

## Literary Tetris? A Possible Approach to Francophone Literature of the Caribbean

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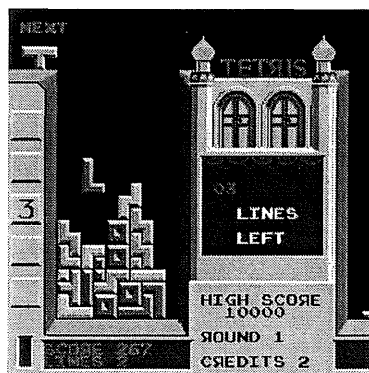
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*[This is the text of a paper originally presented in April 2005 at the Bristol University French Postgraduate Conference 'French Studies: where from, where to?' The text probes aspects of Francophone Caribbean Literature, introducing the student to different approaches to this writing and taking as its central conceit the metaphor of a Tetris game. Specific reference is made to the Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé.]*

### Introduction

Tetris: the computer game with the never-ending theme tune. Francophone literature of the Caribbean: a specific category of French literature which has produced some major ideologies and literary theory since its coming to prominence at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. So where's the link?

This paper will discuss approaches to Francophone Caribbean literature, exploring the parameters of the concept of a 'Francophone Caribbean author'. The cultural synthesis inherent in this literature is often emphasised by critics, and it has been likened to a crucible, whereby different cultural elements fuse and react to form Caribbean society. Not just an issue for critical debate, the nature of Caribbean-ness is also discussed by the authors themselves. The celebrated Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé described the pattern of events in the Antilles in terms of 'des vagues d'acteurs qui se présentent



sur scène'<sup>1</sup>, each wave heralding the arrival of a new group, representative either of the colonisers or the colonised.

In this paper, I suggest viewing the composition of Antillean culture in terms of a Tetris game: each individual cultural element being a different Tetris Block. In the first section of this paper, these different factors will be considered as Tetris blocks of varying shapes, colours and sizes, fusing together to form a whole – although this whole is by no means a neat brick wall, but a gappy patchwork which is sometimes far from complete.

### **Blocks of influence**

*Francophone Literature of the Caribbean* is a term used to define the literature of Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Haiti. Upon their 'discovery' by European explorers (Guadeloupe was sighted by Columbus in 1492 and Martinique in 1502)<sup>2</sup>, the Antilles were caught up in a tug-of-war between European colonizers and passed through stages of different European rule. The Francophone islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe (which form the basis of this study) were colonies until 1946 when they obtained *Département d'Outre Mer* (DOM) status, which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1947.

The Tetris metaphor is appropriate in its colourful multiplicity, in that it foregrounds the hybridity of Caribbean Francophone literature and permits an examination of cross-currents between French, African and Caribbean Francophone literature as well as inviting examination of the diversity within the Caribbean archipelago itself.

In the essay 'The Conflict of Becoming: Cultural Hybridity and the Representation of Focalization in Caribbean Literature', Joan Miller Powell notes:

The Caribbean is the very essence of hybridity... It is at one and the same time an eclectic blend of all the world's components ethnically, socially and culturally. Consequently, Caribbean people are people who in ordinary everyday activity automatically bring to any exercise an encoded imprint of multiple world views.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maryse Condé speaking at the University of Western Australia, Perth, July 2005

<sup>2</sup> Haigh:1

<sup>3</sup> Powell: <http://www.highbeam.com/library/index.asp>

This opinion sits well with the pattern of adaptation of multiple influences which we will now attempt to map. The idea that this is an ‘encoded imprint’ is more problematic and we will examine this notion of multi-culturality as more of a conscious choice.

Very prominent African blocks of influence can be identified. For example, the *tam-tam parleur* or talking drum, the *griot* tradition of oral storytellers and the witch doctor figures of the *quimboiseur* and *obéah*, are three examples of an African heritage which asserts itself in Francophone Caribbean society.

The European blocks, or more specifically, French blocks, exert a major influence, synonymous with the colonizer and especially the language of the educated – hence the literary tradition of Martinique and Guadeloupe is predominantly Francophone, although the majority of the population are Créolophone.<sup>4</sup>

These are but two examples. In *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), Césaire emphasises this heterogeneity, referring to ‘le Caraïbe aux trois âmes’<sup>5</sup> – the triple heritage of the West Indian deriving from the indigenous Caribs, Africans and Europeans. Although the Caribs have been practically eliminated as a distinct racial group, their physical features are still to be seen in the people of mixed descent in Martinique and other parts of the West Indies. The Amerindian or native Caribbean Tetris block must then also somehow be incorporated into this society and its literature.

Moreover, following the abolition of slavery by France in 1848, the Colonial powers transported workers from other colonies to the Caribbean. As early as 1852 the first Indians arrived and shortly after they were followed by Chinese workers. With them came cultures reaching beyond Europe and Africa.

In addition to this, the influences of South American authors such as Alejo Carpentier and Anglophone Caribbean authors such as Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul can both be said to form blocks of influence –

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<sup>4</sup> A balance that the authors of the *Créolité* movement (particularly Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant) have begun to redress in recent decades – nonetheless, a significant majority of literature from the francophone Caribbean is still written in French.

<sup>5</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Bloodaxe, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1995. p.88

along with the impact of the Harlem Renaissance and Black American authors such as Richard Wright and Langston Hughes.

We see, then, that these blocks of influence include numerous languages, cut across racial divides (by no means restricted to black/white) and encompass the entire globe. And rather than smoothly slotting together to form Caribbean cultural and literary traditions, these blocks of influence must be manipulated, turned and examined, much as the player of Tetris turns their little coloured blocks, before being assimilated into Francophone Caribbean society.<sup>6</sup> This Tetris process is evident in other literature of the Caribbean (Anglophone, Lusophone and Hispanophone). Yet dialogue within the global space of *la francophonie* adds an extra dimension of cross-cultural discussion to the Francophone Caribbean context.

### **The Tetris game in action**

Let us now examine some examples of this Tetris-style of fusion. African influences are prominent in Caribbean music and dance; the talking drums or *tam-tam parleur* being one instance. These drums originated in Africa and are used in Martinican dances such as the *laghia*, a combat dance. They were employed as communicators in Africa; this use found a more urgent expression in plantation society where expression was censored. An excellent demonstration of this is found in Joseph Zobel's short story *Laghia de la mort* (1946), where the talking drum is used to explore the Caribbean context of plantation society and the question of unacknowledged paternity. Thus the African block (in this instance the tam-tam) is introduced into Caribbean society, adapted to create the *laghia* dance (specific to the Caribbean) and even given a créole identity as the *gwo-kà*.

The *griot* tradition of storytelling also has a Caribbean manifestation in the *paroleur* or *conteur* so prominent in the work of Patrick Chamoiseau and related to his ideas of *oraliture*, with a particular twist in the creation of the créole call and response formula of 'crik – crack', sometimes represented as 'ye crik – ye crack'.

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<sup>6</sup> (At this point, students have asked 'Who is the Tetris player in this analogy?': we might consider it is the author who, when writing, is trying to create a particular view of Antillean space and interactions; on another level, it is a process inherent in Antillean society due to the intense states of flux and adaptation it has undergone).

Caribbean authors are aware of this fusing of cultures and its implications for Caribbean society. Some elements, such as the *tam-tam parleur* and *griot*, are assimilated with apparent ease. However, radically contrasting elements result in dualities within society: thus Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950) represents French influences in the context of institutions such as the school and Catholic education, both firmly associated with white culture, whilst on the plantations, the elderly figures of Médouze the story and riddle-teller and M'an Tine represent an African cultural heritage, notably in Médouze's desire to return to *Guinée*<sup>7</sup> after death.

Furthermore, there are determined attempts by some authors to emphasise diversity within these blocks of influence – such as Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba sorcière... Noire de Salem* (1986), set at the time of the first Black slaves in Barbados and thus emphasising African culture not as a distant, idealized past but as an immediate, recent history. In *Moi, Tituba...*, the historical context provides an opportunity for the blanket term *African* to be abandoned in favour of more detailed terms such as Ashanti and Fanti, an important device to emphasise differences and diversity within blocks of Caribbean influence, and in effect reminding the contemporary twenty-first Century reader of the multiplicity of cultures and heritages brought to the Caribbean. We must then look beyond the initial impulse to label and categorize (which was itself a significant Imperialist approach, defining the colonized subjects for a European readership) when considering this literature.

### **The Tetris wall dismantled**

I've tried to demonstrate so far that a kind of Tetris wall is constructed in Caribbean literature, suggesting a flow of one-way traffic of external blocks into the Caribbean. The situation is, however, far more complex; since the 1940s, these influential currents have been to some extent reversed, as Caribbean authors impose themselves onto the African and metropolitan French scene. This in turn makes the term Francophone and the notion of Caribbean Francophone literature even more problematic.

Consider the novel *Batouala*. The eminent critic Abiola Irele comments that 'French African prose can be given a beginning with the

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<sup>7</sup> A term synonymous with Africa as a whole in Francophone Caribbean literature.

publication in 1921 of the novel *Batouala...*<sup>8</sup> Pinpointing the neat beginning of any movement is rarely this simple; author René Maran's parents were from French Guiana, he was born in Martinique and spent most of his childhood in Africa before studying in France. When *Batouala* won the Prix Goncourt in 1921, just two years after Proust's *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, it indicated the new status of Francophone literature; indeed, it was an academic and political acknowledgment of this literature. Yet Maran resists definitive categorization, as Martinique, French Guiana and Africa all lay (valid) claim to him. Moreover, Maran heralded a new kind of author: writing not only as a Caribbean man with African ancestry, but as a man whose daily life was grounded in Africa (and France) whilst his ancestral roots traced back to the Caribbean. Maran's own subtitle to the novel as a 'véritable roman nègre' is more appropriate and casts aside questions of national identity.

This reversal of currents is also apparent in the wider Francophone context: in 1997 the *Bescherelle* included verbs from Quebec and Africa for the first time, under the newly-created category of *Francophonie*. This marks the changing attitude and increasingly official status of *Francophonie* in French cultures. Once, the French language was rigidly determined as radiating from a fixed epicentre – France – to her colonies; now, we begin to see official recognition of valid diversity within the language.

This change is also evident in English works on French literature – the *Oxford Companion to French Literature* (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1959) was in 1995 renamed the *New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*, a nuanced shift indicating that the French language is no longer exclusively considered the domain of the French. As Peter France indicates in the 1995 introduction, the very idea of a francophone culture is problematic: the term francophone implying something which comes from outside of France, yet as France states, many non-hexagonal authors have established themselves in France or at the very least spent several years there. Equally, there is space for exchange within the realms of *Francophonie* (and beyond). In this way the boundaries become blurred between a French author and a Francophone author.

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<sup>8</sup> Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981) p.146

To illustrate the Antillean author's resistance to pigeonholing, let us consider the case of the Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé. A recent homage to Condé is entitled *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante*<sup>9</sup>, an apt title for an author who has lived and worked in Guadeloupe, France, Britain, the USA and Africa.

#### Select Bio-/Bibliography of Maryse Condé

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|---------|--|
| 1937    | Born 11 <sup>th</sup> February at Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe – childhood shared between Guadeloupe and France (especially Paris) as parents are civil servants and are entitled to annual journeys to France |
| 1953    | Moves to Paris to study, first at Lycée Fénélon then Lettres Classiques at Sorbonne  |
| 1960    | Marries actor Mamadou Condé and couple leave for his native Guinea. Teacher at École Normale Supérieure, Conakry, Guinea   |
| 1964    | After divorce from Mamadou Condé, Maryse stays in Africa with her 4 children   |
| 1966-68 | Worked at Ghana Institute of Language in Accra<br>Teacher at Lycée Charles de Gaulle, Saint Louis, Senegal   |
| 1968    | Maryse Condé moves to London to work for BBC   |
| 1973    | Marriage to Richard Philcox. Condé takes teaching posts at several Universities and begins her literary career   |
| 1985    | Condé obtains Fulbright scholarship to teach in the United States and spends one year in Los Angeles   |
| 1986    | Return to Guadeloupe   |
| 2003    | Condé takes up teaching post at Columbia University in New York  |
| 2005    | Condé divides her time between New York and Guadeloupe and continues to write and publish  |

<sup>9</sup> COTTENET-HAGE, Madeleine & MOUDILENO, Lydie, (Eds.) *Maryse Condé: Une nomade inconvenante (Mélanges offerts à Maryse Condé)*. Paris: Ibis Rouge, 2002.

This example is something of a cautionary tale – although Condé is by nationality a Guadeloupean author, her nomadic life means she resists easy pigeonholing. Certain of her works are concerned with the Caribbean context, such as *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989); others are set in several countries such as *Moi, Tituba sorcière... Noire de Salem* (1986) which begins in Barbados, moves to Boston and the village of Salem before returning to Barbados. Condé herself says this novel is partially conceived as a critique of contemporary American society despite being set in the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century:

...à travers elle [the figure of Tituba], je voulais aussi parler de l'Amérique au présent. L'histoire des puritains ne m'intéressait pas en tant que telle. Je voulais montrer que les intolérances, les préjugés et le racisme dont Tituba est victime, existent encore dans l'Amérique contemporaine. *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... Noire de Salem* est un roman d'aujourd'hui, ce n'est pas du tout un roman historique.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, the short story *Nanna-Ya* moves from Jamaica to Portsmouth and back again in a quest to uncover roots and define identity. The themes of movement and 'retour au pays natal' were first brought to the fore by Aimé Césaire's seminal text *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* in 1939; indeed travel and displacement, voluntary or forced, are both important themes in Caribbean literature, reflecting historical, political and social spheres. This opens up wider questions: how helpful is it to speak of 'Caribbean Francophone' writers, given that these very authors have often lived in France and/or Africa for extended periods and have in some cases settled away from the Caribbean? Are these authors French authors, defined by the language in which they publish? Or African authors, writing about issues pertaining to the African continent? Does being born in the Caribbean seal your identity as a Caribbean author? How do these writers play the Tetris game of piecing together different influences in their works?

This situation also begs the question of audience: given the complex entanglement of experiences, for whom is the 'Francophone Caribbean' author writing? Angela Chambers describes the situation as one in which an author may become alienated from the *pays natal*:

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<sup>10</sup> Pfaff:96



Césaire's status as a poet in Europe, Africa and, latterly, the USA, has raised the question of the relevance of his work in the context of the Antilles and the Caribbean. It has been pointed out that many of the constituents of Césaire the politician would not be capable of reading and understanding the *Notebook* or the more obscure poems in the later collections. Moreover, throughout his life the poet himself has been eager to emphasize the 'universal' significance of his poetry.<sup>11</sup>

This tendency of the Antillean author to operate outside of the Antilles should not be ignored, and the implications of this for the potential audience must be considered. In achieving global status, must authors distance themselves from the *pays natal*?

### Conclusion

This paper has made a case for considering Francophone Caribbean literature through the metaphor of Tetris. The argument builds upon existing approaches to Antillean literature and develops the conviction that the diversity, manipulation and fusion played out in a Tetris game is also central to Caribbean Francophone literature. Furthermore, the effect of these cross-currents on a writer's audience merits consideration – in all, we find evidence suggestive of a move towards a literature of globalisation, reflecting the heightened awareness of affairs across the globe in the twentieth century. To recognise the hybridity of Caribbean literature is to accept the challenge this literature poses; to appreciate these texts, the reader must have a knowledge of the different influences which combine, sometimes not without a degree of manipulation, to form Francophone Caribbean literature, and from which the author draws inspiration, linguistically, socially and historically.

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<sup>11</sup> Sam Haigh (Ed.), *An Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing*. Berg: Oxford/New York, 1999. p.37

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