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Author

Tarica, Estelle

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Patrick Chamoiseau's Creole *Conteur* and the ethics of survival

Estelle Tarica *University of California*

Abstract

This article concerns the Creole Conteur in Patrick Chamoiseau's depictions of the slave plantation in Au temps de l'antan (1988a), Écrire en pays dominé (1997) and Texaco (1992). It proposes that Chamoiseau's vision of the plantation be seen as a parable for contemporary Martinique, one that seeks to reinstate a redemptive history in which the past has a positive claim on the present. The article examines the tensions internal to this recuperative attempt, especially those carried in the relationship between literal and spiritual forms of hunger: the slaves' famine condition and the survival tactics of débrouillardise compete with the spiritual nourishment found in an emergent collective identity. The article demonstrates that Chamoiseau uses the Conteur to redraw the symbolic boundaries of the plantation from an amoral grey zone to a cohesive Creole social order, making the plantation past relevant to the present day. It explores how Chamoiseau preserves the parable's frame of moral instruction even though, as a survival tale involving extreme duress, it involves a calculus beyond good and evil.

Keywords

Chamoiseau
Creole
storyteller
folk tale
hunger
Au temps de l'antan
Ecrire en pays dominé
Texaco

Résumé

Cet article porte sur le personnage du Conteur créole dans la plantation esclavagiste dépeinte par Chamoiseau dans Au temps de l'antan (1988a), Ecrire en pays dominé (1997) et Texaco (1992). Cette vision de la plantation peut être perçue comme une parabole pour la Martinique de nos jours, une Martinique qui chercherait une histoire rédemptrice où le passé revendiquerait positivement le présent. Cet article examine les tensions engendrées par cet effort de récupération, en particulier celles qui sont associées à la relation entre les formes littérales et symboliques de la faim: la confrontation entre, d'une part, la famine inhérente à l'esclavage et la débrouillardise des tactiques de survie, et d'autre part la nourriture spirituelle puisée dans l'identité collective naissante. Le Conteur, pour Chamoiseau, va élaborer un nouveau tracé des frontières symboliques de la plantation qui irait d'une zone grise amoral vers un ordre social Créole cohésif. Cet article explore la façon dont Chamoiseau préserve l'inspiration morale de cette parabole de survie et de détresse même si, paradoxalement, les catégories du bien et du mal doivent être dépassées.

Esclavage sur les Habitations. [. . .] L'exode de soi commence; c'est prix du survivre sous la morsure des fers. Se nourrir autrement, avaler la pitance accordée par le Maître mais aussi décoder le nouvel univers [. . .] (Chamoiseau 1997: 151)

For Martinican novelist and *créoliste* Patrick Chamoiseau, nourishment is a matter of both literal and symbolic food. In much of his writing he reminds us that slavery was a literal famine condition, marked by a daily struggle to find enough to eat. But he also writes of how the slaves, pushed into an 'exodus of the self' by the brutality of slavery, were famished for other kinds of nourishment. They lacked food for the soul and the self, which are sustained by the sense of belonging to a cultural tradition and by the ability to remember a collective past – symbolic food that was in short supply on the plantation. For Chamoiseau, the lack of such symbolic nourishment is not limited to the plantation. He argues that the same is true today in contemporary Martinique, the age of 'colonial modernity' marked by a 'silent domination' whose effects include disenchantment, alienation and dependence (Chamoiseau 1997: 17–18). The past of slavery and the present of French assimilationism are thus linked in his work by the continuities of hunger.

On the plantation, symbolic food had to be cultivated through new cultural practices, embodied in a series of iconic figures who appear throughout Chamoiseau's work: *Nègre marron*, *Quimboiseur* and *Mentô*. For Chamoiseau, the most important of these is the *Conteur*, the storyteller, because he forges a collective identity out of the fragments and famine of plantation life: 'Le Conteur, né d'un désordre d'hommes et tout projeté dans des liens à créer, est inventeur de peuple' (Chamoiseau 1997: 170). In contemporary Martinique, suggests Chamoiseau, the cultivation of this symbolic food requires that the existence of these old practices, especially storytelling, be remembered and accepted as part of the collective history. To accomplish this goal, he self-consciously shapes his own role as writer in the image of the Creole *Conteur*: '[J]e reprends la parole où vous l'aviez laissée,' he writes in the preface to his collection of Creole folk tales, *Au temps de l'antan*, directly addressing the *Conteurs* of old (Chamoiseau 1988a: 9). In many of his novels, he positions the figure of the author – himself – as the flawed transmitter of the popular language of storytelling. His essays and novels contain a strong didactic element: to demonstrate that the storyteller's words are necessary to Creole survival in the contemporary world and under ongoing conditions of alienation and dependence.

Yet this is no easy matter. Chamoiseau writes that, although the words of the Creole storyteller on the plantation were a form of resistance, it is a resistance that most would prefer to forget – a resistance of a subtle, devious, shameful sort, like other practices involving guile and negotiation within the confines of the plantation. In describing the plantation as a place of literal starvation, Chamoiseau reminds us of its status as a kind of grey zone, a place of intense desperation and hence an impossible moral universe, perhaps not unlike what Primo Levi described in his writings on Auschwitz (Levi 1986: 22–51). The Creole folk tales open a window to a disturbing universe: 'Les contes créoles illustrent bien l'absolu agressif qui nouait ce quotidien: trahison et méfiance, craintes et suspicions' (Chamoiseau 1997: 162). This vision of the plantation places Martinique's history over an abyss – not the genealogical rupture in history, the *gouffre* opened up by forced displacement across the Atlantic that Edouard Glissant describes and which he locates as the foundationless origin of Caribbean culture (Glissant 1990: 18–19), but rather a *moral* abyss located on plantation

land. Chamoiseau suggests that the shame associated with survival on the plantation casts a long shadow on the present, that it explains why the fascination with the Maroon's bold heroism, located beyond the bounds of plantation land, has displaced the memory of those who resisted slavery on the plantation. His turn to the *Conteur* is a critique of the symbolic elevation of more traditionally heroic and masculine figures, especially the Maroon. It emerges from his speculative explorations of how other, less noteworthy slaves survived the destructiveness of the plantation system, and it is part of his extended phenomenological reflection on the psychological costs of contemporary French assimilationism. The *Conteur* thus embodies Chamoiseau's concern with the ethics of survival under slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism.

For the most part these ethical concerns have not been explored by scholars who address Chamoiseau's fixation on the *Conteur*. Such work tends to approach the author's attachment to Creole orality in one of two ways: either by advancing formal and linguistic arguments about the incorporation of the Creole oral tradition in contemporary Caribbean writing (Bérard 2005; Casas 2001; Jermann 1994; Perret 1994; Seifert 2002), or, in a more negative vein, by seeing it as a prescriptive self-authorization that acts to silence other kinds of writing (Arnold 1995; Condé 1993, 1998; Tcheuyap 2001). These approaches, though valid, hardly exhaust the topic, and in particular they miss the moral nuances of Chamoiseau's work. His turn to the Creole *Conteur* and his desire to rescue the storyteller's 'parole de nuit' (Chamoiseau 1994: 154–55) speak to the need for another mode of telling Caribbean history. As becomes evident in many of his works, that mode is the parable, a form which allows Chamoiseau to confront the legacy of the plantation as moral abyss and restore what Walter Benjamin calls the 'secret agreement' between past and present generations (Benjamin 1968: 254). If, out of shame, people refuse to accept the plantation past as theirs, then Chamoiseau re-frames the past as parable, a story that conveys a moral lesson for the present.

By describing the plantation as a place, not just of literal starvation, but also of spiritual or cultural starvation, Chamoiseau presents it as a place of desire for meaning and transcendence. He thus sets up a parallel between the struggle to survive on the plantation and the contemporary struggle for collective cultural survival under vastly different circumstances, namely, French assimilationism – a situation, it bears noting, in which literal starvation has been largely eradicated. His vision of the plantation past as parable for the present day, in which the *Conteur* plays the starring role, seeks to reinstate the possibility of a redemptive history in which the past has a positive claim on the present. It responds in a recuperative vein to the collective desire to forget life on the plantation. Taking the plantation up as parable, Chamoiseau offers the possibility of recognizing an alternative and hitherto unacknowledged moral order created by slave resistance, particularly the *Conteur*, one that can orient the island's present-day inhabitants in a new direction.

However, this effort is not without profound contradictions. These stem in part from the fact that Chamoiseau's parable cannot help but also be a genesis story of Creole culture, and Chamoiseau, guided by Glissant's poetics of relational identity and his critique of origins, largely rejects

notions of identity that would seem to mimic or reinstate the founding exclusion, the fetishization of origin, on which the ideology of the colonial edifice is built. Yet despite this suspicious attitude towards a discourse of identity and origins, Chamoiseau has insisted on finding words against the silence, memory against forgetting, identity against alienation, historical continuity against rupture – on founding a ‘traditional community’ (Morgan 2005: 194). Thus, as Doris Garraway has argued, Chamoiseau’s work is an example of ‘the central paradox of Caribbean post-identitarian discourse; that is, its simultaneous refusal of origin myths and its striving for an alternative means of legitimating a fantasied social bond between individuals of radically different origin’ (Garraway 2006: 164; see Gallagher 1994 for an incisive critique of the contradictions of *créoliste* thought). We might consider Chamoiseau a kind of ‘postmodern populist’, one who uncovers and celebrates the existence of a culture called ‘Creole’ yet simultaneously refuses to proclaim its unity or uniqueness, since Creole culture, he makes clear, is not to be understood as local or particular, but as global, an expression of ‘le tout-monde’ (Morgan 2005: 194).

But beyond the paradoxes of *créoliste* thought there lies another troubling aporia that requires examination, one that emerges from the moral dilemmas of the plantation grey zone. Chamoiseau’s parables of life on the plantation are structured by the unresolved tension between literal and symbolic hunger. On the one hand, the narrative thrust of the parable is redemptive: he uses the figure of the *Conteur* to redraw the symbolic boundaries of the plantation, transforming the grey zone of literal hunger into an emergent Creole social order forged by symbolic hunger. Chamoiseau’s *Conteur* rescues life on the plantation from the abyss, strips it of shame and thereby turns it into a story that can be meaningful to the present. But what to do about that other hunger, the literal kind? Chamoiseau adopts a complex stance vis-à-vis literal hunger and the famished slave, powerful and problematic historical agents in their own right. On the plantation as parable for life in a colonized land, this literal hunger is not to be sated but rather displaced by symbolic hunger and thereby transcended – complacent satiety being one of the ills of *départementalisation* that Chamoiseau seeks to address. Yet Chamoiseau dwells at length on the situation of the famished slave, and the stories of hunger found in his work always involve a return to a place of extreme duress – ‘l’absolu agressif’ of daily life on the plantation. These are survivors’ tales; *survie* is their obsessive theme, and so they involve a calculus beyond good and evil – an amoral calculus of survival that Chamoiseau elucidates in his depictions of *débrouillardise*, the art of making do. The very return to the duress of survival thus places the parable function of the story under strain; it breaks the frame of moral instruction by implying questions that few survivors can answer: what is the price of survival? Is survival an end in itself, worth any price?

Chamoiseau’s *Au temps de l’antan: Contes du pays Martinique* (1988a), his *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997) and his novel *Texaco* (1992) provide points of departure for a needed reassessment of Chamoiseau’s ethics of survival and resistance. Such a reassessment involves a return to his depictions of hunger, and to the complex interplay between amoral *débrouillardise* and collective moral transcendence found in his writings on slavery and plantation life. Most of all, it requires a return to the *Conteur*, who embodies

the ethical undecidability of survival and who is both symptom and cure of a history lived as traumatic. Chamoiseau's *Conteur* lies somewhere between the experience of Creole history as rupture and the need – and love – for a Creole cultural tradition on the verge of disappearing, the hinge that provides these two experiences of Creole life a dynamic coexistence. Both trickster and progenitor, he embodies a parable of decolonization about the transition from an amoral to a moral order, a parable used by Chamoiseau to illustrate the path from alienation to identity in the present day. But the storyteller remains nonetheless a liminal figure, because Chamoiseau uses the *Conteur* to open the door to a world that requires a suspension of known moral codes, whose only possible lessons are the lessons of survival. He writes, 'Sa parole n'émergeait pas des lignes d'une Genèse ou d'un mythe fondateur, ni d'une Histoire ramifiée dans des chants littéraires, elle n'avait que le trouble du bateau négrier, l'éblouissement sanglant des désastres coloniaux, l'emmêlée des histoires venues de tous les Territoires' (Chamoiseau 1997: 176). And yet repeatedly, despite the fact that the storyteller's word 'has only' disaster, disturbance and confusion to engender it, Chamoiseau uses the *Conteur* to allow a crossing past the limits of one hunger to another, from the antidiscipline of famine to the alternative discipline of a nascent cultural order.

The amoral universe of hunger on the plantation

Chamoiseau's *Écrire en pays dominé* uses the plantation past in order to frame the dilemmas of present-day Martinique. Speculative and phenomenological, the argument he offers is not causal but allegorical: rather than seeking the source of Martinique's present ills in the plantation, he offers the plantation as a model for the present. This allegory is based on a particular idea about the nature of colonial domination, namely, that its effects are largely of an interior, subjective nature:

Je soupçonnais que toute domination (la silencieuse plus encore) germe et se développe à l'intérieur même de ce que l'on est. Qu'insidieuse, elle neutralise les expressions les plus intimes des peuples dominés. Que toute résistance devait se situer résolument là, en face d'elle, et désertier les illusions des vieux modes de bataille. (1997: 21)

These new 'modes of combat' relevant to present-day Martinique, he makes clear, can be found among the tactics developed by slaves to resist the soul-destroying effects of plantation life. His account of the past is thus framed in such a way as to serve the decolonizing aims of the present. He seeks to extract from it a lesson about resistance that can be applied to the contemporary moment, one that lends resistance to colonialism a collective and transcendent meaning, one that 'feeds' survival in the present.

However, as Chamoiseau himself makes clear, the slaves' experience cannot be easily taken up into a story of uplift. The brute reality of plantation life must be reckoned with:

Quel chant lever de ces échoués sinon celui des geignements? [. . .] Quoi, de l'héroïsme parmi ces troupeaux d'esclaves? quoi, de la résistance? quoi, une grandeur dans cette misère? (1997: 150)

Given the exigencies of life on the slave plantation, what kind of moral lesson can be drawn from it? How can it be understood as a history that orients us to the significance of the present moment?

The Creole folk tales themselves illustrate this problematic well, because instead of transmitting a moral lesson, they explode the moral order itself:

le conte créole éclabousse le système de valeurs dominant, de toutes les sapes de l'immoralité, que dis-je: de l'amoralité du plus faible. Il n'a pourtant pas de message 'révolutionnaire,' ses solutions à la déveine ne sont pas collectives, le héros est seul, égoïste, préoccupé de sa seule échappée. (Chamoiseau 1988a: 10)

Indeed, the stories' predominant theme is hunger itself. Chamoiseau writes that, given the conditions of deprivation on the plantation, given the slave-owners' punitive and greedy reluctance to feed their labourers, one can understand why 'nos Conteurs aient érigé la faim comme une lancinance du conte créole, et la nourriture, comme un obsessionnel trésor' (1988a: 11). The stories told by the *Conteur* evoke an almost primal state of need, the egotism of pure desire. The *Conteur* bring us onto the plantation as a universe of want, where the distinction between virtue and immorality, and hence the existence of a cohesive social order, has ceded to the pressures of daily famine.

Most Creole folk tales are parables and aim to pass on a moral lesson. Chamoiseau writes, 'ils constituent globalement une dynamique éducative, un mode d'apprentissage de la vie, ou plus exactement de la survie en pays colonisé' (1988a: 10). But in Chamoiseau's vision of life on the slave plantation, the parable function of the stories has been practically neutralized by the moral contradictions of the plantation system itself. The lessons conveyed by the Creole tales do not reinforce the existence of a moral order to which the listeners should conform. On the contrary, they offer lessons in amorality, as contradictory as this might sound. The *Conteur* teaches that surviving slavery and other forms of colonial exploitation involves accommodation, conformity and negotiation. To save one's skin, to make do: these feats involve the abandonment of one's social condition. The folk tales, as Chamoiseau interprets them, refer to the plantation as an impossible moral universe, where survival is only possible through individual acts of complicity, guile and shameless transgression.

Although Chamoiseau consciously confuses literal and symbolic hunger in order to draw out the parallels between the struggle to survive on the plantation and the struggle to survive in modern Martinique, the *Conteur* makes clear in his tales that these two hungers compete against one another. The hunger for real food supersedes and even destroys the possibility of a coherent moral or symbolic order. Survival on the plantation comes at the cost of abandoning the moral universe; it involves rejecting a collective identity. In the folk tales, literal hunger inspires virtuoso feats of creative individual survival and resourcefulness – 'which is never a sin', Chamoiseau points out (1988a: 10). Yet that hunger is also a destabilizing force, one that makes the cultivation of other kinds of nourishment difficult.

The same is not the case, however, in the contemporary situation. If, on the plantation, hunger is an insidious instrument of domination, in

present-day Martinique it is rather the *absence* of literal hunger that contributes to domination. Addressing a present-day inhabitant of the island, he writes, ‘tu n’affrontes qu’une mise sous assistance et subventions’ (1997: 18). The price of prosperity is cultural alienation; Martinique gets its food yet still goes hungry. Chamoiseau uses the Faustian language of unholy debt to describe this state of affairs – it is ‘usure fine’, a devil’s bargain (1997: 18).

Confronted with the false choices provided by the island’s *départementalisation*, Chamoiseau finds a solution in the figure of the *Conteur*, who represents for him the ability to forge a collective rather than an individual will out of the struggle to survive the alienation of plantation life. Adopting the *Conteur*’s locus of enunciation, he writes the following:

Je n’ai pas de solution collective à l’oppression esclavagiste car le collectif n’existe pas encore, il me faut d’abord *relier* ces hommes émiettés. Ce lien n’est pas dans les héros solitaires amoraux débrouillards qui peuplent le filage de mes contes. Il est dans cette dynamique où tous communient dans un seul personnage. (1997: 170, original emphasis).

Through an act of communion, the storyteller cultivates that other kind of nourishment. Chamoiseau writes, ‘Je me mis à considérer l’émergence du Conteur comme *l’effort de vie d’une nouvelle entité collective* dont les modalités rebelles me seraient qu’un symptôme’ (1997: 174–75, original emphasis). Rebellion here has been accorded a secondary status, the symptom of a more fundamental action: the ‘effort to live’ of a new culture. Collective survival, then, is the heroism of the storyteller.

Seen in this light, the *Conteur*’s act of storytelling is a virtuous one, but not because of what the *Conteur* says. On the contrary, Chamoiseau attributes little moral value to the content of the *Conteur*’s stories. Indeed, in his novel *Solibo Magnifique*, about the death of a Creole *Conteur*, Chamoiseau says explicitly that it is not a matter of ‘understanding’ the storyteller, but of opening oneself up to the words, of letting oneself be carried away by them: ‘Il ne s’agissait pas de comprendre le dit, mais de s’ouvrir au dire, s’y laisser emporter’ (Chamoiseau 1988b: 33). If the *Conteur* is possessed of virtue in such a context, it lies in being able to transcend hunger – and the moral transgressions it provokes – and restore the social order. The very action of telling the story affirms the existence of the community to its members. Storytelling promotes a coming together and heightens peoples’ collective self-awareness: ‘le Conteur fait *parler-ensemble* ces corps restaurés par les gestes, répondre-ensemble, marcher d’un pas commun, éprouve les mêmes joies, des peurs unanimes, des échappées conjointes’ (1997: 169). He bonds the people together, turns social disorder into moral order, by turning individual slaves into the members of a group.

Despite the amoral nature of the stories he tells, the *Conteur*’s actions provide evidence of an underlying cultural formation: ‘un système de contre-valeurs ou de contre-culture, où se manifestent *en même temps une impuissance à se libérer globalement et un acharnement à tenter de le faire*’ (1988a: 10–11, original emphasis). These words predate and prefigure *Éloge de la Créolité*, co-authored by Chamoiseau with Raphaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé. The authors write, ‘L’oralité créole, même contrariée dans

son expression esthétique, recèle un système de contre-valeurs, une contre-culture; elle porte témoignage du génie ordinaire appliqué à la résistance, dévoué à la survie' (Bernabé et al. 1989: 32). Although under most conditions, plantation survival tactics thwart the emergence of a collective awareness at every turn, in the figure of the *Conteur* these acts of survival are elevated to a shared 'genius' that is symptomatic of an underlying collective being. The *Conteur* is a powerful agent of historical transformation: he signals the transition from an amoral to a moral system. Under the emblem of the *Conteur*, survival becomes a virtuous act. But surviving is metaphorically akin to fasting, in this conception, for it involves substituting words for food, transforming hunger into self-imposed famine. Chamoiseau's vision of the plantation thus acknowledges the formative impetus of hunger yet seems also to banish it to an amorphous precultural past.

From food to fasting in *Texaco*

Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* also uses the figure of the *Conteur* to dramatize the transition from the amorality of hunger to the morality of oral cultural transmission. As in *Écrire en pays dominé*, *Texaco* strongly affirms the virtuous nature of the act of storytelling and offers a narrative in which the power of stories competes against, and ultimately vanquishes, the amorality unleashed by hunger. Like many of his novels, *Texaco* contains numerous tropes of oral transmission, and participates in forging the author's position in a chain of storytellers. The bulk of the novel's *récit* is presented as the transcription of an oral history communicated to a writer, Oiseau de Cham, by his informant, Marie-Sophie Laborieux. This communication is itself a reproduction of a series of earlier stories, especially the life-story Marie-Sophie tells an urban planner, which incorporates the life-stories told to Marie-Sophie by her father, Esternome. The novel consists of twice-told tales re-framed and transcribed by multiple 'authors'.

To assess the value of these transcriptions does not involve measuring them against 'what really happened', but rather in terms of the conventions of oral storytelling. Marie-Sophie prefaces her tale with a comment that destabilizes her own reliability: 'Et si c'est pas comme ça, ça n'a pas d'importance . . .' (Chamoiseau 1992: 38, original ellipsis). She incorporates the tradition whereby the storyteller presumes the existence of the listeners' doubts regarding the veracity of the folk tale and addresses these doubts directly. Examples of this technique can be found in many Creole tales, which often begin with rhetorical comments to the effect of 'You may not believe what I'm about to tell you, but it's an old story so pay attention anyway' (see for example Kichenassamy 2000). Marie-Sophie's words in *Texaco* signal that the novelist will be less concerned with exploring the relation between history and fiction – how true is this tale? – than with recreating a particular mode of telling tales, one which draws attention, with a wink, to the irreverent artistry of the storyteller.

Texaco contains an episode that tells of the conception and birth of the *Conteur* – now a *Conteuse*, Marie-Sophie. Her origin story takes the form of a parable, a story called 'La Volante'. The title refers to a malefic self-transforming sorceress named Adrienne Carmélite Lapidaille. She is 'la volante', changing shape into a cock every night. This *soucounnan* is directly

involved in the circumstances surrounding Marie-Sophie's birth. Unlike the many other stories recounted in the novel, the story of Marie-Sophie's birth is invested with the mythology of patriarchal foundation, in a novel that otherwise aims to deconstruct this mythology at every turn. Marie-Sophie is born from the romantic union of Esternome and Idomenée, a marriage with obvious Biblical overtones. Idomenée, the mother, was born into slavery; like Abraham's Sarah, she is already a crone when she bears Marie-Sophie. This miraculous birth is the occasion for a battle between good and evil: good in the form of Esternome and Idomenée, evil in the form of the *soucounnan* Adrienne, Idomenée's twin sister, who is destroyed at the end of the episode. As an 'engagé volant', Adrienne is associated with the devil pact, and hence with a specific kind of economy: the commerce of entrapment and dependency, of voluntary self-enslavement (Degoul 2000). Adrienne is a liminal figure who serves as a magnet for a range of desires that strike dissonant notes. One of these desires is hunger of the literal kind.

The passages surrounding Adrienne are formally significant in the novel, in part because they demonstrate Chamoiseau's attachment to textualizing the 'marvelous reality' of the Caribbean. In describing her evil powers and transplanting a folk belief to the novel, Chamoiseau employs techniques of magical-realist narration, most notably, the practice of reporting extraordinary events in a matter-of-fact voice or tone, such that the reader must grapple with the competing demands of familiarization and defamiliarization. Fantastic events narrated in a voice that carries not a trace of surprise or bewilderment: this is the hallmark of magical-realist narration such as found in works by Gabriel García Márquez, and indeed Chamoiseau has made his affinity with Spanish-American writers explicit (Pausch 1994: 155). The practice intends a subversion of the rationalism of Enlightenment history, in an implicit dialogue with Europe along the lines proposed by René Menil. Menil's words served as the epigraph for Chamoiseau's first work of theatre, *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse* (1982), which theatricalized a famous Creole folk tale. Chamoiseau included the following passage by Menil, originally published in *Tropiques* in 1941:

La tâche des hommes ne peut consister qu'à tenter d'intégrer le Merveilleux dans la vie réelle de façon à atteindre à quelque grandeur. Tant que le Mythe n'arrive pas à s'inscrire en toute banalité, la vie humaine n'est qu'un pis-aller ennuyeux. (Chamoiseau 1982)

In this desirable ordinary or 'banal' textualization of myth and magic, the author refuses to provide an alternative standpoint against which to measure the truth value of the magic described (for example, the narrative lacks ironic distancing, or lacks it precisely where the reader might expect to find it). The novel thus adopts certain characteristics of popular oral narrative. Although there exist other forms of narration that run counter to *oralité* in *Texaco*, such as the discourse of the Western-educated urban planner, these do not hold greater moral or epistemological weight than the oral discourse.

In *Texaco's* *soucounnan* episode, Adrienne's evils are associated particularly with hunger, much as they might be in a traditional Creole folk tale.

Adrienne meets Esternome when he arrives in Fort-de-France as a refugee from the destruction of St. Pierre in 1902, in the wake of the Mont Pelée volcanic eruption. Esternome, like the other survivors, is utterly destitute, living in a refugee camp run by the army. Adrienne is there too, serving soup to this pitiful group. Having no place to go once the camp is closed, Esternome ends up following her home, famished, as if under a spell cast by her soup. 'Tu m'as suivie ici comme on suit son destin,' she tells him. But it is hunger, not destiny, that leads him to follow her. His response makes this clear: he proffers her again his empty bowl – 'Mon Esternome lui tendit sa gamelle en réponse' (p. 186). First and foremost, to Esternome Adrienne represents physical nourishment. She is 'la donneuse de manger' (p. 166). Significantly, in this first one-to-one encounter with her, Esternome does not speak. Instead, he simply holds out his empty bowl. 'Fill this up,' the gesture implies, 'satisfy me.' His hunger speaks gesturally; words do not express it. It refers to an oral experience (food consumption) that is not verbal. The novel's depiction of Adrienne's primal role, as provider of food, is constructed in such a way as to remind us of the pre-verbal orality of hunger.

Over the course of the 'La Volante' episode, the pre-verbal orality of hunger comes to stand in stark moral opposition to *verbal* orality, the former linked by Chamoiseau to diabolical sorcery, the latter to the *Conteur's* magical oral textualizations. These passages from the novel illustrate that collective Creole life in the modern city takes shape through speech. Esternome believes that the city is constructed by memories, and that for the city to grow, 'Il faut parler, raconter, raconter les histoires et vivre les légendes' (p. 197). Esternome understands that spoken remembrance is essential to surviving in the city – and that memory is essential to the city: 'Mais c'est quoi la mémoire? C'est la colle, c'est l'esprit, c'est la sève, et ça reste. Sans mémoires, pas d'En-ville, pas de Quartiers, pas de Grand-case' (p. 197). Marie-Sophie recognizes this in turn, for she is the direct beneficiary of the symbolic transfer of oral Creole knowledge from rural to urban space. When, during World War II, the island is blockaded and famine rules, she draws on his words and transmutes symbolic food back into the literal: 'L'art de survivre que mon Esternome m'avait transmis à mots couverts, me permet de tenir sans un trop de dégât' (pp. 262–63). Furthermore, Marie-Sophie owes her own birth to oral knowledge, when the verbal wordplay of two accomplished narrators – Esternome and the blind Idomenée – becomes an art of sexual seduction. The erotic encounter between them takes place through voice: their conversations about the two great 'En-villes' of the island, St. Pierre and Fort-de-France, draw them into an intimate relationship which parallels the growth of the Creole city. While they woo each other with words, the city is invaded by waves of rural migrants. Their sexual ecstasy, described as an arrival – 'L'arriver arrivant' (p. 197) – bespeaks the marriage of the rural and the urban, as the French colonial city is effectively 'creolized' by the culture of Martinique's *mornes*.

In a novel which prizes verbal production above all, and which understands the word to be the origin of life, the non-verbal experience of hunger comes to be associated with negative social relations. Within the moral schema of the novel, Esternome's mute craving is dangerous: it makes him vulnerable to the seductions of a diabolical woman. It is no

coincidence that no one knows Adrienne's history – that she has 'no story', as far as popular opinion goes, just as she has 'no man' (p. 182) – and that Esternome cannot recall her ever remembering her past. Though Esternome and Idomenée are fed by Adrienne's eternal soup, while they are in her house they are effectively cut off from the true nature of human social relations: the spoken web of remembering. Once they re-engage in this web, seducing each other with their memories and in the process conceiving a child, Adrienne is destroyed. Read as a parable, this episode in the novel transmits a moral lesson: shared speech – the oral transmission of narrative – conquers the evil introduced by hunger.

Jean Bernabé, in *Le fable créole*, turns to Deleuze and Guattari in his approach to Creole orality (Bernabé 2001: 31). They argue in their description of 'minor literatures' that those who must write in an imposed or alien language will dramatize this dilemma by returning to the primal deterritorialization that all languages imply, for the mouth must always be transformed from a site of eating to a site of speech:

Riche ou pauvre, un langage quelconque implique toujours une déterritorialisation de la bouche, de la langue et des dents. La bouche, la langue et les dents trouvent leur territorialité primitive dans les aliments. En se consacrant à l'articulation des sons, la bouche, la langue et les dents se déterritorialisent. Il y a donc une certaine disjonction entre manger et parler [. . .] Parler, et surtout écrire, c'est jeuner. (Deleuze and Guattari 1975: 34–35)

They write that Kafka paradoxically satiates himself by fasting – by writing in a dominant language that has been stripped down to its barest essentials: 'on se remplira de jeune; on arrachera à l'allemand de Prague tous les points de sous-développement qu'il veut se cacher, on le fera crier d'un cri tellement sobre et rigoureux' (Deleuze and Guattari 1975: 48). Chamoiseau's aesthetic response is different: he proffers excess, a language of rich effusion that is inspired by the verbal prowess of the old *Conteurs*. But although he writes under substantially different circumstances and recurs to a different aesthetic solution than Kafka's, Chamoiseau too displays his fascination with that primordial transition when nourishment becomes a matter of words, not food, and circumstances allow that famine be symbolically transmuted into feast through a disciplinary art. In effect, that transition marks the birth of a Creole cultural order in Martinique.

Débrouillardise: the art of making do

In setting itself up as a parable for Creole cultural survival, Chamoiseau's modern-day version of the folk tale seems implicitly to repudiate the short-term tactics of the famished individual. It stresses the need to temporarily lay aside real hunger– the refusal of Adrienne's soup – in order to cultivate that other kind of nourishment provided by the *Conteur*, the food of words and memories, which allows a collective bond to emerge. As he says, there is no transcendent meaning to be found in the 'héros solitaires amoraux débrouillards' who people the folk tales (1997: 170). The didactic elements of Chamoiseau's essays and novel demonstrate that he, like Esternome, intends to pass on a moral lesson. Thus, over the course of his phenomenological explorations, Chamoiseau subject the figures he encounters in his

vision of plantation life to moral judgement, praising some, criticizing others. For example, although the figure of the *Quimboiseur* is initially taken as a source of positive resistance to slavery, Chamoiseau eventually dismisses him as a charlatan, practitioner of an unreliable and potentially dangerous art of transformation (1997: 163). Rather than validating all of these figures, he seems implicitly to ask, Which of these characters responds the best to his circumstances? Although all practices of *survie* initially seem virtuous, eventually it becomes clear that some are more virtuous than others – those that can be endowed with a collective purpose, that rise above survival as end in itself and achieve a transcendent meaning.

Nevertheless, Chamoiseau endows even the most banal or passive practices of survival with a certain heroicity and dignity. His appreciation for the resourcefulness of the famished slave is apparent in all his writings. Alongside the oppositional practices of the *Marron*, we find a list of the more ‘minor’ forms of subversion: ‘*mélancolie sans nom, chagrin assassin, paresse, railleries, vols systématiques, mensonges, disparition des notions de mal et de bien, suicides, sabotages, révoltes démentes où l’on saccage et l’on tue et l’on brûle sans projet*’ (1997: 149). Chamoiseau sings the praises of the plantation’s anonymous and forgotten slaves and validates even minor acts of resistance, offering an elaborate inventory of micro-heroic practices. These are as worthy of celebration as the Maroon’s bid for independence, even if they involve remaining on the plantation rather than physically escaping its bounds: ‘*La résistance africaine à l’esclavage connut toutes les formes,*’ he insists (1997: 144).

The symbolic importance Chamoiseau and other Caribbean thinkers have attached to the night is crucial in this regard, for it suggests that the slave inhabits temporary yet recurrent moments of resistance on a daily basis. Chamoiseau begins his collection of Creole folk tales by establishing the nocturnal setting: ‘*D’abord, imaginer la nuit sur l’une de ces grandes plantations de canne à sucre appelées habitations*’ (1988a: 9, original emphasis). The storyteller inhabits the night as if it were a place, using it to carve out a sphere of human relations through speech that escapes the Master’s control, a sphere in which the anonymous, fearful slave becomes a Master in his own right: ‘*la nuit, une exigence obscure dissipe sa lassitude, le dresse, l’habite d’une force nocturne et quasi clandestine: celle de la Parole dont il devient le Maître*’ (1988a: 10). In Chamoiseau’s depictions of slave resistance, the temporal distinction between day and night allows for the possibility of what Martin Lienhard has termed ‘intermittent marronnage’. Lienhard reports that the records of judicial proceedings against slaves, whether in the United States, Brazil or the Caribbean, frequently allude to ‘an intermittent marronnage that does not necessarily lead to a radical rupture with plantation life’, and that this periodic escape ‘demonstrates that the slaves, in the midst of their captivity, never ceased to create the spaces and times of an alternative life’ (Lienhard 2005: 246, my translation).

Rather than focusing exclusively on the heroics of the singular Maroon, Chamoiseau attempts to understand and respect the responses of slaves who would otherwise be seen as submissive to, or morally complicit with, the system of slavery. By offering a new perspective on the energy and resourcefulness of slaves and dignifying small acts of daily resistance, he seeks to rescue the plantation past from collective shame. He suggests

that however small and constrained it may be, the performance of these acts constitutes in itself a kind of freedom, because it demonstrates that the interior colonization of the mind by slavery remains incomplete. In Chamoiseau's writings, slavery is a way of life with its own perverse order, which he attempts to reconstruct from a phenomenological perspective. In such reconstructions, slavery is an intimate and insidious encroachment on the individual's very being – not unlike the 'silent domination' taking place in the contemporary world. It involves a process of *chosification*, whereby being – 'l'Être' – is transformed into a thing: 'l'irrésistible transformation de soi en oeuvre dans ces sales plantations' (Chamoiseau 1997: 163). This is understood as a kind of emotional or mental 'place', as the character Esternome recounts to his daughter in *Texaco*: 'là où sans contre-coeur tu acceptes ce qu'on a fait a toi' (1992: 95). One can inhabit this place mentally long after one has left the physical plantation behind. Esternome points out that once Emancipation is decreed, there are slaves who refuse to become free, having become too habituated to slavery: 'Ils allaient sur la terre de leurs maîtres comme chiens à corde courte. Jamais ils nous voulaient nous suivre, comme pris dans l'habitude d'être mort avant leur enterrement' (p. 142).

In Chamoiseau's account, the slave can act from within or from outside the system without changing geographic locations. Resistance to *chosification* is an interior affair, a matter of minute responses in the slave's experience of daily life, a particular way of exercising the imagination. Regarding the *Quimboiseur*, he writes, 'Il résiste. Et, dans une contraction de son imaginaire, devient le Nègre marron le plus extraordinaire: celui qui ne quitte pas l'Habitation' (1997: 160). In Chamoiseau's work, the plantation is an almost entirely symbolic space, and its boundaries are elements of the collective imagination. One can thus remain 'on' the plantation and 'within' the slave system even if one has physically or temporally left it behind, or conversely, one can be 'outside' the slave system while still remaining on the plantation.

Making do, surviving: these are expressions of the will, signs of the slaves' humanity. To survive – to engage in the labours of survival – is to resist slavery and remain free at some level. Indeed, in *Texaco*, Esternome seems to suggest that these labours of survival are not only distinct from literal marronnage, but also superior to it. Speaking of the freed slaves' agricultural reconquest of the mornes, he comments, 'c'était pas marronner, c'était aller. C'était pas refuser, c'était faire' (1992: 140–41, original emphasis). Literal marronnage has here been relegated to an unproductive and passive 'refusal', positioned as less virtuous than Esternome's active 'doing' or 'making'.

From this evidence of Chamoiseau's appreciation for a variety of responses to slavery, it is clear that his exaltation of the *Conteur* cannot be seen as a matter of simply repudiating these other modes of resistance. On the contrary, as Richard Burton has shown, Chamoiseau exalts *débrouillardise*, the art of 'making do', by classifying these tactics as *maronnage*, though of a lesser sort – 'la petite marronne', which occurs when 'the runaway absents himself partially and temporarily, and usually at no great distance, from the plantation and continues to live in ambivalent symbiosis with it until he eventually returns' (Burton 1993: 474). This smaller act of

rebellion involves simultaneous opposition to and coexistence with the plantation and parallels a variety of other practices described by Chamoiseau with the language of *maronnage*: 'La désamarre et les gardes-corps autorisent toutes formes de maronnage, même les plus symboliques. Avec eux, on supporte mieux (on croit mieux résister à) l'irrésistible transformation de soi en oeuvre dans ces sales plantations' (Chamoiseau 1997: 163).

Burton's analysis offers a lucid account of the everyday responses to domination – whether on the slave plantation or in contemporary urban Martinique – that Chamoiseau celebrates and textualizes in his prose. Burton argues that *débrouillardise* is a 'tactical maneuver', using the distinction between 'tactic' and 'strategy' developed by Michel de Certeau. De Certeau explains, 'A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it' (De Certeau 1984: xix, original emphasis). The strategy is spatial, self-defined and institutional; it is the province of the powerful. In contrast, the 'tactic' is a popular response, 'a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization)'. De Certeau continues as follows:

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. (1984: xix)

The tactic is reactive, impermanent and improper. Chamoiseau's *débrouillardise* and *petite maronne* are examples of the 'tactic'. Each constitutes an art of daily survival, what De Certeau would call a popular *poiesis*, whose various instances 'compose the network of an antidiscipline' (1984: xv).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Chamoiseau's own work complicates De Certeau's distinction between strategic discipline and tactical 'antidiscipline', which is simply too neat to account for the dynamic interplay between popular and lettered practices unleashed by decolonial thought. Chamoiseau is not content to let *débrouillardise* speak for itself, as De Certeau might be; he appropriates it for a decolonizing vision and in so doing brings tactic and strategy into dialogue. In this Chamoiseau is like other decolonizing intellectuals who celebrate popular practices that are disparate from, if not antagonistic to, their own disciplinary culture. Because Chamoiseau attributes such a strong didactic force to the popular 'poesis' of the *Conteur* and other non-heroic slaves, the 'tactic' also serves as a kind of strategy: when *débrouillardise* is taken up by the decolonizing intellectual, it is with the intention of using it to claim a distinct space from which to oppose colonialism. The recuperative thrust of his turn to *survie* and the storyteller attempts to generate a new historical consciousness and thus restore the broken agreement between past and present generations. De Certeau writes that tactics are temporary victories, and of a temporal rather than a spatial nature: 'a tactic depends on time [. . .] whatever it wins, it does not keep' (De Certeau 1984: xv). In Chamoiseau's vision of plantation life, however, the tactic does keep something of its winnings, which can then be used to carve out a foothold in the mind and transmute famine into verbal feast. Looking back to the plantation and to

the diverse ways that slaves responded to their situation, Chamoiseau finds food for the soul: 'De l'élan soudain figé de Nègre marron, à la dérouté de l'Être qui transforme en zombies au cœur des plantations: deux ultimes bout des résistances. Ils alimenteront mon âme de leur vigueur particulière' (Chamoiseau 1997: 150). Through the storyteller, *débrouillardise* becomes an act of creation with a heroic edge.

Conclusion

Chamoiseau proposes a narrative by which, by virtue of the *Conteur*, an amoral social order becomes a moral order, although he also sustains a sympathetic vision of that amoral past, for it is shaped by the imperatives of 'literal' hunger. What allows these two visions of the past to coexist is that both respond to the needs of the present – the need to liberate the colonized from the silence and stigma associated with plantation slaves, and the need to liberate them from the complacency of their 'postcolonial' dependence, which seems perversely to be sustained by the former. Chamoiseau's reflections on the *Conteur* and his desire to recover the power of the *Conteur's* words stem from his phenomenological account of racism in contemporary Martinique – his sense that French assimilationism is more toxic than nourishing. His depiction of the slave system as one in which people lose their 'contre-cœur' and become accustomed to captivity enables him to establish a direct parallel between contemporary and past forms of domination. In Chamoiseau's vision of the plantation, life under slavery becomes in part a metaphor for contemporary life 'en pays dominé'. The 'silent domination' of the present is understood to be a version of the *chosification* of the past, and slavery is understood, not as a specific regime of power, but as one expression of the broader situation of colonial dependence.

The turn to the *Conteur* is a conscious intent to displace the Maroon from the centre of the Caribbean's insurgent imaginary, to destroy the myth that holds that this was the only true form of resistance. Chamoiseau searches for other figures, other bodies, whose resistance took place on the plantation rather than outside it – the plantation writ large as a metaphor for all of Martinique in the age of colonial modernity. Yet overall, Chamoiseau's stance towards the Creole folk tale is profoundly contradictory. He wants to preserve the stories – to be a storyteller himself – yet he also stresses their amoral message, which brings the listener back to the plantation grey zone. The *Créolistes* say that Creole *oralité* is a system of counter-values, antagonistic to the assimilationism that dominates French policies towards its former colonies. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Creole orality's system of counter-values, as they envision it, is also antagonistic to another kind of orality – hunger – one which threatens systematicity and social order, which relies on deviousness and selfishness, collaboration and guile, and which at times requires a dependence on powerful 'donneurs de manger'.

This tension in Chamoiseau's work between literal and symbolic orality – between the hunger for food and the hunger for words – reflects the underlying moral undecidability attached to *survie*. If alienation, 'l'exode de soi', is the price of survival under slavery, then how can survival bring the self back to itself? Chamoiseau's answer seeks to restore agency to this oppressive equation, to make a virtue of necessity: *survie* as a shared genius, endowed with the transcendent, ineffable quality of sheer resistance – even

suicide is a mode of survival, in this view. But Chamoiseau does not let *survie* escape completely its condition as a brutally imposed necessity. It thus remains both that which resists and that which must be resisted.

These two visions of survival cannot be completely reconciled, even though the parable of the *Conteur* seeks to mediate between them. On the one hand, Chamoiseau searches in the *Conteur* for lines of moral instruction, trying to counteract the island's collective denial of its past (or the denial of its collective past). Though conscious of the partial and fragmentary nature of the Creole oral tradition, he sees in it one possibility for recreating the bridge between past and present. It is in the spirit of this bridge that one can interpret his creative use of Creole, his neologisms and his use of frame stories, among other notable elements of his novelistic form and language. On the other hand, Chamoiseau's interpretations of Creole stories and of the role of the storyteller in the past refer back to the plantation as a moral grey zone, a world of extreme deprivation and violence that has been internalized. Plantation lifeways thus envisioned do not easily offer themselves up as a tradition that can be recovered for the moral instruction of the present. It is chaotic, lacking a moral order; those who inhabit it are adrift and disoriented. It speaks to us of the destruction of a cohesive tradition and its replacement by a set of temporary, individual acts.

Chamoiseau's vision of the *Conteur* is the product of a will to see, in the fragments of this traumatic disorder, the traces of an enduring cultural order:

nous n'avons pas de genèse et notre histoire – ce sont les histoires des peuples, et pour nous ce qui est fondamental, ce qui est créateur au départ, c'est le conte. Le conte est fondateur parce que c'est au moment où le conteur va se dresser le soir dans la veillée sur la plantation esclavagiste et qu'il va dire "Et cric?" et que tout le monde va répondre "Et crac!" ensemble que le lien communautaire va commencer à se faire et que la culture que s'était créée, la culture de résistance que s'était créée dans les plantations esclavagistes va trouver ses modalités d'expression et de verbalisations. C'est à partir de là que ça commence pour nous, nos communautés. (Morgan 2005: 195)

From these words and others like it, Chamoiseau might be accused of an overly romantic, redemptive and heroic vision of the storyteller. But it is worth underscoring that the transformative actions of the *Conteur*, as Chamoiseau describes them, never erase that which is anterior them, do not relegate it to a pre-history which, in Ernst Renan's memorable phrase on the essence of the nation, all agree to forget (Anderson 1991: 6). The *Conteur* is rather that hinge between the famine world of wily tactics, which Chamoiseau does not want forgotten, and the Creole cultural order in nascent state. In adopting the *Conteur's* voice and offering us the tale of the storyteller as parable, Chamoiseau too becomes a hinge, between the plantation past and the colonial modernity of the present – a hinge that swings the door between them back and forth, like an unanswered question. He wants to listen to, recreate, transcribe and preserve the stories, yet what does the contemporary *Conteur* do with their amoral message, which brings the listener back to that place where survival does not mean collective resistance and nascent cultural formation, but the crafty, desperate, immediate and individual effort to feed oneself?

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Contributor details

Estelle Tarica is Associate Professor of Latin American Literatures and Cultures in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism* (Minnesota, 2008). Her articles have appeared in *The Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, *Chasqui*, *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* and *Latin American Literary Review*. Her research interests concern race, nation and culture in Latin America and the Caribbean, and she is currently working on a book about the presence of Holocaust discourses in Latin America. Contact: Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of California, 5319 Dwinelle #2590, Berkeley, CA 94720-2590, USA.
E-mail: etarica@berkeley.edu

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