Eva Sansavior

(Cloth US$75.00)

In a key 1993 essay, Maryse Condé called for the liberation of West Indian literature from political and aesthetic dictates that stifle creativity, advocating a vision of literature summed up in a quotation from *Le livre à venir* by French philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot: “The essence of literature is to escape any fundamental determination, any assertion which could stabilize it or even fix it. It is never already there, it is always to be found and invented again” (in Sansavior, p. 16). Taking this defense of literary freedom as a point of departure, Eva Sansavior’s tightly-crafted, perceptive study maps Condé’s interventions into and across French, Francophone, postcolonial, and international modernist debates, using spatial metaphors to highlight the importance of boundary crossing in Condé’s efforts “to define a socially responsible and socially situated literary freedom” (p. 17). The “space of literature,” Sansavior’s title concept, recalls Blanchot’s use of the term as it designates here the specificity of the literary (as a discourse irreducible to politics).

In highlighting Condé’s resistance to readings that would impose preconceived political expectations or narratives on her work, Sansavior aligns herself with much recent criticism of Condé’s writing. The originality of her study lies, however, in its examination of space as utopian opening or nonplace. If Condé maintains a skeptical attitude toward identity politics or commonly held conceptions of the writer as representative of a collectivity, she remains committed, Sansavior argues, to literature’s role in re-imagining such conceptions, a “re-imagining ... marked by a perhaps necessarily unresolved emotional and intellectual implication in the very categories that are assumed to be outmoded” (p. 120). Sansavior’s analysis of Condé’s utopian commitment to transformation through creative assimilation also succeeds because it relies on a series of careful, close readings that reference past scholarship productively, take account of recent developments in French and Francophone studies, and bring new perspectives to selected novels and interviews.

Sansavior’s introduction focuses on the emergence of Condé’s concern for the relationship between literature and politics—a concern marking Francophone postcolonial studies currently as well—within a literary and critical space shaped by two dominant critiques of Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of *littérature engagée,* or politically committed writing. The first of these takes up Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of the (re)production of aesthetic value, while the second, including the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Blanchot, defends the specificity of literature against attempts to appropriate it for programmatic...
political ends. Sansavior locates her own perspective alongside work that has interrogated the gap between these positions, most notably, that of Graham Huggan, Deepika Bahri, and Nicholas Harrison.

Considered in relation to this map, Condé’s 1993 essay “Order, Disorder, Freedom and the West Indian Writer” can be read as a manifesto that critiques common conceptions of commitment while also pointing to potential transformations of the political through a defense of literary freedom. Sansavior’s first chapter pursues the problem of freedom through an examination of Condé’s numerous interviews, a dimension of her body of work that has received less extended critical attention. Considered “sites of irreducible strangeness” (p. 31), Condé’s interviews serve as entry points into an examination of an authorial performance in which notions of marginality and the personal are deployed ambiguously and strategically in order to prevent the foreclosure of meaning in readings of her work and her life. The following chapters examine selected individual texts: Condé’s first novel, En attendant le bonheur (originally titled Heremakhonon in both the 1976 French original and the English translation); Moi Tituba, sorcière … Noire de Salem (1986, translated as I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem); Condé’s 1999 autobiography, Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance (Tales from the Heart: True Stories from My Childhood); the 1992 novel Les Derniers Rois mages (The Last of the African Kings); and her 1997 novel, Desirada. Each of these chapters provides succinct, focused readings that foreground new perspectives. Among these are Sansavior’s discussion of “making space” in the interview, her re-reading of En attendant le Bonheur as a deferral, rather than outright rejection, of identity and collective affiliation, and her attention, in her analysis of Moi Tituba, to the testimonio genre.

The book’s conclusion presents a brief but particularly helpful recapitulation and synthesis of the study that draws out its most important insights. These hinge broadly on the mapping of engagement discussed above, but more specifically on the notion of the provisional in Condé’s conception of subjectivity and political action. Provisional modes of action recognize the way in which identities are “circumscribed by existing myths,” yet open to refashioning (p. 113). Stressing Condé’s staging of “an open-ended, ongoing movement within and between a number of provisional positions” (p. 61) and the use of “creative identifications” (p. 110), Sansavior ultimately argues that Condé’s work proposes “an alternative vision of literary engagement” committed to freeing the individual reader to re-imagine constractive social categories. This work is thus utopian in the dual etymological sense of the term: it is invested in the good and looks forward to sociopolitical change, while insisting on the not-yet-achieved character of this future in its refusal to project these re-imaginings on behalf of the reader.
In short, *Maryse Condé and the Space of Literature* represents an eloquent and welcome addition to Condé scholarship and to efforts to rethink, rather than rule out, the possibilities for a re-engaged literary practice today.

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