Foreword / Préface
The “Alternative” Space of the “Minor”

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1 When Guadeloupean / French writer Maryse Condé won the so called “alternative” Nobel Prize in literature on 12 October 2018, French-Ivorian professor Dr. Maboula Soumahoro commented that writers such as Condé knew all about being “alternative.”

2 Dr. Soumahoro - speaking at an event in Paris where African American author Ta-Nahisi Coates was the guest of honour - emphasized the various ways that “minority” writers have to deal with alternative placement, including receiving lower financial rewards. Condé’s prize, officially known as the New Academy Prize, came with one million kronor (about US$ 112,000), in contrast to the “real” Nobel Prize whose cash award would have been nine million kronor and accompanied by a valuable gold medal.

3 As extensively reported, the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature was cancelled because of a scandal involving sexual misbehaviour, and the alternative prize was set up by “a wide range of knowledgeable individuals” working in the cultural sphere who accepted nominations from Sweden’s librarians.

4 The public was then invited to vote on the selection of 47 writers, and some 33,000 people around the world answered the call, according to the New Academy. Readers in Guadeloupe meanwhile used social media to encourage people to vote for Condé, who eventually made it to a shortlist of four authors and emerged the winner.

5 Condé may still gain a future Nobel Prize in Literature, as highly merited, but given the prize’s history regarding women (who fit the “minor” positioning although they are a majority in most countries), this is wishful thinking. Since its beginning in 1901, the Nobel in Literature has been awarded to 14 women writers, among 114 recipients (up to 2017). Most of the winners overall have been white and European.

6 Despite the recognition of “alternativeness”, many writers are averse to labels - including the “minor literature” label, regardless of its thought-provoking precepts. Condé, in her own comments about her writing, has said:

People often ask me for whom am I writing. The answer is I am writing for myself. I write about slavery, Africa, the condition of black people throughout the world because I want to order my thoughts, to understand the world, and to be at peace.
with myself. I write to try to find answers to the questions I ask myself. Writing for me is a type of therapy, a way to be safe and sound.

Still, the characteristics of “minor literature” as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari could apply to Condé as well as to many other Caribbean authors writing in the region’s “colonial” languages - Dutch, English, French and Spanish - if one insists on using this designation. Condé says she writes neither in French nor Creole but in her own language, yet her mother tongue would be identified as French - a major language. Whatever linguistic choice they make, Condé and her fellow writers do understand that “the question of language is tied to the question of political power” and that writers on the “periphery” of the language, or in “outside spaces”, face an uphill battle in being taken as seriously as writers from the centre - even when they are a numerical majority or ostensibly part of the nation.

“For the French, Martinique and Guadeloupe are their Club Med,” Condé says in the documentary Maryse Condé : Une voix singulière.

Like her work, such comments can be considered political and they do have collective / “enunciative” qualities, to use the “minor literature” vocabulary. Readers and fellow writers in the Caribbean understand where Condé is “coming from”, and they recognize the importance of her work, even if others prefer to downplay its significance. A privately expressed complaint is that coverage of her award was muted in mainland French media. But this comes with “alternative” territory, as Dr. Soumahora might say. The spotlight always shines more dimly on those who don’t happily inhabit the “majority” space.

While writers (rightfully ?) reject labels, research on the ways “minor literature” resists the status quo is a relevant issue, and scholars have been making essential contributions to the conversation.

At the 2018 “Revolutions” conference in Nanterre, where Dr. Angela Davis was the keynote speaker, workshops on “cultures et écritures mineures” provided a revelation to a visiting author. Led by Dr. Christine Dualé and Dr. Anne Garrait-Bourrier, the discussions centred on Dr. Davis’ appeals for “intersectionality” in the fight against injustice ; the challenges of writing from an Afro-Caribbean space in which the colonial culture and language still dominate ; the “quiet resistance” of two Caribbean women poets in Canada ; the importance of memory in expressing historical traumas including genocide and deportation … amid several other topics.

All the papers highlighted ways in which individuals, sometimes unconsciously, use their “alternative” position to “question preconceived definitions of identity, history, race, class and gender”, in the words of Drs Dualé and Garrait-Bourrier. For “minor” writers then, perhaps “alternative” awards should become the norm.

The New Academy said its one-off prize was meant “as a reminder that literature should be associated with democracy, openness, empathy and respect”. It added that: “in a time when human values are increasingly being called into question, literature becomes the counterforce of oppression and … silence.” The same might be said of this collection of scholarly works.
NOTES

1. See: https://www.dennyaakademien.com/kopia-pa-the-finalists
2. See: https://www.dennyaakademien.com/
5. See the documentary: Maryse Condé : Une voix singulière
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAb8RyzR9uo&app=desktop
6. Ibid.
7. https://www.dennyaakademien.com/

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