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**ASCALF BULLETIN**

**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**

The ASCALF logo is based on a Téké mask from the Upper Sanga region (Congo-Brazzaville).

### **The ASCALF Bulletin**

The ASCALF bulletin appears twice a year and contains information on recent developments and on forthcoming meetings, talks, conferences, etc., likely to be of interest to members. It also presents reviews and brief articles, however, and contributions of same are most warmly invited from members.

Items of information or more extensive pieces which members may wish to submit for inclusion in the bulletin should be sent to the Editor not later than January 1st for inclusion in the Winter issue and not later than May 1st for inclusion in the Summer issue.

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POUR QUI

POUR QUOI

POUR QUI

POURQUOI

Arawaks, Caraïbes Incas Mayas Aztèques  
Peuples déracinés  
Merveilles de l'Altiplano englouties  
Oubliées  
Rumeurs de l'Orénoque Ses brunes eaux  
Douceâtres murmurent encore leurs noms  
Cristobal Colon Encomienda

.....

POUR QUI

POURQUOI

La croix épouse l'épée  
Ils se nomment désormais justiciers  
Meurtres Pillages aux visages camouflés  
Anacoana Higuanoa Suppliciées  
AU NOM DE QUI AU NOM DE QUOI  
Tes cavaliers de l'apocalypse font irruption  
Cupidés sournois  
Raz de marée qui déferle et écume  
Il gronde "Le Christ et l'or ou la mort"  
AU NOM DE QUI AU NOM DE QUOI  
Les fleurs du mal poussent sur l'arbre de la foi  
Branches de crucifix et d'épées  
Elles portent et donnent les fruits de  
Fausses identités Mots passe-partout  
Fourre-tout d'altérités

.....

AU NOM DE QUI

AU NOM DE QUOI

Ton histoire est glorifiée dans les musées  
Ton nom gravé en or sur les monuments aux morts  
POUR QUI POUR QUOI  
Dans les cahiers des écoliers des pages blanches  
Restent muettes Le souvenir se tait indigne  
Les livres d'histoire restent des cicatrices mal refermées  
Mémoires de terres usurpées De gloires falsifiées

POUR QUI            POUR QUOI  
Héros ou martyres    Bourreaux ou victimes  
Avec ou sans toi Cristobal Colon L'Europe continue  
De s'appropriier le Monde  
Elle cherche éperdue le jardin d'Eden Obscur paradis inconnu

POUR QUI            POUR QUOI  
Les Indes te narguent  
L'Amérique soigne encore ses blessures  
Continents qui n'en finissent pas de mourir  
Fébrilement le soleil se lève sur une nouvelle humanité  
Timide et pâle comme une aurore boréale  
POUR TOUT CELA    POUR TOUS CEUX-LA  
Le Présent a du mal à enfanter  
Un Futur plus humain. Volcan endormi  
Témoin il attend Battements incessants dans les  
Oubliettes du temps  
Il reste inaccessiblement  
Suspendu dans l'espace

Allix Belerose Hugues Des Etages

(Allix Belerose Hugues Des Etages est Martiniquaise et professeur de français en Allemagne. Elle a publié des poèmes en Angleterre et en France).

## "NEGRES BLANCS": FURTHER COMMENT

With my highly developed *esprit de l'escalier*, it occurred to me only after I had written my paper on "Nègres blancs" (see ASCALF Bulletin, 4, 1992) that the computerised database FRANTEXT might usefully supplement my investigations into occurrences of the term. Taking advantage of the impending visit of Emeritus Professor Danielle Bouverot, of the University of Nancy and INaLF (Institut National de la Langue Française), I wrote to her asking if she could run a check and bring the results when she came to Dublin in February 1992.

The resulting list provides eight instances of the collocation in texts ranging in date from 1766 to 1966. Only two coincided with those I had quoted in my original paper: the poems by Hugo and Verlaine. Four occurrences, from Buffon (*De la dégénération des animaux*), Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (*Etudes de la nature*), Cuvier (*Leçons d'anatomie comparée*) and the 1817 *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'histoire naturelle*, have the manifest sense of albinos. Another from Bernardin, this time from his *Voyage à l'Île de France*, seems to mean little more than "pauvres types" as we saw in the case of Baudelaire: "Ils allaient leur chercher du bois de leur ajoupa, moyennant quelques vivres; ils passaient quelquefois des semaines entières avec eux, sans défiance, parce que c'étaient des malheureux comme eux, qu'ils appelaient quelquefois des nègres blancs. Quand vous les aurez bien apprivoisés, ne les livrez jamais à leurs maîtres: votre honneur, non pas aux yeux des habitants, mais au jugement de votre conscience, y est intéressé". The final example, found in Catherine Paysan's 1966 novel *Les Feux de la chandeleur*, suggests a fair skin as a result of miscegenation: "Né au Sénégal à Dagona près de la frontière mauritanienne sur les bord du lac de Guier, en pays Toucouleurs d'un père adjudant-chef dans la Coloniale et d'une mère infirmière originaire du Morbihan broussard comme eux, Champenois est un nègre blanc. Il a fait le joint entre deux civilisations."

\*

In the process of investigating Mérimée's *Tamango*, I came across a further occurrence of "nègre blanc", this time referring not to a person but to a mode of writing, in Jacques Chabot's study of the short stories.<sup>1</sup> His argument is subtle, focusing on the irony of Mérimée's style and deducing psychological postures from it:

[...] ce discours «à double foyer», comme les lunettes du même nom, pour voir l'objet de loin et le sujet de près, fonctionne également comme un discours à double sujet: la traite et le Moi. Car l'ironiste est librement subjectif, et c'est même le principal intérêt de sa parole; mais il est subjectif sur le mode ambigu d'une subjectivité qui s'exprime formellement dans l'objectivité la plus complète. [...] La traite et la révolte des esclaves, en un mot le scénario de la nouvelle, ne constituent que le sujet apparent qui recouvre le sujet plus intime des rapports de Moi (qui écrit) à Soi (qui est décrit dans le texte «en forme de nègre», comme d'autres composent des «morceaux en forme de poire»): il y a donc deux sujets dans *Tamango*. Le discours de l'ironiste est toujours un nègre-blanc [sic].

The author ends a section there, moving on to another aspect of his argument, and so does not explain his use of the term. It seems, however, to take on the meaning of "double-take" or double viewpoint, being used as a metaphor, appropriate to the subject matter of the narrative, for the author's ironic distancing from his depiction of an inflated and self-destroying "hero" which can be seen in a broader context as a projection of his inner self.

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<sup>1</sup> See my "Oroonoko and *Tamango*: a parallel episode", *French Studies*, XLVI, 1, (Jan. 1992), 26-32 and Jacques Chabot, *L'Autre Moi: fantasmes et fantastique dans les nouvelles de Mérimée*, Aix en Provence: Edisud, 1983, p.64.

My colleague Dr Jim Jackson kindly drew to my attention a political (and polemical) work entitled *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*. I had expressly excluded North America from my considerations, but was naturally interested to find such a work still using the term for "poor whites". Written by a self-confessed militant member of the Front de Libération du Québec, Pierre Vallières, the book uses the phrase "nègres blancs" to cover poor whites in the United States generally in the following terms:

Etre un "nègre", ce n'est pas être un homme en Amérique, mais être l'esclave de quelqu'un. Pour le riche blanc de l'Amérique yankee, le "nègre" est un sous-homme. Même les pauvres Blancs considèrent le "nègre" comme inférieur à eux. [...] Très souvent, ils ne se doutent même pas qu'ils sont, eux aussi, des nègres, des esclaves, des "nègres blancs". Le racisme blanc leur cache la réalité, en leur donnant l'occasion de mépriser un inférieur, de l'écraser mentalement, ou de le prendre en pitié. Mais les pauvres blancs qui méprisent ainsi le Noir sont doublement nègres, car ils sont victimes d'une aliénation de plus, le racisme, qui, loin de les libérer, les emprisonne dans un filet de haines ou les paralyse dans la peur d'avoir, un jour, à affronter un Noir dans une guerre civile.<sup>2</sup>

Vallière's own position as a Québécois, however, leads him to draw more particular attention to others like him and to particularise the title of his book:

[...] les travailleurs du Québec ont conscience de leur condition de nègres, d'exploités, de citoyens de seconde classe. Ne sont-ils pas, depuis l'établissement de la Nouvelle-France, au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, les valets des impérialistes, les "nègres blancs d'Amérique"? N'ont-ils pas, tout comme les Noirs américains, été importés pour servir de main-d'oeuvre à bon marché dans le Nouveau Monde? Ce qui les différencie: uniquement la couleur de la peau et le continent d'origine.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Vallières, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique: autobiographie précoce d'un "terroriste" québécois*, [Montréal:] Editions parti pris, nouvelle édition revue et corrigée, [n.d.], pp.25-26. An editorial note indicates that the book was written between October 1966 and February 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.26.

\*

Some reference was made in passing to Irish instances of "black whites". Sean O Ríordáin's poem "Cloch scáil" (meaning "quartz", but literally "stone of shadow") has a black child stand out on a beach with a brighter whiteness than all the white children around him:

Géaga nocht ar an dtrá,  
Boilg is cosa ag fás  
As spota de bhríste snámha,  
Tráthnóna buí sa bhFómhar -

An cruth daonna á admháil,  
Gan ceilt ach ar imleacán,  
is an ilfhaoistean uile bán,  
Tráthnóna buí sa bhFómhar -

Ach leanbh cneasdubh amháin,  
Drithle na cloiche scáil,  
Níos gile ná a raibh ann de bhán,  
Tráthnóna buí sa bhFómhar.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Seán O Ríordáin, *Línte Liombó*, Baile Atha Cliath: Sáirséal & Dill, 1971, p.19. Ciarán O Coigligh kindly supplied the basis for the following translation:

Bare limbs on the strand,  
Stomachs and feet growing  
Out of a spot of swimming-costume,  
One yellow evening in autumn -

The human form acknowledged  
Without concealment except the navel,  
And the multi-confession wholly white,  
One yellow evening in autumn -

But one lone dark-skinned child,  
The sparkle of quartz, stone of shadow,  
Brighter than all the white there was,  
One yellow evening in autumn.

Discussing the matter generally with friends and colleagues has inevitably brought further instances to my attention. None has altered the basic pattern which I suggested in my original paper; some have merely gone to confirm it; most (notably in respect of "black Irish") have been peripheral to it. Zapping idly to RTE 1 on 29 March 1992, I happened on the 1939 film of *Stanley and Livingstone* with Spencer Tracey and Sir Cedric Hardwicke at the moment when a black character was being referred to as a "black white man or a white black man". I have little doubt that there are many further instances of the phrase and should still be interested to hear about them.

Roger Little  
Trinity College, Dublin

## VINCENT PLACOLY

I first met Vincent Placolý in 1973, shortly before or after, I forget which, the publication of *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran*. I needed somewhere to stay for the six weeks I intended to be in Martinique and, without hesitation, Vincent offered me his *baraque*, as he called it, at Ravine Vilaine which he was not occupying at the time and which I accordingly shared, free of charge, with an impressive assortment of mabouyas and other creatures throughout my stay. I also availed myself of Vincent's remarkable collection in which Faulkner and García Marquez were to be found cheek by jowl with Trotsky's *Leur morale et la nôtre* and, as I recall, *My Secret Life* by "Walter": Vincent was nothing if not an internationalist. In 1977 I was again housed free of charge by Vincent, this time in a rather more spacious duplex in Schoelcher and this time for three or four months. I mention this simple, spontaneous generosity - lending one's house to a more or less total stranger - because it seems to me typical of

Vincent's carelessness of so many of the attachments and restraints that dominate the lives of most of us and which, in his daily life, he appeared to hold at a contemptuous distance. It was immediately obvious to me as, I imagine, it was to everyone who met him that Vincent was not a run-of-the-mill *révolté* but an authentic *révolutionnaire* of a kind which, even in those heady days, one did not often encounter. To write was, for Vincent, to engage in an intrinsically radical *mise en question* of the society about him. He never separated his activity as a writer from his activity as a militant or, for that matter, from his activity as a teacher, and to that extent he remained true to the example of Aimé Césaire, the early inspiration and father-figure whom, like every other Martinican literary Oedipus, he had symbolically to slay in order to be able to write himself. Michel Leiris once wrote that for Césaire literature and politics - "autrement dit, superluxe de l'imaginaire et grosse quincailleterie des manoeuvres socialement utiles" - "parviennent à se fondre au lieu de tant bien que mal coexister": this was Vincent's ideal, though opinions will differ as to how far he - or, for that matter, Césaire - succeeded in realizing this particular "quadrature du cercle" upon which so much twentieth century writing has floundered. Yet, in at least one instance, Vincent succeeded as few other French West Indian writers have succeeded. When I read *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran* it seemed to me, as it still does, the single most telling diagnosis in French West Indian fiction of the multiple alienations - political, psychological, cultural, sexual - brought about by that complex phenomenon known as assimilationism. The novel is, I think, remarkable for the insight and compassion with which the author, a demystified product of the Fanonized 1960s, espouses the mystified consciousness of a Martinican of the 1930s and 1940s. It is *Biswas* over again, but radicalised: one of the very best first novels by a West Indian writer, and one which, appearing at a time when French West Indian writing was beginning to languish after the first dynamism of the Negritude movement, opened up a whole range of new possibilities, not least on the level of language and style.

Perhaps it was too much to expect that such high early achievement could be sustained. I have to say that I found, and

still find, *L'Eau-de-mort* guildive fragmented and contorted to the point of *illisibilité*, and while *Frères Volcans* is remarkable for the way, once more, that it reconstructs and explores a mystified consciousness (this time that of a slaveowner on the eve of, and during, the emancipation of 1848), it seems to me too bound up in local controversies concerning the significance of "Le 22 mai" to be wholly successful as a work of art. *Dessalines ou la passion de l'indépendance* is, for better or worse, the kind of work that goes down well with the jury of *Casa de las Americas*, and Vincent's experiments in his later work with Creole seem timid and stilted beside works like *Chronique des sept misères* and *Le Nègre et l'amiral*. It would be simplistic to ascribe this evident falling-off simply to alcoholism: the alcoholism might better be regarded, at least in its early stages, as a symptom rather than a cause of the decline in his writings after the auspicious beginning. There were, as there are for every French West Indian writer, problems of readership which, in Vincent's case, were exacerbated by the extreme difficulty of some of his texts, not least of their recondite lexicon. There was also, I think, a growing tension between the complexity of his personality and his artistic vision on the one hand, and, on the other, the terrible simplicities of the political viewpoint he espoused. The ultimate failure of the GRS to develop beyond being yet another intellectuals' *groupuscule* must have generated much frustration, perhaps even a kind of despair as the likelihood of Martinique ever becoming independent - let alone independent and socialist - became increasingly remote.

Finally there is the question of literary rivalries and antipathies. The literary-intellectual milieu in Martinique is remarkable for the intensity of its personal likes and dislikes, as well as for the rigidity and exclusivism of its *prises de position*, and it has not been an edifying experience to read in recent weeks some of the posthumous "tributes" that have appeared in *Le Progressiste*, *Justice*, *Antilla*, *Karybel* and elsewhere, tributes made by writers, *et pas des moindres*, to whom Vincent, in his later life, was "Alcoly" and nothing else and whose literary practice was held to be hopelessly retrograde or culpably at variance with whatever "isme", "itude" or "ité" that is currently on special offer. I once asked Vincent, speaking of a well-



known Martinican writer of the younger generation, "Est-ce que tu connais X?", as though everyone does not know everyone in that exiguous "calebasse d'une île". "Je le connais, mais je ne lui parle pas", Vincent replied in that cavernous deep voice of his, and this is how, not having known him especially well despite twenty years' acquaintanceship, I recall him: intense, passionate, highly gifted, uncompromising but with a rigidity in both ideological outlook and literary practice (but not in temperament) that made it difficult for him to adapt, in both literary and political terms, to the regionalized Martinique of the 1980s. No man should have his life made into a symbol by others, but in the fate of Vincent Placolý - born in the year of departmentalisation, died in "L'année du loup" - there seems too close a link with the complex predicament of Martinique, the *pays natal* that never became a nation, to be wholly fortuitous.

Richard D.E. Burton  
March 1992

## HOMMAGE A PLACOLY

Vincent Placolý died on January 6, 1992 two weeks before his 46th birthday. An *écrivain engagé*, he was one of the leading French Caribbean writers whose work as a dramatist and novelist combined with activities as a political activist. His work was manifestly anti-colonial, sometimes anti-France and always staunchly independentist.

Placolý's political activities began when he was a student at the Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris in the 1960s. He became first a member of Les Jeunesses Communistes and later President of AGEM (Association Générale des Etudiants Martiniquais). This radical trajectory of his political development was emphatically confirmed, if it needed to be, when, in 1972, Vincent and others founded the Trotskyist "Groupe Révolution socialiste" in Martinique.

His first novel, *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran*, was written while he was still a student in France and was published in 1971, mainly through the efforts of Maurice Nadeau, with the publishers, Denoël. Denoël had by then developed a staunch tradition of radical anti-colonial publications from the pens of angry colonial writers. Not at all surprisingly, colonialism is the focus of *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran*. Placolý manages at once an examination of the effects of colonialism upon a single individual, as well as the condemnation of the entire system of colonialism. This novel successfully analyses and explores the alienation, deracination and repression brought about by French colonialism.

Placolý's enterprise in this first novel written, we must remember, when he was still only in his teens, was to somehow conjure up a down and out character rather like the "nègre dégingindé" of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, and decree for him a fate which was to be that of no more than a "badaud - étranger à tout et partout", i.e. one who has left paradise and cannot return. But this is often the fate of the colonised in the Metropolis. The alienation in *Marcel Gonstran* is Placolý's own alienation, chillingly foretold. His own personal situation, especially in his latter years, has been one of a "badaud", certainly in terms of his survival as a writer in Martinique. It is also ironical that the real sense of Gonstran, who apparently made the wrong choice in not returning to his native land, confirmed for Placolý (who returned to Martinique but may have had doubts about this decision) that:

il n'y a pas de bonheur possible hors du pays natal.<sup>1</sup>

Placolý's novel is prophetic in that in parts it greatly emphasises the revolt which became the hallmark of his life. For Placolý, the "success" of a revolt was not even the issue. Rather, it was that revolt with desperate despair where "failure" is less important than self-respect, precisely because self-

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Placolý, *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran*, p.90, Editions Denoël, 1971.



respect is the child of the act of revolt. In doing so, he also stressed the positive and emblematic aspect of this so-called "futile" revolt.

*La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran* is outstanding for its richness of language and its eroticism. Erotic descriptions and surrealist images are presented where parts of the body are displaced. For example, when Gonstran first meets Eleonora, he describes her eyes as "deux sexes rapprochés", and her lips are "lèvres de miel". The displacement of parts represents on the one hand the alienation of erotic feelings where character is "taken out of self" as demonstrated in the central character, Gonstran. But there is also much in common with displaced peoples here: the displacement of parts also expresses the psychological displacement of a people. In the character of the bemused, semi-conscious, alienated Gonstran, Vincent Placolý has given us a microcosm of the most important section of the Martinican people.

His second novel, *L'Eau de mort guildive*, was published in 1973. Strongly influenced by the Latin American novel of that period, i.e. by writers such as García Marquez, Vargas Llosa and Miguel Asturias, it is set in Martinique's capital, Fort de France, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and is based on certain historical events in the life of the island. It is about the situation which existed then for many people, more than ten years after departmentalisation. It is a situation which precipitated a kind of revolt by the youth against police harassment and unemployment. It is a novel in which Placolý shows great concern for a society limited by deprivation, alienation and oppression brought about, and sustained, by what he saw as the constraints of departmentalisation. His novel also reveals its young people's frustration and escapism (into violence) as the ultimate absurdity of the Martinican condition.

Many people find the language of this novel obscure and virtually unreadable. Its structure is complex; characters enter and exit as on a stage and there doesn't appear to be any plot. We see through the eyes of characters who are not introduced from the outside, and hear their words. Monologue

and dialogue abound. This leads to a poetic recreation of the life, colour, noise, contrasts and incoherence of the crowds in Martinique. The characters laugh with their speech, with their very characters, even when they are close to unfunny themes like violence, injustice and death. The title, *L'Eau de mort guildive* is an unusual one, and is derived from a crude kind of spirit, *eau de vie guildive*, given to slaves in 18th century Martinique. It is typical of Placolý to change the "vie" to "mort", which he said reflected the harsh and bitter realities which he describes in his novel.

The first novel, *La Vie et la mort de Marcel Gonstran*, is a marvellous illustration of literary deviance or literary subversion. *L'Eau de mort guildive* takes this subversion one step further. These two novels depend greatly on sound, that is, they demand to be read aloud on account of the rhythmic language. In fact, it is such a waste if *L'Eau de mort guildive*, in particular, is not read aloud ... The difference between listening to the sounds and reading aloud is as great as the difference between listening to music and reading the score.

Placolý has never really been popular in Martinique as a novelist, although those who have read his works recognise him as an "écrivain engagé". His novels are often described by some of his country's intellectuals as "opaque", "illisible", "impénétrable" even, and according to *Les Antilles dans l'impasse?*, there are often "[des] questions et invectives populistes sur son style et l'objet de sa littérature".<sup>2</sup> He certainly saw himself as a revolutionary, (the great dilemma of the political writer who cannot make the art subordinate to the politics), and often dismissed much of the criticism levelled at him with regard to the aim of his literature. The main argument has been that it is absurd for someone like Placolý to write in such an obscure way that the average working class member of French Caribbean society cannot read his work - at least not sufficiently well to be able to decipher the obscurity of Placolý's texts. His reply to this charge is an answer typical of Placolý:

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Placolý, Interview, *Les Antilles dans l'impasse?*, p.137

Quand le peuple aura acquis une certaine maturité esthétique, il comprendra.<sup>3</sup>

In 1983, Placolý published *Dessalines ou la passion de l'indépendance*, a play about the great Haitian leader who led his country to independence in 1803 and for which Vincent received the *Premio Casa de las Americas* - the literary prize awarded annually to Caribbean writers by the Cultural Centre of Havana. But it is not only a play about independence, it can also be seen as a personal statement from Vincent on how he saw his own function as a revolutionary writer in Martinique.

*Frères Volcans*, a novelle, was published the same year. Written partially in the form of a diary, the narrator registers the day to day events leading up to the emancipation of the enslaved in Martinique in 1848, and it is written from the point of view of a white slave-owner. These two works emphasised Placolý's preoccupation with political liberation and revolution and, interestingly, are considerably more accessible to the average local readership.

Although he continued to write a number of plays (some of which have been screened on local television) and a variety of political essays, one had the impression that by the late 1980s he had burnt himself out. He became increasingly disillusioned with the political scene in Martinique, especially after his friend and co-founder of the GRS, Edouard de Lépine, defected to Césaire's PPM. His own enthusiasm, however, for the GRS also seemed to diminish towards the end of his life.

The last few years were difficult for him, for I believe it was a time in his life when he perhaps realised that some of his ambitions were beyond fulfillment, and that openings he perhaps once counted on were no longer available.

Placolý is a case-history precisely because it was probably easier for him at the time, than it was for a metropolitan writer, to get his first two novels published. The effect of being published twice while still in his twenties must

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Placolý, Interview with the author of this article, November, 1989

have been traumatic, especially when he returned to his native country as one who had "made it". It was then that he learnt that he was now faced with a different problem - the problem of survival. His failure to "survive" as a writer in the sense that perhaps Glissant has, in terms of continuing to have texts published in Paris, could be adduced from the fact that it would be more than nine years before another major work appeared. When it did, critics said it lacked the radical appeal of his first two novels. This was his play, *Dessalines*, a work which the *Premio Casa de las Americas* lost no time in publishing.

Placolý's writing met the challenge of his creative task with honesty, while at the same time managing to avoid degenerating into mere propaganda. In recent years he witnessed the rise of younger writers who have gained recognition and popularity both in France and Martinique and he found it difficult not to register disenchantment. Despite this, however, he managed to maintain a marvellous sense of humour and he had a warm and generous personality. In the last few weeks of his life he had the satisfaction of seeing his collection of short stories and essays, *Une journée torride*, awarded the Prix Franz Fanon. This is a leading Martinican literary prize and must have been for him the highest accolade.

Richard Burton pointed out in his obituary that, as a writer, Placolý will be remembered for his promise, rather than for his achievement. It was this promise in his early writing which attracted me to him. I found his writing interesting, demanding, challenging and totally engaging. He became a great friend of mine and I shall miss our conversations in the bar of L'Impératrice. His resignation and pessimism were often obvious. His favourite lines were usually a (mis)quote from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Life is a story, full of sounds and fury, signifying nothing.<sup>4</sup>

Vincent Placolý's life was full of the "sound and fury" of revolt for self-respect and happiness. This is true. But,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

contrary to his favourite quotation, it is also true that these sounds and fury did signify something. I took Placolý as a case history because as a young revolutionary writer, anti-colonialist and uncompromising independentist, he was, to a great extent, representative of the plight of the aspiring intellectual in a small community - unpretentious, but a genius in the wrong place.

It is startlingly true how accurately Placolý's life fulfilled so completely the prescription of CLR James, perhaps not so coincidentally, another Caribbean intellectual, scholar and Trotskyist revolutionary:

Great men make history, but only such history as it is possible for them to make. Their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment.<sup>5</sup>

The limitations of Placolý's environment, both human and geographical, were those parameters which compelled him to play upon a limited stage. Yet, the significance of his message, and the example of his life transcend these limitations, so we here in London, as they did in Paris and Martinique, give him this last salute.

Vincent Placolý was born on 21 January, 1946 and went to join our ancestors on 6 January, 1992.

Rita Christian  
24th March, 1992

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<sup>5</sup> CLR James, *The Black Jacobins*, Preface, p. x.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### NEW NOVEL

Henri Lopès, *Sur l'autre rive*, roman (Paris, Seuil, mai 1992), 236p, Isbn 2-02-016873-1, 95fr

Henri Lopès's last novel (*Le Chercheur d'Afriques*, Paris, Seuil, 1990) was an exploration of *métissage*, both physical and cultural. This latest work extends the interrogation of identity.

The narrator is a painter who has abandoned her husband, her country (Congo-Brazzaville) and her name (Madeleine, which in turn concealed another, African name, barely used) and adopted a new persona in Guadeloupe under the name of Marie-Eve. The opening chapters of the book turn around the question of geographical identity: Madeleine/Marie-Eve finds herself uneasily situated between the critics' interest in her as a Caribbean artist, her own sense of exclusion from the creole world of her Caribbean friends, and the (often rhetorical) sense of identification shared by Africans and Caribbeans. The multiple and contradictory planes of her identity intersect in her paintings: the critics laud them as expressions of nationalism rather than artistry; for her, "Ce ne sont pas mes tableaux qui ressemblent à ma vie, mais le contraire." (p.56); and in a concrete sense, they are a link with her past which threatens to unmask her.

As the work proceeds, Madeleine/Marie-Eve explores her identity as an African and a woman. From early works such as *La nouvelle Romance* (1976), Lopès has been notable for his readiness to identify with the social position of women in Africa. Here he links this with an extended and audacious exploration of female sexuality. Madeleine/Marie-Eve evokes her marriage, threatened on the one hand by her own childlessness and the resulting hard negotiations with the extended family; on the other, by the secret emotional and sexual frustration arising from her husband's premature ejaculation. The personal thus merges into the political, and a love affair with a visiting Nigerian diplomat extends the

exploration of what it means to be "African". The use of different time-levels and places contributes both to Madeleine/Marie-Eve's interrogation of herself, and to the reflection on African identity and politics in the broadest sense. Lopès's characteristic attention to patterns of speech allows of considerable, though not overloaded, parody of an anti-imperialist "conference-speak" which extends beyond the conference-hall into the ineffectual lives of the middle class. Significantly, though, while the Nigerian diplomat's exasperation with empty rhetoric is made clear, his own more direct and gripping speeches are barely sketched in: no solution to the problems of development is offered. On another level, the Nigerian's early passion for Madeleine, followed by unexplained silence, and the husband's sexual problems (and his apparent inability to discuss them) can be read as political symbol as well as psychological and ethical exploration.

Over the years, the early optimism of *Sans Tam-tam* has disappeared from Lopès's work: but his continuing emphasis on concrete problems relating to cultural and/or psychological ones and his appetite for thematic and technical exploration, make him a writer of endless inventiveness and interest.

Anna Ridehalgh  
University of Southampton

## ON AFRICAN CINEMA

*After Empire: the New African Cinema*, MOMI, 1991

In February 1991, the Education section of MOMI (Museum of the Moving Image) brought out a booklet entitled *After Empire*. Subtitled "The New African Cinema", this booklet was produced by Fred Creasey, James Leahy, Marysia Lachowitz and Margaret O'Brien. Although slim, it provides a very useful source of information for the uninitiated. In its introduction, the eleven-page (but large-format) pamphlet situates the vicissitudes and richness of African film since the 1960s. It holds the neo-colonial stranglehold (of European, American and Asian financial interests) on the world marketing and

distribution structure of films responsible for the relative paucity of Black African films and for the very limited screening (even, and indeed often most of all, in Africa itself) of those African films which do get made.

The general, diagnostic introduction includes an excerpt from an interview with the Mauritanian director of *Sarraounia*, Med Hondo. It is followed by a very useful presentation of the background and oeuvre of six African directors, five of whom are from former French colonies: Sembene Ousmane and Safi Faye (Senegal), Souleymane Cissé (Mali), Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) and Med Hondo (Mauritania). The exception is the American/Ethiopian film maker, Haile Gerima.

In fact, the authors of the pamphlet/brochure quite explicitly make the point that "most of the important Black African film makers" have emerged from countries which were once the colonies of France or Belgium. France, in particular, has been active in providing financial backing and technical assistance through the aegis of its Ministère de la co-opération. One also notes with interest that two of the directors introduced in the brochure studied film in Moscow.

The thumbnail sketches of the above-named *cinéastes* are clearly intended to whet appetites rather than to satisfy them. Which is fair enough, given the unfortunately rather widespread ignorance in Europe on African cinema. However, despite the brevity of the booklet and its consequently slight treatment of the work of individual film makers, the authors manage to evoke much of the texture and the variety of the new African cinema. The two-page conclusion, on "language in African cinema" is particularly illuminating. It raises the very pertinent questions of the cinematographical language of African films (to what extent is it a universal language, etc) and also explains the specifically linguistic challenges which face most African film makers. Finally, the brochure provides an appetising bibliography and a useful list of distributors with African films on their lists.

Mary Gallagher  
University College, Dublin

## LITERARY CRITICISM

Bernard Mouralis, *Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba de Birago Diop*, Paris, Bertrand Lacoste, 1991, Série "Parcours de Lecture", 128 p.

Daniel Delas, *Aimé Césaire*, Paris, Hachette, 1991, Série "Portraits littéraires", 220p.

These two "handy volumes" aimed at the student market in the "reading guide" format, cover two contrasting bodies of work: one a seminal collection of African folk-tales, deceptively simple and superficially accessible, and the other one of the most centrally important and apparently difficult bodies of writing in the canon of Afro-Caribbean literature in French. Both will be useful to students tackling the texts for the first time, and to teachers as reference materials, and both deserve at least a library recommendation.

Bernard Mouralis's systematic approach to the text of Birago Diop's *Contes* successfully defamiliarizes it for anyone tempted to regard it as unproblematic, by reminding the reader of the importance of oral literature in West Africa, the ambiguous status of the "author" (copier? translator? collector?), and the multiple layers of cultural allusion contained in the mythical personages, animal and human, that people the *Contes*. Mouralis brings to bear the apparatus of modern criticism to very good effect: analysis of narrative, morphological breakdown of the structures à la Propp, etc. He juxtaposes extracts from comparable adaptations and transcriptions of oral literature by figures as diverse as Ahmadou Kourouma, Bernard Dadié, F-V Equilbecq (author of the 1913 *Contes populaires d'Afrique occidentale*) and even Buffon (on the subject of the hyena!).

Daniel Delas tackles the elusive subject of the writings of Césaire in a more classic manner: a 100 page essay divided into three main sections - *Le poète*, *Un homme de parole*, *Le dramaturge*, followed by an anthology of quotations and commentaries from mostly little known sources, by Césaire himself as well as others, from Breton (1942) to Michel Hausser (1986) or Edouard Maunick (1990). The volume concludes with a detailed chronological table and a very comprehensive bibliography.

In his essay, Delas draws attention to the many variations in the text of all Césaire's poems, from numerous additions to the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* between 1939 and 1956, to some ruthless pruning of his later collections. Delas can only suggest the nature of these changes, leaving the major headache of a definitive edition to future scholars. The coverage of the political writings and theatrical work is a good deal less thorough, but then they are probably a lot easier to deal with; nonetheless, *Une saison au Congo* is dismissed in a paragraph, and *Une Tempête* in two, so as to give pride of place to *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*. The section on Césaire's political writings is similarly rather sketchy, consisting of little more than a chronological summary of his various *prises de position*. Even so, this is a useful volume for reference and as an introduction for students who probably need all the help they can get when tackling the unavoidable complexities of Césaire's poetry.

Peter Hawkins  
University of Bristol

### Notre Librairie

Of all the periodicals covering the field of interest of ASCALF members, *Notre Librairie* is one of the most useful. It regularly publishes issues on various aspects of African and Caribbean literature, as well as that of the Indian Ocean. The three most recent issues illustrate the point very well: the July-September issue of 1991, no. 106, entitled "2000 titres de littérature des

Caraïbes" provided a very useful bibliographical check-list of works from or about the literature of the Francophone Caribbean, including works available in French translation. This corresponds to the comparable "2000 titres" on African literature, published in the mid-eighties, one of the most valuable bibliographical aids to study in this area.

The next issue, no. 107, dated October-December 1991, provided a comprehensive survey of one national literature, "Littérature nigérienne", in complement to several other similar volumes published in the past. The most recent issue, No.108, dated January-March 1992, is aimed at a more general readership, particularly in teaching, who might be interested in putting on introductory courses in the French literature of Africa, the Caribbean or the Indian Ocean. It suggests the most important writers and texts in each field, and gives brief descriptive notes on some of the most useful texts for study at various levels, ranging from primary school through to university. In this respect it acts as a complement to the various manuals such as Jacques Chevrier's recent *Littérature africaine*, published by Hatier.

The editor of *Notre Librairie*, Marie-Clotilde Jacquey says that it is a source of great chagrin to her that to date she has **no subscribers in the U.K!** Shame on you all! I hope that what I have described above will convince you that this is an indispensable tool for reference and bibliographical research which, at the very least, should be available in a number of university libraries. You can expect a sustained campaign on the part of the CLEF, the Club des Lecteurs d'Expression Française, who publish *Notre Librairie*, to recruit a wider readership amongst ASCALF members, and they may well send a speaker to our next conference. They work closely in collaboration with the French Ministère de la Co-opération et du Développement, and have sponsored exhibitions and visits by well-known authors and academics in our area of interest. *Notre Librairie*, Club des Lecteurs d'Expression Française, 57, Boulevard des Invalides, 75007 Paris. Tel: 47.83.14.38

Peter Hawkins  
University of Bristol

## NOTICES AND USEFUL INFORMATION FOR MEMBERS

### ASCALF annual conference

The 1992 annual ASCALF conference will be held on Friday-Sunday, 27-9 November 1992 at the French Institute, 17 Queensbury Place, South Kensington, London SW7 2DT. Offers of papers are welcomed and should be sent by the 2nd October to Peter Hawkins, President, ASCALF, Department of French, University of Bristol, 19 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TE, U.K.

At the time of going to press, details have not been finalised, but we hope to enjoy a visit from the well-known African critic and scholar Professor Ambroise Kom of the University of Yaoundé, Cameroun. The programme will feature an African film showing on the evening of Friday 27th and we hope to have on display an exhibition mounted by the CLEF (Club des Lecteurs d'Expression Française), entitled *Littératures d'Afrique noire de A à Z*.

The conference fee will be £20 (£7 for students and unwaged) which is simply a contribution to the running costs of the conference and does not include lunches at the Institute, which will be moderately priced and available by advance booking only. If you are not a member of ASCALF but would like to be sent the full programme as soon as it is available, about a month before the conference, send a stamped addressed envelope to Peter Hawkins at the above address.

We had originally planned a joint conference with the Commonwealth Institute on the theme of "Africa, the

Caribbean and Europe: Literature in 1992" for the 11-14 September of this year.

We regret that, because of the lack of financial support from various funding bodies we approached, we have had to abandon this project. Our annual conference will therefore take place as above at the more usual time of year, and we sincerely hope you will give us your enthusiastic support as in previous years.

Peter Hawkins

#### Papers from preceding ASCALF conferences

Before the year is out, two collections of papers from earlier ASCALF events should be available for purchase. The long-awaited record of the inaugural conference of 1988, edited by Peter Hawkins and Annette Lavers under the title of *Protée noir*, is due at last to be published by L'Harmattan in Paris by September 1992. A further collection of papers from the last ASCALF event in 1991 should also be appearing in a forthcoming issue of *L'Afrique littéraire*, edited by Jacques Chevrier and Peter Hawkins. Copies of both of these, subject to availability, should be on sale at this year's ASCALF annual conference at the French Institute, 27-29 November, 1992.

Peter Hawkins

#### French Caribbean Seminar

The ASCALF seminar group has continued to meet in Bloomsbury for papers and discussion on the French Caribbean.

On Tuesday, 24th March 1992, at the Institute of Romance Studies, Rita Christian paid tribute to Vincent Placolý (1946-1992), sharing insights from her discussions with the writer-teacher-activist whose life has been cut so tragically short. One of Placolý's texts was read by Louis-George Duval, and Richard Burton also sent a personal appreciation. This was a modest "veillée", but developed into a wide-ranging and quite passionate discussion on politics and the situation of the writer in Martinique, ending over drinks in SOAS bar.

Dr Mary Gallagher gave a paper on "Re-membering or reviewing? Nostalgia for a Caribbean childhood in *Antan d'enfance* by Patrick Chamoiseau and *Eloges* by Saint-John Perse" on Monday, 11th May at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Arguing that the principal function or effect of both works is "to evoke the texture of memory and nostalgia", Dr Gallagher illuminated these texts by her attentive analysis, and demonstrated a rigorous critical method. In the discussion which followed, there was a stimulating exchange involving different critical approaches to fictions of childhood in colonial situations, in English as well as French language areas.

Both seminars provided a useful meeting ground, allowing staff and students from British institutions developing links with the Caribbean DOM to meet some of the students from Martinique in the U.K. and to exchange useful information.

Bridget Jones / Vivienne Liley



## Register of ASCALF Members

As promised, we have begun to compile and to publish a register of ASCALF members' contact addresses and of their research and teaching interests and activities in the field of African and Caribbean literature in French. The following is the first version of this list. The Editor would be grateful if more members could add their names and interests to the register and if everybody would update their own entry as and when necessary.

\* **Asti, Frank**, Languages Dept, Nottingham Polytechnic, Clifton, Nottingham

**Research interests:** Négritude; West Africa in immediately pre- and post- colonial period; A. Kourouma

**Courses taught:** Final year degree course (multi-disciplinary degrees) in Francophone literature, involving post 1945 texts from West Africa, the Maghreb and Québec (one of a range of French options). One such text studied in Year I of course (currently *O pays, mon beau peuple*).

\* **Gallagher, Mary**, Department of French, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland

**Research Interests:** Saint-John Perse and the Caribbean; Contemporary Caribbean women writers; Caribbean self-definition in general (especially the writings of Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau).

**Courses taught:** BA semester course on Caribbean writing (*Eloges, Gouverneurs de la rosée, Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*). MA module on autobiography in Caribbean writing in French (one of several modules in an MA option on autobiographical writings in general). Text for 1992/3 is Patrick Chamoiseau's *Antan d'enfance*.

\* **Hawkins, Peter**, Department of French, University of Bristol, 17-19 Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1TE

**Research interests:** Women Writers: Aminata Sow Fall, Werewere Liking; Issues of critical theory in relation to African and Caribbean literature

**Courses taught:** Final year special subject; postgraduate supervision

\* **Hitchcott, Nicki** 18a Turle Rd, London N4 3L2

**Research interests:** Black African Women's Writing in French.

\* **Ibnlfassi, Laila** 9 Park Court, Balham Park Rd, London SW12 8DS

**Research interests:** Le personnage féminin dans le roman marocain de langue française

**Courses taught:** Currently teaching a course on Francophone North African novel

\* **Jones, Bridget** Dept of Modern Languages, Roehampton Institute, Whitelands College, West Hill, London SW15 3SN

**Research interests:** French Guiana; Caribbean literature, especially folktales and drama

**Courses taught:** Year 5: 2 options

(1) "Francophonie" including some films/novels from West Africa and Caribbean (with Pat Corcoran)

(2) Final Year segment of "Langue, culture et société" on *Martinique since 1935*

\* **Liley, Vivienne** 5 Moorfield Road, Woodbridge, Suffolk 1812AJN

**Research interests:** Caribbean writing in French; Women's writing

**Courses taught:** Course taught at Queen Mary and Westfield College (University of London) 1990-91 on Caribbean literature

\* **Little, Roger** Department of French, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland  
**Research interests:** Modern French poetry; "Black" "Francophone" Writing; Image of Black in French Literature  
**Courses taught:** Aspects of French Literature in Africa and the West Indies

\* **Ridehalgh, Anna** Dept of French, University, Southampton SO9 5NH  
**Research interests:** Political themes in West African literature in French  
**Courses taught:** Final-year option on West African literature in French

\* **Smedley, Nicholas** 114 Highgate Road, Parliament Hill, London NW5 1PB  
**Research interests:** Political fiction since independence; particularly literature from Guinea, Congo and Zaire. Protest literature in Haiti during the Duvalier era; Writers of specific interest are: Emmanuel Dongala, Tierno Monenembo and Sony Labou Tansi (Congo); V.Y. Mudimbe (Zaire); Alioum Fantoure and Williams Sassine (Guinea), René Depestre, Roger Dorsinville, Jean Metellus (Haiti)  
**Courses taught:** I am a part-time PhD student, in my first year at University College London.

\* **Wendeler-Opere, Catherine** 4A Chelsea Green, Linslade, Leighton-Buzzard, Beds LU7 7PU  
**Research interests:** Currently working on studies of space in *L'Enfant noir*, *Les Soleils des indépendances*, *L'Ex-père de la nation*, *Une si longue lettre*, *Juletane*, *La Vie et demie*, prior to finding a title for my PhD thesis in the next few months (Birkbeck College London).  
**Courses taught:** 2 modules in the context of a BA (Hons) in English Studies at Luton College of Higher Education.  
1. African Literature in French (studied in translation)

2. African Literature in English including: *A Man of the People*, *Changes*, *Burger's Daughter*, *Call Me Woman*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Kongi's Harvest*.

\* **Whitford, Margaret**, French Department, Queen Mary and Westfield College, Mile End Rd, London E1 4NS  
**Research interests:** not in the field  
**Courses taught:** Twentieth-century Afro-Caribbean Francophone writing  
Twentieth-century Women's Writing (including African and/or Caribbean writers).

