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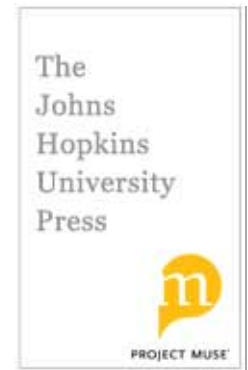
For What the Land Tells: An Ecocritical Approach to Patrick  
Chamoiseau's *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*

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Callaloo, Volume 26, Number 1, Winter 2003, pp. 219-234 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2003.0013>



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**FOR WHAT THE LAND TELLS**  
**An Ecocritical Approach to Patrick Chamoiseau's**  
*Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*

*by Renée K. Gosson*

How can one practice *marronnage* when the hills themselves have become plantations?

—Richard D.E. Burton, *Le Roman marron: Études sur la littérature martiniquaise contemporaine* (86–87)

In his *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant states that any discussion of French West Indian identity must take into account the centrality of landscape. He writes:

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from that land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood. (105–6)

Beginning with the original “discovery”<sup>1</sup> of Martinique by Christopher Columbus in 1502, its possession by French colonizers in 1635, the over 200 years of slave trade and dehumanizing labor in the sugarcane fields, and today the destruction of the ecosystem, the land itself is a powerful repository for Martinican collective memory and consciousness. Part of why the landscape of Martinique is so sacred, according to Glissant, is that it is a witness to the years of unrecorded subjugation of French West Indian people. Indeed, the landscape functions as a repository for a misrepresented past: “Landscape retains the memory of time past” (*Caribbean* 150). Consequently, any gesture of destruction against that land is portrayed as an act of violence against the collective memory of the past. The land, states Beverly Ormerod, is the past’s “only true guardian . . . history waits, latent, in the Caribbean nature, which is filled with sorrowful reminders of slavery and regression” (170). Physically cementing over the natural landscape with over-development, then, can only have disastrous consequences for the preservation of a memory already occulted beneath the rhetoric of

Western history. French West Indians are literally running out of room in which to store and preserve their cultural heritage.

It is in this climate of environmental concern that an ecological association was created in Martinique in the 1980s. Since its inception, ASSAUPAMAR (*Association pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine martiniquais*) has had as its mission the preservation of Martinique's natural and cultural heritage for future generations. Its current concerns include environmentally-insensitive land development, poor waste treatment, the recession of agricultural lands, forests and mangroves, and the pollution of the bays of Fort-de-France, Marin and Presqu'île de la Caravelle. These issues are all the more serious when we consider the fact that Martinique (a) is an island and, as such, has limited resources, and (b) is still occupied by France and depends on the "Mother Country" for the majority of its food supply.<sup>2</sup> When asked about the reasons for preserving Martinique's agricultural lands, Pascal Tourbillon (legal consul for ASSAUPAMAR) explains the importance of offering an alternative to European products in order to have a certain level of security concerning quantity (self-sufficiency), quality (health) and to maintain a certain biological diversity on the island.

In addition to being Martinique's most celebrated Martinican author today, Patrick Chamoiseau is deeply committed to issues of ecology, having served as vice president of MODEMAS (*Mouvement des démocrates et écologistes pour une Martinique souveraine*) in the 1990s. MODEMAS is a militant movement for Martinican sovereignty and has as its president Garcin Malsa, who is an outspoken ecologist and mayor of the town of Sainte-Anne (Pied). It should come as no surprise, then, that Chamoiseau weaves his ecological convictions into his fiction. An examination of his first novel, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*<sup>3</sup> reveals a very definite correlation between the French modernization of Martinique and the erosion of its indigenous countryside and culture.

In this study, I take an ecocritical approach to Patrick Chamoiseau's first novel in an attempt to *unearth* the expression of a suppressed culture beneath. I examine how Chamoiseau makes use of land and space metaphors in *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows* to demonstrate a topological *lieu de résistance* to the endangerment of Creole culture in the face of ever-encroaching *bétonisation*<sup>4</sup> in Martinique. I investigate the various culturally symbolic spaces Chamoiseau uses to situate the struggle between Creole and French cultural forces and I demonstrate to what extent they reveal a relationship between the perpetual examples of undermined opposition and the very real ecological devastation, which France is wreaking across the French West Indian landscape. As mentioned above by Glissant, the ecological pollution suffered on the island functions here as more than mere backdrop to economic, political, and cultural infringement. Rather, the setting itself emerges as a character in its own right, a measure of the degree of cultural obliteration and separation of Martinican people from their culture, community, and selves. The land and the French West Indian novel harbor, at the same time, the most obvious symptoms of oppression and the most latent traces of the French West Indian past, if we learn to read it.

Chamoiseau differs from his predecessor Glissant in the space in which he chooses to locate his novels' storylines. Whereas Glissant situates his fiction in the *mornes*, Chamoiseau privileges what has become the "former" plains: the town or *En-ville* of

the capital, Fort-de-France. There, where one notices an almost complete occultation of *la ville* in Glissant's writing, all of Chamoiseau's most renowned novels take place in the capital:

In passing from Glissant's almost exclusively rural universe to the essentially urban one of Patrick Chamoiseau, we go from one form of *marronnage* to another: from one form that, in choosing the hills as privileged space, takes place in the margins of the "system," to another that maneuvers from within, at the very heart of the system, be this on the plantation or in the city, first in Saint-Pierre and then in Fort-de-France. (Translation mine, Burton, *Roman marron* 151)

This shift in locus from Glissant's fiction to that of Chamoiseau parallels the actual physical migration of French West Indians away from the hills of their former agriculturally-productive existences, down into a consumer-oriented, modernized, and unmistakably French center of consumerism. Seduced by the comforts and pleasures of French culture, which they have come to value over their own, French West Indians unknowingly participate in their own cultural alienation. Their topological displacement symbolically captures the island departments' relationship with France: little by little, Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana are drawn into a tighter economic, institutional, political and cultural resemblance with the "Mother country."

In *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, Chamoiseau poignantly places French and Creole spheres in direct confrontation with each other thematically, linguistically, and topologically. In this novel, Chamoiseau constructs a *mise-en-scène* of the endangered Creole culture faced with the ever-encroaching and sprawling presence of French assimilation in its topological and cultural forms. Chamoiseau portrays a drama, which inevitably takes place in one of the remaining culturally representative and symbolically menaced Creole settings, be this the Creole marketplace or a garden. Each of these spaces struggles to preserve its existence despite the French forces of standardization, which are sometimes embodied by topographical markers (supermarkets, shopping centers, city) and, at other times, represented by tools of destruction, such as the agronomical pesticides which are used to tame, industrialize, and eventually exterminate an indigenous Creole garden space.

Through the use of certain symbolic topographical references, Chamoiseau, like Glissant before him, suggests a comparative reading between Martinique's countryside and its cultural vitality. His protagonists' attempts to assert a space of Creoleness in the face of French assimilation are symbolic for a people who have been both historically and geographically disinherited. Their failure to successfully claim a space of their own reveals the continued presence of cultural domination in Martinique. Plans to build and preserve Creole spaces are repeatedly answered by a more powerful gesture of destruction, which bulldozes, plows, and pollutes whatever stands in its way. In this manner, space literally closes in on Chamoiseau's elected models of cultural preservation, who, like the maroons before them, see their options for viable resistance shrink with the natural land around them.

Faced with the ever present and progressively imminent dangers of assimilation, Chamoiseau's characters attempt to repeat the resistant gesture of the primordial maroon, albeit in a space whose marooning options are increasingly limited: "There is no elsewhere, no exteriority, no *arrière-pays* for the modern maroon, no possibility of getting wholly outside the system in order to resist it" (Burton, *French and West Indian* 161). Because of the exiguity of space, Chamoiseau's characters must adopt different strategies of resistance. In the absence of the possibility to remove oneself from the milieu of oppression, these modern-day resisters attempt to navigate from within the system.

If we turn to Michel de Certeau's distinction between *resistance* and *opposition* as applied by Richard D.E. Burton,<sup>5</sup> space plays an important role in determining the *kind* of resistance possible in the French West Indies. Resistance is contingent upon an environment, which allows for an outside space to which to retreat. Opposition, on the other hand, takes place within an oppressed space, for lack of any other space to retreat to. According to Burton, Chamoiseau, unlike Glissant, embraces the slave figure, rather than the maroon, as his heroic emblem, the slave who remained in the plain, at the very heart of the plantation system. In *Texaco*, Chamoiseau writes: "If there were maroons in the hills, so too there were maroons in the middle of the plantation itself" (52). The slave's resistance consisted of a much more subversive, oppositional game, which allowed him, here and there, to take advantage of the smallest space left for cunning self assertion.

Today, this modern-day avatar of the *slave* is found, according to Burton, in the character of the *djobber*.<sup>6</sup> It is he who repeats this deft "*débrouillardise*"<sup>7</sup> within the oppressive space of the city center. Chamoiseau's *djobbers* occupy mainly the market space; they float from one odd job to another, depending on who is in need of their services. They are known for their skill in navigating wheelbarrows between crowded rows of produce and busy streets. Similar to the oppositional slave before him, the *djobber* cunningly weaves in and out of the urban space, which, like the plantation, leaves little room for maneuver. For Burton, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows* suggests that the *En-ville* is an apt terrain for interior opposition:

[W]hat the novel also shows is that there is significant, if limited, room for maneuver on the lowlands themselves, not least in the capital itself which, in certain of its parts (notably the market and surrounding streets), offers an ideal intercalary realm for the practice of *débrouillardise* and *la petite marronne*. ("Debrouya" 474)

However, the fact that these characters ultimately face the disappearance of the market and garden spaces, and the consequent extinction of their jobs, leads me to conclude otherwise. Chamoiseau's *djobber* is no better off than Glissant's maroon<sup>8</sup> before him as he experiences the same fateful demise due, ultimately, to an exiguity of space. Chamoiseau's novel suggests rather, that there is no room either for resistance or for opposition.

In fact, if we use Burton's argument, *Chronicle's* protagonist is arguably more a maroon character than a cunning slave figure in his attempts to remove himself from an oppressive system. His retreat to a hinterland is hindered by the sprawling presence of French culture, in its various ecologically devastating forms, which is never far behind. Ultimately, Pipi's failed attempts at resistance are directly related to the transformation of a landscape that offers him no room in which to play an oppositional game. His death at the end of the novel indicates the eventual infection of foreign values, which invade even the most resistant of minds. Pipi's indoctrination into the French material value system represents the mass of Martinicans who likewise passively consume an imposed culture.

In *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, Chamoiseau symbolically captures the eventual demise of the Creole marketplace and garden in the wake of Departmentalization so tragically described in the second half of the novel. French supermarkets and shopping centers sell exotic imported products at lower prices with which the local market simply cannot compete. The adoption of French pesticides, which seek to tame the delicate and ever-changing ecological balance necessary to the production of local vegetables, is eventually responsible for the garden's poisoning. The slow extinction of each of these spaces reflects the disintegration of traditional Creole culture, which, we will see, is rooted, indeed buried like a pot of gold, beneath the slowly deteriorating natural landscape of Martinique.

The novel's protagonist is strongly connected to these spaces, and it is within them that the drama of his life unfolds. The very *déroulement* of the novel is centered around Pierre Philomène, whom, to his mother's disgust, the Fort-de-France community affectionately renames "Pipi." The novel follows Pipi's development from his cursed conception to his eventual adult demise. This pattern of defeat repeats itself three times, on a micro-level, over the course of the novel and suggests a parallel danger in the fate of the Martinican people, whose future is also threatened by a seemingly inescapable French presence which continually robs Pipi of self-fulfillment.

Early in his life, Pipi's mother takes him away from the *mornes*, or hills, down to the *bourg*, Fort-de-France, to escape his *dorlis*<sup>9</sup> father. This is a man who possesses the secret of how to magically enter a locked door, in this case that of Pipi's virgin mother, and satisfy his otherwise uninvited sexual needs (*Chronicle* 20). Because of this violation which resulted in his existence, Pipi will suffer some ill and, until the end of the novel, an undisclosed fate which is enigmatically imparted to him one day at the market by his father: "You will learn to speak to the jar, but Beauty will gobble you up . . ." (34).

It is in the market space of Fort-de-France that Pipi grows up, between his mother's skirt, the shouting vendors, and the wheelbarrows of the *djobbers*, which he aspires to, and eventually does become. Despite his periods of elevation, for example, his nomination to "king of *djobbers*," "vegetable expert," or "agricultural artist," Pipi's temporary elations are repeatedly dashed by a more powerful force: that of French assimilationism, which eradicates those spaces of community whence Pipi receives both definition and existence. In the end, it is impossible to tell if Pipi's decline is due to his father's curse or that of Martinique's departmental status for, indeed, each setback is inevitably caused by the spreading effects of cultural and political assimi-

tionism. The novel follows Pipi's gradual retreat away from the island's capital center, toward a more natural and uninhabited space, which also eventually closes in on him.

Pipi's first moment of success comes with his election to "king of djobbers." He owes this title to the speed and deftness with which he transports the country's largest yam from the hills down to the market place, hence gaining fame and fortune. Chamoiseau writes:

We couldn't even get close to him to show our love and respect.  
A crowd rolled in from all around, and a newspaper photographer had him stand on the yam next to the vendor from Ducos.  
(*Chronicle* 64)

The image of Pipi triumphantly standing on the yam is a symbol for the country's rootedness, which comes from a sense of productiveness and well-being.

However, with the contagion of French supermarkets, which offer more desirable imported products at lower costs, consumer interest wanes for the indigenous fruits and vegetables left to rot. Consequently, with nothing left to transport, Pipi loses both his position and his fame. This demoted status is sadly exacerbated by unrequited love and a consequent precipitation into alcoholism. The last lines of this section refer both to Pipi and to Martinique whose culture is menaced by an invisible force. The collective narrator proclaims: "We did not yet know that for him, as for us, suffocation would soon follow" (*Chronicle* 91).

Pipi will once again rise above his situation and know fame with his growing of a miracle garden which, in its rich production of local fruits and vegetables, reminds his country of its productive past and possibility of economic and political autonomy. Once again, however, despite his retreat from the city center, his existence will literally, as well as figuratively, be trampled over by the same forces which destroyed the market. This time, however, the damage is more permanent as French-schooled scientists and botanists attack the indigenous production of fruit and vegetables at their very roots. Pipi loses more than fame this time: his adoptive family, once well-fed, now undernourished, is irreversibly fragmented by French Social Services.

Finally, with a third and final retreat further away from the ever-spreading urban center, Pipi will suffer his final and irrevocable demise. Fully withdrawn now from civilization, he enters into a sort of pure communion with nature, almost to the point of becoming part of the clearing he inhabits. He engages in conversation with the earth, whose spokesman is a ghostly slave from the past, a guardian of a buried treasure, which Pipi is intended to understand metaphorically and not materialistically. However, in spite of his temporary election by his community to *quimboiseur* status, Pipi disgraces this title by choosing material wealth over the richer, more precious cultural memory deposited in the land. This consumer-impulse and ensuing punishment serve as a lesson: Chamoiseau, like Glissant before him, warns Martinicans against the dangers of appropriating the capitalist values of French culture instead of preserving the land as a receptacle of cultural past.

To more fully comprehend the depths of this extended metaphor, I would like to examine more closely the representative spaces, which both frame and cause Pipi's

ultimate decline. We begin with the competing forces at work within the space of the vegetable market in Fort-de-France. The Creole marketplace in Fort-de-France is a place of diversity where people of different racial origins and cultural backgrounds come together to sell their goods. It is a place of disorder in opposition to the standardizing tendency of French space. Here is what Chamoiseau tells us about the market atmosphere:

Of course, this was before city hall had tidied things up: meat, fish, and vegetables were still sold all together. . . . Everything else, we djobbers included, latched on to these women in a crab-basket atmosphere of seeming chaos. (*Chronicle* 31)

Because of its atmosphere of relative chaos, the Creole marketplace serves as a useful metaphor for the Martinican community, itself as racially mixed and culturally diverse as the products it buys and sells. The marketplace is a space of community where these people do indeed come to buy their food, but also to see friends, to catch up on gossip, and to seek medicinal remedies:

People came to the market to do the day's shopping, but above all to sharpen the tongue on disputes and chit-chat, to search for the friend-relative-loved-one who'd vanished around some corner of fate, to spread the news of births and deaths, to dispel the languor of a loneliness, and finally, to consult about one's ailments with the sellers of medicinal herbs and wonder-working seeds. (32)

More than a space of consumerism, the *marché* of Fort-de-France is a space of life and community. Much of this, however, dissipates during the course of the novel, due to Departmentalization and the consequent massive importation of "Frenchness":

As time passed, more boats and planes kept coming from France. They brought crates of inexpensive merchandise, exotic apples and grapes that capsized our hearts, unfamiliar produce in cans, in vacuum pouches, or wrapped in cellophane. The *békés* sold their agricultural land to low-income housing developers, or to civil servants eager to live in the suburbs, and erected import-export warehouses on the harbor. Soon they were covering the country with self-service grocery stores, supermarkets, and mega-markets that made ours look pretty sad. (97)

In contrast to the fresh fruit and vegetables offered by the Creole market, French products arrive full of preservatives, cellophane-wrapped and vacuum-packed. These products are then sold in French stores, whose well-stocked, neatly-organized aisles are but a miniature of the equally logical order of the urban plan. Frenchness, in its various forms, little by little displaces Creole culture by flooding the indigenous economic base with imported products and by eventually destroying the need for a



local market space. The Creole market simply cannot compete economically with the *supermarchés*, which offer products at a lower cost and which successfully seduce their customers with the lure of imported goods.

The eventual demise of the marketplace has consequences reaching far beyond economic appearances, for both vendors and *djobbers*. As for the vendors, there simply is no longer any need for their services: "We never saw the bush-medicine women anymore—there were so many pharmacies!" (*Chronicle* 154). Consequently, the market eventually undergoes a general exodus, first of clients, then of vendors, away from the *marché* and toward the French centers of commerce:

The extinction was imperceptible, at first. When the evidence finally jumped out at us, it was too late. The elderly peasant women gave up, the middle-aged ones abandoned their baskets for housekeeping jobs in office buildings or huge villas, and the young vendors went off to France with the help of the Division of Departments Overseas. . . . (*Chronicle* 97)

With the demise of the market, the vendors pack their bags and are subsumed by the system, which put them out of work in the first place. They either leave for France or go work for French-owned supermarkets and boutiques: "Their stalls were now used to sell souvenir carafes, knick-knacks made-in-etc., and stock close-outs from warehouses frequented by somewhat sleazy secondhand dealers" (154). Former vendors turned boutique shopkeepers, they now symbolically carry vegetables in plastic supermarket bags. Some even finish by ingesting the new order. Whereas, before, these vendors lunched on such indigenous noontime dishes as "shark *étouffé*" and "macadam" ("a dish of rice in saffrony yellow sauce and codfish simmered with green peppers") (32), they now prefer fast food: "The new market vendors preferred chicken'n'fries from the fast-food places or hamburgers from movie-theater snack bars" (121).

One vendor in particular, the newly-widowed Elyette Paville, surnamed "Odibert," decides to go into a business which she knows well. Upon her husband's accidental death, she opens a funeral commerce, "shop of mortuary items" (*Chronicle* 31). However, in the wake of Departmentalization, she will be forced to close shop with the establishment of French funeral suppliers who rent out, rather than sell, funeral accessories, thereby putting her out of business by driving her to bankruptcy and uselessness:

Once we were officially declared French, however, made-in-France funeral parlors began offering complete service packages: hearse, interment, and all the trimmings. People no longer had to buy what they could now rent. (122)

Odibert returns briefly to the market, where she sells pepper until the day she hears of her own death, prematurely and wrongly announced during the radio's daily obituary. It is revealing that the very enterprise that occasioned her professional

death goes a step further in proclaiming her medically dead.<sup>10</sup> At this pronouncement, Odibert collects her things and quietly disappears into the public fountain (123–24). Not by coincidence, she does so symbolically clutching a handful of dirt: “At the last swallow, she rippled like a damaged film, and reaching into a corner of the fountain, grabbed a handful of dirt and stared at it, desperately seeking something” (124). Chamoiseau thereby reinscribes the link between land, productivity and viability. Both Odibert and Pipi’s expiration can be compared to the collective death the Martinican people are symbolically undergoing with the newly-Departmentalized island status described in the novel.

The vendors are not the only ones to suffer from the increasing demand for French products. The *djobbers* also see their means of livelihood disintegrate. Unlike the migrating vendors, however, the *djobbers*’ skills are not transferable: “the market was all we knew” (*Chronicle* 99). Like the unsold vegetables, which eventually spoil, the *djobbers* themselves suffer a sort of deterioration in their newfound uselessness:

Around the deserted market stalls, we transported baskets that were much too light, and the wheelbarrows lost their balance. . . . Baskets of unsold wares spoiled in the heat. At the end of the day, we’d fight over the wrinkled tomatoes, the shriveled carrots, the oranges going rusty with age. . . . (97–98)

The absence of a viable market economy destabilizes more than the *djobbers*’ wheelbarrows. As a *djobber*, Pipi, like his wheelbarrowing peers, doesn’t create anything: “Possessing simply our wheelbarrows and our skill with them, we did not farm, or fish, or bring anything to market” (*Chronicle* 7). Rather, their very existence is contingent upon the vitality of the market space: “the three markets of Fort-de-France (meat, fish, vegetables) were, for us *djobbers*, the compass of our lives” (7). And the vitality of the market space is, in turn, contingent upon the land’s capacity to produce.

It is not surprising that the *djobber*, like the maroon in Glissant’s novels, is menaced by the disintegration of his home, here the market space, which is in danger of being replaced by the imported French supermarkets. Predictably, like the maroon species in unprotected territory, Chamoiseau’s modern maroon, the *djobber*, faces a similar endangerment in the face of modernization:

[T]he *djobbers* are disappearing, eliminated by the proliferation of supermarkets, by the explosion of massive and passive consumption that no longer even allows a man to rustle up some work or strive to keep it going day after day. . . . (Glissant, “A Word Scratcher” viii)

This modern-day avatar of the maroon, although adapted to fit an urbanized setting, is nonetheless equally dependent upon the freedom of movement so essential to the maroon before him. Indeed, the maroon’s constant movement was his most effective tactic for survival. With the introduction into the city of a more capitalistic presence, however, the *djobber* experiences a restriction in his movement which is attributable

to a diminishment in navigable space and reasons for navigation. Like the characters Dlan, Médellus, and Silacier from Glissant's *Malemort*, a certain symptom of the *djobber's* decline is his transformation into a *driveur*, a floating, directionless unemployed individual who aimlessly drifts about before he is eventually recuperated by social services and placed into the country's only insane asylum, Colson. Walking emblems of their country's non-productivity, these *djobbers* are harbingers of a future cultural disintegration.

In the absence of physical space to turn to, some *djobbers* end up going mad: "Those who clung to the market often succumbed to a kind of madness that became commonplace. For us aging master-*djobbers*, there was no escape. . . ." (*Chronicle* 99). The fate of one *djobber*, Bidjoule, seems to summarize best that of his compatriots:

The alarm went up when his barrow lost a wheel and snapped its axle. A trifling repair. But our colleague spent a whole Sunday in perplexity before the unfathomable enigma of his open toolbox. . . . Helplessly, we saw him go under, saw him botch his *djobs* more and more badly, saw the scrapes his wheelbarrow inflicted on cars. (*Chronicle* 99)

The wheelbarrow functions here as a barometer to Bidjoule's mental health. Indeed, there is nothing more indicative of a *djobber's* demise than the loss of control over his vehicle. It is significant that this *djobber* dies soon after his ultimate gesture of mental illness, when he pretends to be a yam and half-buries himself in the earth: "On the sixth day, the police found him in the brushwood of Bois-de-Boulogne, just behind La Savane, buried up to the waist and claiming to be a yam" (*Chronicle* 100). This last gesture of despair signifies Bijoule's attachment to the land and his dependence on its production. By symbolically becoming one with the earth, Bidjoule expresses his personal desire for a return to a state of autonomous vegetation and production, so essential to Martinican cultural rootedness. It is especially significant, in a changing society which is increasingly favoring imported food substances, as seen in the predominance of the burger-eating vendors, that this *djobber* symbolically opts rather for the land and its indigenous production. However, his choice is pessimistically portrayed as not exactly a viable option, for it is inevitably linked to mental illness and death.

This desire for a productive land provides the foundation for the novel's second metaphorical space, which, like the market, eventually succumbs to the devastating effects of French standardization. Out of desperation to feed his lover's famished sixteen sons, and out of an attempt to return to a personal and cultural state of production, Pipi sows a miracle garden, which, for a brief period of time, successfully alleviates his family's hunger and revives local produce. However, both the production of indigenous produce and Pipi's adoptive family will be destroyed by the introduction into that space of French assimilation in the form of agronomical standardization and the French language itself. This failure comprises Pipi's second rise and fall from fame and a viable existence.

What could be more representative of Creole diversity than the flourishing indigenous production of plants, vegetables, and fruit? Thanks to Pipi, for a brief period, the country and vegetable market celebrate a return to post-war production because he sends his produce to the market for sale: "The vendors' prices were so reasonable that the supermarkets with their made-in-France fruits and vegetables found themselves facing stiff competition" (*Chronicle* 142). It is not coincidental that this resurgence of indigenous production is considered by those members of the community most concerned with the disintegration of Martinican culture to be a sign of hope for independence. Pipi and his garden are ceremoniously embraced as a symbol:

Independence-minded political parties and other groups of modestly marooning black activists awarded Pipi medals, inviting him to meetings where he sat up on the speaker's platform patiently listening to reams of nonsense. He had proved, people trumpeted, that independence was a viable option. (*Chronicle* 142-43)

Once again, Pipi enjoys reputation and fame. This time, he even appears on the evening news. However, something is obviously amiss underneath this pretense of honor. Pipi's inability to understand French foreshadows his eventual alienation in a discourse he is not prepared to enter into and in which he will not fare well. Ironically, it is the same dignitaries that hold Pipi up as a paradigm of cultural resilience who will be responsible for destroying the garden. This group includes Aimé Césaire, Fort-de-France's former mayor and father of the *Négritude* movement, in a fictionalized form.

Literarily, Césaire inscribes himself into the lineage of traitors.<sup>11</sup> Like them, Césaire is indicted for turning his back on his own people:

Politically, the "official" opponents of the system, notably Césaire and the autonomists of the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais, have, unbeknown to themselves, internalized the dominant discourse, not least in their fetishistic cultivation of French and unspoken contempt for creole. (Burton, "Debrouya" 472-73)

The caricaturization of Césaire in Chamoiseau's novels is important given the *Créoliste's* at times violent reaction against Césaire's theories and political policies, which, according to them, did not always have the best interests of the Martinicans in mind. In their *In Praise of Creoleness*, Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant, and Patrick Chamoiseau declare that they will forever feel indebted to Césaire and *Négritude* for restoring that part of Martinican identity which has been the most denigrated: the Black or African side. They nonetheless reproach Césaire for ignoring those other cultural components which constitute Martinican identity. This includes, not only a disregard and even disdain of the racial complexity, but a suppression of the Creole language which is its result and emblem. The *Créolistes* declare that, even though *Négritude* played a certain key role in raising consciousness and restoring pride in cultural otherness, this came at a cost:

Negritude did not solve our aesthetic problems. At some point, it even might have worsened our identity instability by pointing at the most pertinent syndrome of our morbidities: self-withdrawal, mimetism, the natural perception of local things abandoned for the fascination of foreign things, etc., all forms of alienation. A violent and paradoxical therapy, Negritude replaced the illusion of Europe by an African illusion. (*In Praise* 82)

According to the proponents of *Créolité*, *Négritude* caused more damage than good in simply substituting an African paradigm of identity for the French one.

It is in Raphaël Confiant's *Aimé Césaire, une traversée paradoxale d'un siècle* that Aimé Césaire and the *Négritude* movement receive their fullest critique. Here, Confiant identifies what he calls a contradiction between Césaire's literary and political agenda. As a political figure, Césaire did not fully consider the cultural ramifications in securing equal rights, pay, schools, airports, and development for his country: "Martinique of 1993 is but an ersatz of a country and Aimé Césaire and his administration are, to a large extent, responsible for this situation" (Translation mine, 32).<sup>12</sup> In particular, Confiant accuses Césaire of pandering to a White audience in his embracing of the French language and in his categorical refusal of the Creole one. He indicts Césaire for privileging those parts of his cultural identity which are "pure," (European or African) instead of acknowledging and taking pride in the cultural complexity that is Creole culture. As an example of the extent to which Césaire denies those other cultural components, Confiant points out the absence of a Hindu presence in his literary *œuvre*. Despite the fact that Césaire had numerous friends and even a childhood governess who were Indian, Césaire is remiss in making any mention of them:

This occultation of Hindu culture in his poetic work inscribes itself into a larger process of illegitimization of Martinican Creole culture and a refusal, even disgust, of its mixed or hybrid character. (Translation mine, 71)

Where this repulsion of the mixed, or impure is the most blatant, though, is in Césaire's repression of the Creole language, which is sarcastically portrayed in his fictional but symbolic encounter with Pipi, who could not be more Creole.

The garden quickly becomes a space whose fate depends upon the victor in a linguistic battle between Pipi's untranslatable Creole gardening techniques and the French desire to analyze and standardize them. Pipi is ultimately as much a victim of the imposed pesticides as he is of the linguistic system, which, like pesticides, seeks to tame and reduce the incomprehensible into comprehensible morsels.

In order to understand Pipi's technique, the town council demands that Pipi explain everything to them in a language they understand: "Read this, monsieur: mastering this vocabulary and these basic principles of agronomy will help you to impart your knowledge to us . . ." (*Chronicle* 144). Not only does Pipi not understand nor speak French, but Césaire and his assimilated entourage refuse to speak to him in

their common language: Creole. By rendering the discourse a French one, on French terms, Pipi literally loses ground in this struggle. Upon meeting Césaire, Pipi remains speechless:

He was thrown into a dither when the municipal council of Fort-de-France, led by the mayor, marched up to him in great pomp. Seeing Aimé Césaire in person come forward to hug him and call him a *fundamental Martinican*, Pipi went *ababa*. Sweating, stammering, he no longer understood a thing they said to him and proved incapable of explaining his methods. The workings of the garden were suddenly a complete jumble to him. (143)

The imposition of the French language renders Pipi's own gardening techniques incomprehensible even to himself.

It is the lack of communication between Pipi and the agronomical engineers which initiates the fateful demise of the garden: "Something gradually went awry in the garden. Caterpillars flourished there. Mysterious mushrooms appeared" (*Chronicle* 145). Pipi, who figures the scholarly specialists know more than he does about gardening, eventually abandons his project and leaves its fate in the hands of those who destroy it:

The learned men took the situation in hand. Fertilizers. Pesticides. Additives. Electronically controlled scientific waterings. Sprayings. Thermometers. Plastic greenhouses. Grafts. Removal of specimens judged to be without interest. Soon the garden looked different. (145)

The garden's decline results in the reappearance of famine in the Jupiter family and the eventual intervention of Social Services, which whisk away the four seriously under-nourished and sick youngest boys. As one might expect, it is the French language that wins out by imposing its logic and written structure on the garden:

The "black botanists and agronomists" from the Conseil Régional succeed in disrupting the complex ecological balance of the smallholding and reducing its owner to final dereliction and death . . . Once more the written word—manipulated as so often by black and coloured Martinicans—destroys the unwritten, and perhaps unwritable, subtleties of Créolité. (Burton, "Debrouya" 474)

"Césaire" and his learned entourage, botanists and agronomical engineers, physically rob Pipi of his land and symbolically of his discursive power.

Disinherited once more of a livable space, Pipi recedes even further into the natural landscape and into an even more Creole imaginative space. With this second separation of Pipi from his surrounding community, in this case his family, and the loss of yet another role (first *djobber*, then miracle gardener and adoptive father), Pipi returns

once again to nature and to his quest for a hidden treasure, which he is convinced is just waiting to be discovered: “[T]his country’s full of treasures, pirate chests, the moneybags of mean rich *békés* . . . There’s legends about them, after all . . .” (*Chronicle* 102). In particular, Pipi becomes preoccupied with the story of a master who, on the eve of abolition, asked his slave to help him bury his gold as a final favor before he sets him free. However, once the slave has carried and buried this treasure, the master betrays him by killing him and thus safeguarding his gold’s location. It is said, however, that this slave, Afoukal, till this day, hauntingly guards the jar of gold and the secret of its location.

This treasure obviously symbolizes the wealth that the *békés*, white French settlers and plantation owners, have wrongfully reaped from a land which is not theirs and, quite literally, *on the backs of* African slaves. Having murdered and entombed his faithful servant, this *béké* buries Afoukal’s word in both senses. First of all the master buries Afoukal’s promise. Afoukal gave his master his word that he would not disclose the gold’s location: “You can depend on me, Master” (*Chronicle* 105). Second of all, the master inters Afoukal’s rich source of stories, which Afoukal-ghost will eventually impart to Pipi during their numerous conversations. These stories include the *real* history of Martinique: the capture and transport of African slaves, the arrival and labor in the new land, and the years of an oppressive relationship between the French and the Martinicans.

This pot of gold is also significant in that it is both a product and producer of the oral tradition. First of all, Pipi’s quest is motivated by the *rumors* he hears about how the wealthy bar-owner, Chinotte, came into her riches: “Everyone says you found a treasure in Columbia!” (*Chronicle* 103). Second of all, his quest will lead him to interviews with other *vieux* who have themselves embarked upon this quest for Afoukal’s gold before Pipi. Lastly, Pipi himself enters into contact and dialogue with Afoukal, in ghost form, who shares his stories of the slave past. This oral exchange of information is essential in a society whose history is not represented in the European history books Martinican children study at school: “Children in school learn stuff about France no one understands. . . .” (*Chronicle* 102). Rather, the Martinican past is lodged somewhere in the memory of the land, as represented by the pot of gold.

So fascinated is Pipi with Afoukal’s stories that he temporarily forgets to ask about the gold in question. Afoukal invests him with a different kind of gold, that of oral history: “Afoukal enjoyed visiting his dreams and began speaking to him more and more clearly about plantation life during slavery, that most searing day-after-day distress” (*Chronicle* 110). These conversations with Afoukal allow Pipi to remember things about his cultural past which he was on the brink of forgetting: “It is through them that Pipi went back into his own memory cleft open like a calabash by oblivion and buried in the farthest corner of himself” (110). Finally, this interaction with Afoukal also allows Pipi to re-enter into communion with the earth, to the point of becoming one with it: “There were periods, it was said, when he changed himself into grass, for he was nowhere to be seen” (*Chronicle* 152). It is this interaction that turns Pipi himself into a sort of storyteller, hence his third elevated status as a respected *quimboiseur*,<sup>13</sup> a wise man who is at the same time intimately connected with nature and its capacity to heal and to reveal the real story behind Martinique’s oppressed past.

Sadly, however, Pipi forgets the old slave's message when he opts to pursue the gold in its material sense in an attempt to win over a woman as illusive and unreal as she is beautiful. He demands that Afoukal yield the material pot of gold. Once in his greedy hands, however, this pot crumbles into dust and dissipates between Pipi's greedy fingers. At the same moment, the beautiful woman he so desired, transforms herself into a beast-like being which devours Pipi for good. The novel thus closes with a reminder and an unveiling of the meaning of Pipi's *dorlis*-father's curse. Indeed, Pipi knows how to speak to the pot, and the "belle" does, in fact, devour him. It is at this point that the novel offers us a final comparison between the fate of its protagonist and that of the Martinican people:

As for us . . . we're being devoured by another sort of *jablesse*. Worn out on our crates, huddled together to ward off a piercing chill, we say these words over and over again, these memories of life, certain that we must disappear. (*Chronicle* 172–73)

The most important lesson which, unfortunately, Pipi will not understand until it's too late, is the old slave's message that the richest "gold" of all, which is hidden in the earth, is that of Martinican history: "[T]he oldtimers around here still believe every jar stashed in the ground is full of treasure. . . . They're right, but they forget that not all riches are gold: there is memory . . ." (171). In spite, then, of Pipi's physical distance from the urbanized center, he unfortunately succumbs to the consumer impulse which is destroying his country's hopes of recuperating its cultural past.

Pipi's failed attempts to assert a space of Creole vitality are continually checked with increasing vigor, first by the supermarkets, then by pesticides, and finally by a capitalist value system which succeeds in infiltrating his mind. A modern-day maroon figure, Pipi suffers from a lack of space to which to retreat as French standardization spreads first *outward* with the encroaching presence of concrete and then *inward* in the form of desired assimilation which coats Martinican imagination with dreams of material wealth. Chamoiseau's novel thus suggests that a "successful" quest for French West Indian identity is one which does not yield to the pressures of materialism but one which, instead, values the land as a repository for an otherwise unrecorded, misrepresented, and under-appreciated Martinican past.

#### NOTES

1. See Edouard Glissant's chronology of Martinican events, in the section labeled "Dispossession" of his *Caribbean Discourse* (13) in which he characterizes Martinique's history as a false, incomplete, or imposed one.
2. In a recent interview with Raphaël Confiant, he stated: "Our food supply, our capacity to withstand a blockade in the event of, say a world war, is one week" (Translation mine).
3. *Chronique des sept misères* was originally published in 1986. Its English translation appeared in 1999. All passages cited in this article are taken from the English translation by Linda Coverdale.
4. Sedimentation or cementing over.
5. See Burton's "Debrouya pa peche, or Il y a toujours moyen de moyenner" published in *Callaloo* in 1993 and then later in a modified version in *Le Roman marron* (1997).



6. From the English "job," a kind of market "gofer."
7. Swift maneuvering.
8. See *Malemort* and *La Case du commandeur*.
9. Man who has the power to change form in order to sleep with the woman he covets. See Leti (57–59).
10. I am indebted to Emily Twiss, one of my former Bucknell students, for this observation.
11. See, for example, the river-controlling Garin from Glissant's *La Lézarde* and the first Black overseer, Euloge, from Glissant's *La case du commandeur*.
12. A recent article by Raphaël Confiant reveals his ongoing disappointment with Césaire and his administration for their oversights, primarily environmental, in seeking, obtaining, and effectuating the Departmentalization of Martinique. Confiant writes: "Dear friends, you will agree with me that over the course of over 50 years of an uninterrupted term, there is nothing left to electrify, almost nothing left to pave, hardly anything left to construct or rebuild. . . . Yes, dear friends, Negritude failed in Fort-de-France. . . . Fort-de-France is dying. Fort-de-France is asphyxiated" (translation mine, "Pourquoi" 14).
13. For a precise definition of "Quimboiseur," see Leti (143–48).

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