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Dawn Fulton, *Signs of Dissent: Maryse Condé and Postcolonial Criticism*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008. viii + 185 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8139-2714-5.

Review by Nicole Simek, Whitman College.

In the more than thirty years since she began publishing, internationally renowned Guadeloupean novelist and critic Maryse Condé has developed a reputation above all as a dissenter, an iconoclast who contests dominant political and aesthetic ideologies and an advocate of artistic freedom. Published in the University of Virginia Press's interdisciplinary New World Studies Series, Dawn Fulton's sensitive and well-argued book acknowledges the importance of Condé's confrontational stance but takes it as a starting point rather than an end in itself, as a sign of something more than resistance for resistance's sake, namely, Condé's deep commitment to the topics and concepts at the heart of the postcolonial theories and reading practices she challenges: identity, difference, power relations, and the role art can or should play in addressing and redressing inequity, domination, and exclusion. In adopting this approach to Condé's literary and critical work, Fulton builds productively on prior work celebrating the writer's recalcitrance, successfully moving the critical reception of Condé's novels forward through close analyses of nine main texts that stage tensions and blind spots within postcolonial theory.

Fulton organizes her study along two axes, treating Condé's novels in chronological order of publication while allowing key problematics to generate the selection of texts and dictate the flow of the argument. Each chapter situates the novels and concepts studied so clearly within the context of postcolonial criticism that the reader--and particularly the student--interested in a given text or question could usefully read selected chapters alone, yet doing so would be to miss an important dimension of Condé's literary production that this study's double framework reveals, namely the length, depth, and complexity of Condé's "sustained reflection on the productive and critical limits of postcolonial theory" (p. 3). Focusing on the intersection of Condé's early and ongoing critical work[1] and her literary production, Fulton convincingly supports her opening claim that Condé's novels challenge postcolonial criticism's tenets and interpretive frameworks through a particular strategy of incorporation, embodiment and inscription. Condé's novels deliberately inscribe within themselves--in their characters, in their use of *mise en abyme* techniques, and in the reading practices and logics they portray--the "metafictional discussions" that both inform and constrict postcolonial literature (p. 3).

By staging the interpretive frameworks through which her works are read, Condé seeks "not to refute the tenets of postcolonial theory out of hand, but to examine dialogically its ambitions and limitations in order to sharpen its critical acumen....exhort[ing] the field of postcolonial studies to live up to its own best intentions" (p. 12). Her works do this effectively primarily by offering what Fulton aptly describes as "imperfect reflections" (p. 13), that is, characters that *almost* exemplify preconceived types, and plots that "approximat[e] familiar narratives of social ostracism and prejudice, but exhibit in other ways qualities that are inconsistent with visions of oppressed subjects" (p. 10).

In identifying and prioritizing this aspect of Condé's *œuvre*, Fulton makes clear the interest Condé's fiction holds for readers and scholars from a range of disciplines. While primarily addressed to students and scholars of literature and cultural studies, her own study, written in concise, lucid prose, remains accessible and valuable to readers in related fields. Following an introduction outlining the specific conceptual binds of postcolonial theory that Condé's work engages most directly (such as competing demands for generalizable categories and respect for the particular, or the tendency towards exoticism and reductiveness in attempts to redeem or recover oppressed peoples and histories), *Signs of Dissent* begins by analyzing the relationship between criticism and literature through an analysis of Maryse Condé's first two novels, *Heremakhonon* and *Une saison à Rihata*. Entitled "After Essentialism: Language, Representativity, Political Action," this opening chapter, arguably one of the most original in the book, investigates Condé's views on the attainment of artistic freedom in and through language, bringing together her critical statements on the subject and her literary figuration of the encounter with language, the attempt to carve self-understanding and expression out of the terms, narratives, and categories of thought that pre-exist the self, but that one can, with difficulty, rework and contest. As this chapter makes clear, the goal of artistic freedom is bound up with a number of linguistic and epistemological questions, questions that Fulton approaches from multiple angles throughout her book. Chapters three, "Imperfect Genealogies: *Traversée de la mangrove* and *La migration des cœurs*," and seven, "Unfamiliar Cannibals: Postcolonial Readings in *Histoire de la femme cannibal*" deal most extensively with Condé's novelistic investigation of ways of knowing the self, the other, and the past in the wake of colonial violence. "Imperfect Genealogies" explores the gap between "the search for genealogical *identity* and the search for genealogical *knowledge*" that Condé's work points up by staging the desire for transparency, consensus and repetition motivating the characters' quest for origins and the anxieties produced by the absence or undesirability of the knowledge genealogical narratives can provide. "Unfamiliar Cannibals" similarly addresses a gap, this time the narrative gaps within two related but divergent plot lines that Condé's characters--and her readers--quickly fill with presumptions, revealing the facility with which postcolonial critics can fall into reductive patterns of interpretation very much like the colonial frameworks they seek to dismantle.

The intervening chapters also give attention to reading practices, examining Condé's ongoing dialogue with her audience and her attempts to engage and reshape the critical horizons circumscribing the interpretation of her novels. Chapters two and five enter into the more familiar but still highly relevant terrain of marginal histories and critical race theory in their analyses of *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...noire de Salem* and *Célanire cou-coupé*, cogently illuminating lesser-studied problematics as well. "Fixing Tituba: Imitations of the Marginal" focuses on Condé's critique of the category of Third World, female writer and the expectations placed upon her by a Western audience, while "The Margins of Race: *Célanire cou-coupé*" argues that Condé's parodic revision of Shelley's *Frankenstein* exposes the extent to which racial indeterminacy remains "a persistent phobia" today, bringing with it anxious desires for "legibility" (p. 99). Chapters four and six productively explore Condé's engagement with trauma theory and the logic of reparations in *Desirada* and *La Belle Créole*, respectively, examining in each the power and persistence of narratives invoking a collective identity, despite the problematic basis of temporal continuity and the elision of individual difference upon which they are founded.

*Signs of Dissent* closes with a brief reflection on the translation of Condé's novels into English and Fulton's own choice to work from the English texts, a choice she makes as a reflection and extension of Condé's contribution to cross-linguistic dialogue. It is in this conclusion that Fulton points to avenues that remain to be explored, both in Condé's work itself, which remains essentially open-ended and committed to ongoing debate, and in the critical study of that work. Chief among these is perhaps the relationship between Condé and the critic-readers who make

up a substantial portion, but not the entirety, of her audience, as well as the relationship between Condé's conception of literary creation as at once a solitary act requiring distance and individuation of expression and a fundamentally dialogical activity. In pointing to new paths of inquiry while also furnishing a valuable set of analytical questions that will shape and refine the study of these problematics, *Signs of Dissent* makes an excellent contribution to both an understanding of Condé's literary projects and the critical contexts within which they continue to unfold.

## NOTES

[1] While some of this work (including, for example, *La civilisation du bossale*, *La parole des femmes*, and articles such as "Pourquoi la Négritude?") remains available only in the original French, the absence of translations does not fully account for the lack of attention that Condé's early literary criticism has received relative to the interest generated by her novels.

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