

RAPHAEL CONFIAINT'S ANTI-EUROCENTRISM IN NEGRE MARRON

Moussa Traore
University of Ghana

Abstract:

This article does a thorough analysis of a Caribbean strong male hero, Simon Louis Jerome's attempt in Raphaël Confiant's novel *Nègre marron* (maroon Negro), to reconnect with his roots and literally to return to Africa which is often referred to as *pays d'avant* -- the country before-- ,or where we came from or *Pays Guinée* (Guinea in West Africa). Throughout the article, the author demonstrates that this novel attempts to undo the derogatory stereotypes that Western Modernity associates Africa with but the article ends with the defeat of the nègre marron in his mission, as if the Raphaël Confiant was trying to show that any attempt by a Carribean to reconnect with Africa is bound to fail.

Key Words: Nègre marron, anti-eurocentrism, créolité, marronnage

Introduction

Raphaël Confiant's *Nègre marron* (2006) presents some exceptional thematic and narrative features that do not appear in other Caribbean Francophone writings. The novel follows a transhistorical "collective" protagonist who doesn't accept enslavement or assimilation and who never stops resisting, a symbolic *nègre marron* or maroon Negro who resists exploitation and white hegemony in all its forms. The *nègre marron*'s resistance begins as a reaction to the inhuman treatment and exploitation of the Caribbean plantation system, and metamorphoses into other forms of resistance like trade unionism, revolutionary socialist oppositions and the fight against corruption and racism. The novel unfolds along various terrains and situations which correspond to specific periods in the history and contemporary situation of the Francophone Caribbean and the world in general, and the social contradictions and injustices of each of those periods and eras are bravely combated by the *nègre marron* and his allies.

In *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*, David Macey introduces the *marronage* process itself, and shows how deeply rooted the practice of *marronage* is in Caribbean society in general and in Fanon's Martinique in particular. Macey presents two contrasting towns in Martinique, and shows that each of these towns tells a different history of the country: Fort-de France, the capital city, associates the history of Martinique with the Savanne, the area whose main attraction is the statue of Josephine, who is a source of pride to many alienated Martiniquans. She is portrayed as a "white Creole born in Les Trois Ilets across the bay from Fort-de- France, and wife to Napoléon from 1794 to 1809, when he repudiated her because she could not give him an heir. The cult of Josephine is still alive and well in Martinique" (Macey 10). Rivière Pilote is another town which tells a completely different history of Martinique. The dominating monument in that city defines and celebrates the practice of *marronage*:

The streets of the little southern town of Rivière-Pilote tell a different story to those of Fort-de- France. A plaque in the rue du Marronnage records the history of the runaway slaves or *marrons* who launched armed attacks on the white plantations. It explains: 'In the Caribbean, some slaves fled to the hills and woods in order to rebel against slavery and to prepare for insurrection. This was *marronage*. The marron-blacks [*les nègres marrons*] formed communities and organized themselves into small armies under the command of one leader in order to launch attacks on the plantation of the white masters so as to liberate their brothers and their country. Their heroic leaders included: Makandal, Boukman, Palmarès, Pagamé, Moncouchi, Simao, Secho...' (Macey 11).

The connection between the *marron* as he is defined by this plaque and Frantz Fanon was clearly expressed in 1982, when a 'Mémorial International' was organized in Fort-de-France in order to honor Fanon. Macey writes that according to a commentator, "the *Mémorial* marked the return to their people of the first heroes of a pantheon: *the marron* and Frantz Fanon" (13). It might also help to recall here that both Raphaël Confiant and Frantz Fanon were born in Martinique; they share a common background.

The specific features of *Nègre marron* place Confiant in a position between Western Eurocentrism and its related Caribbean writings at one extreme, and the Créolité movement at the other extreme. Confiant rejects Eurocentrism as he tries to undo the negative representations that Western Modernity attaches to Africa, and he also diverges from the Créolité movement in *Nègre marron* (although he is one of the founders and main partisans of the movement); he does not solely ground his work in the Créolité context, or the Caribbean context.

The first pages of *Nègre marron* evoke a nostalgic longing for the African lands where the ancestors of the *nègre marron* or maroon Negro came from: the "Pays Guinée" or "Pays d'Avant". One of the most striking and anti-Eurocentric features of *Nègre marron* is the composite protagonist's burning desire to return to Africa. That feature distinguishes Confiant's novel from most of the Francophone Caribbean works. The way back to Africa is so important that it is literally shouted several times on two consecutive pages: RETROUVER LA VOIE QUI VOUS CONDUIRAIT EN AFRIQUE-GUINEE (*Nègre marron*, 44) and RETOURNER AU PAYS D'AFRIQUE-GUINEE. Oui! (*Nègre marron*, 45).

Unlike other Caribbean writings, Confiant's portrayal of the African landscape focuses on the physical difference that exists between that landscape and that of the Caribbean. It does not celebrate the bounty of natural resources of Africa; it often rather stresses the scarcity. Confiant's protagonist prefers the hardship of African existence to the excessive and crippling richness of natural resources of the Caribbean, or "le Pays d'ici là". Living conditions were challenging in the African savannah; as a consequence, the continental African or the *Nègre Guinée* became a tough-minded, a creative and ingenious person, who lives in harmony with nature in order to survive on those limited resources. On the other hand Confiant describes the climate and living conditions of the "Pays d'Ici-là," as a place where nature is bountiful but also simply too hostile for survival. The Caribbean is depicted as the land of thick forests and indomitable rivers, a land enveloped in a gloomy atmosphere. That denotes the twist that Confiant administers to Eurocentric Caribbean representations of Africa, in which, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is depicted as rich in natural resources available for plunder, but also darkly mysterious and dangerous. For example, René Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres* associates Europe with knowledge and a healthy life style, while Africa is represented by its jungle: "les cocotiers, le sable, les bêtes féroces, les chameaux, les fonctionnaires coloniaux et un tas de bestiaux de même farine"/ coconut trees, the sand, wild animals, camels, colonial civil servants, and a whole bunch of beasts of the same kind (32).

Here is Confiant's contrasting view:

Au Pays d'Avant, votre village s'étalait au milieu de la savane et sa terre rouge, ses arbustes étiés, son ciel pur. L'horizon était à portée de regard. L'eau rare. Il fallait creuser des puits et encore des puits, les premiers se tarissant au fil du temps, et il arrivait que pendant une année entière il ne pleuve pas une seule journée malgré les prières ferventes adressées aux divinités. Ici-là, à l'inverse, tout n'est que mornes arbustes à la végétation enchevêtrée, rivières bondissantes qui déversent une onde diaphane qu'on aurait jurée infinie. (17)

In the "Pays d'Avant" / Previous Country, your village was located in the middle of the red earth savannah, with its short trees and pure sky. The horizon was not far. Water was rare. One had to keep digging wells continuously because they would dry up as time went on and sometimes it would not rain for a whole year despite the fervent prayers addressed to the gods. Here on the other hand, everything is simply bushy intertwined vegetations, fast running rivers which project water waves which seem to be infinite.

The *nègre marron* can no longer enjoy those familiar living conditions that he was used to, in Africa and as a consequence, hence, his nostalgia. The primitiveness of Africa is represented here as a positive ideal, one can start a fire by rubbing two stones together, matches are not needed:

“Les premiers temps, ceux de l’échappée, furent des temps sans feu. Là-bas, au Pays d’Avant, deux pierres frottées ensemble ou une buchette habiliment tortillée dans la rainure d’un bout de bois vous suffisait pour en allumer un”. Ici-là, la pluie incessante l’interdit. Tout est humide, mouillé, visqueux même. Une mousse grisâtre recouvre en permanence les troncs des rochers. Le feu vous a longtemps manqué. (23)

The first times, the moment of the salvation was a time without fire. Over-there, in the Previous Country, two stones rubbed against each other or a stick cleverly twisted in the crack of a piece of wood was enough to make fire. Over here, incessant rains do not allow that. Everything is humid, wet, and even viscous. A grayish fungus permanently covers trunks of rocks. For a long time you missed fire.

The diasporan protagonists in *Heremakhonon* and *Nègre marron* both consider Guinea on the West African coast as their home, as the country from which they were uprooted and shipped to the Americas. Veronica travels to Guinea with the hope of reconnecting with her roots, and the *nègre marron*'s main goal in his rebellion and resistance is to return to “PAYS GUINEE” (*Nègre marron*, 45). The fact that both characters view Guinea as their native land is very significant. In “Afro-Americans and the Futa Djallon” (Harris 1982), Boubacar Barry traces the roots of the symbolic significance of Guinea in general and the Futa Djallon mountain in particular, to the powerful personality, determination and charisma of Abdurahman, a prince from Futa Djallon in Guinea who was sold as a slave and ended up as the property of American farmers in the South of the US. Barry writes that Abdurahman left no stone unturned in order to return to his native Guinea, and that he succeeded in combining that ambition with hard work and dignity to such an extent that he earned the respect and admiration of all the slaves in the South and also the white slave owners. The prince's background and the conditions of his captivity are presented in these terms:

Abdurahman was the son of Ibrahima Sori Mawdo, the second Almami (ruler) of Futa Djallon. He studied the humanities at Timbuktu. In 1788, at the age of 26, he was taken prisoner during a battle north of Futa Djallon and was subsequently sold as a slave to a farmer named Thomas Foster in Natchez Mississippi. (Harris, 285)

The royal slave succeeded in imposing himself as an admirable and highly respected figure who makes the black race proud in Southern US:

Abdurahman maintained his dignity during this long ordeal, and as a result of his unswerving faithfulness to Islam he succeeded in winning the admiration of his contemporaries. He compelled recognition in spite of many feelings of abnegation among his kin and also in the midst of the blatant brutality of the Southern slave masters. In the final analysis, he became the centerpiece of the prosperity of his master's farm. (Harris, 286)

Boubacar Barry recalls that out of frustration --due to the exile of his daughter who had a relationship with Foster's son--Abdurahman wrote a letter in Arabic to the Sultan of Morocco around 1826, asking him to use his influence with the president of the United States so that Thomas Foster would grant him freedom. After thirty nine years of servitude, Abdurahman was free. The American Colonization Society lent their support to him and his family and relied on him for the propagation of Christianity in West Africa, and in 1829 he died in Liberia. According to Barry, Abdurahman's life and work ultimately became a source of hope and inspiration which was passed on to generations of diasporan blacks:

The energy of this man who had lived in the unforgettable shadow of the land of his youth, was sustained by his relentless faith in the idea of a return to his native land. Like

Abdurahman, thousands of black slaves toiled in the cotton and tobacco fields of Mississippi and the South. By keeping faith in an eventual return to the ancestral land, they survived. A precious heritage passed on from father to son, this hope survived over several generations. (286-87)

Another connection between the Caribbean and Guinea stems from the influence of Edward Blyden (the West Indian writer who is also one of the pioneers of the organization of the pan-African movement), who left the West Indies and settled in Sierra Leone, where he wrote extensively on the political and social organization of the kingdom of Futa Djallon (Harris 287). The nostalgia for Guinea in *Heremakhonon* and *Nègre marron* therefore reflects the general influence that that part of West Africa has on the diasporan black. Guinea and the Futa Djallon constitute an ideal of resistance and redemption which inspires the radical and subversive position of the *nègre marron*.

Confiant tries in *Nègre marron* something which is similar to what Achebe did in *Things Fall Apart*, as an answer to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: rectifying or erasing the distorted images presented by the imperialist powers and replacing them with more accurate representations. Conrad writes that the Congo is a savage river and Africa is a land inhabited by savages and cannibals, a continent where imperialist Europe bears the weight of the "white man's burden" through agents like Kurtz. In response to Conrad, Achebe constructs in *Things Fall Apart* an African society with its cultures, beliefs, practices and manners, like any other stable human society. Achebe doesn't present a utopian or romanticized idealist depiction of a pre-encounter African society. Nor does he allow the reader to harbor any illusion that the traditional African society will be able to withstand the pressure of Western influence without changing. But Achebe does show a pre-encounter African society that reveals a stable civilization, and in his epilogue that consists of the notes of a myopic colonial administrator, he dramatizes the disastrously presumptuous misunderstanding of traditional African societies by the Europeans. Like Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, Raphaël Confiant presents in *Nègre marron* African societies with their physical and human realities, their living conditions and their interaction with other people like Arab traders. For example, *Nègre marron* mentions the main numerous languages which were spoken by the newly arrived slaves in the Caribbeans, and the author shows that time and need led to the replacement of the African languages with Creole, the medium of communication on the Caribbean, or the "Pays d'Ici-là":

les langues aussi s'enlient les unes aux autres; la votre, le bambara, à celle des peuples voisins, les Mossis et les Peuls, ou éloignés, les Wolofs et les Sérères. Quelques phrases d'arabe grappillées à ces marchands enturbannés, égrenant sans arrêt leur chapelet en ivoire qui étendaient leur tapis de prière sur la place du village et se prosternaient en direction du levant à la grande joie des gamins qui les imitaient en cachette. (18-19)

Languages also intertwined; yours, Bambara, with those of the neighboring people, the Mossi and the Peuls tribes, or farther, the Wolofs and the Sérères. Some Arab phrases grabbed from the traders with turbans and ivory chaplets who used to spread their prayer carpets on the village spot and prayed facing the East while children happily imitated them.

In the direct voice of the narrator, Confiant recalls some of the derogatory depictions of Africa created by Western Modernity, and juxtaposes those features to his representation of Africa and Africans. Some of the negative images of Africans come from local newspapers announcing the escape of some run-away slaves from the plantations, or papers broadcasting a message that the white slave owners would like to pass to the literate portion of the population. This announcement on a Bambara slave who escaped from the ship "l'Amelie" which was bringing slaves from the West African coast stresses the "inhuman", "aggressive" and "dangerous" characteristics of the slave:

Il se peut qu'il ait rechappé aux requins de la baie de Saint- Pierre et se soit réfugié dans les hauteurs du Carbet ou autour du Morne –Rouge. Il s'agit d'un Nègre bambara de onze pieds de haut, au teint noir fonce, qui porte trois scarifications parallèles sur le front. Il semble très dangereux et n'hésite pas à s'approcher nuitamment des populations pour y voler ou y mettre le feu.(16)

He might have escaped the whales of Saint Pierre bay and taken refuge in the high cabarets or around Morne-Rouge. He is an eleven foot tall Bambara Negro with a very dark complexion and parallel tribal marks on his forehead. He seems to be very dangerous and does not hesitate to come closer to people's houses at night to steal and set fire to houses.

The gross, rough and beast-like features of the African slave in this description can be contrasted with the description that Confiant's narrator provides some few pages further, of the slaves who have been bought by "le chef blanc/the white master", from the ship captain, when the ship reached the Caribbean. The narrator celebrates the beautiful, strong and noble stature of the slaves who survived the trip on the sea. The only female among those survivors is so pretty that the slave traders cannot resist her charm:

Le chef blanc tendit une sacoche au capitaine d'un air maussade, non sans vous avoir recomptés du regard. Vous étiez douze à être marqués à la chaux. Onze jeunes Nègres à la membrature parfaite et à la taille élancée, plus une Nègresse très belle que les marins avaient surnommée Oriane. (26)

The white master handed a small bag to the captain with an unpleasant look, and he made sure that he counted you again with his eyes. Twelve of you were branded with white paint, eleven young Negroes in perfect shape and great height, plus a very pretty female Negro whom the sailors had nicknamed Oriane.

But it is above all the *nègre marron* who himself embodies all the qualities which Eurocentrism denied the black man. The *nègre marron* is a brave black Caribbean man who refuses the domination of the plantation system and its slavery, and seeks refuge deep in the forest where he creates a community of *marrons*; together, they work to undermine the domination and exploitation of the plantation system. He is the opposite of the cowardly brainless Africans who never achieves maturity and remain as children forever in Eurocentric writings. In *Le Discours antillais*, Edouard Glissant refers to the *nègre marron* as the courageous hero who openly opposed the mainstream policy of slave owners and plantation proprietors who, for their part, turned the image of the *nègre marron* into an assassin or a vulgar bandit:

Le Nègre marron est le seul vrai héros populaire des Antilles, dont les effroyables supplices qui marquaient sa capture donnent la mesure du courage et de la détermination. Il y a là un exemple incontestable d'opposition systématique, de refus total. Il est significatif que peu à peu les colons et l'autorité (aidés de l'Eglise) aient pu imposer à la population l'image du Nègre marron comme bandit vulgaire, assassin seulement soucieux de ne pas travailler, jusqu'à en faire la représentation populaire, le croquemitaine scélérat dont on menace les enfants (Edouard Glissant quoted in *Nègre marron*, 169). The *Nègre marron* is the only real hero of the Antilles whose courage and determination can be measured through the dreadful punishment that was administered to him when he was captured. He is an incontestable example of systematic opposition and total refusal. It is important to point out that the colonial authorities (supported by the church) succeeded in imposing to the population the image of the *Nègre marron* as an ordinary bandit, an assassin who refuses to work, and he ultimately became a popular scarecrow used to frighten children.

Resistance to exploitation is one of the core features of the diaspora. In "African Diaspora: Conceptual Framework, Problems and Methodological Approaches", Oruno D. Lara writes:

For blacks, to exist is to resist the capitalist stronghold which is seeking to neutralize, to annihilate, to liquidate them physically and culturally. In this regard, it must be noted that the diaspora was forged in a dynamic framework of resistance, symbolized by a movement extending over six centuries without interruption. There is no existence without resistance; this will never be emphasized enough. Those communities within the diaspora which have

expressed their existence the most are still the ones which have resisted with the greatest zeal. (Lara quoted in Harris, 59-60)

One of the great qualities that Confiat attributes to the *nègre marron* is his sexual attitude. Unlike the black African men like Ibrahima Sory in *Heremakhonon* who turn women into sex objects, or unlike the black man who is turned into a phallic symbol in Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, or the black man who is tirelessly running after the virginity of the white woman as in René Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres*, the *nègre marron* controls his sexual desire. He is neither passionately attracted to white women nor to black Creole women. He has a relationship once in a while with a Creole woman who admires him and is attracted to him. The *nègre marron* puts his target before everything: to overthrow the white master and if possible, to kill him: TUER MON MAITRE BLANC/ TO KILL MY WHITE MASTER (108), and that leads the *nègre marron* to choose a monastic, solitary life (124). He stays away from the exigencies and obligation of relationships in order to devote all his time and energy to the cause he is fighting for. His relationships with woman, when they exist, take place in "le provisoire et le furtif/ in a provisory and furtive way" (116).

There is no doubt that the *nègre marron* views violence as the main weapon in the anti-slavery struggle, just like Fanon assigns to violence the pivotal role in the anti-colonial struggle. Fanon's advocacy of violence can be explained by the main events of his life: first, his disillusion after the Second World War, when he realized that he had fought for a country (France) which claims to uphold 'égalité et fraternité' (equality and fraternity) while it invades Algeria whose inhabitants it tortures and kills. Secondly, Fanon and all the other Martiniquans who had fought on the side of the French during the war were still victims of racism both in France and also in Martinique, where the skin color was still a determining factor and the 'lactification process' was the means that many dark skinned Antillean used in order to lighten their skin and get close to whiteness. Fanon's anger also stemmed from the injustice and inequality that he saw around him in the world in general. David Macey captures the sources of that anger in these terms:

And yet, if there is truly a Fanonian emotion, it is anger. His anger was a response to his experience of a black man, in a world defined as white, but not to the 'fact' of his blackness. It was a response to the condition and situation of those he called the wretched of the earth. (28)

The main trait that Edouard Glissant and Francis Jeanson -- the latter was Fanon's editor at Seuil-- associate with Fanon is that he was 'un écorché vif', someone who had been skinned alive, a hypersensitive person (Macey 159). One of the most striking moments of Fanon's advocacy and acceptance of violence in the struggle against oppression was his speech at the All African People's Congress in Accra in 1958:

His hugely successful performance in Accra also helped to promote the image of Fanon as the apostle of violence three years before the publication of *Les Damnés de la terre*. When she met him in Rome in the summer of 1961, Simone de Beauvoir knew little about Fanon himself, though she had recently read his books, but she did know that this was the man who had been applauded in Accra for the 'impassioned speech on the necessity for and value of violence' and for his criticisms of Nkrumah's 'pacifist these'. Fanon's reputation had also come to the notice of *L'Express*'s Jean Daniel. Daniel was not present in Accra himself, but he had, he recalled in 1961, heard many of those who were there speak of the 'poignant speech' in which Fanon justified the use of violence 'with accents that reduced him to tears and made his audience feel a sort of communion'. (Macey 371)

Fanon's emphasis on the legitimacy of violence within the context of the liberation struggle can be better understood if we examine it this way: he first made it clear that the colonial process or the colonizing enterprise itself was founded on violence, and the only way in which the colonized could get their freedom from the colonizer was also through a violent liberation struggle. Then, he extrapolated his discussion to the personal or individual virtue of violence, or the way in which the

colonized people can ‘expunge’ themselves of the poisoning and incapacitating effect of colonization, and he adds that this stage also prepares the individuals when it comes to protecting their newly found liberty and independence:

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from the inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic and the nation is demobilized through a rapid movement of decolonization, the people have the time to see that the liberation has been the business of each and all and that leader has no special merit. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 73-74)

Fanon’s emphasis on the cathartic effect of violence is what critics like Irene L. Gendzier find to be less convincing:

Fanon’s thesis, as expressed in his notion of the cathartic effect of violence, was that decolonization could only occur successfully where the colonized not only seized their freedom through a liberation struggle, but participated in violent actions to individually expunge themselves of the colonial heritage of inferiority and submission. It is this aspect of violence which, so graphically expressive in words, is considerably less convincing as a policy. (198)

Fanon’s emphasis on violence was also often interpreted as a call for terrorism, a revival of extreme nationalism. Critics who were enraged at Fanon’s advocacy of violence condemn both Fanon and Sartre, who was Fanon’s ideological mentor. Macey brands such readings of Fanon as negative readings:

When he is read, the readings are negative. In an essay which turns the ‘white man’s burden’ (*le fardeau de l’homme blanc*) into the ‘white man’s sob’ (*le sanglot de l’homme blanc*) and argues that there is no viable alternative to white European civilization. Pascal Bruckner claims that Sartre’s support for Fanon was no more than masochism, and argues that Fanon’s writings are based upon an analogy between the thesis that maturity is a form of decadence that has not lived up to its promise, and the adulation of the south, seen as the north’s only future. In 1982, former Maoist turned New Philosopher and anti-Marxist Andre Glucksmann could claim that Fanon was responsible for celebrating the ‘second wave’ of ‘planetary terrorism’ that came to Paris when a bomb exploded in the rue Mabeuf. (Macey 21)

Fanon’s advocacy of violence is also the main element which transpires in the US when his works are criticized. *The Wretched of the Earth* is considered by most American critics of Fanon as a work which spreads violence among the youth in black slums. The Grove Press advertised *The Wretched of the Earth* as ‘a handbook for a Negro Revolution’:

Here, at last, is Frantz Fanon’s fiery manifesto-- which in its original French edition served as a revolutionary bible for dozens of emerging African and Asian nations. Its startling advocacy of violence as an instrument for historical change has influenced events everywhere from Angola to Algeria, from the Congo to Vietnam—is finding a growing audience among America’s civil rights workers. (Macey 23)

American pacifists are also strongly advised to read *The Wretched of the Earth* because of the danger that it represents. In *The New Yorker* of January 15, 1966, Nat Hentoff issues one of those warnings:

His arguments for violence are the most acute in current revolutionary theory... they spread amongst the young Negroes in American slums and on American lecture platforms. Those

who are engaged in rebutting these precepts of violence (which includes arming for self-defense) ought to find his book a fundamental challenge, and for this reason, if for no other, Fanon should be read by the non-violent activists, and by people who are simply opposed to violence.(p 115)

In *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt contends that Fanon had an influence on the violence that affected American university campuses in the 1960s. Another dominant image of Fanon stems from the “Americanization” of Fanon in the Charles Lam Markmann’s translation of *Peau noire masques blancs*. David Macey refers to that translation as a “seriously flawed one” because it eradicates the specifically French and Martiniquan dimensions of Fanon’s colonial experience. The following passage is typical of Macey’s critique of Markmann’s translation:

Fanon refers at three points to an image of a grinning *Tirailleur sénégalais* (a black colonial infantry man) who is eating something from a billy can. He is saying ‘*Y a bon banania*’, which is an advertizing copy-writer’s idea of how an African says ‘*C’est bon, Banania*’. In the English translation, this becomes ‘Sho good eating’. The *tirailleur* has become the caricatured black of the Deep South, and he is supposedly eating ‘some chocolate confection’. In the original, he is eating something very specific, and with specific connotations. Banania is a ‘breakfast food’ made from banana flour, cocoa and sugar. Posters of the *tirailleur* and his dish of Babania were still a familiar sight in the France of the 1940s and the 1950s; the Senegalese poet and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor wanted to rip them down from all the walls of France. (Macey 29)

I understand David Macey’s indignation at the changes that Markmann made in the translation of *Peau noire*; Macey’s position is marked by the need to remain as faithful as possible to the original text, but I also perceive the reasons behind the Americanization of *Peau noire* in this the translation process. The battle African Americans were waging in the 1960s shared some similarities with the Algerians’ fight for independence. Both combats aimed at achieving freedom and human rights from an oppressing force, although the French occupation of Algeria was certainly more cruel and atrocious, as Fanon’s portrayal of the torture and trauma that French soldiers and police officers caused in pre-independent Algeria in *The Wretched of the Earth* shows. I consider Markmann’s translation of *Peau noire masques blancs* as an attempt to create a motivating solidarity between the Civil Rights’ Movement and the Algerian liberation war. Markmann’s translation of Fanon’s works into English inspired African Americans: Fanon became one of Stokely Carmichael’s ‘patron saints’ and ‘every brother on a roof top’ could quote Fanon (Macey 24).

One of the specific traits of the *nègre marron* in Confiant’s work is that he is not a misogynist; he simply consents to a sad but necessary sacrifice hoping to achieve his aim. The *nègre marron*’s attitude is the complete opposite of the behavior of the alienated Francophone Caribbeans like Jean Veneuse, the protagonist in *Un homme pareil aux autres*. In the novel, Jean Veneuse, born in the Antilles and having grown up in Bordeaux, confesses that he is attracted to French white women, to such an extent that all the white women whom he sees on the boat “l’Europe” which takes him to his new post in the colonies in Africa, confuse him and remind him of the French girl whom he loves, Andrée Marielle. His attraction to the girl is based on her Caucasian French features. She is the daughter of the French poet Louis Marielle and she epitomizes French white beauty. Jean Veneuse loses his breath when he describes her to his friends: “Si Andrée Marielle est jolie? Mon Dieu, oui. Plutôt jolie. Cheveux acajou sombre coupés à la Ninon. De beaux yeux bleus, une petite bouche aux lèvres rouges comme une blessure fraîche” /whether Andrée Marielle is pretty? My God, yes, she is rather pretty. She has dark nicely cut hair, pretty blue eyes, and a little mouth with red lips that look like a fresh wound (37). He later reflects on his relationship with Andrée Marielle, and his decision to marry her. Jean Veneuse is not convinced that his decision is based on love. He rather believes or suspects himself to be getting married to Andrée Marielle out of “proud revenge” for the treatment which has been / and is still being meted out to his race. He also wonders if he is not one of those who try to run away from their race by marrying European women:

Alors je me demande s'il n'en est pas de moi comme de tous, et si, en me mariant avec vous, qui êtes une Européenne, je n'aurais pas l'air de proclamer que non seulement je dédaigne les femmes de ma race, mais encore qu'attiré par le désir de la chaire Blanche qui nous est défendue, à nous autres nègres, depuis que les hommes blancs règnent sur le monde, je m'efforce obscurément de me venger sur une Européenne de tout ce que ses ancêtres ont fait subir aux miens au long des siècles. (185)

And so I wonder whether in my case there is any difference from theirs; whether, by marrying you, who are European, I may not appear to be making a show of contempt for the women of my own race, and above all to be drawn on by desire for that white flesh that has been forbidden to us Negroes as long as white men have ruled the world, so that without my knowledge I am attempting to revenge myself on a European woman for everything that her ancestors have inflicted on mine throughout the centuries.

Although Jean Veneuse ultimately gets married to Andrée Marielle, he is almost convinced that their relationship and marriage is one more example of a black Caribbean man trying to solve his identity crisis (which is also linked to his anger and frustration of being unjustly treated by white colonizers) by securing for himself the relationship and marriage with a white woman. In stark contrast to this pattern, the *nègre marron* totally distances himself from any relationship with white women.

In his attempt to redeem the image of the African, Raphaël Confiant grants a special place to the black woman. One of the main characteristics of Africa in Western Europe was the “feminized” and “sexualized” continent and as such, both the African continent and the African woman were therefore made to deserve only one thing: to be possessed and raped by European men. Raphaël Confiant’s response to such a portrayal is his representation of the strong Caribbean woman figure. Confiant’s prototype of the Creole woman is a very strong, proud and authoritarian one, who teaches Creole men languages and other skills, and organizes life in the Creole community while controlling everything: “L’une des femmes pourtant était créole. Cela se remarquait à son port de tête, à la hautaineté dont était empreinte sa démarche, bien qu’elle ne se refusât point aux étreintes charnelles que sollicitait chacun des hommes” /One of the women was Creole, and one could notice that through her hair style and the pride in her walking style, although she never refused the sexual solicitations of each of the men (42). She is the opposite of the passive dark woman who submits to white and black men. The strength of Confiant’s Caribbean woman figure lies in the control and choices that guide her sexual life. She falls in love with only the *nègre marron*, because he is a courageous, and they ultimately develop a silent but infallible solidarity:

Cette solidarité muette s’étendait parfois aux femmes qui n’hésitaient pas à livrer leur corps à ces héros, au hasard d’une rencontre dans les bois, dans l’espoir d’enfanter un négrillon plein de vaillance. Ceux qui parmi nous étaient réputés avoir pour géniteur un grand Marron étaient très respectés. (122)

That silent solidarity was often extended to women who would not hesitate to offer their body to these heroes whenever they met them in the woods, hoping to give birth to a brave black child. Those of us who were reputed to have a great maroon as a father were treated with a lot of respect.

Although this Creole woman is empowered with some agency and negates some of the stereotypes attached to the dark woman in Eurocentric representations, she nonetheless illustrates the eroticization of the dark woman, which is the proof that some of the features that Western modernity attributed to colonized subjects always keep creeping into the discourse emerging in the colonized, neo-colonial and postcolonial territories, regardless of the anti-Eurocentric determination of some of the writers of those areas, and Confiant is one of such writers.

The resemblance between the Creole woman mentioned above and Veronica in Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon* is very striking. Each of them is a strong figure who boldly breaks free from Western alienation and oppression and tries to put in place an autonomous social and political pro-African system which opposes Western European domination. Veronica leaves the Antilles and France behind, travels to Africa in order to reconnect with her roots and herself. She earns her living

as a Philosophy teacher in a lycée in Guinea, while trying to solve her identity crisis through a relationship with a Guinean man. In a similar way, the Creole woman in *Nègre marron* left behind the residence assigned to the slaves, *l'Habitation Bel-Event*, and teamed up with a group of maroons who were determined to return to "Afrique Guinée". The *Nègresse créole* devotes her skills to the life and mission of the maroon community, teaches them Creole words and gets sentimentally involved with the men of that community.

The *nègre marron* is endowed with an exaggerated masculinity which seems to be a reaction against the feminized or emasculated Eurocentric image of Africa. He is an indefatigable militant or combatant whose struggle begins historically with mere *marronnage* and gradually extrapolates to trade unionism and leftist radical political commitment. The *nègre marron* is therefore a symbolic figure whose personality constantly changes in the novel. From the run-away slave who refuses the submission of the plantation system and seeks refuge in the forest, he becomes the one who organizes the workers and eloquently teaches them how to discuss and argue for better salaries and working conditions when slavery ends and blacks become workers on the fields of the rich land owners. Confiant adapts the resistance of the *nègre marron* to the evolution which affects the world in general and the Caribbean in particular. The leadership of the *nègre marron* begins at a period which corresponds to the Cold War era of tensions between the West and the Soviet bloc. At this time the French government feared the rise of Soviet influence, which prompted the beginning of the "departmentalization" of some of the French Caribbean islands. The *nègre marron* character morphs into a labor activist whose companion in the workers' struggle is Leon, a name which is reminiscent of Leon Trotsky one of the main ideologists of the Soviet revolution:

Léon était, en effet, le bras droit de Simeon lors des grèves marchantes. Il devenait soudain loquace quand tous deux se rendaient de plantation en plantation pour convaincre les travailleurs de baisser leur coutelas. Il savait trouver le mot juste, l'argument qui faisait mouche, si bien qu'à chaque début de récolte, les Békés de la côte caraïbe essayaient des débrayages implacables qui les contraignaient à faire appel à la gendarmerie. (148)

Leon was indeed Simeon's right hand man during protest marches. He would suddenly become loquacious when the two of them would go from one plantation to another in order to convince the workers to put their cutlasses down and stop work. He would always find the right word, the argument which would fit the context and as a consequence at the beginning of every harvest season, the white farm owners of the Caribbean coast would face severe clashes and call for the rescue of the gendarmerie.

The *nègre marron's* radicalism transpires in the fact that he reads *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and openly asserts his allegiance to the "défenseurs de la classe ouvrière/defenders of the working class" (159), a group who regularly distribute tracts or leaflets issued by "le Mouvement Communiste Martiniquais/ Martinican Communist Movement"(166). Confiant associates him with the most radical and revolutionary movements which existed in the twentieth century, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and the Black Panthers Movement of the USA. The *nègre marron* is referred to as "la panthère noire" in the last section of the novel, where he becomes an armed "bandit" who attacks wealthy traders and corrupt public civil servants, aided by the local populations who protect him and support him. At the highest level of those activities, his name becomes Simao Louis Jerome, and the first component of the name is said to be that of a famous African King-- perhaps Samory Touré, one of the most famous kings in African History. Samory Touré who was also known as "The Black Napoleon of the Sudan" repeatedly defeated the French colonial troops for 18 years in West Africa until he was betrayed by one of his generals, captured and deported to Gabon where he died in 1900. Simao Louis Jerome seems to combine "Samory" and "Louis Jerome" or African and French components, two features which are also present in "Samory the Napoleon of the Sudan". By naming the *nègre marron* "Simao Louis Jerome," Confiant makes his position very clear: he glorifies the African past and the African famous kings and he shows admiration and devotion to the *nègre marron*, the one who challenges Western suppression and domination and follows the same path which the famous African kings followed. These names also ground the mission of the *nègre marron* into the Martiniquan soil: the plaque in the southern town of

Rivière Pilote in Martinique-- that I refereed to at the beginning of this chapter mentions “Simao” as one of the leaders of the *nègres marrons*. Finally the names of those Marniquan maroon leaders could have been African in origin as I initially said, if one juxtaposes “Samory” and “Simao”.

In the novel, Confiant criticizes the internal divisions which weaken leftist political struggles. The *nègre marron*-- who had suffered imprisonment, hunger and insecurity because he was wanted by the forces of the repressive French authorities who were governing the island is finally betrayed by his comrades. This betrayal emphasizes that political ideologies (the revolutionary leftist or communist ones which claim to defend the cause of the grassroots or the downtrodden included) often remain only theoretical and leave the needy ones to die. On the last pages on the novel, before his defeat, the *nègre marron* remembers his mother warning him against the unreliability of blacks, whom she paints as a doomed race of people with betrayal in the blood. The *nègre marron* realizes that he has been abandoned by his race, the black race, and his mother’s statement provides a very strong illustration of Eurocentrism and Afro-pessimism finding their way into the *nègre marron*’s discourse. The old black lady reiterates that blacks are the last race, a race which is not far from animals:

Pourtant ma vieille mère m’avait prévenu: complot de Nègres, ça ne tient jamais; le Nègre est en deveine depuis l’arche de Noé; aide un Nègre et aussitôt il voudra te défier à la course; le nègre est la dernière des races après les crapauds ladres et patati et patata. Elle avait eu bien raison! (205)

I had however been warned by my old mother: Negroes’ plots never succeed. The Negro has been cursed since Noah’s Ark; help a Negro and he will soon try to beat you in the race. The Negro is the last race after toads, and so on and so forth. She was right!

This resurgence of Eurocentrism on the last pages of *Nègre marron* plays the same role as Veronica’s relapses in *Heremakhonon*, when she falls back into certain Eurocentric beliefs like the hypersexual image of African men. This pessimistic ending is also a kind of call for revolutionary vigilance from the reader. The betrayal of Simao the *nègre marron* by his people discourages all other similar existentialist adventures. One is almost sure that nobody else will be interested in a battle or a quest of the type that the *nègre marron* led, as the last sentence the novel shows: “Je suis, je serai le dernier Nègre marron d’ici-là... (211)/ I am and I will be the last *Nègre maron* of this place.... The actions of the *nègre marron* represent an assertion of the existence of the Francophone Caribbean, a diasporan existence which cannot be expressed through any other medium except resistance. In that respect, the Afro-Brazilian counter-part of the *nègre marron* is the *kilombo* who asserts the existence of the Afro-Brazilian community by “setting on fire and painting red the colonial society” (Harris 60).

Conclusion

Raphaël Confiant’s *Nègre marron* tries to undo the Eurocentric influence that Western Modernity had on the representations of Africa in Western writings and in Caribbean Francophone writings. Through the character of the *nègre marron*, Raphaël Confiant shows that blacks can resist the enslavement and inhuman exploitation of the plantation system and fight for their rights, and for better conditions. Confiant’s *nègre marron* is not a black man who is in a constant pursuit of the white woman’s body. His priority in life is his combat against white injustice and only black beautiful and politically conscious women have the chance to get close to him, with the hope of giving birth to heroes like the *nègre marron*. Unlike the mentally enslaved black Caribbean who associates Africa with savagery, the *nègre marron* is proud of his African origins, and draws inspiration from them in time of serious combats and that emphasis on African culture places Confiant between Eurocentrism which his work refutes, and the Créolité movement which advocates the predominance of the Creole culture in Caribbean writings. The *nègre marron*’s political commitment makes him stand against European domination in the Caribbean, and it also makes him espouse the ideology of the working class and the victims of exploitation and segregation all over the world.

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