had wanted to insert herself into an admittedly exilic portrait of Guadeloupe, this polyphonic text certainly would have been an opportunity to do so; however, Condé refuses this move, supporting the theme of her novel: like the metaphorical mangrove, whose roots and branches intertwine, "identity can no longer be found in the root, but instead in the Relation."⁹ It is only through their relations with the indeterminate figure of Francis that the

⁹ Mitsch, "Maryse Condé's Mangroves," 54.

characters are able to articulate their own experiences, a dynamic that reveals that in fact all of the characters are as decentred as the Other against whom they attempt to fashion an identity for themselves. There is a proliferation of Others and a deferral of selfhood that can be explained in much the same way that Leigh Gilmore addresses the project of Caribbean self-portraiture which, she argues, “explores how a colonial subject may refuse a certain imperial injunction to offer an account of herself that is intelligible within the structure of colonialism by refusing to engage the autobiographical [and in this case fictional] to those ends. [The author] refuses to engage the subject of the law and the subject of self-representation metaphorically.”¹⁰ The many voices of *Traversée de la mangrove* dismantle Francis, the subject of their vignettes, with the result that he cannot be claimed by those who identify with colonial France, as does the ignorant elitist Loulou Lemeaulnes, nor can he be assimilated into the anti-colonial, nationalist history espoused by Emile Etienne (“History is my nightmare,” he tells the historian). His identity is only intelligible in conflicting fragments of the other characters’ discourses and therefore can be signified only in and between fragments of narrative that never cohere into a singular, whole portrait.

Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues that the genre of autobiography is particularly well suited to express the fractured histories of the Caribbean so much in evidence in Condé’s novel. Paquet states, “the radical instability of the Caribbean as a cultural domain coincides with the radical instability of autobiography as a genre.”¹¹ Paquet’s point is well-taken in view of a variety of Caribbean women’s autobiographies in which the authors’ shared emphasis on the fragmented nature of Caribbean experience finds expression through literary fragments shaped to thematic effect. We see this method in convincing parallels between Condé’s self-portrait and those of two Anglophone counterparts, Jamaica Kincaid and Jean Rhys. Taken as writer-critics, Kincaid and Rhys help to reveal the central themes of Condé’s self-portrait, for if *Traversée de la mangrove* demonstrates the decentred “je” of Caribbean autobiography, the component parts of this “je” are highlighted by emergent themes among this constellation of autobiographical works.

Beginning with narrative structure, we see a clear pattern among Condé, Kincaid, and Rhys, each of whom sustains self-portraiture through a series of allegorical vignettes. Kincaid’s autobiographical novel *Annie John* presents a very similar formula to that of *Le Cœur*. In both works, the

¹⁰ Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, 104.

¹¹ Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation*, 8.

vignettes fuel a powerfully direct narrative voice that draws its strength from the straightforward clarity of a child's vision of her world, and the short, fable-like stories have the added quality of personifying childhood. Similarly, Rhys's *Smile, Please: An Unfinished Autobiography* is a discontinuous collection of vignettes, which recounts the author's childhood in Dominica in flashes of memory.¹² Rhys's memoir also utilizes the child's point of view in an attempt to bridge the evident gap between the adult she represents in the second half of the book and the lost childhood of the first half; in contrast to the more narrative form of the adult sections, the brief, discreet stories describing her youth in Dominica conjure a child's narrative voice. Thus, the vignette serves these autobiographies in part as a means of access to the child's forceful candour.

Yet, these authors are not motivated to recount their pasts in fragmented stories simply as a means of approaching some impossible form of "authenticity" insofar as the structure of their works confirm that the histories and autobiographical subjects they portray are multiple and contradictory. The authors mutually illuminate one another through the thematic schema of their memoirs; for example, the breakdown of Kincaid's vignettes finds direct parallels with that found in Condé: Kincaid's chapters on "Gwen," "Columbus in Chains," and "The Long Rain," for example, explore the themes of girlhood friendships, resistance to colonial education, and the last, poignant moments of mother-daughter closeness as do Condé's chapters "Yvelise," "Chemin d'école," and "A nous la liberté?" These themes thus bear further analysis in my reading of Condé.

Rhys's memoir also features a chapter on "My Mother" and, as Gilmore observes of this theme in Kincaid, "[o]ur sense that the mother-daughter relationship is overdetermined with meanings it cannot disclose gives us the sense that there is a body of political meanings here. To discover it we must move between a representation of the psychic and social text."¹³ This is precisely the end to which all three authors put their thematized vignettes: the psychic and social texts are in constant dialogue as we see in such socially charged chapters of Rhys's as "Black/White" and "The Doll," both of which depict her conflicted racial identity as a white Creole. Rhys confronts deep social divisions in her startling

¹² As I have shown elsewhere, it is problematic to read Rhys's autobiography as self-portraiture since it was written not by Rhys but by a rather hostile ghostwriter. In this analysis, though, I wish to emphasize the work's structure and themes at their most general level over the book's fraught content on a more detailed level.

¹³ Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, 111.