American Creoles

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Richard Price
or the Canadian from Petite-Anse:
The Potential and the Limitations
of a Hybrid Anthropology

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On the cover of the second edition of Richard Price’s *The Convict and the Colonel: A Story of Colonialism and Resistance in the Caribbean* (1998), Maryse Condé comments that the author’s ‘research is more fascinating than a piece of fiction’. American anthropologist Richard Price’s study of the role of memory in modern Martinican society examines the strange fate of a social pariah, Médard Aribot, thief and artist, who, following his return from prison on Devil’s Island, divided his time during the final years of his life between Petite-Anse and the town of Le Diamant in the south west of Martinique. The first 100 pages of the work set out the results of a scholarly anthropological investigation, combining documents and interviews conducted by Price on the life of Médard and on the furore surrounding the 1925 municipal elections in Le Diamant. The last portion of the book, by contrast, presents the anthropologist’s own life: his encounter with Martinique and his reflections on the process of modernization that the island has undergone. This part aims to explore ‘how one generation’s powerful historical metaphors could so quickly become the next generation’s trivial pursuit’ (Price, 1998: 157).

Given the composite and often eclectic construction of this work which combines travel narratives, self-portraiture, documents, letters and critical commentaries, and in which we hear many different voices, it should come as no surprise that Price’s anthropological work was cited by James Clifford in *Writing Culture* as a demonstration of the ‘serious partiality’ that characterizes a form of anthropology which inclines towards the literary. In Clifford’s view, this approach has the virtue of defining the limits of certain epistemological ground rules in anthropological field work and of making explicit the fact that
it is possible to gain knowledge of a culture without losing sight of the way in which that knowledge has been constructed (Clifford and Marcus, 1986: 7–8). Clifford is referring to Richard Price’s *First Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Price, 1983). For Clifford this ‘serious partiality’ derives from Price’s exposure of the constructed nature of knowledge and from a foregrounding of the techniques of writing. A *fictional* element (in the sense of *fingere*, to construct) is added to the scientific research and leads to a new conception of knowledge acquisition. In the promotion of Price’s book its literary quality is given as much weight as its scientific significance: the constructed and fictional aspects of his writing are brought out in the material on the cover through quotations from critics who describe the book as a ‘fusion’, a ‘mix’ and a ‘superb callaloo of a book’. Nevertheless, the text the reader is about to engage with contains no invention and while there are indeed a number of genres in operation in Price’s narrative they can hardly be said to mix. They are juxtaposed and are mutually influential without ever really producing a fusion. This brings us back to Condé’s remark. According to the novelist, *The Convict and the Colonel* is not a fiction, not even in part. While she certainly compares anthropological research with fiction, this is to enable her to distinguish between them. In Price, the discourse of knowledge is endowed with qualities which are associated with fiction. But this has very little to do with the truth value of certain fictional aspects of the anthropological narrative and it leads to a different form of knowledge.

On the contrary, Condé presents the comparison she makes with fiction as the consequence of the effect on the reader of Price’s research. She uses the concept of fiction in order to bring out the anthropologist’s ability to convey sensations to the reader. We can thus see that this brief remark by the novelist offers a way out of the current impasse in the debate initiated by *Writing Culture* (Bonoli, 2007; Colley, 2005; Debaene, 2005; Foster, 1996; Jamin, 1986) on what constitutes fiction and what makes a science. As Debaene comments, the valorization of the fictionality of the anthropological narrative has lost its ‘subversive scope’ now that the concept of fiction has become banal (Debaene, 2005: 220). Whereas for some all writing has now become fiction, others are still looking for a new ‘great divide’ between fictional and anthropological narratives (Bonoli, 2007: 55).

This chapter aims to study the style and form of Price’s book in order to demonstrate how certain poetic qualities of the anthropological narrative work to inhibit a fixed view of the other and to invite immediate engagement with a living representation whose quality makes it a worthy companion to recent Caribbean discourses that have defined the Creole world in terms of unpredictability and chaos (Glissant, 1990 and Benítez-Rojo, 1988). Taking Condé’s observation as our starting point, we propose to view the question
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not as a tension between fictional and referential discourses but as evidence of the anthropologist’s desire to use writing as a means to communicate a relationship with the world founded on involvement. The dividing line between matters pertaining to the science of anthropology and those which concern the effects of writing techniques effectively disappears when Price seeks to link the fate of Médard to his own life and that of a Martinican society caught up in a process of modernization. ‘By taking the literary equivalents of the circuitous paths through the forest favoured by Médard’, explains Price, ‘I will try to shed light on how a people’s central mnemonic for colonial repression could find itself transformed, in less than two decades, into the anodyne and picturesque icon on the cover of France’s best-selling tourist guide to Martinique [published by Gallimard]’ (Price, 1998: 157). It is clear from this that Price wants his style of writing to reproduce the wanderings of his object of study in order to give a better representation of a social reality. These words also justify his use of autobiography; in retracing Médard’s travels, the latter having now become an emblematic figure of resistance and living memory, the anthropologist allows himself to move around between times, spaces and discourses. Thus, as Bonoli suggests, quoting Schaeffner, Price’s narrative replaces the division between fiction and science with the pragmatic dimension of an anthropology which aims to make its readers see and experience its object of research in a move towards the poetic.

The Anthropologist as Outsider

*The Convict and the Colonel* opens with a prologue in which the anthropologist evokes a childhood memory of New York City during the Second World War that at first sight seems to have little to do with Martinique. In fact it is modernization which provides the link between the city and the Caribbean island. Just as Price once witnessed the modernization of New York, twenty years later he would become a witness to the transformation of Martinique. There then follow a hundred or so pages of relatively traditional field anthropology, which narrates, with supporting documents, the story of the events surrounding an election in Le Diamant in 1925 in which Médard was said to have been compromised. In accordance with the practices of dialogic anthropology the interviews allow Price’s presence to be seen although he assigns himself a secondary role allowing his informant to speak without prompting. In parallel with the latter’s narration, the reader is provided with the official version of the events of the election, described by the inhabitants of the town as the ‘Le Diamant war’. There is thus a real concern for objectivity and care is taken to establish a link with the referent. The anthropologist allows free rein to his imagination only when he conjures
up the years spent in prison. In the absence of any authentic witness accounts, 
Price imagines the sufferings of his subject without making any attempt to 
camouflage the fictional nature of the reconstruction he has produced from 
the available documents.

It is at the point where the anthropologist seeks to integrate Médard’s fate 
with a contemporary Martinican society in which he himself is implicated 
that the question of the position of the foreign observer in relation to his 
object of study suddenly enters the narrative. In the spirit of postmodern 
thories of anthropology, Price exposes the weaknesses and the ethical and 
epistemological limits of his anthropological investigation, emphasizing the 
necessity of describing the process of knowledge acquisition as much as its 
results. Although he himself doesn’t mention it, the extent of the impact of 
this approach is highlighted by the fact that it determines the relationship 
between the anthropologist and the Martinican society he studies. While 
the link to the referent remains crucial in his anthropological work, such 
considerations are as much epistemological in nature as they are poetic 
or even emotional. ‘Though I cannot pretend to evoke the world [Médard] 
experienced, I would like at least to bear witness from my own perspective to 
that early 1960s world I shared with him’ (Price, 1998: 175). Unable to describe 
Médard’s lived experience, he turns instead to his own life, integrating his 
own memories with his research. The foreign observer must thus not only 
overcome a representational difficulty, he must also deal with the problem 
created by his own position. It would appear that the inclusion of his own 
life makes it easier to write about a society which, in spite of everything, is 
not his own. This is all the more important in that the severe criticism which 
The créolistes, a group of militant Martinican writers, have directed towards 
him is founded less on the relevance of his observations than on his status 
as an outsider.¹ The reader soon learns that Price has lived for thirty or so 
years with his wife Sally, also an anthropologist, in the village of Petite-Anse

¹ On the evidence of the recent debate on Creole identity in Martinique, the 
mistrust felt among writers towards external observers has increased. Since the 
1980s, and in particular with the publication of the famous Éloge de la Créalité, 
Martinique, or rather an intellectual class on the island, would appear to be 
moving towards a rejection of the gaze of the other as it searches for its own 
identity as a community. Reactions to commentators on Martinican culture who 
have, what is more, dared to criticize créoliste discourse have always been violent 
and sometimes sexist (Lebrun, 1996). In any event, it is not our intention here 
to question the créolistes; others have done so before us and it seems counter-
productive to linger too long over a problematic manifesto which was, after all, 
only a speech given at a festival.
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where he is known as ‘the Canadian’ and has gradually gained a reputation as a learned foreign scholar who is an authority on Médard’s life. Whatever the créolistes may say, Price is certainly in the position of an insider.

The fact that Price repeatedly reminds us that he is not just any foreigner can be read as an indirect response to the créolistes’ criticism. He does this elsewhere: for example, in a contribution he makes with his wife to the debate on the role of memory in Martinique. ‘We are not studying people out “there” from a home base back “here”, but rather engaging the intellectual agenda with people who are very much our peers in terms of their education, publishing involvements, and access to the media’, they state in the article ‘Shadowboxing in the Mangrove’ (Price and Price, 1997: 3). Placing the emphasis on social group, education and access to the media rather than on ethnicity and origin, the Prices effectively construct a position for themselves which is at least to some extent that of insiders. It also demonstrates how aware Price is of this problem associated with anthropological research. In his formal choices, too, Price appears to have wanted to take advantage of his position as both insider and outsider to enhance his evocation in *The Convict and the Colonel* of a relationship with a society in a state of perpetual transformation. As the first foreigner to have gained the right to own land in the village, Price portrays himself as its adopted son, although he remains aware of his unusual status as a foreign researcher whose academic post in the United States allows him to divide his time between Petite-Anse, Virginia and Paris. He exploits this mobility most of all within the analysis itself, enacting an anthropological process which expands the notion of fieldwork by opening up the society under investigation to the movements of the anthropologist and of those he studies. The place and time of the investigation are no longer fixed, and it is characterized by a movement which is reflected in the narrative structure, shifting from place to place and from time to time.

Whereas the various locations involved in the fieldwork combine to create an impression of heterogeneity, the relationship between the researcher and the society he studies is articulated, rather, on a temporal plane. First, there is the memory of childhood which opens the study. The narration then shifts to a proper historico-ethnographical narrative of the ‘Le Diamant war’. The following section combines the study of the years which Médard spent in jail with the narrative of Price’s 1980s quest for traces of Médard. The final part likewise offers a combination of text types, in this case involving Price’s autobiographical narrative of his arrival in Petite-Anse in 1962 as a young doctoral student in anthropology and a critical commentary on the tendency in assimilated Martinican society to idealize the past. Moreover, this eclectic mixture is accompanied by photographs and illustrations drawn from the different periods covered by the text. We are thus faced with a complex
construction combining several temporal levels and linking together several spaces. It could even be described as a nested narration, being composed of several narratives in each of which the narrative voice adopts a different position: heterodiegetic in the Médard narrative and homodiegetic in the case of the more autobiographical narratives. The third part acts in some respects as a bridge between these two principal narrative levels, involving the evocation of the past in the present. This intellectual nomadism makes all the more apparent the less mobile character of the adherents of créolité.

Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant associate créolité with a particular place and culture, suggesting that Creole identity is innate, not acquired. Price, by contrast, plays with different standpoints, drawing on other locations and periods in order to construct a heterogeneity within his work which can be described as Creole. The narrative and metatextual play accordingly allow him to engage in the Creole world while representing it.

The juxtaposition of the autobiographical and anthropological narratives establishes points of contact between Price and his object of study on an emotional level. His own narrative is coloured by a marked nostalgia: nostalgia for his youth; for the birth of love; nostalgia, too, for his first experiences of fieldwork (he had previously carried out research in Peru). This last introduces touches to the narrative of his sojourn in Petite-Anse in the summer of 1962 that evoke rites of initiation. This period will subsequently be identified as a pivotal one for Martinican society which, according to Price, was at that time on the threshold of modernization. It would be required to undergo this process very rapidly at the time of the French annexation which made the island a département d’outre-mer. ‘I would argue that the early 1960s in fact marked a watershed in Martinique’ (Price, 1998: 180), writes Price, after criticizing the patent nostalgia for ‘ancestral life’ in 1990s Martinique. Price can thus claim that, like the inhabitants of Petite-Anse and like the writers of créolité, he too has had experience of the shift from a rural society to a modern one comprised of motorways, supermarkets, hotel complexes and so on, all funded by France. But the migration of the narrative ‘I’ from the autobiographical sections into the anthropological ones makes it hard to separate the nostalgia felt by Price himself from that which he is the first to detect in contemporary Martinican society. The shifts in position implied by the combination of the different discourses become vanishing points in the picture he paints of Martinique. Just as this interplay brings one narrative ‘I’ closer to the world under investigation, so the other one is distanced from it.
A Poetics of Involvement

A double movement of involvement and distance governs the relationship set up with Médard. Although Price never met him in person and first heard of him only in passing in 1978, the Martinique encountered by the young doctoral student was the same country as that of his hero. On this matter, it is interesting to note that he left Martinique after completing his thesis on the superstitions associated with fishing in Petite-Anse to work on the maroons in Saramanka (Price, 1998: 250 n. 36). Curiously, his rediscovery of Martinique as an object of anthropological study therefore happened to come about at the same time as the créolistes were publishing their first works – although this coincidence is barely touched on by him. It was an encounter with a part of Martinique previously unknown to him which inspired him to turn his attention once again towards the island which had in the meantime become his new home. The result is a strange piece of fieldwork that lasted more than ten years and was punctuated by a series of comings and goings between various locations. The facts on Médard’s life appear in an unordered way, woven across the years into the narratives which make up the book. It can thus be said that the conditions of research were partly responsible for the hybridity of The Convict and the Colonel.

However, despite the many links established by Price between his own life and that of his adopted island, the anthropologist also generates a certain distance in his writing. This distance is even the necessary condition for the anthropological narrative and its expression. An external viewpoint can be said to be required if Price is to produce a hybrid anthropological form of writing that combines research and self-reflexion. The staging of a distance which is then superseded is thus the result of a conscious strategy on Price’s part to achieve the exploration of relationships with the world.

Despite his metatextual awareness, Price does not sense the mediation inherent to this relationship with the world. He never remarks on the fact that the play between levels and positions, the tensions between distance and involvement, are also to be found in his style. The sections on the elections in Le Diamant, on Médard’s life and those containing the interviews with local people who were alive during the period in question, some of whom even knew Médard, are written in a more scientific and neutral style. For example, the author almost exclusively employs the present tense and reported speech, and his sources are annotated, analysed and transcribed in the endnotes. The ‘I’ who is represented here guarantees the process of gathering informants’ statements and explains where choices have been made, while sometimes slipping into the academic ‘we’ (Price, 1998: 5). In those sections which tell the story of the elections and Médard’s life in prison we encounter an authen-
tically historical style of narrative with a focus on action and almost devoid of description. This contrasts with the passages which narrate the search for traces of Médard carried out by Price in the 1980s in preparation for his book. Suddenly, the historical discourse is replaced by descriptions and narratives which plunge the reader into the heart of events.

We were rattling up the dirt track to Morne l’Afrique, high above the bay of Diamant, squeezed into the front seat of Julien’s dilapidated pickup truck, its doors tied shut by lengths of rope – Julien, his wife Tina, Sally and me. A kind of joyous Sunday outing, in search of traces of Médard, of people who might have known him, people who might be willing to share their reminiscences. We pull up even with a very old man, walking up the steep slope leaning on a staff. ‘Good afternoon’, greets Tina out the window in Creole. ‘Good afternoon, Madame,’ he answers, gracefully tipping his bakoua. ‘We’re looking for the place where Médard used to live, you know the man who –’ ‘Madame, no one ever got to the bottom of that fellow! What a tremendous secret he had! … His house is further up the hill, at Bompi, but it’s hard to find, you’ll have to ask.’ We thank him, and Julien grinds the old Peugeot into first gear for the climb.

Farther along, by the side of the road, we come upon an elderly man lifting a sack of charcoal onto his head. Had he known Médard? We ask, again out the window. ‘He was a genius – a genius without the diploma’, he replies without hesitation. Could he tell us where Médard had lived? ‘I’ll bring you there, it’s on the path I am taking myself.’ So, we pull over to the side and, on Julien’s insistence, cut staffs against the snakes and follow the man down a path toward the setting sun.

The scenery takes our breath away. The whole bay of Diamant is spread out at our feet, the white foam of breakers washing the distant beach, and Diamond Rock floating in a sea of turquoise. To the right rises the deep green slope of Morne Larcher, a worn volcanic cone and the highest peak on the island’s south. We slip and slide down the narrow path, trying to keep the old man in sight, converting our snake-killers into walking sticks on the steep terrain. Finally he yells up at us and points in the direction of the only house in the little side valley. […]

This tiny house sits at the edge of a deep ravine amidst lush vegetation – bananas, papayas, lime trees, callalou plants. It’s in a verdant cul-de-sac, backed against the hill, and facing, across the ravine, the sweep of the bay and Diamond Rock. (Price, 1998: 53–54)

The above description of a research trip to find information on Médard opens the second chapter. For all that this passage forms part of an anthropological, scientific and referential narrative, we are here fully immersed in
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a novelistic style reminiscent of travel narratives. Its structure, moreover, is that of a detective story: the reader wants to know if Price and his friends will succeed in finding what they are looking for. The description of the setting is detailed and affectionate, as is that of the people he encounters along the way. The portraits of the elderly gentlemen, whose politeness and accoutrements (the bakoua hat and sack of charcoal) evoke a bygone age, add to an effect of wildness in the scenery in their indirect suggestion of a temporal shift. We should also note that their reminiscences concerning Médard are proof, with no need for explanation by Price, of the existence of the living memories sought by the anthropologist. For them, Médard is a legend, a real myth whose memory has not faded. What is more, these exchanges provide the narrative with authenticity and life. Imperceptibly, the tense of the narration shifts towards the present as though about to come to a halt at the end of the passage in front of the splendid view which appears as the group arrive at Médard’s house.

However, if fiction is simply equated with evidence of composition, this passage is no more ‘fictional’ than the more scientific passages, since the latter are just as crafted as this one. In one of the historico-anthropological sections, for example, Price uses a collage technique where he provides parallel accounts of the events of the 1925 election, supplying the right-wing point of view in one column and the left-wing view in the other. The difference lies in the fact that in the above passage the relationship with the world is mediated. It is thus the mode of expression which has changed, not the compositional complexity of the narrative. The logic of this passage is more that of poetry than science; the adjectives and descriptions are markers of a relationship with the world based on feeling. Equally, the landscape which the narrator portrays for us is presented from the point of view of a subject involved in an action which renders the description dynamic. This way of making the description dependent on a subject corresponds to the demands of literary discourse and not of a scientific discourse within which a description would not be legitimated by the presence of a subject. Moreover, the narrative ‘I’ in the passage expresses an emotional relationship with the surroundings it describes in contrast with the ‘I’ of the purely anthropological sections where information is accessed more directly. But, above all, the author establishes a different relationship with the reader founded on an appeal to the latter’s imagination. The style, based on a concept of engagement and involvement, is designed to involve the reader in the moment of discovery of Médard’s house. Although Price has long been familiar with Morne l’Afrique and its surrounding area, he uses a style associated with the experience of the new to paint a panoramic view of the Caribbean sea. Put differently, he composes the passage in such a way as to encourage the reader to discover the sea with
him as if for the first time and to produce an effect of identification. This is an essential technique for an author who considers that his audience should first and foremost be able to find themselves in any representation of the past. The particular construction of the narrative not only demonstrates the shifts in position that underlie all anthropological narratives but also provides it with a poetic frame, moving beyond the anthropological context. The result is a strange tension between participation and distance, and the reader ‘falls under the spell’ of Price’s narrative, as Condé suggests.

The recourse to literary techniques demonstrated by such shifts in expressive modality is in no way a break with the referent. Price’s writing challenges the idea that the dividing line between fiction and science in anthropology is determined by the relationship with the referent: in such a view scientific discourse would report true events while fiction would be the fruit of invention. In Price, by contrast, it is literary style itself which creates the connection between the researcher and reality and, moreover, between the reader and the Creole world. We can suggest, following Bonoli, that the ‘[texte] ethnographique apparaît ainsi comme le résultat d’un effort imaginatif qui construit une forme médiatrice, à partir de notre langage, qui nous permet de voir l’autre comme ce qui est présenté dans le texte’ [The ethnographic [text] thus appears as the result of an imaginative effort that constructs a mediating form whose starting point is our language use and which allows us to see the other as that which is presented in the text] (Bonoli, 2007: 56). The imaginative element does not compromise the referentiality of the discourse; its function is to allow the reader to visualize the world under observation. Anthropology and fiction share a referential force. In addition, Price submerges himself, as we have seen, in the experience of research. No sooner is otherness constructed than it is wiped out by a process of identification founded on feeling. Involvement, as a product of style, serves as proof to the extent that Price, in this age of commemoration, bases his system of argument on the fate of memory as observed in the field. He himself becomes a witness to what he is about to describe and uses himself to test out the argument and convince us of its validity. It is as though the literary mode of his expression served both to move and to convince the reader.

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2 We can compare this description with the first time that Price sees Petite-Anse during the 1960s: ‘In June 1962, from the top of a hill in Martinique, I looked down for the first time on what I saw as a spectacularly beautiful, isolated fishing village – Petite-Anse – rimming the blue Caribbean’ (Price, 1998: x). It also reminds us of the view of the house currently inhabited by the Prices (see <http://www.richandsally.net/>).
Concluding Thoughts: An Anthropology of Creolization?

Price’s style is nevertheless far from unique, but belongs within a particular movement which has been described as a Caribbean anthropology. His methodology reminds us of what Glissant, in an article on Michel Leiris, calls an ‘ethnographie de la Relation’ [ethnography of Relation] explicitly linked to Creole experience:

Toute ethnographie des Antilles cesse d’être strictement récapitulative, engage dans le présent tout un avenir, force à considérer les relations entre cultures, à prendre position sur les heurts entre cultures et confirme (malgré le racisme qui sévit dans ces pays) qu’il n’est pas utopique de concevoir l’avènement un jour d’une véritable civilisation composite.3

(Glissant, 1969: 127)

In his own unique formulation, the Martinican author dreams of a processual ethnography which would be able to grasp experience as it is lived, to track its movements and transformations, and which would aim to demonstrate that belief in a future composite society is not utopian. According to Glissant, in order to approach Caribbean reality, anthropological discourse must abandon its realist aspirations; its aim should not be simply to make observations in the field and then reproduce those observations. On the contrary, it must not only focus on contemporary encounters but must also create an active role for anthropological narrative in the society which is being created. This concept of a representation of Creole society which can itself be described as creolizing is to be found in the créoliste writers who define créolité as ‘le monde diffracté, mais recomposé, un maelström de signifiés dans un signifiant: une Totalité’ [the diffracted but reconstructed world, a maelstrom of signifieds in a signifier: a Totality] (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, 1989: 27); a ‘spécificité ouverte’ [open specificity] lived as a question and whose expression is ‘réservée à l’art’ [reserved for art] (ibid.: 29). With regard to the valorization of the processual in the expression of the Creole world, an issue which is as important to the créolistes as it is to Glissant, we can note that the hybrid composition of The Convict and the Colonel, which appeared about ten years after Éloge de la Créolité, is evidence of the quest shared by

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3 ‘Any ethnography of the Antilles is no longer strictly recapitulative in nature, engages an entire future in the present, requires us to reflect on relationships between cultures, to take a stance on clashes between cultures and confirms (despite the racism which is rife in these countries) that it is not utopian to envisage the eventual appearance of a truly composite civilization.’
Price and the Martinican authors for a form fit to capture the heterogeneity of the Creole world.

This idea reappears in another anthropological study published in the same year as *The Convict and the Colonel*, with a preface by Price: Michèle-Baj Strobel’s *Les Gens de l’or* (1998). Like Price, she attempts to engage with her object of study on a formal level through the construction of a narrative, which, like the rivers of Guyana which are so crucial to the life of the gold washers she studies, moves forward in a series of meanders. Strobel draws on Michel Foucault in her explanation of the need to turn to aesthetics when engaging with the silence of histories for which no archive exists. ‘Il faut être autant requis par une vibration émotionnelle et esthétique que par les rigueurs des recherches de la rationalité’ [You have as much to respond to an emotional and aesthetic call as conform to the rigours of rational research] (Strobel, 1998: 57). She expands on this later in relation to Creole culture:

S’il fallait rattacher les cultures d’abatis créole à une esthétique ce serait évidemment celle de l’assemblage-collage, ou plus exactement par analogie avec le tissage – activité corrélée à la culture d’un champ, comme on le sait – celle des *twèl konwé* (toiles des convois) ou patchwork, que les femmes créoles fabriquaient en assemblant les morceaux de vieux tissus et les rubans usagés.⁴ (Strobel, 1998: 134)

A surrealist aesthetic of collage is here compared to the cultivation of the land and to weaving. The same analogies could describe her own book as well as Price’s. It is as if these anthropologists were attempting, through the fragmented and heteroclite form of their narratives, to leave the reader with a physical impression of the movement of the underground memory and the composite culture they study. Form and content are bound together in the chaos of their narratives. More than a concern for truth, it is the desire to establish a physical relationship with the world which causes Price to break up his narrative and to juxtapose various discourses in order better to grasp the ineffable aspect of his subject matter: the transformation of a society. Thus we can suggest that an aesthetic imperative is to be found running through writings on the Caribbean insofar as writers and anthropologists

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⁴ ‘Were it necessary to link the cultivation of the Creole *abatis* to an aesthetic it would clearly be that of assembly-collage or, to be more precise, by analogy with weaving – an activity which correlates to the cultivation of a field, as we know – in particular the work known as *twèl konwé* (convoy canvases) or patchwork, which the Creole women created by combining scraps of old fabrics and worn ribbons.’
agree that the representation of an elusive Caribbean reality needs to be realized in terms of poetics rather than mimesis.

Equally, the only reason that many theoreticians of hybridity, including Clifford, have explored Creole cultures has been the desire to discover in them the promise of a future world and the transformation of the scientific paradigm into a processual and hybrid form of knowledge, emerging out of ‘a more ambiguous “Caribbean” experience’ (Clifford, 1988: 15). However, the analysis of Price’s study allows us to realize that while creolized societies invite the anthropologist to make use of fragments and myriad discourses to stage a relationship with the shifting world, and while this process certainly breaks the links with monocultural tradition, as Clifford suggests in relation to the Caribbean experience, contrasting it with a traditional anthropology which would focus exclusively on one culture henceforth isolated and fixed in time and space (ibid.: 14), it does not constitute a break on the level of the mode of expression. On the contrary, the idea of matching form to content is derived from a classical paradigm. Although the eclecticism which characterizes writings on Martinique, whether anthropological or fictional, hardly figures in Boileau’s hierarchy of the genres of Belles Lettres, for instance, it is still the case that the idea that the style should reflect the content is a profoundly classical one. In the same way, Price has recourse to literary techniques in order better to instruct, please and move his reader – an ideal which finds a distant echo in the classical aesthetic. As regards description, the incorporation of a human point of view in the portrayal of nature, such as we have seen in Price’s text, belongs according to Philippe Hamon within an aesthetic of description specific to the classical age, in which a description lacking any human reference would have been judged excessive and, above all, uninteresting (Hamon, 1993: 17 and 25). On the other hand, Price remains a modern writer/anthropologist who, in line with Rousseau and romanticism, uses the harmony of form and subject matter not in order to create a distancing effect, to adopt the term that Thomas Pavel uses to conceptualize the aspirations of classical literature (Pavel, 1996), but rather an effect of involvement. The Pricean movere therefore operates in a different mode, one of the reader’s identification and participation on a horizontal rather than a vertical level.

However, the analogy with classicism demonstrates that we would be wrong to attach a priori a subversive value to this ‘creolizing’ writing. Hybridity in and of itself is never processual and can never liberate us from monoculturalism, since in doing so it would risk becoming fixed in a form which would only repeat a pre-established image. In the case of Price’s book, we can see that although he creates a hybrid form of anthropology the content of his narrative reveals a trend in the opposite direction: Martinican
society has become less composite than ever under the pressures of assimilation. In his demonstration of how Médard appears in the imagination of the villagers he suggests that in the reminiscences they produce of this curious figure we might detect the existence of a living and subterranean memory that invalidates theoretical claims that the Caribbean has no past (Price, 1998: 171–73). The problem is thus not the absence of history but the gradual erasure, under the pressure of assimilation, of a certain form of memory. By combining scientific research with the story of his life, Price’s narrative attempts to recreate this living memory in writing. Although Price shares the concerns of many writers from Martinique, in particular the signatories to the manifesto of créolité, his narrative also exposes the dangers of monumentalizing the past by divorcing it from the present.

This chapter thus claims that for Price the literary features of anthropological narrative, which, since Writing Culture, would seem to number among the commonplaces of anthropology (Debaene, 2005), have a function that goes beyond the demonstration of the awakening of anthropology’s self-critical faculties or the construction of a new object of knowledge. In his book, the inclusion of the researcher as an object of study, the fragmentation of the narrative and the poetic style would appear, rather, to be intended to reflect this world in transition and this underground Creole memory, and also to involve the reader in them. In the Caribbean, the past does not deliver itself directly into the hands of the observer. It is hidden and calls for the alternative logic of interpretation offered to us by Price in the book. To trace out underground memory we must look for it in ‘hidden layers of history, called by other names and inscribed not in books (the people among whom we lived were barely literate), but in language, in proverbs, in metaphors, and in the land (and sea) itself’ (Price, 1998: 171). According to this argument, it is the imaginative dimension of the referent itself which provides the justification for the poetic quality of the anthropological narrative. If memory remains unarticulated and exists in the Creole world only in the form of the fragment, the formal and narrative fragmentation of the book is intended to reproduce it. Its logic is one of continuity, not of rupture. Price invites his audience to read The Convict and the Colonel in the same way that he himself has had to interpret the Creole world in order to understand it and to follow it on its transitional path towards new times.

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5 Curiously, when translated into French, Price’s book became caught in this very trap, as the official launch praised his revival of a forgotten part of Martinican heritage. Price himself comments on this in the epilogue of the second English edition.
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Works Cited


