
REVIEWS

Maryse Condé. *The Last of the African Kings*. Trans. Richard Philcox. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Trans. of *Les derniers rois mages*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. 216p.

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Maryse Condé's *The Last of the African Kings* follows the thoughts of its protagonist one rainy December 10 in South Carolina. Spero is the fictional great grandson of the king of Dahomey deposed of his throne by the French and deported to Martinique in 1894. However, Spero's grandfather, the illegitimate son of the exiled king, is left behind when the king returns to Africa. Failing to come to terms with their condition of exile from the royal family, both the abandoned son and his son after him drown themselves in rum as they wait for the world to recognize them as members of an African dynasty. Spero finds his life shipwrecked as well, even though he attempts to turn the page on his royal heritage and start life anew in the present.

As Richard Philcox points out in the book's preface, Condé goes against the commitment of many Caribbean writers to give a positive or sympathetic view of the Caribbean and its people, putting her on the same page as V.S. Naipaul (x). In a satirical tone, she pokes fun at the hierarchy of color on the islands and upsets the notion of white as superior and black as inferior when Spero's relative lightness of skin, hair, and attitudes become a handicap for him. In France, people "took him for an Arab and spared him little in the way of insults" (65). He wonders if his red hair and skin would be "one of the deformities the dynasty detested" and be cause for his banishment from the royal family. He has never heard of W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X, or Martin Luther King Jr. (15), prefers westerns to Spike Lee films, refuses to participate in political rallies, "even those in support of Nelson Mandela" (140), and eventually pays a heavy price for not fitting into a politically correct black mold. His "white taste in art causes him to be fired from his job at a mostly black Catholic school" because "the students threaten to go on strike if he returns" (147) and his wife, Debbie, banishes him from her bed as punishment for taking the white Tamara Barnes as a mistress.

However, Condé is careful to show that Spero's white attitudes are not due to his skin tone. She demonstrates the error of trying to delineate a black or mulatto

essence at all as she reveals that experiences and points of view vary from one individual to the next. Agnes Jackson, who is so light she could pass for white, feels more victimized by Whites than anyone in the novel. Isaac, a graduate of Harvard and professor of Black American history at Berkeley, secretly looks on his brothers in the ghetto with shame and fear, while a younger generation of Blacks rejects the prestigious “white schools,” opting instead for the University of Atlanta and Columbia College in order to discover “what *nigger* mean[s]” (93). In answer to R. Radhakrishnan’s question, “in which narrative should the postcolonial subject be launched on its way to identity?” (758), Condé offers a variety of suggestions, yet all are drawn into question and none are presented as totally satisfying.

Whereas Debbie, one of the leading specialists on the Reconstruction, sees history as a tale of black martyrs and white tormentors (63), both Condé and Spero reject Debbie’s Manichean historicism opting to look at the more sordid side of African and Afro-American history. Spero notes that Blacks as well as Mulattoes owned slaves, and Condé is quick to point out that Spero’s royal ancestor sacrificed “forty-one young boys and forty-one young girls” during the funeral rites of the latter’s late father (15). Condé further turns the table on Debbie’s unilinear interpretation of the historical genealogy of Africans and the diaspora when she illustrates how a black bourgeoisie, which identifies itself as the victim, can become the victimizer by imposing a repressive unification on Charleston’s black community. Amanda, a free spirit who resists the stranglehold of their prescriptions, opts to bask in the fluidity of racial boundaries: because she does “not approve of the ghetto black women lock[] themselves up in to lament the absence of their men,” she has “taken many white lovers, even a Japanese” (189). Likewise, Spero chooses to see his affair with Tamara Barnes as just one among many. However, he is ostracized by Debbie and by the politically correct black bourgeois community who interpret it as the ultimate betrayal of the race.

Condé’s refusal to essentialize blackness allows her work to draw into question the basic premises of Aimé Césaire’s Negritude: the idea of Africa as Motherland, an “image of Africa as a lost paradise for the black diaspora; the innate solidarity of the black race,” and the “concept of race ... as an explanation of difference” (Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa 551). Instead, her writing has been linked to Glissant’s notion of *Relation* which valorizes relationship over universalizing force (Glissant 28, Rosello 577). In short, in her depiction of a network of many characters with greatly differing points of view, rather than of a single creolized essence, she succeeds in incorporating into her work what the Creolistes Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant have only realized in theory (see Bernabé 26-33, and Price 149). Mireille Rosello describes Condé’s literary praxis as a process of insularization that

deconstructs and usurps the authority and legitimacy of the center by “reversing the opposition between dominant mainland and dominated . . . island,” turning every territory into its own island (Rosello 576). Indeed, just as the mainland is not privileged over the island, no one all-encompassing vision of history, politics, social justice, and race are allowed to dominate the others in the book.

Despite the novel’s postmodern refusal to take a definitive stance on issues of race and identity, it manages to communicate the past and present plight of Blacks in Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, important names and events in Afro-American, Caribbean, and African history, and the angst of the modern day Afro-American/Afro-Antillean for identity, thus performing a marriage of the postmodern and the postcolonial. Although the novel does require its readers to have a background knowledge of Black American, Caribbean, and French colonial history, the sense of the past it evokes and its implicit dialog with issues of creolization, negritude, identity, postcoloniality, and postmodernism make it a suitable complement to Caribbean, Afro-American, and postcolonial literature courses. ❀

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