This collection of ten essays by primarily Canadian and French scholars (along with one professor at a U.S. university) was inspired by the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of several West African nations. The use of the plural “imaginaires” in the title reflects two principal competing visions of the continent: négritude’s idealized Africa embodying the ancestral past and the one that créolistes distance themselves from, which leads the editors to conclude that the relationship between the Caribbean and Africa is “fait d’ambiguïtés et de contradictions” (p. 19). The introduction opens with a discussion of the changing meanings of “Africa” over time, and then cites studies on the continent’s representations in French literature and art in order to provide a context for the essays that will follow. Focusing, for the most part, on novels published since 1980, L’Afrique noire dans les imaginaires antillais is not exhaustive, a fact that the editors concede.

Sébastien Sacré’s “La mise à distance de l’Afrique ancestrale: Les romans antillais contemporains” is appropriately placed first as it traces the evolution of the representation of Africa, beginning with Aimé Césaire, before concentrating on works by Raphaël Confiant, Maryse Condé, and Simone Schwarz-Bart, whose characters he feels redefine their identity by emphasizing their Caribbean roots. Thomas Demulder’s “Littératures francophones d’Afrique et des Antilles: Prolégomènes à l’affirmation d’un ‘Tout-Monde’ partagé” closes the study, arguing that the contemporary “circuit poétique, culturel et identitaire” between Africans and Caribbeans produces important dialogues and interconnections (p. 217).

Some essays focus on one writer; in “L’Afrique dans l’oeuvre romanesque d’Édouard Glissant,” for example, Marie-Christine Rochmann examines the presence or absence of Africa in Glissant’s oeuvre, ranging from La Lézarde to Mahagony and Sartorius. Most of the essays, however, treat a single text: “La perception de l’Afrique dans Ti Jean L’horizon de Simone Schwarz-Bart ou la quête d’un imaginaire composite” (Corina Crainic); “Le fil africain de Gisèle Pineau dans L’Exil selon Julia” (Françoise Simasotchi-Bronès); “Tremblement de femme-terre dans Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle de Simone Schwarz-Bart” (Sarah B. Buchanan).

There are four stand-out essays that merit special consideration. Françoise Naudillon’s “Mythographies d’Afrique dans le roman populaire antillais: Filiations de Tony Delsham” offers an excellent analysis of the multivolume work
by the writer who targets the local market rather than what could be labeled an “elite” audience. Naudillon argues that three mythographies characterize Delsham’s saga: “le marron primordial,” “le Survivant,” and “le Viol fondateur.” Thoroughly researched, it also includes a bibliography of Delsham’s more than two dozen novels. Obed Nkunzimana’s “Fragments d’un continent maudit et mythique: L’Afrique dans Biblique des derniers gestes de Chamoiseau” follows Balthazar Bodule-Jules’s trajectory, which takes him, among other places, to Lumumba’s Congo. One of the many strengths of Mouhamadou Cissé’s “Béhanzin ou l’épopée du Dahomey dans Les derniers rois mages de Maryse Condé” is its interrogation of the discourses of history and myth in a close reading of the novel about the African king deported to Martinique. Mylène Dorcé offers a feminist, comparative analysis of two women’s texts in “Déconstruction de l’imaginaire de l’Afrique mythique dans En attendant le bonheur de Maryse Condé et L’autre qui danse de Suzanne Dracius.”

There is inevitably some overlap, for example Césaire’s Cahier and Glissant’s Le Quatrième siècle are cited in several essays. However, curiously, no one mentions Condé’s Histoire de la femme cannibale (2003), a novel set primarily in South Africa, nor the controversy that surrounded her portrait of the continent, which came to a head with the publication of the two-volume Segou (1984–85). At the time critics such as Jonathan Ngate in A Current Bibliography of African Affairs (1986–87) characterized her depiction as problematic. That she addressed the issue of representation in a keynote speech in 2007 at Stanford entitled “Images de l’Afrique de Ségou à l’Histoire de la femme cannibale” attests to her awareness of this persistent perception and critique. In her recent memoir La Vie sans fards (2012), she chronicles her experiences—struggles and well as friendships—while living in independence-era Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal, making Véronique Hélénon’s French Caribbeans in Africa: Diasporic Connections and Colonial Administration, 1880–1939 (2011) a fascinating companion piece for these two books.

L’Afrique noire dans les imaginaires antillais could be the spark that encourages literary critics to examine the work of young writers (like Fabienne Kanor, who was born in France to Martinican parents) who revisit the continent in their fiction. Kanor’s novel Humus (2006), for example, is based on a 1774 incident in which fourteen captive women jumped from the ship transporting them to Saint-Domingue in order to return to shore.

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