Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 39 | Issue 1 Article 5

2015

# Maryse Condé's Heremakhonon As a Noir Novel

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## Abstract

A noir genre analysis of *Heremakhonon* explains the confusion, sensuality, red herrings, and flashbacks that permeate the novel, as well as the primacy of an investigation to the plot. Upon arriving in a newly independent West African country, protagonist Veronica witnesses the arrest of a political activist who opposed the ruling elite. When she investigates his disappearance, Veronica realizes that she is complicit with the elite perpetrators.

## Keywords

noir, postcolonial, West Africa, interiorized racism, Guadeloupe, Maryse Condé, Heremakhonon, En attendant le bonheur, Waiting for Happiness

# Maryse Condé's *Heremakhonon* as a Noir Novel

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Maryse Condé demonstrated her interest in the noir murder mystery genre in her novels *Traversée de la mangrove* (*Crossing the Mangrove*), *Célanire coucoupé* (*Who Slashed Celanire's Throat*), and *La Belle Créole* ('The Beautiful Creole'). In this article, I apply the perspective of the noir genre to examine Condé's famous and enigmatic first novel, published as *Heremakhonon* in 1976 and as *En attendant le bonheur* (*Waiting for Happiness*) in 1988. This novel, often interpreted as an unsuccessful and misguided quest for identity, recounts a murder mystery that the heroine must investigate against her will. As in a typical noir novel, the opening crime will uncover a global social problem—the ruling elite clings to power by secretly eliminating political opponents. As a typical noir novel, *Heremakhonon* reveals the identity of the perpetrators from the beginning. As a typical noir investigator, the protagonist Veronica takes too much time to "solve" the case because she associates herself with the perpetrators. Veronica's journey to Africa and her investigation do not teach to her anything about herself that she did not know before going there, but they make her come to terms with that knowledge. She comes to realize that while she considers herself a victim of colonialism and racism, her elitist upbringing prevents her from associating herself with victims of class oppression in Africa, Paris, or Guadeloupe. For this reason, the heroine chooses to associate herself with the elite perpetrators, rather than the victim, a young political activist who challenged the elite. All elites in the novel—Guadeloupian, French, and African—while professing to defend the underprivileged repressed by colonialism, continue to repress them using paternalist rhetoric. Thus, consistent with other noir novels, *Heremakhonon*'s criminal investigation exposes the corruption within supposedly incorruptible institutions and leads the investigator to acknowledge her involvement with the perpetrators.

## The Noir Novel

Noir is a tool of social criticism: authors use crime to identify instances of social injustice and individuals in positions of authority responsible for it (Conard 17). In classic detective novels, the central crime disrupts the societal order and must be solved for the order to be restored. In contrast, noir novels use crime to uncover chronic malfunction of society and social evils, such as poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. The central crime aims to expose the corruption of the very institutions thought to ensure justice and equality—the government,

the police, and the army. In other words, while classic detective stories excite and reassure, noir seeks to disorient and disconcert. As Lee Horsley summarizes, "In contrast to the kind of mystery story that is based on a stable triangle of characters (detective, victim, murderer), noir narratives do not move toward a tidy assignation of guilt. Instead of terminating in satisfying closure, they demonstrate the folly of thinking that there could be any easy solution" (137).

The signature noir atmosphere of anxiety, paranoia, and confusion first appeared in 1940s Hollywood films based on proto-noir hardboiled novels. The filmmakers employed German expressionist cinematographers' low-key black and white photography (Neale 161), "high contrast, chiaroscuro lighting where shafts of intense light contrast starkly with deep, black shadows, and where space is fractured into an assortment of unstable lines and surfaces, often fragmented or twisted into odd angles" (Spicer 11-12). In his 1946 article, the French critic Nino Frank proposed that these films constitute a distinct genre, which he called "noir" (138). Critics describe the atmosphere of noir films as characterized by "loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurities" (Schrader 58), "despair, loneliness, and dread" (Porfirio 78), and "dislocation and bleakness which earned the style its name" (Hirsch 72). In noir novels, this atmosphere is created by intentionally misleading clues and hints, which prevent the investigator from solving the case quickly.

An important feature of the noir genre is the complexity of the characters. Comparing noir and hardboiled protagonists, noir writer Jack Bludis wrote, "Hardboiled = tough. Noir = screwed" (qtd. in Horsley 135). Noir, which "feeds itself and its entire plot on the causes of the immorality of the characters" (Lucamante 64), focuses not on action but on its characters, examining the traumas and prejudices that bring the murderer to commit the crime and prevent the investigator from solving it quickly. Noir investigators are violent and confused, and their limited and distorted perception of events defines the reader's. In addition, the investigator character is often sexually involved with, or revealed to be, the victim or the perpetrator. These factors make the characters and the plots of noir novels especially complex and disorienting.

For black writers, noir can be an instrument of resistance: to racism, internalized racism, and the hegemonic literary tradition. Manthia Diawara argues that like rap musicians, black noir genre novelists and filmmakers deconstruct racism (526). They depict "Black men and women trapped by systems" who express their frustration with violence through a tradition that "dares every form of policing the Black body, mind, or air" (534) "to generate new ways of being that later become styles for the community, symbols of freedom, or elements of Black nationalism" (533). For Francis Higginson, the noir genre—"popular," "low" "frivolous," and American—helps Francophone black writers emancipate themselves from the "high" and "intellectual" French literary tradition, which was

instrumental in justifying colonialism and was imposed on the colonized by the colonialist education system. Wendy Knepper similarly believes that the Caribbean writer Patrick Chamoiseau used noir "to critique the neocolonialism evident in current-day Martinique" (1444), to reveal the "patrolling of the colonial order by the law and the internalized self-policing" (1440) in his novel *Solibo the Magnificent*. Internalized racism as well as the questioning of the dominant literary and philosophic tradition are crucial topics in Condé's *Heremakhonon*.

## Is Veronica a Victim? Critics on *Heremakhonon*

Condé stated that Veronica experiences an identity crisis because she has not been "educated about her identity" ("Desiderada" 527): at the time of the novel's writing, West Indians were not taught their history. Indeed, Veronica explains her flight from Guadeloupe to Paris and then to Africa as an attempt to discover "what was before" (12),[1] that is, history and identity prior to colonialism. It is through this identity crisis that many critics explain Veronica's unwillingness to participate in the confrontation between the ruling elite and the underprivileged classes. This confrontation, muted in Guadeloupe and Paris, is so violent and overt in Africa that the heroine can no longer choose to ignore it. Why does Veronica refuse to take sides in this confrontation? For Sarah Mosher, it is Veronica's "search for the past [that] allows her to ignore events occurring in the present" (150). For Jeannie Suk, Veronica "imagines the process of *recovery from the past trauma* as the wrestling of the personal away from the political" (my italics, 96). For Françoise Lionnet, Veronica "remains *caught* in the grammar of her own alienations" and "falls *victim* to another . . . mirage created by her desire for the (African) Other" (my italics, 167-68). For Hershini Bhana Young, Veronica "cannot hear herself, due to her assimilation of the racist and sexist colonial/national voices that insist on the ultimate *unworthiness* of anything she, as a diasporic black woman, might have to say" (my italics, 188). Nicole Simek also writes that the novel is about building "new, empowering practices that allow *the victim* to function as much as possible" (my emphasis, 148).

Without a doubt, Veronica is a victim of colonialism and sexism, as these critical readings point out, and she often calls herself a victim, especially at the beginning of her narrative. We see that Veronica seeks to exonerate her family and herself by this lack of identity and history: her parents "mimicked [white colonialists] because they hadn't been taught anything. *They were victims. Like me*" (my italics, 135). At the same time, Veronica vigorously rejects the victim label. "I am not an underdog," she says, and insists that she was "born with a silver spoon [in her mouth]" (23). I will show that Veronica does not feel like a victim of racial trauma, but perceives this trauma as imposed on her by society, and travels to Africa to try to get rid of it. Imposed victimhood is a crucial topic of

many of Condé's works. Already in her dissertation written concurrently with the novel, Condé questions the traditional portrayal of blacks in West Indian literature as victims (interview with Pfaff 18, interview with Wolff 79). In her more recent noir novel *La Belle Creole* (2000), the black protagonist who murdered his white mistress rebels when his lawyer represents him as a victim of racism and slavery acting symbolically to avenge all other victims. Similarly, the heroine of *Célanire cou-coupé* (2001), left for dead with her throat cut amidst piles of trash when she was a baby, survives and, far from feeling like a victim, sets out to avenge herself.

In the same vein, if we approach *Heremakhonon* from the perspective of the noir genre, Veronica will transform from a victim into an investigator complicit with the murderers. As she seeks to discover what happened to her friend, the disappeared political activist who challenged the ruling regime, she becomes aware that she has always chosen to identify herself not with the victims of oppression but with the perpetrators. Although Veronica is friends with two opposition activists—Saliou, the head of the institute in which she teaches philosophy, and her student Birame III—she chooses to ignore their arguments. Soon, Birame III is arrested for performing in a play that mocked the president of the country and his associates. Unlike other students involved in the performance, Birame III refuses to publicly recant and is never seen again. Veronica's friends among opposition activists tell her that the student has been murdered, but she does not believe them. On the contrary, she becomes the lover of the opposition's most hardened enemy, Ibrahima Sory, Minister of the Interior and Defense. Her friends in the opposition tell her that her lover personally orchestrates repression, but again, she refuses to believe them. She idealizes her lover, whose royal ancestors have never been enslaved and deported, unlike hers. However, Veronica soon learns that her lover despises non-elite Africans just as her parents despise non-elite Guadeloupians. She realizes that she attached herself to this rich and powerful man because she is seeking the comfort and security of her childhood in Guadeloupe. The elite, claiming to regenerate the country after colonialism, deceive their compatriots with the same paternalistic rhetoric the colonizers used. When Veronica finally cannot continue to ignore this, she acknowledges her long-standing complicity with the hegemonic class—in Guadeloupe, Paris, and Africa. Thus, *Heremakhonon* follows noir internal logic: the crime that opens the novel exposes the corruption of the elite who, pretending to work in the people's interest, oppress their compatriots in order to gain greater power.

Condé herself questions Veronica's posturing and initial self-perception as a victim. Calling Veronica a negative heroine,[2] she urges readers to scrutinize rather than justify her actions. My reading follows this lead by tracing how Veronica, unwilling to engage with classes historically deprived of agency and voice, allies herself instead with their oppressors. Leah Hewitt pointed out that critics have often criticized Condé for her heroine's behavior and questioned her

"political commitments to Africa or to Guadeloupe" (642). My objective is not to criticize Veronica or the author. Clearly, Veronica is much more ruthless with herself than any critic could ever be—this is why her "enunciations work very effectively, if indirectly, to critique postcolonial Africa" (Miller 357). As for parallels between the heroine and the author, I do want to draw the reader's attention to Condé's memories that facilitate our understanding of the novel. In the past, Condé described Veronica as "the opposite of myself: a person lacking in willpower, energy, and dynamism; a character who does not know who she is" (interview with Clark 121). Yet she also noted that "Veronica's childhood is mine in a way. […] I was a bored, discontented princess" (interview with Clark 93). Condé's parents were wealthy and took great pride in being successful: "Blacks who were not 'successful' were considered failures" (interview with Pfaff 5). As a child, she was not allowed to mingle with ordinary people—"it was a question of behavior—not to talk to just anybody below our level. It was [the parents'] general attitude toward life" (interview with Clark 88). Condé's parents disapproved of her marriage to a man from a poor African family but welcomed her sister's marriage to an African "from a very wealthy family" (interview with Clark 99). However, the recent, yet untranslated, memoir *La vie sans fards* ('Life Without Artifice,' 2012)[3] shows that the author's beginnings in Paris were not at all like Veronica's. An unmarried woman of color with a child, she was shunned by racist white society, but also by her sisters who had successful and rich husbands. In Africa, unlike Veronica, Condé also struggled to provide her four children with basic necessities. On the other hand, although she claimed that seeing "les deux Afriques" 'two Africas'—"privilégiés" and "plébiens" 'the privileged' and 'the plebeians' (*Vie sans fards* part II, chapter 6) made her forget her "souverain mépris des inférieurs" 'sovereign scorn for the inferior,' a result of her upper-class background and upbringing (part 1, chapter 1), she also insists that she remained "toujours et partout qu'une spectatrice" 'always and everywhere merely a spectator' (part I, chapter 2)—like Veronica. Later on, she describes her relationship with a powerful lawyer who also helped her get out of prison after she was detained. Veronica's frank and intense narrative undoubtedly takes root in the author's experience.

## The Perpetrator: Three Elites

Unlike the author, in both Paris and Africa Veronica immediately finds the same comfort and privileges that surrounded her since childhood in Guadeloupe. Drawing on her memories, she comes to realize that all three elites are equally snobbish and paternalistic. The novel's first elite is Veronica's estranged family, whom she has not seen in nine years. In Veronica's opinion, her parents, who got rich by selling low-quality alcohol, are not really elite. She believes that they

imitate their "secret demigods" (83) white colonialists, and mocks their manners as inauthentic. For example, recalling the compliment "You're divine" (8) that she overheard at her parents' party, Veronica comments sarcastically, "Divine niggers! Can you dig it!" (8). She recalls her father saying about a group of poor celebrating in the streets, "Soon we won't be able to go out anymore. They'll be everywhere" (72). Veronica believes that her black parents' resentment towards black lower classes is unnatural and must be copied from European colonialists.

The second elite Veronica scrutinizes is the Parisian intelligentsia. Veronica seems to be at ease among this elite, though her white Parisian lover treats her family with ironic disdain. He laughs at the photos of her sisters' lavish weddings, ridicules her aunt behind her back for flashy attire and jewelry, and does not introduce Veronica to his parents. Her lover's sarcastic attitude towards her parents offends her (even though she thinks they deserve it), as does the fact that most blacks arriving in Paris are reduced to menial jobs. There is one street sweeper who often stares at her as she strolls with her white lover in the Latin Quarter. Veronica dreams about him often, but it does not occur to her to talk to him in real life. She is aware of the abyss separating her from the poor, and when non-elite Africans beg her to talk about Paris, she thinks with impotent bitterness, "My Paris wouldn't be yours. Yours is the tall, dark plastic dustbins and the short, phosphorescent jackets in the dawn" (25).

Veronica meets the African elite after becoming the lover of the Interior Minister, Ibrahima Sory, whose family has ruled the country for centuries (23). He appears educated, courteous, and self-confident, yet Veronica soon realizes that, like a "cop" (88), he controls her comings and goings, her friendships and acquaintances. Sory confines her to his luxurious villa, supposedly to protect her from antigovernment protesters. Notably, Veronica does not object; she likes his villa, whose name, Heremakhonon 'Wait for Happiness,' makes her hope that she will find spiritual peace there. As the author explained in *La vie sans fards*, while she lived in Guinea, there was a store there called "Heremakhonon" whose salesclerks answered all questions about an item's availability with "Tomorrow" ("Demain," part 1, chapter 6). At her lover's villa, waiting for that future happiness, she can ignore the rumors about prisons bursting with political prisoners and covert assassinations orchestrated by her lover. Gradually, Veronica realizes that through her aristocratic lover, she seeks to reconcile with her own elitism and her estranged family in Guadeloupe. She states, "My revolt is a lure. This piece of truth hits me and goes to my head. I have never realized it so clearly. In fact I'm not escaping from anything. Through Ibrahima Sory I am trying to get back to them [. . .]. Entitled to be what they were—arrogant and contemptuous" (100). Sory's comfortable villa is a safe haven amidst universal poverty. Every time Veronica escapes to the villa in her lover's Mercedes, she thinks with relief, "That's where I feel best" (149). At the same time, she scorns

herself for feeling that relief: "Oh, of course, I'll come back to Heremakhonon. I shan't be away for long. Heremakhonon and Ibrahima Sory are traps I couldn't avoid, even if I wanted to. But I don't want to" (145). The everyday life of the African elite so strikingly resembles that of her parents that Veronica almost faints as she visits her lover's sister's villa. All her childhood memories come back to her at once: fine European furnishings, the music teacher's irritated voice, even smells. Overwhelmed, Veronica says to herself, "They are like us" (75). Among the elite, in familiar luxury, Veronica feels "protected" (150) from the common folk with whom she does not belong. Still, she fears that the lower classes may suddenly attack: "And suppose the crowd, whom I thought obedient and disciplined, turned round under the cover of the night and marched on us with sticks and stones?" (150). Veronica realizes that between her and the common people lies an abyss that she is unwilling to cross.

Noir works reveal that the elite, who claim to be the mainstay of justice and order, abuse their power. The heroine of *Heremakhonon*, over the course of her half-hearted investigation, observes that the African ruling elite make a show of combating colonialism's legacy of economic underdevelopment with paternalistic and falsely patriotic rhetoric. This comes as no news to her: she notes that the African elite behaved in this fashion both before and during colonization. Veronica sarcastically notes that the kings Agaja and Tegbesu, who ruled the kingdom of Dahomey (modern-day Benin) in the seventeenth century, eagerly sold their compatriots to European slave traders, making "400 pounds sterling per boat load" (32). They gained access to the sea in order to deal with slave traders directly (Thomas 352), and spent their revenue on fine European merchandise, poor quality firearms, and industrial-grade alcohol (Bay 121). Condé's Guinean friends tell her that the pre-colonial era "ce n'était pas un Âge d'Or" 'was no Golden Age' because of "l'eclavage domestique, le système des castes, l'oppression des femmes" 'domestic slavery, caste system, oppression of women' (*La vie sans fards*, part 1, chapter 7). After the colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century, local elites collaborated with colonial authorities, making it possible for European empires to minimize colonial administration costs. Condé's friends describe them as "ancêtres [qui] ont fait le lit des colonisateurs. Ce sont eux qui ont mené nos peuples là où ils en sont aujourd'hui" 'ancestors [who] paved the way for the colonizers. It is they who led our peoples where they are today' (*La vie sans fards*, part 1, chapter 7). When colonialism fell, local elites— "meilleurs élèves des colons" 'the colonizers' best pupils' (*La vie sans fards,* part 1, chapter 7)— assumed key social and political positions and adopted "opportunistic and perverse public policies to enrich themselves at the expense of the rest of the people" (Mbaku 48). The elites "whitewashed the instruments and structures of domination, marginalization, exploitation and repression" (Ihonvbere 242) and continued the colonial-era repression.

*Heremakhonon* describes these postcolonial realities: "an oligarchy of greed has taken over from Europe" (32). The events narrated in *Heremakhonon* refer in particular to Guinea and the regime of its first president, Sékou Touré, who remained in power from 1958 until his death in 1984. After winning public approval by pledging to combat imperialism and capitalism, Touré morphed into "a dictator, eliminating opposition to his power and resorting to the worst methods of oppression" (Goerg 1033). As Condé said, "I was to see black leaders oppressing black people in Guinea; I was to see black people forced into exile because of their political opinions" ("The Role of the Writer" 698). Condé described this regime as "corrompu, égoïste, et indifférent au bien-être de son people" 'corrupt, egoistic, and indifferent to the well-being of the people' (*La vie sans fards*, part 1, chapter 7). More than a million Guineans fled the country, while fifty thousand perished in concentration camps (*Dying for Change* 8). Rulers who succeeded Touré perpetuated this autocracy, and Guinea remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

Veronica observes that the local elites who replaced colonial powers control their subjects by means of supremacist, paternalistic, and racist discourse, just as white colonialists did before them. These elites present themselves as competent, and the masses as immature and unfit for exercising political will. In addition, the elite blame former empires and white colonialists for the fact that the economic recovery they promised did not materialize. As a typical noir investigator, Veronica finds herself under the influence of the perpetrators of the central crime. In noir novels, these high-profile perpetrators initially hold great sway over the investigator and blind him or her with false clues that distort the investigator's perceptions. The investigator initially trusts the perpetrators as they occupy positions of moral authority and must break through a smokescreen of untruths with which they conceal their involvement in the crime. In *Heremakhonon*, the elites' paternalistic, purportedly caring and protective discourse conceals their real political priority: staying in power at all costs.

The president's name, Mwalimwana 'our Father,' and his image as a big-hearted man, are such a false hint. It serves to convince Veronica and Mwalimwana's subjects that the president is working in the people's interest. To solidify this idea, a hymn celebrating Mwalimwana is played on the radio four times a day, stating that the people trust him completely and accept everything that he may wish to undertake. Mwalimwana boasts that he takes good care of the people and that now there are more schools, hospitals, roads, and universities than there were in colonial times (46). He notes ironically that the government does too much for the people, saying, "We spoil them too much" (32). The masses believe the government-controlled radio and criticize activists for "always [having] something bad to say about Mwalimwana" (127). Thus, Mwalimwana and his administration govern as the colonizers before them: preventing non-elite

Africans from participating in politics (Ginio 100), presenting their rule as the "order that would rectify African 'chaos'" (Gadzekpo 455), and describing their subjects as lazy and inferior, unsuitable for self-government (Memmi 82).

Veronica's lover, the interior minister, also claims that his priority is "rebuilding a country that colonialism has drained of its strength" (102), yet rebel activists tell her that his family has always been "the staunchest ally of the colonial powers. [. . .] Whip in hand, they forced the laboring masses to work for the profit of the whites" (23). According to her lover, whites alone are responsible for his country's problems, and, upon learning of her white Parisian lover, he indirectly calls Veronica a whore: "After all they did to us… For me, only whores should deal with white men" (152). In contrast, Veronica's rebellious students call her a whore for sleeping with the duplicitous minister. As the opposition leader Saliou tells Veronica, the elite "belong to a different world. [...] For them, men without a name are scum, good for working in jobs they decide to give them" (94). Veronica eventually becomes convinced that the African elite despise their non-elite subjects and mask their supremacist convictions with paternalistic discourse.

## Investigator Veronica

Although Veronica becomes conscious of her investigative role early on, she finds this role to be inopportune. She complains, "I came reaching for peace and what did I find? A corpse" (63). As she spends most nights with the man who is considered the mastermind of the repressions and therefore must know what happened to Birame III, Veronica says to herself, "I can make inquiries. And right from the very source!" (60). Still, she finds it impossible to confront Sory when she is with him: "I can't pronounce [the victim's] name, make enquiries about him. I don't know why" (142), and feels reassured when he laughs off her accusations as nonsense. When she is not with Sory, she is again emboldened and determined, claiming, "I am starting to conduct my little private investigation" (150). Yet upon listening to her lover's relatives praising Mwalimwana and his regime, Veronica becomes confused again: "How much of this I can believe? I'll never manage to complete my investigation" (151). She deplores her intellectual impotence, saying, "It's impossible for me to search for the truth. You don't become an investigator overnight" (163) and lamenting, "Always pieces of information that never fit together" (165).

Like all noir investigators, Veronica wastes too much time realizing what happened to Birame III. She complains, "I've been here for three months and I haven't got one step further" (136). She blocks out the information that she does not want to hear. She distrusts Saliou "for painting a bleak picture [of Africa]. For inventing things even. Or else boring me" (167). Instead, she trusts the elite,

declaring, "I've decided to believe Ibrahima Sory" (84). At first Veronica chooses to concur with Ibrahima Sory that all Africa's problems stem from white colonialists. This is what she thinks during the ceremony at which the rebel students must publicly apologize for mocking Mwalimwana's regime in their play. All the students have apologized to Mwalimwana, and now it is Birame III's turn. From her seat in the audience, Veronica silently exhorts Birame III to recant:

> Don't play the hero. [. . .] Our history is full of atrocities. It started with those they threw to the sharks, perhaps even earlier. The Oscar for imagination goes to the Americans. They roasted us, dismembered us, tarred us, stuffed us with gunpowder and exploded us in mid-air between heaven and earth. They wore white masks to remove the genitals with silver tongues. Not that the Europeans were any better. They made us into cannon fodder. Don't add to the list of atrocities. (47)

Veronica's list of persecutors consists solely of Westerners. Veronica blames European slave traders for throwing sick slaves to the sharks, the Ku Klux Klan for lynching blacks in the nineteenth century, and European colonial powers for obligating the colonized to fight in their wars. At this point of her investigation, Veronica does not include Mwalimwana, his associates, or his predecessors in this list, indicating her desire to believe that colonialism, a foreign philosophy fabricated by white westerners, is the only explanation of the problems in former colonies. Although she is not ready to blame Mwalimwana for repressing his own people just yet, she is clearly afraid for Birame III, who accused the president of destroying his country.

Over the course of her investigation, Veronica denies that the ruling elite orchestrate the murders of opposition activists. Playing the devil's advocate, she tries to justify the elite and find fault with the poor. She scorns French colonialists, but her attitude toward the poor is often as paternalistic and supremacist. Thus, when she sees universal poverty in which Africans live, she comments, "Did not the rumor have it that they had rushed to take over the luxurious villas deserted by the whites? Wasn't that the reason why they grabbed their independence to get the white man's villas and the white man's women?" (5). Of course, Veronica means to say that she does not buy into the colonialist portrayal of Africans as lazy and immature. And yet, she often acknowledges that she does. Sleeping and unhurried taxi drivers annoy her. Likewise, she discounts her students' efforts to oppose the regime, calling them "children" (75) for criticizing the president and counting the number of Mercedes in his cortege. "Do they expect Mwalimwana to ride around on a bicycle like the King and Queen of Denmark?" (32), asks Veronica. Listening as her students accuse the elite of assassinating activists, Veronica mockingly comments, "It's obvious they don't

read the right books" (24), implying that only young people can take Marx seriously. Although she mocks herself for reading Marivaux and Laclos at their age, she also indicates that Marx and his theory of class domination are outdated.

In addition to making light of the opposition's efforts, Veronica downplays the regime's repression. When Mwalimwana gives an order to imprison the students who satirized him and his government in their play, Veronica jokes, "No sense of humor, Mwalimwana! [. . .] couldn't he have given out extra homework lines or something?" (40). When other students show solidarity with their detained classmates and go on strike by climbing the mango trees surrounding the institute, Veronica jests that they should come down because they are not mangoes (40). Later, when soldiers and tanks arrive to make the students come down, she flippantly remarks that Mwalimwana went a bit too far in his desire to impress: "It was all bluff" (44). Veronica consoles herself that a night spent in jail "will even teach [Birame III] not to criticize his elders that much" (42). When Saliou subsequently tells her that Birame III has been murdered, Veronica nervously laughs it off as a product of Saliou's "melodramatic [. . .] bad taste" (60) and "overcharged brain" (63). Similarly, when other acquaintances suggest that Birame III is being tortured at a concentration camp, Veronica laughs it off as the propensity for exaggeration and sensationalism ascribed to Africans: "Here come the flying saucers again" (96).

A typical noir detective, Veronica does not use her intelligence to solve the novel's central crime. On the contrary, she solves the case when she acknowledges that she had purposefully blocked out all the clues. She recognizes that she did not really want to find out what happened to Birame III because she shares the ruling elite's condescending attitude toward the common people. Even though Veronica constantly rebels against her parents' contempt for commoners, she also shows that she interiorized it. She recalls that as a child, she joined her classmates in bullying the child of an Indian-born peasant. Reflecting on her willingness to join the oppressors, she concludes, "I hate them, but behave just like them. Exactly the same" (51). Veronica acknowledges that interiorized racism and victim-blaming compel her to disassociate herself from the weak. For the same reason, she blames her ancestors for having become slaves, as if they had had a choice. Aware of being cruel and unjust, she resents her ancestors "For having been conned. The victims are always to blame" (95). Although observing social injustice makes Veronica feel angry and impotent, she cannot ally herself with the victims because she is not one of them. As she says bitterly, "Poverty and filth are nothing new to me. I've been looking at them ever since I was born, gazing through the half open window of my father's car. They used to thrive in their huts built out of cardboard boxes. We did not have dry mud at home" (9).

A conversation with Saliou about their mothers reveals how viscerally Veronica identifies with the elite she professes to despise. Saliou tells Veronica

how he decided to become a revolutionary. When he was twelve, he saw his mother suffering from stomach pain and medicating herself by sticking Koranic verses to her body. When her family finally carried her for many days on foot to the nearest hospital, it was too late. Saliou began fighting for social justice in order to avenge his mother. Veronica sighs that she did not have to avenge her mother, a rich woman who suffered only from "imaginary ills" (84). And yet, just a few pages earlier, Veronica relates that her nurse, her true mother figure who really loved her and whom she loved in kind (61), died under circumstances eerily similar to those surrounding Saliou's mother's death. Mabo Julie died from a malignant tumor and lack of medical attention, even though a doctor was a frequent visitor in their house. Rushing to treat Veronica's mother's hay fever, the doctor never took time to properly examine the servant. When she suddenly died, Veronica's parents organized a "lovely funeral," claiming that she was "one of the family" (63).

Veronica so greatly resented her parents for carelessly letting Mabo Julie die that she could not even cry, yet she continues to identify herself with them. While making love to Sory, she talks to him in her mind: "Let's leave them to fight outside because their mother died when they were twelve. That's not our business. Our mothers will die of old age" (89). She is uncomfortable when non-elite Africans sense a friend in her: "She loves us. She is one of us. Whereas it is not true" (60). Time and again she feels out of place, saying to herself, "I don't belong here" (25, 94, 151). Condé asked these same questions in her 1993 article: "At what cost do you become middle-class? What sort of compromise should you make? How far must you alienate yourself from your people? [. . .] If one decides that after all it was not worth the trouble, can one go back to the people?" ("Role of the Writer" 698).

Veronica leaves Africa when her investigation comes to an end as she receives the proof she wanted. After Saliou and other rebels are arrested, the radio broadcast indicates that Minister Sory must decide their fate. The announcer continues to say that Saliou had repented of his subversive actions and committed suicide. It dawns on Veronica that her lover has personally given the order for Saliou's murder. She simultaneously understands that her disappeared friend Birame III was most likely murdered, too. Veronica leaves Africa, but her investigation was not in vain. Veronica no longer doubts that the local elite murder their compatriots: "They can't tell me I have not any proof. I have stacks of it" (170). More importantly, she realizes that her upbringing has made her complicit with the perpetrators because she shared their supremacist and paternalistic convictions. She had to lose her two friends, Birame III and Saliou, before she could say, "I've understood. *Understood* (italics in the original, 173). With sadness, she confesses her inability to avenge their deaths or even confront Sory, their executioner: had she stayed, she would have "continue[d] to shuttle

back and forth between Heremakhonon and the town" (175), enjoying her lover's villa and privileges, and "[i]n a way nonetheless despicable and cruel, although bloodless, [she] would have helped to kill" them (175). Condé notes that this journey liberates Veronica and frees her of "binding, confining, and paralyzing" myths ("Stealers of Fire" 163). Veronica leaves Africa because she no longer wishes to remain complicit with murderers.

Examination of *Heremakhonon* as a noir novel explains the plot's internal logic and the heroine's role of an investigator. The novel opens with a crime: the disappearance of a political activist arrested by the police. Unlike classic detective stories, which reveal the perpetrator at the end, noir novels introduce the perpetrators at the beginning and examine why the investigator cannot identify them as murderers. Usually, the noir investigator falls under the influence of the perpetrators, who put him or her on the wrong track. The perpetrators assume key positions in society's most important institutions and use their authority to manipulate the investigator. Noir investigators are particularly vulnerable to manipulation: unlike the rational and confident detectives in classic detective stories, they wrestle with insecurities and mental instability. Furthermore, noir investigators become sexually involved with either the victim or the perpetrator, and this relationship contributes to the novel's atmosphere of oppressive confusion and the sense of powerlessness. *Heremakhonon*'s heroine, Veronica, finds herself in the role of investigator when her friend Birame III disappears. While trying to find out what happened to him, Veronica becomes involved in the struggle between the ruling elite and the opposition. Although she has been told from the beginning that the elite execute opposition activists, Veronica refuses to believe this claim. Instead, she decides to trust the perpetrator, her lover, the mainstay of the ruling elite, who secretly orchestrates the murders. Over the course of her investigation, Veronica comes to realize that she has been choosing to ally herself with the powerful rather than the weak, which prevented her from helping her friend. In this novel, the protagonist's black skin and female gender, which traditionally denote victimhood, serve as red herrings. As the heroine turns out to be the perpetrators' accomplice, we realize that the author has used the conventions of the noir genre to invert these familiar stereotypes.

## Notes

1. All quotations from *Heremakhonon* refer to Richard Philcox's 1982 translation of the novel.

2. This quotation comes from the 1988 edition of *Heremakhonon* (12).

3. *La vie sans fards* has not yet been translated into English. All translations from this work are mine.

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