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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE IN FRENCH



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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE IN FRENCH

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INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER, SPACE AND LANGUAGE IN PATRICK CHAMOISEAU'S *ANTAN D'ENFANCE* AND *CHEMIN D'ECOLE*.

Patrick Chamoiseau's two volumes of autobiography, *Antan d'Enfance* (Gallimard, 1990) and *Chemin-d'Ecole* (Gallimard, 1994)¹, remain largely neglected by critics, a seeming anomaly given the recent proliferation of generic studies and the rehabilitation of autobiography as a "respectable" area of literary endeavour and academic attention. Indeed, much recent work has focused specifically on the autobiographies of those perceived to be writing "from the margins", notably women and post-colonial writers. The relative absence of any in-depth discussion of Chamoiseau's undeniably rich and rewarding autobiographies can perhaps best be attributed to the exceptional attention given to his fiction, especially after the award of the Goncourt prize for *Texaco*² in 1992, and by the continuing polemic aroused by the *créolité* creed espoused in the more theoretical and critical *Lettres créoles* (Hatier, 1991, co-authored with Raphaël Confiant) and *Eloge de la créolité* (Gallimard, 1989, co-authored with Confiant and Jean Bernabé).

Ironically, however, as Richard D.E. Burton explains, these autobiographies may in fact better exemplify the tenets of *créolité* than the much more analysed *Texaco*³. In their depiction of a truly multicultural, multiracial and multilingual society, through their particular version of textual *métissage* by mixing genres, language and register, and by virtue of frequent pronominal and subjective shifts, they are perhaps truest to the "totalité kaléidoscopique", the "chaos originel et (la) mangrove de virtualités" lauded in *Eloge de la créolité* (p. 28). To quote only a few examples, Man Ninotte effortlessly

1 In the course of this article, *Antan d'Enfance* will be abbreviated to *AE*, and *Chemin-d'Ecole* to *CE*.

2 Chamoiseau, Patrick, *Texaco*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992

3 Burton, Richard D.E., *Le Roman Marron. Etudes sur la Littérature Martiniquaise Contemporaine*, pp. 99-200. *Texaco* is criticised by Burton for in fact proposing a "vision singulièrement simplifiée de l'espace foyolais" and for the "logique binariste qui le sous-tend".

switches between singing the songs of Piaf and Aznavour one minute and recounting creole fairy-tales the next (AE, p. 82). A character such as the painter who sings "dans toutes les langues du monde" becomes a kind of archetypal model of *créolité*:

Il tenait à chanter dans ce qui lui paraissait être, *c'est vrai señora Ninotte*, le plus extraordinaire jardin de la création, car l'homme a une bouche comme partout dans la création, mais partout dans la création chacun s'en sert pour une musique différente, *et c'est là Miss Ninotte le grand phénomène, il faut y penser madame Ninotte, il faut y penser*[. . .] Le négriillon le suivait d'une pièce à l'autre, à mesure qu'il changeait son échelle de place, répétant après lui ses braillements de langues étranges, son ivresse des accents, et ce délire bienheureux quand en pleine envolée il mélangeait le tout (AE, pp 65-66).

The delirium and *ivresse* provoked by the painter's easy language shifts calls to mind the rapturous descriptions of the *Eloge*, according to which the domain of *créolité*, "c'est le langage. Son appétit? toutes les langues du monde. Le jeu entre plusieurs langues (leurs lieux de frottements et d'interactions) est un vertige polysémique" (*Eloge de la créolité*, p. 48).

What is, however, explored in more oppositional terms is the interplay of space and language, both of which become strongly gendered in the course of the autobiographies. The trajectory of the *négrillon* from his "antan d'enfance" to his "chemin d'école" is clearly predicated on a series of polar opposites: mother/father; Man Salinière/le Maître; Home/School; Créole/French. In this article I hope to examine the interplay and opposition of conflicting spaces: that is, the matrix of the home and its association with the mother, the *langue maternelle* and creole culture in general, as opposed to the harsh initiation into the masculine world of socialisation, schooling and the French language. As the autobiographies progress, indeed, language itself, like its associated culture, becomes increasingly permeated by spatial associations, evoked very often in terms of distance from and proximity to the subject.

The Feminine Domain

The home is categorically identified as a female space dominated by the presence of the indefatigable Man Ninotte. Equally, the communal building in which many other families are housed is identified not with "le nom du père" but with the other mothers, whose names are repeatedly invoked almost as a litany:

L'escalier menait donc à l'étage où restait les familles, famille Man Romulus, famille Man Ninotte, Famille Man la Sirène, famille Man Irénée (AE, p. 16).

The narrator's descriptions of the home inevitably focus on characteristically "feminine" activities: cooking, cleaning, sewing. Life within the protective walls of the home is lived out in complete dependence on and attempted oneness with the mother. Even a shared space such as the marital bed is designated exclusively as the mother's territory. Indeed, the *négrillon* and the father seem mutually exclusive in this feminine space: "le négriillon s'allongeait [. . .] sur le grand lit de Man Ninotte si le Papa n'y était pas en sieste" (CE, p.29). The *négrillon's* movements are dictated by hers ("Un désir de la suivre l'avait précipité de son lit", AE, p.25; "Il la suivait pas à pas, avait besoin de sa présence", AE, p.71). At times, he almost physically fuses with her as "une petite ombre inquiète qui ne la quittait pas des yeux, coulait dans son sillage, s'arrêtait avec elle" (AE, p.121). Terrified when she leaves the home to buy provisions ("Il craignait de ne plus la revoir et demeurerait muet d'épouvante jusqu'à son retour" AE, p.71), the young boy eventually learns to "*domestiquer cette crainte*" (AE, p.71 - my italics). The young narrator thus enacts a pattern which Richard D.E. Burton identifies as common to the work of all Martinican authors:

[...] chez l'homme martiniquais "typique", l'existence d'un complexe de dépendance vis-à-vis de la mère, complexe où

désir et crainte se mêlent l'un à l'autre de façon à paralyser tout mouvement vers une autonomie réelle.⁴

This "paralysis" comes into effect quite literally in *Chemin-d'Ecole* with the mother's departure on the *négrillon's* first day at school: "Il prit le parti de se changer en roche et d'attendre pétrifié le retour de sa manman" (*CE*, pp.35-36).

The home itself (or parts of it) is characterised as feminine, simultaneously a source of fascination and repulsion for the young boy. The wax-cloth roof, filled with water during the rainy season, is looked upon by the narrator almost as an erotic object of desire ("délectation", "titiller"), although it resembles nothing so much, perhaps, as a pregnant woman, whose waters are literally about to break:

Il fixait la bosse jaunâtre qui s'alourdissait, à la fois inquiet et impatient de voir crever sous le poids. Il imaginait, plein d'effroi et de délectation, cette douche brutale qui l'assommerait presque. Parfois, il grimpait sur une chaise pour titiller le ciré d'un bout de doigt. Le plastique semblait toujours trop mou, et la douche toujours très proche (*AE*, pp 29-30).

In the next paragraph, the house figures as a kind of formidable *doyenne*, "vieille de toute éternité". The crevices in its paintwork, ("les cloisons devenues vivier tendre") constitute a matrix of protection and nourishment for a multitude of insects. The house and its component parts are personified in succeeding pages, endowed with the same qualities of endurance and resilience that characterise, almost without exception, the women of Chamoiseau's *oeuvre*:

La maison vivait avec la pluie, mais sous le carême - oh quel fer !- elle vibrait [. . .] le bois luttait avec les clous [. . .] les poutres voulaient descendre au vent rare des fenêtres [. . .] Elle émergeait de cette mue, bruissante comme caisse de crabes, un peu plus austère, moins pensive, et surtout étrangère (*AE*, p.35).

4 Burton, Richard D.E., *La Famille Coloniale: La France et la Mère-Patrie*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1994, p. 258

In its rhythms, its particular "trop-plein" overflowing with exuberance and energy, its association with domesticity and children, the home becomes the female Caribbean space *par excellence*:

Et la maison reprenait son frisson de bois, pourri par l'eau, sa friture de tôles sous les pluies d'hivernage, ses chants de négresses devant leurs dangereuses lampes, ses odeurs de sucre cuit, ses bavardages de radios ouvertes jusqu'à usure des piles, et la brusque débandade des enfants qui allaient s'asseoir au bas de l'escalier (*AE*, p.31).

In this feminine domain, time is demarcated not by watches or clocks. Rather, it is experienced by the mothers - although all engaged in their individual activities - as a collective rhythm created by their intimate knowledge of the comings and goings of their children:

Leurs montées et leurs descentes étaient si régulières que Man Romulus derrière sa Singer à coudre, Man Irénée dans sa cuisine où elle salait ses frites, Man la Sirène à hauteur de son chapelet, ou Man Ninotte dans le combat de ses casseroles, pouvaient se faire une idée très exacte de l'écoulée du temps (*AE*, pp 31-32).

The home is also, significantly, the seat and symbol of creole culture. Creole is the everyday language (French is spoken exceptionally, and only then, it seems, somewhat pretentiously). The home is the venue for the ritual "messes du punch" and the creole cooking of Man Ninotte. Within its corridors, Jeanne Yvette recounts her folktales. Here, too, is the site of Man Ninotte's "débrouillardise", mending even the most worn-out clothes, making her paper flowers and confectionery as public demand dictates.

And yet for all that this childhood house (Chamoiseau grew up in the 1950s) resonates with such features of the traditional creole way of life, there is already a sense of the approaching demise of creole culture. The herbal medicine practised so effectively by Man Ninotte is beginning to yield ground to the external influence of the pharmacist, and

Chamoiseau (clearly these are the words of the present-day narrator) states ominously:

Un peuple défaille et meurt quand pour lui-même s'invalide
sa tradition, qu'il la fige, la retient, la perçoit comme
archaïque sans jamais l'adapter aux temps qui changent, sans
jamais la penser, et avancer riche d'elle dans la modernité.
Ainsi, nous-mêmes, par ici et par là (AE, p.89).

Symbolically, too, the house is moribund by the end of *Antan d'Enfance*. Prefigured by the demise of the communal kitchens ("Quand le négroillon survint, les cuisines étaient déjà mortes", AE, p. 40), the house is again personified in the closing pages of the book:

O mes frères, vous savez cette maison que je ne pourrais
décrire, sa noblesse diffuse, sa mémoire de poussière [. . .]
O mes frères, vous savez, elle meurt dans ses poussières.
Elle s'étouffe de souvenirs. L'escalier a rétréci. Le couloir
est devenu étroit et un entrepôt l'a réduit des trois quarts [. . .]
] Dans le peu d'espace qui demeure, Man Ninotte (la seule à
y rester encore) cultive une jungle créole nourrie comme
nous de cette lumière (AE, p. 164)⁵.

This feminine space is literally closing in on the stalwart Man Ninotte. In spite of the Voltairean undertones of the last line, there seems little place for optimism concerning the future of this consecrated site of *créolité*.

⁵ Here we see a clear parallel with Chamoiseau's fiction, which also charts the demise of some of the principle facets of creole culture. *Chronique des Sept Misères* (Gallimard, 1986) explores the decline of Martinique's marketplace (particularly the rôle of the *djobeurs*), while *Solibo Magnifique* (Gallimard, 1988) even more explicitly centres on the corpse of the eponymous storyteller, a symbolic representation of the death of Martinique's oral culture.

The Masculine Domain

In contradistinction to the intimacy and the real sense of physical proximity achieved with Man Ninotte, "le Papa" (who is never named, the definite article conveying a sense of impersonality and distance lacking in the intimacy of the mother's name) remains, both spatially and emotionally, a distant and quasi-absent figure. When passers-by encounter the child on the street, he is described as "fils de Man Ninotte et d'un tel facteur" (AE, p.134 - my italics). Even visually, the adult narrator has difficulty in re-conjuring him: "Il y a l'image du papa cordonnier. Elle est incertaine" (AE, p.97). He is repeatedly described as "elsewhere", unable or unwilling to hear or understand the negrillon and his siblings: "Le Papa ne sembla pas entendre" (CE, p.31), "Le Papa regardait ce phénomène de loin" (CE, p.42), "Le Papa, penché au dessus des maisons, . . ." (CE, p.43). He is associated with the signifiers of conventional masculinity; his first appearance is with the Gillette blade: "Le Papa était un élégant. Il se rasait de près et cultivait selon les modes une moustache ou bien des favoris" (AE, p. 24). His "drill blanc", painstakingly ironed by Man Ninotte, is endowed with an "élégance compliquée" (AE, p.86), and his first appearance in *Chemin- d'Ecole* is "en grand uniforme de facteur" (CE, p.31).

He is also strongly associated with the French language and culture. Although "maître ès l'art créole du petit-nom" (CE, p. 28), his love of and proficiency in French is underlined:

Il distille son français impeccable, développe sa voix de cérémonie dans les formules soigneuses et dans les phrases qu'il pense. Il sait le pouvoir de la langue française et, quelquefois, maîtrise une ire de Man Ninotte avec un bout de Corneille, un décret de la Bruyère (AE, p.97).

Le Papa lui, à l'occasion d'un punch, déroulait un français d'une manière cérémonieuse qui n'en faisait pas une langue, mais un outil ésotérique pour créer des effets (CE, p.64).

Moreover, he is at one point identified with the bourgeois aspirations of the mulatto caste:

Le négriillon ne le connut qu'en *mulâtre* à crinière blanche, sentencieux et dominateur, érigeant autour de lui, lors des compagnies du punch, les cathédrales d'un haut français. Ou alors [. . .] distribuant ses petits noms et un geste de tendresse rare pour ses affectionnés. Ou alors absent et triste, indifférent, sirotant d'amers punchs en compagnie d'un compère encore plus sombre (AE, p. 98 - my italics).

The overriding impression is of a man given to a certain ostentatiousness and posturing, both in his appearance and in his displays of French. Like the *négriillon's* sense of (physical and emotional) distance from his father, his remoteness from the father's impeccable French is emphasised. When bombarded with this alien language in school, the narrator again invokes a spatial metaphor to convey its otherness:

Le français (qu'il ne nommait même pas) était quelque chose de réduit qu'on allait chercher *sur une sorte d'étagère*, en dehors de soi, mais qui restait dans un naturel de bouche proche du créole (CE, p. 64 - my italics)

It is significant, however, that *Chemin-d'Ecole* opens with a double repudiation, an out-growing of both of the mother and of the home. The narrator, who had been teased by his "rancunier grand frère" for having been "têteur jusqu'à un âge déconseillé par la raison" (AE, p.14), now seems to experience a desire for separation from the maternal body and a concomitant appetite for more than the domestic space has to offer.

[...] il avait depuis longtemps abandonné son activité de suceur de tété [. . .] lancé dans l'infini de la maison, il en avait pour ainsi dire épuisé les ressources (CE, p.17).

The *négriillon* now gravitates "aux rebords des fenêtres" (CE, p.17) and volunteers for any opportunity to leave the home on an errand. Eventually, the long-awaited first day at school

arrives. The *école maternelle* proves, rather reassuringly however, to be another feminine space (we are even told that lessons take place in the dining room) associated with the creole language with the gentle control of Man Salinière. The latter is explicitly portrayed (as, indeed, her name intimates) as "une autre manière de Man Ninotte, aussi douce, aussi prodigue en disponible tendresse" (CE, p.39). So easy is this transition (after the initial shock of leaving Man Ninotte) that the narrator concludes "le négriillon avait désormais deux manmans, ou, plutôt, de Man Ninotte à Man Salinière il glissait sans angoisse" (CE, p.39).

True initiation into the masculine order (single-sex education, overseen by *le Maître* and *Monsieur le Directeur*), which is also the sphere of French, is only achieved at the Ecole Perrinon. Spatially, this school is a much more regimented terrain: "une grande bâtisse de bois affublée d'un drapeau bleu-blanc-rouge" (CE, p.46). Its dimensions seem immense and threatening: "l'ensemble était effrayant, sonore, plus dépouillé, plus anonyme" (CE, p. 48). Here, pupils are enclosed by the *grille* that the caretaker closes each morning, and "Ordrre, Discipline, Rrespect" (CE, p.56) are the values promoted. Even physical movement seems unnaturally restricted, almost robotic ("[Les Maîtres] marchaient comme des sénateurs, ne tournaient jamais la tête mais la totalité de leur corps. Leurs gestes étaient mesurés." - CE, p.59). The *négriillon* is far removed here from the easy physical intimacy and corporeality of his mother and Man Salinière. When Ninotte appears at the railings, his desire to reach her is overwhelming: "[il] s'y précipita comme un perdu, prêt à passer entre les barreaux" (CE, p. 62). The master's austerity is counteracted by the "démessurée douceur" of rediscovering the mother's hand: "On est joie. On vibre en contentement" (CE, p.62).

The teacher (like the father, designated impersonally throughout as "Le Maître", in contrast to Man Ninotte and Man Salinière) is also associated with a conventional marker of maculinity: "ta pomme d'adam qui montait-descendre était énorme" (CE, p. 53). As with the father, re-calling and re-visualising is difficult: "Quel était ton visage, premier Maître? [. . .] Quel était ton nom?" (CE, p.53). He too displays great pride in his proficiency in French. Entry into this school

clearly marks the end of the prevalence of the feminine: "Là, rien ni personne ne faisait manman" (CE, p. 48). For perhaps the first time, the *négrillon* is identified by "le nom du père" rather than as his mother's son or by the Créole version of his name:

Son nom était un machin compliqué rempli de noms d'animaux, de chat, de chameau, de volatiles et d'os. Comme si cela ne suffisait pas, il se découvrit affublé d'une prononciation réfugiée en bout de langue qui l'amenait à têter les syllabes les plus dures et à empater les autres (CE, p. 51).

His profound sense of alienation from this name is thus compounded by his inability to pronounce the word. Significantly the word "téter" recurs, re-inscribing the maternal in an attempt to mitigate the harshness of this masculine order.

French, on the other hand, "l'organe même" of the teacher's knowledge (CE, p.65), is again a signifying system described as spatially remote from the child:

Et sa langue *n'allait pas en direction* des enfants comme celle de Man Salinière, pour les envelopper, les caresser, les persuader. *Elle se tenait au-dessus d'eux* dans la magnificence d'un colibri-madère immobile dans le vent (CE, p.65 - my italics).

Creole ("la tite-voix babilleuse de sa tête [. . .] sa langue-maison, sa langue-manman" CE, p.65) is inextricable from the maternal and the domestic space, but this language "dans l'espace de l'école devenait inutile" (CE, p.66). For the children described as "les petits-revenus-de-France", their privileged proficiency in French and familiarity with French culture becomes a territory to be closely surveyed and unnaturally reinforced:

[Ils] n'avaient n'avaient voyagé qu'entre les murs de leur blockhaus familial dans lequel l'univers créole n'avait pas pointé. Leurs parents avaient maçonné autour d'eux de

hautes murailles d'images de France, de comportements prophylactiques, d'articulation surveillée, de manières traquées" (CE, pp.82-83).

For their creole peers, however, who are in the process of losing their "équilibre linguistique", (CE, p.57) the sense of distance from French is accompanied by an enforced shame in the *langue maternelle*:

En français, il n'y avait pas de proximité. Le créole, lui, circulait bien, mais de manière dépenaillée. Précipitée en contrebande, il se racornit sur des injures, des mots sales, des haines, des violences, des catastrophes à dire (CE, p.57).

Inevitably then, in the course of the autobiographies, we witness the replacement of one domain by the other (or rather the superimposition of the masculine, French order on the feminine creole space). This is first intimated by a gnawing distance that grows up between the *négrillon* and his mother:

Pourtant, des *espaces inaccessibles* à Man Ninotte s'accumulaient en lui. . il se rendait opaque à Man Ninotte, il n'était plus ouvert-confiant sur la présence des autres, il jouait des paupières sur l'innocence traîtresse de ses yeux et apprit à *creuser une distance* entre son élan de cœur et le jet de sa parole. C'était survivre, je dis, et mourir en même temps (CE, p.99 - my italics).

This is coupled with a predilection for meandering on the way back from school, taking a variety of detours to prolong his time away from the home. Such deliberate distancing from the mother prefigures a growing remoteness from creole language and culture. This is perhaps most forcibly expressed by the changing responses to "Petit Pierre", the metropolitan hero of the reading books taught at school. The distance between the Fort-de-France schoolroom and the world of this fictional character is geographically and culturally immense, witnessed by the poignantly absurd contrast between the French home described in the primer and the Martinican reality described

by Gros-Lombric (CE, pp. 153-4). And yet the narrator concludes:

Aux yeux de Gros Lombric, le Petit-Pierre des lectures faisait figure d'extraterrestre. Mais pour lui, comme pour la plupart d'entre nous, à mesure des lectures sacralisées, c'est Petit Pierre qui devenait normal (CE, p.155).

Conditioning by the colonial school to venerate all things French at the expense of the creole world results in a psychological distancing from the latter and an inevitable adoption of the former. This culminates in an imagined physical rapprochement with France:

Souvent, au bord de la mer, il croyait voir la France tout-près, tout près même, ô près-près-près dans l'ombre bleu qui troublait l'horizon (CE, p. 156).

*

Of course, establishing a fixed polarity between the masculine domain of French and schooling and the feminine space of Creole and of the home does not entirely account for their interrelationship in the autobiographies. On the most fundamental linguistic level, such a dichotomy is of necessity false, given that Creole vocabulary is itself largely based on French. Moreover, Man Ninotte, although a beacon of *créolité*, is typical of the Martinican woman in her commitment to the (French) education of her children and her delight at their progress. Paradoxically, for all his skill in French, "le Papa" is profoundly sceptical of the education received by his son. Broadly speaking, however, two generally opposing spaces, the female home and the masculine school, spatially represent two opposing facets of the *négrillon's* linguistic unconscious. Throughout *Antan d'Enfance* and *Chemin-d'Ecole*, the remoteness of the masculine order is invoked to suggest the *négrillon's* relationship with French, while simultaneously the proximity

and intimacy with the mother and various m/others parallels his relationship with his *langue maternelle*. Eventually, however, Petit Pierre seems an extraterrestrial no longer, and the imagined sightings of a nearby France is evidence of a radically new relationship with the two linguistic codes.

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AHMADOU KOUROUMA'S *MONNÈ, OUTRAGES ET DÉFIS*: HISTORICAL TIME AND MYTHIC TIME?¹

Ahmadou Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis*² is the fictionalised narrative of the French colonisation of West Africa. This essentially linear historical narrative traces the events of the period from the invasion of West Africa by French troops in the late nineteenth century to the period of political turmoil which occurred in the 1950s when power was nominally conceded to the African authorities prior to independence. The central character in the novel is Djigui, king of the fictional city of Soba in the Mandingue region, whose reign is paralleled by the events of colonisation. The narrative's historical authority is emphasised, however, by the appearance of historical figures such as General de Gaulle and Houphouët Boigny alongside the fictional characters in the text. Reference to historical events such as the First and Second World Wars and the first appointment of an African deputy to the French National Assembly also serve to ground the narrative in historical reality. However, alongside the predominant Western version of events, there appears to exist an alternative perception of the past, that of the native African population. Throughout the novel, Ahmadou Kourouma calls

1 I would like to thank Madeleine Borgomano for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper presented at ASCALF's annual London conference in November 1995. While I have included Madame Borgomano's comments in this version of the paper, I accept full responsibility for the final interpretation.

2 Ahmadou Kourouma, *Monnè, outrages et défis*, Paris: Seuil, 1990

into question the nature of Western historical truth and foregrounds the African experience of colonialism. Discussing the retrospective construction of Africa's past, Zairian author and critic V.Y. Mudimbe points out, however, that there exists conflict not only between African and European versions of the events of colonialism but also between the versions of different African social groups. According to Mudimbe:

two types of societies confront each other in the colonial experience, each with its own memory. The colonial system is coherent, seems monolithic, and is supported by its expansionist practices. It faces a multitude of African social formations with different, often particularist memories competing with each other.³

It is the interplay of each of these competing memories which interests me particularly in *Monnè, outrages et défis*. Drawing on specific examples from the novel, I intend to examine the way in which the temporal fluidity of the text creates a fragmented chronology whose uncertainties and discontinuity raise important issues concerning the authority of the narrative. I will go on to examine the way in which questions concerning textual authority and temporality are illustrated by the disparate narrative voices and storytelling techniques of the novel; alternative versions of the same event raise questions of partiality, foregrounding the limitations of an individual's perspective and prejudice and the difficulties involved in the formation of a collective postcolonial memory. Following the granting of political independence in Africa, post-independence writers sought to repair "the divisions inflicted by colonial history" by attempting "to find and describe networks of racial and ancestral affiliation, to unearth communal memory".⁴ In *Monnè, outrages et défis*, Ahmadou Kourouma calls into question the feasibility of any attempt to produce a monolithic epic narrative of the founding of an African nation-state.

3 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, London: James Currey, 1994, p.129

4 Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.190

In her study of fictional temporality,⁵ Bonnie Barthold contrasts Western perception of time as a process of linear progress with a traditional African 'mythic' or 'cyclical' temporality which reflects the natural seasonal cycles of an essentially agrarian society. While Barthold's definition might be a useful starting point in understanding the conflict between indigenous African and European constructions of the colonial experience, her straightforward binary opposition between 'historical' and 'mythic' time fails to distinguish between the many different perceptions of time in non-Western societies and does not reflect the temporal complexities of Ahmadou Kourouma's narrative. Indeed, Robert Holton points out that precisely such an opposition as Barthold's was used by European colonisers to legitimise their rule over native populations. According to Holton, "the relegation of precolonial cultures to a mythic or religious rather than historical past" constitutes no less than "a denial of the historical past, a denial of the historical claims of those cultures to relevance and integrity".⁶

By thus assigning the native population to an ahistorical or prehistorical time, the dominant interests create a segregated zone - modernity. [...] a form of temporal apartheid which arrogates to itself the right to monopolise discursive and political authority.⁷

It is precisely this authority of monolithic Western historical discourse which Ahmadou Kourouma seeks to call into question in *Monnè, outrages et défis*, a work in which all attempts to establish a definitive version of the past are demonstrated to be fundamentally arbitrary.

In Kourouma's novel, the issue of narrative authority is raised initially with regard to temporality. The calculation of Djigui's age, for example, can be seen as a paradigm for differing perceptions of time in Africa and the West. For the

5 Bonnie Barthold, *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981

6 Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern fiction and the representation of history*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, p.86

7 *Ibid.*, p.62

inhabitants of Soba, Djigui is 125 years old. According to the assimilated African interpreter Soumaré, "[l]es nègres de Soba ne savent pas calculer leur âge",⁸ assuming the twelve-month cycle of the Western year as his reference point for what is "normal". By dismissing the African calculation as lies,⁹ the French commandant also imposes Western cultural expectations on the African situation, oblivious to the limitations of his eurocentric point of view. However, while appearing to reject the eurocentrism represented by the commandant and the interpreter and emphasise the predominance of the Mandingue world view, Kourouma goes on to subvert the authority of the African calculation of Djigui's age. We learn that Djigui has certainly reached 125 years of age according to Mandingue calculations but that, for the inhabitants of Soba, this represents "l'âge fatidique, maximal, qu'aucun humain de chez nous ne doit dépasser" and that referring to a person as older than 125 would be "lui jeter un mauvais sort":¹⁰ "Aussi, la politesse et les menaces des sicaire nous apprirent à répéter année après année, que Djigui s'approchait de ces cent vingt-cinq ans".¹¹ Djigui's age therefore remains veiled in mystery and is not an accurate calculation in either Mandingue or European terms, being rendered a meaningless figure which reflects no point of reference in either culture as ultimate authority is denied to both.

Issues of temporal and narrative authority are raised when, alongside recognisably Western time references such as "c'est au XII^e que [...]",¹² African narrators in *Monnè* provide their own specific reference points which are not recognisable to the Western reader. In this way, Kourouma appears to demonstrate that the temporality of the Mandingue people is as authentic as that imposed by Europe. The "*Boribana*", for example, translated from Malinke as "la fin des reculades",¹³ is the African name given to the time when Djigui decides to

no longer support the colonial authorities after forty years of acquiescence. However, this "desperate, pitiful and even ridiculous"¹⁴ attempt by Djigui to control time is doomed to failure, demonstrating that African temporal authority is illusory. Other periods of time are given several names by the African population; the time of Djigui's extreme piety following his removal from power, for example, is referred to in three alternative manners: "Les jours qui suivirent furent douloureux. Djéliba, le grand griot du règne les appela les jours des *monnew*, les temps des ressentiments, ou encore, [...] les saisons d'amertume".¹⁵ In this instance, the African time span has a direct Western equivalent in the four years of the Pétain regime's control in West Africa,¹⁶ indicating perhaps that once the colonial regime becomes established in Africa, the native population assimilates the Western concept of time alongside their own and that African terms become increasingly irrelevant as events in Europe become the accepted point of reference. Throughout the novel, while initially subverting the authority of Western time reference, Kourouma equally appears to subvert the authority of African "mythic" time in order to demonstrate the increasing dependency of Africa upon the West for its historicity,¹⁷ problematising, once again, the narrative's temporal construction.

Kourouma equally demonstrates the way in which time-references are manipulated in narrative and lose their fixed point of reference. The fluid nature of time in *Monnè* is seen in references throughout the novel to "[c]et autre vendredi",¹⁸ "le premier jeudi du mois des chenilles",¹⁹ "c'est lundi matin"²⁰ and so on. These references to ostensibly fixed periods of time are consistently undermined by the absence of

14 Madeleine Borgomano, in private correspondence, 28 April 1996.

15 *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.156

16 "Les saisons d'amertume durèrent les quatre années que durera l'Afrique de l'Ouest pétainiste", *Ibid.*, p.156

17 Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, London: Longman, 1993, [1989], p.3

18 *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.78

19 *Ibid.*, p.82

20 *Ibid.*, p.121

8 *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.99

9 "Les Nègres sont des menteurs", *Ibid.*, p.100

10 *Ibid.*, p.100

11 *Ibid.*, p.100

12 *Ibid.*, p.18

13 *Ibid.*, p.189

any indication of when the narrator is speaking. The precise nature of the narrative present is never clearly defined and the length of time between the action of events and their subsequent recounting is variable and never explicit. Retrospective comments in the conditional tense such as: "ce serait plus tard que nous saurions que [...]"²¹ do little to clarify the situation. There are claims by the narrator that s/he has been present at all events described, which would be physically impossible. The possibility of forming a collective postcolonial memory is therefore constantly called into question as narrative authority is repeatedly undermined.

The complex temporality of *Monnè, outrages et défis* is perhaps most clearly reflected in the uncertainties surrounding the novel's narrative voices. The basically linear narrative of French colonisation is disturbed at various points throughout the novel by alternative versions of events. As Madeleine Borgomano points out, when French commandant Héraud explains the events of the World War II to Djigui, they are couched in the terms of myth and legend which make them understandable for Djigui. Recounted in this manner, however, these familiar events are made strange for a French native.²²

Les quatre alliés s'en allèrent consulter le plus grand devin de l'univers qui leur dévoila les secrets de guerre du maître de Berlin, ses totems, ses faiblesses et leur recommande des ensorcellements qu'ils pratiquèrent, des sacrifices qu'ils égorgèrent.²³

In this way, Kourouma undermines the monolithic certainties of Western historical discourse and presents an alternative perception of events with equal claims to discursive authority.

The discrepancies between Western and African historical memories is further extended to include accounts of natural disasters and their effects as well as historical events. An example of this difference is seen in the description of the

drought and meningitis epidemic which struck Africa during the colonial period.

Et revint la sécheresse, cette fois avec des vents: ils étaient jaunes et charriaient le deuil. (*Les chroniques coloniales de l'époque signalent une catastrophique épidémie de méningite en Afrique occidentale.*)²⁴

The use of italics clearly distinguishes the discourse of the "chroniques coloniales" from the native African account whose powerful imagery and metaphor contrasts sharply with the straightforward rendition of scientific and historical "fact" as it is reported by the French colonisers of the period. There is even doubt as to whether the drought was in reality as severe as the African accounts claim since it is not referred to by the French.

"Les chroniques coloniales", we are told, "ne la signalent pas"²⁵ and the possibility that the African account might be no more than a lie is evoked.

[...] ou elle ne fut pas plus dure que celles qui nous frappent tous les trois ans et c'est nous qui restons, quand aujourd'hui encore nos griots inventent mille métaphores pour la dire, les fieffés menteurs contre lesquels les colons eurent raison de prévenir leurs coreligionnaires nazaréens.²⁶

Despite its claims to the contrary, Western "factual", "historical" narration is demonstrated to be as unstable as African oral storytelling is claimed to be. There appears to be a deliberate attempt throughout the novel to subvert the notion of textual authenticity. Repeated references to the African population as "menteurs" and "fabulateurs" serve as a reminder to readers that nothing written in the novel should be accepted at face value. There is never one definitive version of an event. When the story of Moussokoro, Djigui's favourite wife is recounted, the following comment is one of many which immediately undermine the preceding claims:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.204-205

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.202

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.202

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.47

²² Madeleine Borgomano in private correspondence, 28 April 1996.

²³ *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.216

"Pour ceux de Soba tout cela serait partiel et partial. Moussokoro mentait et faisait mentir les griots historiens".²⁷ The notion of partiality is fundamental to our understanding of the complexities of the narrative voices in *Monnè*. Kourouma's "jeux de mots" contains within it the two fundamental obstacles to establishing an ultimate authoritative historical account of any event: the notions of incompleteness ("partiel") and bias ("partial"). No single voice can convey a full and impartial account of Africa's past as every voice is the expression of the limited perspective and prejudices of a single viewpoint. As Jean Franco points out, there exists a fundamental contradiction in "the struggle to tell the historical truth when the "truth" is always written from a partisan point of view".²⁸

This is clearly seen towards the end of the novel in reports surrounding the military suppression by Djigui's son Béma of an opposition rally during the political struggle which follows Djigui's removal from power. The voice of the Western media is compared to that of the African griots in its power to influence the opinions of a large audience by portraying events in a particular light: "On lui avait appris que les journalistes étaient les griots de Paris".²⁹ As a member of the educated young African population versed in Western culture, Béma is fully aware of this resource and does not hesitate to take advantage of anti-Communist fears in France in order to enhance his own personal standing abroad: "Les commentateurs le présentaient comme le sage de l'Afrique, l'ami de la France qui en moins de quelques semaines avait extirpé le communisme athée de nos territoires de l'Ouest africain".³⁰ In the pre-independence period, the voice of the media becomes extremely important as the West's perception of Africa is constructed by European newspapers and television. In *Monnè*, media interest in the deaths of thirteen Africans in the power struggle is not an expression of human sympathy but rather an example of the exploitation of the

event's political implications as the discourse of the Western media becomes the new voice of authority: "On nous démontra qu'on utilisait nos morts pour des opérations de politique intérieure française [...] on voulait montrer que certaines mains étaient rouges".³¹ The media's authority is discredited as Africans themselves come to understand the implications of the absence of an African voice to represent their point of view in the world press: "C'est toujours nous les Nègres qui n'avons ni agence de presse, ni TSF, ni journaux, ni porte-parole pour le dire, toujours nous qui tirons les premiers sur les autres".³² The African voice is marginalised and not granted any authority, yet by focusing upon the absence of that voice, Kourouma undermines the predominance of the discourse of the Western media which is portrayed as limited by its perspective and prejudice when recounting political events in Africa of which it has little knowledge or understanding.

As we have already seen, discrepancies in versions of historical events exist not only between African and Western points of view but within the points of view of different African social groups. Besides the voice of the unidentified omniscient third person narrator and the communal voice of Djigui's subjects, "ceux de Soba", several characters [Djigui, Diabaté Djéliaba, the chief griot and Fadoua, Djigui's chief military advisor], address themselves directly to the reader. These characters are not "individuals" in the Western sense of the term but represent a collective voice with its roots in the oral storytelling tradition.³³ The polyphonic effect in *Monnè* is achieved by means of the combination of oral storytelling techniques such as repetition or direct address of the reader with a variety of other narrative voices. Alongside the voice of the novel's unidentified, omniscient narrator there is another voice which gives "anthropological" explanations throughout the narrative and can be identified as belonging to Djigui's subjects: "nous, ceux de Soba, ses sujets". The precise identity of the composite voice of "ceux de Soba" is never revealed and its perception alters as the narrative

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.152

²⁸ Jean Franco, 'The Nation as Imagined Community' in *The New Historicism*, ed., H. Aram Verseer, London:Routledge, 1989, p.209

²⁹ *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.267

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.267

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.254

³² *Ibid.*, p.282

³³ Madeleine Borgomano in private correspondence, April 28 1996.

develops or is undermined by alternative points of view. Initially, the praise of Djigui is unquestioning and he is portrayed as a living myth: "il devint ineffable et multiple: il acquit la force de réaliser tant de choses prodigieuses",³⁴ beyond reproach and invested with almost divine qualities and power. The superficial admiration appears to complement the excessive praise of Djigui by the griots. This perception of Djigui is, however, far from expressing the whole truth. The king's speech and actions contradict all that is said in his favour, his pride and wilful blindness betraying his childlike nature. Describing the situation in Soba prior to colonisation, "ceux de Soba" idealise events, referring to "un pays aimé d'Allah comme le nôtre".³⁵ However, on the following page, we learn that: "La vérité était que rien n'avait été renouvelé dans le Mandingue depuis des siècles [...] Le legs était un monde suranné que les griots disaient avec des mots obsolètes".³⁶ The immediate contradiction and subversion of the preceding claims undermines their authenticity. The reader remains unable to locate the precise identity of the narrative voice and cannot invest either of the contradictory versions of events with authority. In *Monnè*, oral storytelling techniques are important in consideration of the themes of partiality and perspective. Different perceptions of history become clear when Djéliba, the chief griot in Djigui's court recounts the Sunjata epic, one of the most important oral narratives of African history. Although versions of the Sunjata epic have appeared in print, the version which is recounted in *Monnè* is only one of the many variations on the basic elements of the narrative. While these elements remain unaltered, the emphasis given to each individual element will alter each time the story is told or sung. In the novel, Djéliba's version demonstrates the way in which an oral narrative may be altered in order to suit its audience, praising a particular historical figure whose descendants might be present, in the light of new events or depending upon the whims of the individual griot. In this case, Djigui is flattered when Djéliba claims that the king is a direct descendant of the legendary

emperor Soundiata: "C'est pendant le Boribana que j'ai révélé ou mieux, créé l'histoire officielle de la dynastie des Keita. [...] C'était une vérité historique qui s'imposait; tous ceux de Soba le disaient et le croyaient [...]".³⁷ What is distinctive about this form of recounting history is the presentation of history as the unique creation of the individual griot. In the African oral tradition, there is no single point of view from which an objective history may be recounted. History is the creation of those who live and recount it. The notion of "invention" or "construction" is extremely important in the African perception of their history and is reaffirmed when one of the novel's unidentified narrators comments that "Djéliba [...] put librement construire le passé et inventer le devenir et la dynastie des Keita".³⁸ Djigui's reign is recounted in order to flatter the king and retain his favour and also in the hope of inspiring a sense of community in his subjects. The griots who recount Djigui's reign in later years seek to give less emphasis to the height of the colonial period when Djigui worked together with the French colonisers, preferring instead to emphasise the king's later resistance to French authority, despite its relative brevity and ineffectuality.

C'est pour rapetisser la quarantaine d'hivernages vécus au service de la colonisation par le roi que les griots qui, plus tard, diraient l'histoire du «siècle de Djigui» consacreront de longs chapitres aux saisons d'amertume.³⁹

Kourouma demonstrates the way in which a narrative can be altered by summary or expansion to suit the desired perception of events. Djigui's griots present their King in a favourable light to ensure the continuing political support of his subjects. However, the presence of alternative versions of Djigui's relationship with the colonial authorities and his personal conduct ensures that the authority of the griot's discourse is subverted and a less positive image of Djigui is foregrounded. Soba's king is demonstrated to be the product

³⁴ *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.17

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.16

³⁷ *Monnè, outrages et défis*, p.190

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.193

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.193

of all discourses surrounding him, both favourable and critical.

In *Monnè, outrages et défis*, Ahmadou Kourouma does not seek to idealise or glorify Africa's history but aims to demonstrate the difficulties involved in any attempt to construct a complete and impartial version of Africa's past. The fragmentary chronology which is such a distinctive feature of the novel foregrounds the existence of alternative world views and the absence of authority in any single version of events. The proliferation of unidentified and unidentifiable narrative voices is demonstrated in Kourouma's examination of the "partiel and partial", a narrative representation of the clash between historical and mythic time in Kourouma's colonial Africa. No single viewpoint can present a full and unbiased perception of events as political and personal prejudice undermines its authority. For Kourouma, it seems, there can be no definitive account of Africa's years under colonial rule. By highlighting the difficulties involved in establishing such an account, Kourouma raises our consciousness of the dangers involved in investing any version of Africa's colonial past, whether written or oral, African or European, fiction or fact, with ultimate authority. In its rereading/rewriting of the history of French colonisation of Africa, Kourouma's text is fundamentally transgressive, challenging the legitimacy of both Western and African discursive and political authority.

Shona Potts
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REVIEWS: CONFERENCES, BOOKS, AND TALKS

Conference report

**'L'Océan Indien et les littératures de langue française -
pays réels, pays rêvés, pays révélés'**

at the University of Mauritius, 7-11 July 1997.

This ambitious conference was the first international event organised by the relatively young Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Mauritius. The Department of French Studies has only existed since the beginning of the decade and it was clearly the intention of the Dean and Head of Department, Vinesh Hookoomsing, to raise its international profile by organising this gathering which was to establish the Indian Ocean as an area of specialist interest within the field of francophone literature. Despite some initial difficulties with funding, the conference more than met the challenge of creating a landmark event which brought together researchers from as far afield as the U.S.A, Canada, Europe, Australia and Africa.

A friendly Sunday-evening cocktail party at the modest but very pleasant Pearle Beach Hotel, where most of the delegates were lodged gave an opportunity to renew contact with familiar faces such as Jean-Louis Joubert and to put a face to familiar names like Françoise Lionnet from North-Western University. The welcoming team included Kumari Issur, Gérard Fanchin and Bruno Cuniah from the University of Mauritius, and there was a local delegation from Reunion including Michel Beniamino, Bernard Terramorsi and later in the week, Carpanin Marimoutou. Madagascar was represented by the lively presence of Liliane Ramaraso of the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Tananarive and the novelist Michèle Rakotoson; and a generous party representing French studies in India was also in evidence, since the Mauritian gathering had first been mooted at an earlier conference in Bombay.

The conference was formally opened the following morning by no less a figure than the President of the Republic of Mauritius, Cassam Uteem, in the presence of the University's Vice-Chancellor, the genial representative of the francophone ACCT Robert Furlong and the best-known living Mauritian poet Edouard Maunick, who regaled us with a passionately-declained poem. This was followed by a book launch - the re-publication of Ananda Dévi's first collection of short stories *Solstices* and her new novel *L'Arbre fouet* - and the presentation at the University's SYFED francophone computer laboratory of a CD-ROM and server for the francophone literature collection at the Municipal Library in Limoges, home of the well-known francophone theatre festival.

The conference proper didn't get under way until the Monday afternoon, with a very crowded programme over the next few days, punctuated by a breathing space on the Wednesday, rapidly filled by various cultural events. The sessions were grouped thematically and with the number of papers exceeding fifty it would be impossible to usefully summarize them all. The themes covered the Travel Literature of the Indian Ocean, *Créolité* and *Indianocéanisme*, Multilingualism and Multiculturalism, Literature, Culture and Anthropology in Madagascar, the Plurality of Mauritius, Reality and Utopia, Images of India, and Similarities and Differences between Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean islands. As Bruno Cunnie's final report emphasized, the literary centres of interest focused mainly on Franco-Mauritian writers, with pride of place going to J.M.G Le Clézio, most often referred to, followed by Ananda Dévi, Malcolm de Chazal and Marcel Cabon. The presence of Carl de Souza and Michèle Rakotoson at the conference also stimulated several studies of their novels. A surprising feature was the little attention paid to the novelist Axel Gauvin and Réunionnais writing in general, in spite of my own paper on Daniel Vaxelaire and his treatment of the utopian theme of *Libertalia*. The quality, richness and diversity of the papers was impressive, but something of a challenge to one's capacity for concentration.

The Wednesday pause was filled by another Presidential opening in the morning: an exhibition devoted to Edouard

Maunick, with texts of poems, first editions, photos and memorabilia spanning the whole of his tumultuous career. He himself announced his intention of returning to permanent exile from his native island, to the bemused scepticism of its amiable President. Later in the afternoon all the delegates further appreciated the generosity of the President in hosting a literary 'table ronde' discussion at the State House, which featured Michèle Rokotoson, Carl de Souza, Ananda Dévi and Jean-Louis Joubert, chaired by Carpanin Marimoutou. It was a pleasure and an honour to be so stylishly received by such an obviously cultivated and sophisticated Head of State.

Every hectic day of papers and discussions was rounded off with an invitation for drinks and copious apéritif snacks, whether to a gallery opening in the new Caudan Waterfront in Port-Louis or to the residence of the French Ambassador in the hills of Floréal. The final evening featured a poetry reading and book launch, and a dinner at the Centre culturel Charles Baudelaire in Rose-Hill, accompanied by the rhythms of a local *sega-ravane* group and an Indo-Mauritian singer accompanied by sitar and tablas.

The impression left by such a rich mixture of discussions and contacts is inevitably diffuse, but I am consoled by the firm intention of Vinesh Hookoomsing and his untiring assistant Kumari Issur to publish the collected papers of the conference, although I don't envy them the task! Inevitably it was hard to digest the sheer quantity and diversity of research presented, but the conference certainly succeeded in demonstrating the vitality of this new and fast-developing area of research within the orbit of francophone studies. A follow-up conference on 'L'écrivain francophone' is already planned for the 13-18 December 1998 at the University of Pondicherry, India, and that event should see the establishment of a new international association for the study of Indian Ocean literatures, francophone and comparative, already agreed in the closing session of this highly successful and enjoyable event in Mauritius.

Peter Hawkins
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French Studies and Caribbean Writing

The fiftieth jubilee conference of the Society for French Studies, which took place at the Sorbonne from 5th-7th September, happily included a session on Caribbean writing. Entitled "Fiction et théorie adans les Antilles", this session was chaired by Professor Robert Jouanny of the Sorbonne-Paris IV, and included three papers: Dr Mireille Rosello's "Magie et créolité chez Maryse Condé et Gisèle Pineau"; Dr Nicholas Harrison's "Frantz Fanon: critiquer sa situation/situer la critique", and Dr Mary Gallagher's "Une écriture métissée? La jonction prodigieuse entre la théorie et la pratique de la littérature des Antilles françaises 1987-1997". We hope to publish an account of this session in the next issue of the *Bulletin*.

The Babel Guide to French Fiction in Translation, edited by Ray Keenoy, Laurence Laluyaux, & Gareth Stanton, Boulevard Books, 1996

Following on the success of Babel Guides to Italy, Portugal & Brazil, Latin America, and the German-speaking world, this volume shares the aim of introducing readers to the 20th century literature of a wide range of French-speaking countries, now available in English. It combines a bibliographical function in the form of a seventy-page "Fiction in English translation" database of novels from the French-speaking world whose English translation has been published or distributed in the United Kingdom between 1950 and 1996 and reviews (by the editors and seven other contributors) of 150 of the best books by 108 major writers. These reviews are intended to introduce these authors to an English-speaking reader, and to situate them in their historical

and geographical context, this latter objective concerning more especially Francophone writers. They are followed in each case by an extract from the title selected, ranging from a single line to half a page.

The guide is both didactic and selective; as a history of twentieth century French-speaking literature - Oyono, Pérec and Pinget follow each other in strict alphabetical order. It includes, after the fashion of an anthology, extracts offering a taste of the writer's style, but has none of Lagarde et Michard's heavy-handed and patronizing approach. The selection of texts is somewhat idiosyncratic, but anyone with an interest in Francophone writing will welcome the high profile given to it in this book.

A consideration of the database of texts available in translation - which inevitably dictates the scope of the guide - shows that the editors have tried to strike a balance between the titles which reflect some publishers' tendency to favour the short-term quick returns of the "littérature de gare", on the one hand, and on the other, more durable investments. The only reservation I would have about the database concerns how far it actually reflects the availability of the texts either in print or in the bookshops. However, the guide is a very welcome encouragement for the English public to explore literature in French "without tears".

Denise Ganderton
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Marie-Thérèse Humbert in Dublin

On 29th October, as part of the annual Africa Festival held in Dublin, Marie-Thérèse Humbert gave a talk at the Alliance française. The style of her presentation was engagingly warm and informal. The Mauritius-born author of several novels¹,

¹ Born in 1940, Humbert has published with Stock (Paris): *A l'autre bout de moi* (1979); *Le Volkameria* (1984); *Une Robe d'écume et de vent* (1989); *Un Fils d'orange* (1992); *La Montagne des signaux* (1994). With

including the acclaimed *A l'autre bout de moi*, gave most generously of her insights in a "lecture" focusing largely, as promised, on issues related to "Le réel et l'imaginaire dans l'oeuvre romanesque". The novelist began by asserting "je ne crois qu'en la fiction: je n'écirai pas d'autobiographie". However, she allowed that, often, her fiction somehow registers the traces of her own experience ("la fiction rejoint la réalité"), although usually at an unconscious level: "Nous sommes tous tributaires de notre enfance: les blessures et les paysages nous en suivent". This talk was shot through with vivid glimpses of Humbert's childhood in Mauritius. An invalid father (this father whom she characterises as "brun avec un peu de sang Indien") and a passion for reading loomed large in her memory of that time and place. But the audience was also given some very interesting insights into the texture of the writing life of the mature Humbert. For example, she outlined the relation between her professional activity as a teacher in France of French (literature) and her writing, speaking of her love of the detail of the French language, in particular the imperfect subjunctive! She also revealed, for example, that the original title of her first novel had been *Jour contre jour*. However, when her publisher told her that this sounded too difficult, too much like the title of a *nouveau roman*, she chose to replace it with the title under which the novel was awarded the *Grand Prix des Lectrices d'«Elle»*. However, she was much taken aback to find that this title, *A l'autre bout de moi*, was much misunderstood by the various critics who interpreted it as indicating an autobiographical slant. It was in reaction against this (rather crass) misunderstanding that Humbert wrote her next novel. For she had decided to show the critics that she was "capable d'inventer". And indeed, while *A l'autre bout de moi* is set in the very real and recognisable physical landscape and multicultural society of Mauritius, the next novel, *Le Volkameria*, is situated in an entirely imaginary island off Newfoundland. However, the author gives to this imagined island an entirely credible topography, history, society, etc., going so far as to provide the reader with a detailed map.

the Editions Christian Pirot, she published *Balzac, Saché ou le Nid de coucou* (1991).

Marie-Thérèse Humbert also spoke at some length about her writing technique. She evoked, for example, her use of a *matrice* as the launching pad and sustaining source of her work on any given text. She also expressed the conviction that the actual craft of writing is therapeutic or "salutaire". For her, it is in the "sueur de l'artisan" that one finds relief from the "angoisse" of creation. She believes, in other words, that the "matériau" itself, that is, the actual flesh of the language, its pronouns, its punctuation, its grammar etc, is intrinsically creative. On a more personal note, Humbert revealed that her second novel was written during a very difficult time in her life, and that the writing of this book literally helped her to struggle with her circumstances and, ultimately, to survive.

However, later on, during the question session, the novelist acknowledged that writing was for her a "devoir très angoissant, une épreuve". Even if she had also raised three children, her teaching and her domestic duties paled into insignificance beside her life's work, which, for her, was her writing: "le seul véritable travail".

When she had finished speaking, the novelist invited questions from her charmed audience. Some of these questions and comments were the occasion of further interesting revelations about the author's background and craft.

One person asked if exile was an important factor in her writing (Marie-Thérèse Humbert lives in France, in the Berri). To this, Humbert replied that having been born on an island and grown up surrounded on all sides by the sea, she had felt both closed in and invited beyond. She spoke then of her love of the sea and of her sailing exploits in her own little boat at the age of five, adding, on a more practical note, that since there was no university on Mauritius, she had been obliged to leave her native land to pursue her studies. In France, where she had been awarded a scholarship, she became a teacher and married a French philosophy teacher. She was quick, however, to qualify this account of her itinerary: "Mais je n'ai jamais quitté l'île. Je la porte en moi. Je la retrouve partout, y compris dans le Berri".

Her response to the question on exile led Humbert to speak further of her Mauritian background. She said that the fact of having grown up in Mauritius had taught her "que le monde

était pluriel". She mentioned, in particular, the vast number of languages she had heard spoken there in her childhood and regretted that time did not permit her to say more about the "langues interdites" such as Creole, a language which one only spoke to the servants. She did state, however, that she was glad about the contemporary "revendication du créole", happy that "cette langue ait enfin trouvé droit de cité".

Questioned on her feelings about psychoanalysis, the novelist replied that she sees herself as an "être en marche", more interested in the journey than in the destination. For her, the attraction of generalisations and theories is completely overshadowed by the attraction of the writing process itself. Finally, when asked about her literary influences, the name she cited with most conviction and passion was Proust.

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NOTICES

The 26th annual French Literature conference takes place at the University of South Carolina from March 26th to March 28th 1998 on the theme of Origins and Identities. Featured speakers include Roger Shattuck and James Hiddleston.

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