

Maryse Condé's *Comme Deux Frères*

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Silence and stigma surround homosexuality in the Caribbean region, despite the fact that same-sex relationships form as wide a swath of the sexual spectrum there as elsewhere and despite the denials made by Caribbean theorists: notably Franz Fanon's assertion in *Peau noire, masques blancs* that in the absence of the Oedipus complex, no pederasty exists in Martinique, or Edouard Glissant's reference in *Le Discours antillais* to "le peu de 'déviance' traditionnelle dans les pratiques sexuelles" (little traditional 'deviance' in sexual practices) in the French Antilles.<sup>1</sup> Such unwillingness to face up to sexual realities has had and continues to have nefarious consequences. In an article in the pathbreaking queer-studies anthology *Our Caribbean*, Lawson Williams calls attention to a shocking event: "On August 19, 1997, the commissioner of corrections, Colonel John Prescod, stated on a radio program that condoms would be distributed to prisoners and warders as part of an . . . (AIDS) prevention campaign—a recognition of homosexuality as a fact of life in Jamaican prisons." The result, Williams reports, was dramatic. Between August 20 and 23, 16 inmates were killed in reaction. "Reports of the incident indicated that there was a concerned effort by the 'men' (heterosexuals) in the prisons to kill the 'boys' (homosexuals)."<sup>2</sup>

In her recent play *Comme Deux Frères* the Guadeloupian writer Maryse Condé has chosen to address this subject that the inhabitants of her region of origin consider a taboo. Her willingness to address this subject is noteworthy and merits our consideration, especially since so little attention within queer studies has been given to the Caribbean and, conversely, so little attention within Francophone studies has been given to queer studies. The play was written by Condé in collaboration with the Caribbean-based Beninese playwright José Pliya.<sup>3</sup> Those of us who know Condé's work are not surprised that she would take on this controversial subject. Famously described as "politiquement incorrect,"<sup>4</sup> Condé routinely writes across the grain of reigning paradigms and ideologies. In *Comme Deux Frères* she goes farther than usual in this regard, not only by treating a subject that is taboo, but by doing so in theatrical form. For, unlike novels which are read in private, plays are performed in public, subject to the collective opinions of authors, directors, actors, critics, and viewing publics. It is this collaborative production of meaning that interests me here. After detailing a few facts concerning the staging and the basic story of *Comme Deux Frères*, I will examine diverse responses to the play and question whether "lifting the taboo," Condé's ostensible goal, was achieved or, indeed, was even achievable. Can literature, especially theater, make a difference in how homosexuality is treated in the Caribbean?

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*Comme Deux Frères* has been performed at least five times,<sup>5</sup> with one performance almost in your midst here in Illinois. The first performance was in 2007 at the national theater of L'Artchipel. That same year, the play was published in Belgium<sup>6</sup> and performed in Martinique and Avignon. In 2008, the Alliance Française of Chicago and De Paul University sponsored a

performance at the Chopin Theater that I attended. The Caribbean Theater Company at the University of Virginia staged it in 2009.

The situation in the play is stark, intense, and psychologically complex. Two men, childhood friends, are alone in the confined space of a single cell following a botched robbery that resulted in a murder. Their hearing is scheduled for the morning. In the early hours before dawn, the threads of their troubled past lives interweave with the crisis at hand: Grégoire, always the dominant partner, pleads with Jeff to continue the role “comme un frère” that he has always played, and to falsely claim responsibility for the murder so that Grégoire can start a new life with a woman he loves. Although Jeff would presumably have no reason to accede to such a request, he has in the past always sacrificed for Grégoire, through a combination of friendship, weakness, and other motivations. The play ends with Jeff agreeing but with one condition. Calling it “une proposition indécente . . . comme celle que l’on se fait entre hommes,” (an indecent proposition . . . of the kind men make between themselves), he elaborates: “Comme deux frères, au fond d’un cachot lorsque la vie, le pays, le système tout entier les a rejetés. Alors, il ne leur reste plus rien: plus de rêves, plus d’espoir, plus d’illusions. Rien que la culpabilité et un désir obscur de négocier.” (Like two brothers, in the back of a cell, when life, the country, the system has completely rejected them. Then nothing is left for them: no dreams, no hope, no illusions. Nothing but guilt and an obscure desire to negotiate). As the play draws to an end, Jeff repeats “Viens,” (Come) Grégoire protests, and the stage directions indicate: “(Jeff le prend dans ses bras. Greg se débat. Corps à corps, secs, abrupts, fermes et feutrés à la fois. Noir brusque).” (Jeff takes him in his arms. Greg fights. Body to body, sharp, abrupt, strong and muted at the same time. Sudden darkness.)

Condé has been very direct in discussing her attitude toward her subject matter. When questioned in 2010 by Noëlle Carruggi about her willingness to address the taboo, Condé responded that she has good reason to talk about the topic since many of her friends are gay, as is her son. She questions why it should always be required to “se taire sur cette grande partie de l’humain, toujours l’ignorer, toujours l’exclure” (be silent about this large part of humanity, always pretend not to know about it, always exclude it); and she concludes, “Ils doivent aussi apparaître en littérature. J’ai toujours été forcée par la vie que j’ai connue d’inclure les homosexuels dans mes portraits littéraires parce que je les ai vus à côté de moi. Dans les romans, depuis le début, je parle de l’homosexualité.” (They too must appear in literature. I’ve always been forced by the life I’ve known to include homosexuals in my literary portraits because I saw them along side me. In my novels, since the beginning, I have been speaking about homosexuality)<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere she has deplored the “non-dit” and the silence surrounding the subject.

Je me suis demandé pourquoi ne pas parler des homosexuels alors qu’il y en a tant autour de nous. Quand j’étais enfant, il y avait des hommes comme des femmes qui vivaient ensemble et qu’on appelait *zanmi*. C’est bien une tradition antillaise. Je ne comprends pas pourquoi personne ne veut en parler.<sup>8</sup> (I asked myself why not talk about homosexuals since there are so many around us. When I was a child, there were men like women who lived together and who were called *zanmi*. It’s a Caribbean tradition. I don’t understand why no one wants to talk about it).

Such straightforward statements in interviews, typical of Condé, differ markedly from the approach found in the play. This too is not surprising. As a professor for many years at Berkeley,

Columbia, Virginia, and other institutions, Condé knows literary theory and is subtle in its application: in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*, for example, she stages a feminist dialogue between Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* and the black protagonist and historical figure from the Salem witch trials, Tituba. *Comme Deux Frères*, like *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*, is also grounded in contemporary theoretical concepts: in this case, regarding reductive and naïve conceptions about homosexuality. The ending is presumably ambiguous: some consider that a sex act has been imposed on Grégoire while others do not. Within the play, we learn that Grégoire had been sexually abused as a child by a police commissioner; Jeff reveals that he once had a three-month affair with a man. Yet both characters would undoubtedly consider themselves “straight,” and much in their life stories concerns their intense love relationships with women. In keeping with a queer studies approach, Condé demonstrates the relative, socially constructed nature of homosexuality. As Laurence Schehr states, “the social constructionist argument sees the content or meaning of the word ‘homosexuality’ as having been produced by the social structures and formats in which any given individual finds himself or herself.”<sup>9</sup> Grégoire and Jeff found themselves in particular circumstance and engaged in specific behaviors which, if deserving of the label homosexual, are so in ways that are a function of how and where they lived their lives: in prison or free in society; in the Caribbean, in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere. Condé is also a fellow traveler with Schehr and other queer theorists in deconstructing binary oppositions between explicit and implicit same-sex sexuality. Schehr argues persuasively that it is no longer possible to posit

une division binaire et primordiale entre le fait d’assumer son homosexualité (mais qu’est-ce l’homosexualité maintenant, aujourd’hui, pour nous, post-industriels, post-modernes, et franchement *post-queer*?) et toute autre position ontologique, politique, et surtout épistémologique? Qu’en est-il aussi de l’homosexualité de l’autre?<sup>10</sup> (a binary and primordial division between the fact of claiming one’s homosexuality [but what is homosexuality now, today, for us who are post-industrial, postmodern, and frankly post-queer?] and any other ontological, political, and above all epistemological position? Also, what about the other’s homosexuality?)

These questions have decided relevance to the identities of both Jeff and Grégoire.

Condé’s deconstructive strategy in *Comme Deux Frères* perhaps explains the divergent critical responses the play has evoked. Stéphanie Bérard considers homosexuality the play’s central theme. Emily Sahakian, a theater critic, disagrees, emphasizing instead its close structural resemblance to others plays by Condé in which two characters, à la *Huis clos*, grapple with the psychological consequences of their personal choices as well as the problematic societies in which they have lived. Sahakian expresses uncertainty as to whether the play ends with a sexual act between the two men, which as she rightly observes, would bring about no meaningful change regarding attitudes toward homosexuality in the society in which they lived.<sup>11</sup> Beth Turner, writing from the viewpoint of African American studies, views Jeff and Grégoire’s stories in the historical context of the emasculation and sexual abuse of black men under slavery.<sup>12</sup> Turner cites the feminist Caribbean scholar Patricia Mohammed who reminds us of the larger issues of masculine identity underlying homosexuality in former slave societies:

In societies where black masculinity constantly seeks to assert itself, where it is defined as power over other men and in relation to multiple relationships with the other sex, where

monogamy and fidelity are perceived as signs of weakness or of being a “soft man,” masculinity is itself a very fragile thing. This fragility is evident in the antagonism and distance which must be maintained from male homosexuality and from homosexuality itself.<sup>13</sup>

In short, it is not easy to pin down what *Comme Deux Frères* says about homosexuality. If some of the reasons for differences in interpretation can be attributed to critical perspectives,—for example, that of a theater critic versus an African American scholar—other, more deep-seated reasons lie in the interaction that occurred among the author, director, and actors. In speaking to Noëlle Carruggi Condé has stated,

La pièce telle qu'on la voit n'est pas tout à fait comme elle a été écrite. À l'origine, c'était plutôt un tabou que l'un des deux obligeait l'autre à regarder en face . . . Au début, ça faisait partie des provocations obligées. Jeff obligeait l'autre à regarder la complexité éventuelle de sa nature.<sup>14</sup> (The play as you see it is not exactly the way it was written. Originally it was part of an obligatory provocation. Jeff forced the other man to look at the eventual complexity of his character).

Stéphanie Bérard, who has interviewed the major contributors to the play, explains why Condé's original intentions were modified in the play. For one thing, as noted earlier, she wrote it in collaboration with the Beninese playwright José Pliya, whose minimalist style resulted in a proliferation of silences and elipses that enhance the ambiguity of the text. Moreover, the Martinican director José Exéllis seems to have wanted to deflect attention away from its sexual content. Exéllis has stated that he does not think that *Comme Deux Frères* is a play about homosexuality. He thinks the author wanted to “fustiger l'hypocrisie et le tabou” (denounce hypocrisy and taboos) and accordingly made the ending vague. Exéllis talks about metaphysical themes and leaving space for the viewer's “rêverie” (daydreaming) and imagination. Bérard considers that what Exéllis did at the end was “s'éloigner du texte en choisissant de transformer l'étreinte finale, directe et brutale, en une danse des corps, largement esthétisée.” (depart from the text in choosing to transform the final embrace, which is direct and brutal, into a corporal dance that is largely estheticized). Nor is the play about homosexuality in the eyes of the Guadeloupian actor who played Jeff, Gilbert Lamond, for whom the play was written according to Pliya's preface to the published text. Lamond sees it as a story of a complicated relationship between two individuals and questions whether the scene at the end is real as opposed to a dream or nightmare.<sup>15</sup>

I would like at this point to offer some observations from my own perspective as a viewer of the play in Chicago and a participant with Condé in a round table discussion of it the following day. It did not occur to me in watching the play that it was not about homosexuality or that the final scene was anything but a prelude to or choreographed enactment of a sex act. I was thus befuddled by the vague and indirect response I received to a question I asked during the question and answer period with the director and actors. At the time, I did not know, as I do now, what Exéllis's and Lamond's views about the subject were. I was also befuddled by the reaction of my fellow viewers who made no mention of homosexuality in their questions. Many were students; others were associated with De Paul University; still others were connected to the Alliance française of Chicago. Members of these groups may have been reserved or inclined to discretion regarding explicit sexual issues for various reasons: a sophisticated Chicago audience

may not have thought of homosexuality or prison sex as a particularly provocative subject; students who have seen recent programs such as the HBO series *Oz* may find nothing particularly new or shocking about the subject of prison life; white audiences may dismiss issues of black masculinity as a demonstration of backwardness; black bi-sexuality may be looked down as something in the category of “down low” behavior; whites may avoid speaking publicly about a topic for fear of saying the wrong thing.<sup>16</sup> The round table discussion at the Alliance française was similarly evasive on the subject. What I failed to understand then was how much difference the audience would make in the reception of the play. I am struck in this regard by Bérard’s report that the actor who played Grégoire—Ruddy Sylaire of Haiti—reports a far different, more direct engagement with the subject of homosexuality when the play was viewed by an audience of incarcerated prisoners.<sup>17</sup>

Curiously we return in closing to prisons, mentioned in my opening remarks: there where homosexuality was not treated with ambiguity and discretion. Whether or not performing a play such as *Comme Deux Frères* makes a difference in that context remains to be seen: that is, would it have enlightened the Jamaican “men” who killed the incarcerated “boys”? Beyond that real-life situation, I wonder whether literature can act to lift the taboo. Some queer studies theorists of the Caribbean think it can. In “In ‘Bullies’ and ‘Battymen’: Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Literature,” Timothy Chin states,

In contrast to . . . binary structures—which often imply the mutually exclusive choice of an either/or—these writers frequently deploy narrative strategies that privilege ambiguity and the ability to negotiate contradictions . . . the willingness to accept the indeterminacy associated with such contradictions—the opposite of rigid binary thinking, in other words—is often the first step in undoing the homophobia that continues to marginalize lesbians and gay men in contemporary Caribbean cultures . . . Given the alarming reproduction in literature and popular culture of ideologies that condone or legitimate such violence, we clearly need a critical practice that goes beyond simple dichotomies—us/them, native/foreign, natural/unnatural—a practice that can not only affirm but also critique indigenous cultures in all of their varied and inevitably contradictory forms.<sup>18</sup>

The example Chin cites is the Jamaican lesbian writer Michelle Cliff, who is probably not widely read outside of Women’s Studies or Caribbean literature classrooms. She is thus unlikely to have much influence in achieving the goals that Chin articulates. Condé reaches a wider audience than Cliff: in France, the United States, and the Caribbean. Yet it is questionable whether she achieves Chin’s stated goals either. Is it not the case that the readers and viewers who are receptive to the lifting of the taboo in a play such as *Comme Deux Frères* are the proverbial choir to whom the playwright is preaching?

I would like to close with a question regarding queer theory as it applies to *Comme Deux Frères*. I fully understand that, notwithstanding statements about lifting the taboo in this play, Maryse Condé ultimately wanted to produce a significant theatrical event. I believe that in collaboration with José Pliya she did so. What Bérard describes as “cette langue effacée et ces accords en mineur” (this subtle language and minor chords)<sup>19</sup> derive not only from Pliya’s collaboration. They were chosen and approved by Condé, I presume, because they constitute a powerful and evocative style that is in keeping with the indirect, ambiguous way in which homosexuality is treated in the Caribbean. A more direct, confrontational approach would not have suited the participants in the creation of the play—the authors, director, and actors for

which it was presumably written. But I question whether Condé let the ambiguity go too far and whether that is not at times the case too with queer theory and other deconstructive approaches. To be blunt, is it possible to want to change society on the one hand and to want to complexify reductive positions for social change on the other? The feminist exchange in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* ultimately gives the reader no sense of a feminist viewpoint, only a somewhat tongue-in-cheek poke at those of us who take those viewpoints seriously.<sup>20</sup> I suspect that the same is true regarding queer studies in *Comme Deux Frères*, which I see as treated with the same cynicism that Condé holds regarding solutions to social problems in the Caribbean and society generally. Not that queer studies is practiced uniformly in a Caribbean context; for, as Schehr was quoted earlier as reminding us, queer studies issues have to be understood as “having been produced by the social structures and formats in which any given individual finds himself or herself.” Of the two Caribbean queer studies critics mentioned here, Lawson Williams is a gay activist; Timothy Chin is a deconstructionist. Where Condé stands on a spectrum with activism and deconstruction as opposing poles remains to be seen, which is undoubtedly the way she would want us to view her and the play.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Stéphanie Bérard in “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” *Maryse Condé: rébellion et transgressions*, ed. Noëlle Carruggi (Paris: Karthala, 2010), 163-179. I draw heavily in this paper on the information contained in Bérard’s informative article.

<sup>2</sup> Lawson Williams, “On Homophobia and Gay Rights Activism in Jamaica,” *Our Caribbean* (Durham, Duke UP: 2008), 282-83.

<sup>3</sup> The exact nature of Pliya’s contribution is not clear. The title page of the play states that he provided an “adaptation dramaturgique.”

<sup>4</sup> *L’Oeuvre de Maryse Condé; Questions et réponses à propos d’une écrivaine politiquement incorrecte* (Paris: Harmattan, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> The play was also performed in a prison context according to the Haitian actor Ruddy Sylaire: Bérard, “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” 178.

<sup>6</sup> Maryse Condé, *Comme deux frères* (Carnières-Morlanwelz, Belgium: Lansman, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Noëlle Carruggi, “Écrire en Maryse Condé.” *Maryse Condé: rébellion et transgressions* (Paris: Karthala, 2010), 215-16.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Bérard, “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” 173

<sup>9</sup> Laurence R. Schehr, *The Shock of Men: Homosexual Hermeneutics in French Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence R. Schehr, “Relire les Homotextualities,” *Aimez-vous le queer?* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Lecture by Emily Sahakian at the University of Georgia, Spring 2011. I am grateful to Sahakian for also discussing her interpretation of the play with me.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Elizabeth Turner, *Haunting Memories: Black Francophone Caribbean Women Playwrights and the Traumatic Slave Past*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Georgia, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Turner, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Carruggi, “Écrire en Maryse Condé,” 216.

<sup>15</sup> Bérard, “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” 176.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Professor Andrew Suozzo of De Paul University for his suggestions regarding the possible reasons for what he termed the “rather pedestrian” comments of the audience.

<sup>17</sup> Bérard, “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” 178.

<sup>18</sup> Timothy S. Chin, “Bullers” and Battymen: Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature,” *Our Caribbean* (Durham, Duke UP), 89, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Bérard, “*Comme deux frères: huis clos nocturne pour d'obscurs désirs,*” 172,

<sup>20</sup> Condé has never been willing to state her position on feminism: see my interview in “Maryse Condé and Slavery,” Athens, *Slavery in the Caribbean Francophone world: distant voices, forgotten acts, forged identities* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000): 211-223.