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Deborah M. Hess, *Maryse Condé: Mythe, parabole et complexité*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011. 197 pp. Bibliography. 20.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2-296-55357-6.

Review by Nicole Simek, Whitman College.

Maryse Condé: Mythe, parabole et complexité presents itself first as an introduction to the work of the contemporary Guadeloupean writer for those not yet acquainted with French Antillean literature and history, and second as an attempt to intervene in and shift critical debates about Condé's writing in order to better account for its at once local and universal appeal. Deborah M. Hess offers up a number of intriguing propositions in the introduction to her book, which she frames as a study combining cultural and historical analysis with forays into recent scientific developments in the study of complexity, and presents her readings throughout in a style accessible to students and non-specialists. Ultimately, however, Hess relies heavily on paraphrase in an attempt to cover much ground, leading her to make both broad historical observations and highly specific assertions about Condé's texts that remain underdeveloped or unsubstantiated. The conceptual framework suggested in the introduction appears fresh and promising at the outset, but is unfortunately never fully articulated. The book is thus, paradoxically, perhaps best suited to specialists of Condé's work with the familiarity needed to supply the evidence needed to confirm or contest her readings and working concepts.

Complexity is the most central of Hess' key terms, and the one that serves as the organizing thread of the analysis. Part one, "La complexité et la littérature antillaise," treats complexity as a broad, descriptive category into which fall the complexities of the natural world, as well as the cultural and demographic upheavals of the slave trade, the subsequent stratification of Antillean society along racial lines, and the intricacies of a literary production that attempts to theorize or thematize cultural complexity. This approach has the merit of presenting Antillean culture as multifaceted and difficult to apprehend in a simple, systematic way (Hess warns against analyzing Antillean literature and history through preconceived Western categories), yet the term complexity becomes so expansive as to risk losing any specificity and analytical use.

Complexity is defined most explicitly in chapter three, where it is said to apply to a system characterized by "la fragmentation, l'indéterminisme, la présence des variables et des facteurs multiples, la non-linéarité ou le virement soudain dans un sens ou dans l'autre et finalement, l'évolution dynamique du système" (pp. 45-46). Antillean literature and history, which are characterized by such traits, are then distinguished from metropolitan French norms (as epitomized by nineteenth-century realist novels and evolutionary models of linear historical progression). Part two, "La quête identitaire dans l'œuvre de Maryse Condé," then explicates Condé's novels and short stories with an eye for non-linearity, recursion, fragmentation, reversals, and jumps or gaps (*écarts*). Readers may well wonder how complexity in Condé's work relates to the briefly acknowledged modernist and postmodernist developments in aesthetics and historiography in France following the nineteenth century (whose implicit portrayal as monolithic might also be questioned), but a more preoccupying tension within the analysis is its uncertain attitude towards Antillean reality as a system.

Hess makes a case for the open-ended nature of the analysis at hand (indeed, the concluding paragraph of the book asserts that “dans la théorie de la complexité, la constitution d’une synthèse s’avère impossible à cause de la nature de la réalité brute à laquelle cette théorie s’adresse” [p. 186]), yet makes sufficient reference to the Antilles’ distinctive history, culture and even geology as to raise the question of the extent to which Antillean identity can be considered bounded. Early references in the book to systems theory, chaos theory, and mathematical models such as the Klein bottle lead the reader to expect an elaboration of the Antilles’ specificity (how, the reader might ask, does the concept of complexity allow us to advance an understanding of globalization, Relation, *Antillanité* or *Créolité*, for example?) and the particular types of approaches such a complexity requires (how do we distinguish between different kinds of complexities and relate them to one another?), but such a discussion does not emerge in a sufficiently explicit manner.

Hess does provide in part two specific explications of the majority of Condé’s novels and short stories that illustrate to some extent how complexity operates as an analytical tool for literary analysis. Beginning with Condé’s 1976 novel, *Heremakhonon*, and ending with her 2008 work, *Les belles ténébreuses* (*Ségou*, *La vie scélérate*, and *Traversée de la mangrove* are the only novels left untreated), these readings treat complexity as a difficulty (from the point of view of Condé’s characters, who confront a muddled history and undertake painful identity quests) and as a narrative technique (associated with non-linearity, flashbacks, gaps, and multiple perspectives). While complexity remains a key term in this section, the other two titular concepts, myth and parable, come to play a larger role here. It is in the deployment of these terms that Hess’ work proves most provocative and interesting, but also frustrating, for here, too, a tension emerges between Hess’s stress on open-endedness and her assertion that Condé’s texts offer clear messages.

Hess reads Condé’s work as myth and parable in the strong sense, as social or moral lessons, and offers firm explications—ranging from the unobjectionable to the perplexing—of the ways in which symbolism functions in her novels (occasionally admitting multiple possible interpretations). Thus, for example, “le destin de Tituba symbolise le sort des peuples qui perdent tout contrôle de leur vie des suites de la traite et d’un état quelconque d’esclavage” (p. 79), “[l]e roman *Célanire cou-coupé* symbolise une complexité résultant du brouillage de l’arrière-plan scénique et culturel,” a complexity resulting as well from an “écart entre la femme antillaise et les modèles qui lui ont été proposés par la société de son temps” (p. 145); and *La colonie du nouveau monde* constitutes a “mythe” designed to underscore “la nécessité d’un fondement juridique et morale de la société” (p. 88).

This last claim points to one of the book’s more provocative implications, which is that Condé—by reputation an iconoclast who questions *idées reçues*, resists commonplaces, and constantly rebels against social and literary norms—is devoted to vague democratic ideals described here in surprisingly conservative terms. Hess develops this conclusion most fully in the final chapter, which treats *La Belle Créole* and *Les belles ténébreuses* as exemplars of *le sacré mythique* characterizing Condé’s work as a whole. In this chapter, Condé emerges as a conservative proponent of civil order and universal moral laws: “Le mythe communautaire sacré préconisé s’adresse à la nécessité de mettre en vigueur un système civil reconnaissant les droits de tous les citoyens ou résidents en bonne et due forme se conformant aux lois du pays, mais non pas à la transgression des lois morales qui seraient, l’auteur le suggère, universelles” (p. 181).

Hess suggests later that Condé’s moral parables function more as warnings against undertaking revolutionary politics without anticipating the potential consequences than as a defense of the status quo per se (p. 186), yet the contention remains that Condé’s late work functions not so much as a critical comment on current socio-political conditions as allegorical warnings against future dystopias, and by default an endorsement of current Western democratic systems, which must be preserved from threats of civil unrest and terrorism. One need not read Condé as an anarchist in order to question how Hess

reconciles the assertion that Condé welcomes political, cultural and religious difference so long as it can be assimilated into existing structures (*L'Histoire de la femme cannibale* is said to reveal, for instance, “la nécessité d’arriver à imposer la paix et l’ouverture à tout être humain exprimant l’intention de suivre les lois et les codes de la société environnante” [p. 161]) with her portrait of Condé as a non-traditional writer rebelling against the institutionalization of racism, as well as the roles society prescribes for women (those of “la femme soumise, la femme mère, la femme épouse bien rangée” [p. 183]). Perhaps Hess’ description of *La Belle Créole* could apply to her own work’s attempt to find order within disorder: “Le chaos du roman, il n’y a pas d’autre mot pour le désordre débordant du récit, se calme subitement par un retour à l’ordre au-delà de surprenant” (p. 185).

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