

Christa's Story... *One of my favorite courses in college was an Honors course on memoirs by French women writers, taught by a Swiss-Canadian professor. Both in her person and her pedagogy, this professor unlocked the power and complexity of these memoirs in narrating the authors' life experiences and their cultures. This course and professor also played a significant role in motivating me to continue on with my graduate studies in French literature and culture.*

While in graduate school I continued to seek out memoirs, travel narratives and historical novels by women writers. For I found the memoirs and historical novels by women writers in particular offered helpful clues or insights into the private, intimate lives of another culture. When deciding upon a dissertation topic, I was interested in plunging more deeply into cross-cultural writings and found my way to West African and Caribbean novels of French Expression. I was particularly inspired by the writings of Maryse Conde, a Guadeloupean women write of French expression, who wrote novels and plays situated in the Caribbean, as well as historical novels about the ancient Bambara kingdom centered in the present day country of Mali. These novels opened up for me new parts of the world and new intercultural dynamics that were fascinatingly complex as I sorted through the layers of culture present in the texts. My dissertation wound up being about the way intellectuals in West Africa and the Caribbean were using such texts to work through the impact of colonization on the personal lives, social systems and political systems of these regions. As I was reading, analyzing and reflecting about these novels, I was sorting through the intercultural dynamics reflected in them.

When I had the opportunity to travel to Senegal in West Africa, thanks to this reading preparation, I had many reference points that I could draw upon to make meaning of my experiences. Later, as a professor at New Jersey City University (NJCU), I put these pieces together and developed a seminar course on West African and Caribbean Women Writers as a means of introducing students to the intercultural dynamics of these regions. To this day, I'm always on the look out for memoirs and historical novels by women that can provide insights into the cultures where I intend to travel.