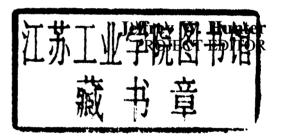
Contemporary
Literary Criticism

GLG 2276

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers





Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 276

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Texaco

Patrick Chamoiseau

The following entry presents criticism of *Texaco* (1992), a novel examining Creole life and history in the Caribbean nation of Martinique. For further information on Chamoiseau's life and works, see *CLC*, Volume 268.

INTRODUCTION

Chamoiseau's novel Texaco is rarely studied apart from the author's status as one of the leading architects of the aesthetic and political movement known as créolité, which has sought to elevate the position of Creole culture in the Caribbean through its systematic reformulation in intellectual theory and artistic production. As explained in the manifesto Éloge de la créolité (1989), a collaboration among Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant, the principal literary objective of the movement is the recovery of an indigenous historical consciousness through the valorization of the Creole oral tradition. To that end, Chamoiseau has assumed the persona of an ethnographer in all of his novels-a "word-scratcher" to use his term-who transcribes the memories and tales of native Martinicans and directly addresses the reader as an oral storyteller would address an audience. A native Martinican personally familiar with the realities of colonial domination. Chamoiseau sought in Texaco to describe the entire history of Creole resistance to French control through the story of one town's struggle to preserve its indigenous identity in the face of mounting pressures to relocate and modernize. Texaco offers a revision to standard French versions of the history of Martinique, establishing a Creole identity that reflects its mixed and fluid heritage—European, African, Asian, and American.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

A story about the settlement of a shantytown on the outskirts of Fort-de-France, *Texaco* chronicles over 150 years in the history of Martinique. In typical fashion, Chamoiseau himself appears in the novel, this time assuming a place of significance as the transcriber—in the person of Oiseau de Cham—of the narrative of its main character, Marie-Sophie La-

borieux. The elderly Marie-Sophie was the original founder of the squatter town of Texaco, named so because of its proximity to the oil refinery along the banks of the river. In his role as word-scratcher, Chamoiseau makes clear that the story he recounts, which he describes as an *oraliture*, is a composite of many voices, mainly those of Marie-Sophie, her father, and the *urbaniste*—the town planner sent to arrange the razing of Texaco—but also those of other witnesses to the events portrayed. In addition, the word-scratcher includes his own explanatory footnotes and excerpts from official records.

The novel begins in the present day, with the arrival in Texaco of the urban planner, named at first l'ange destructeur (angel of destruction) by its residents. Marie-Sophie decides that the only way to convince the urban planner to save Texaco is to regale him with stories about the rich and difficult history surrounding the establishment of the town. She begins in the nineteenth century, with the birth of her father, Estronome, the son of a slave who worked on a sugar plantation near the city of Saint-Pierre. She describes how, with the abolition of slavery, her father's family was lured away from the plantation to the hills around Saint-Pierre, where they found that all the land there had been overtaken by the békés, the white overseers. Estronome and other disenfranchised blacks migrated to Fort-de-France when a 1902 volcano destroyed the entire city of St. Pierre. Their subsequent history is punctuated by outbreaks of yellow fever, cyclones, and harsh treatment at the hands of the békés and white factory owners.

As the narrative stretches forward in time, it documents the momentous facts of history—World War I, the Vichy regime, the election of a black communist as mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945, the decolonization and departmentalization of Martinique—against a backdrop of stories about the ordinary individuals who settled Texaco, descendants of slaves who, like Marie-Sophie, sought refuge from the exploitation of white employers. Marie-Sophie describes her life before Texaco as a succession of cruel bosses, two of whom raped her and another who forced her to sleep on a vermin-infested mattress. Her history, like that of her father's, incorporates folk tales and legends from Creole culture handed down from generation to

1

generation, many of them describing magical experiences and the supernatural powers of the mystical wise men known as *Mentoh*. Marie-Sophie also describes Texaco's conflicts with the officials of Fort-de-France. Long irritated by the chaotic sprawl of the illegal settlement, city authorities have dispatched police to dismantle it on several occasions, only to see it rebuilt time and again. Eventually, the Town Council urges that the outlaw community be relocated as a matter of public health. But in the end the urban planner is converted to Marie-Sophie's way of thinking, for which he earns the new nickname *le Christ*, and Texaco is granted official recognition.

MAJOR THEMES

The major themes of *Texaco* focus on the dynamics of power and derive from Martinique's long history as a colony of France. The settlement of Texaco, and the community's resistance to the Town Council, have their origins in Marie-Sophie's tales of her ancestral origins, dating back to the Martinican slave rebellions of the 1830s. But the islanders' rejection of colonial influence is first and foremost displayed in their efforts to perpetuate the practice of Creole storytelling. Creole—the language of traditional tales and fables central to Martinique's heritage—is, as Chamoiseau writes in an autobiographical passage in the *Éloge*, the chief weapon in the fight against French control and the source of the black Martinicans' unique identity: "[Creole] enabled us to exist furiously, aggressively, in an iconoclastic, roundabout way. There was mutiny in the language. . . . That is why, despite (and especially thanks to) the situation of domination, the Creole language is a fine playground for childhood frustrations and exerts an underground impact on the psychic structure that is inaccessible to the established elevations of the French tongue."

In Texaco, resistance to the official language of Martinique—French—is closely linked to the idea of memory. Chamoiseau, in his role as Marie-Sophie's transcriber, describes to the reader the difficulty of representing her past, an oral history replete with fabulous and magical stories, through the written word. Chamoiseau, as author, attempts to represent that past through the creative manipulation of language. Although it is written primarily in French, Chamoiseau often blends French, Creole, and regional idioms. Critics Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo and Elizabeth Wilson write of Chamoiseau's linguistic innovations: "[A]s a fluent speaker of both Creole and French, one of the major effects of the novel is the way in which he plays with both languages. The text is replete with puns, word-play, a variety of linguistic registers, code switching, blurring the distinctions and complicating the relationship between French and Martinican Creole. . . ."

Texaco embodies other forms of Creole resistance to authority as well. The ideas of geography and space fundamental to colonial expansion are dramatized in Texaco, as displaced Martinicans seek to establish their own locale on the edges of a city populated by Europeans and assimilated blacks. The text itself self-consciously announces its blending of multiple viewpoints, opposing its collective and subjective history, recounted by a marginalized minority, to the histories of Martinique written by the dominant power, France.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The multiple perspectives of *Texaco* have also been widely viewed as a metaphor for the type of community its residents seek to establish, one that embraces difference, subverting colonial notions of space and power. Many critics have emphasized that the community of Texaco defies the hierarchical power structures intrinsic to colonial ideology. As Ashley Dawson notes, Texaco embodies Chamoiseau's new concept of a flexible and diverse Creole identity, "l'identité mosaique": "Marie Sophie's account of her and her ancestors' conquest of what they call l'Enville [the In-city] creates the framework for a creolized vision of urban space that undermines the rigid binaries of colonial discourse. Like the creole language that provides Chamoiseau with inspiration, the creole city embraces the hybrid collective forms created by the historically marginalized black populace of Martinique." In similar fashion, critic Laura Milne writes, "[T]he authorities' chief desire—to plan, order, and subjugate the land—is in total opposition to the organic, chaotic growth of the Quartier créole." Roy Chandler Caldwell focuses on the same theme in Texaco: "[T]he Creole city is flexible, mixed, nonorthogonal, rural, female, unplanned, organic. . . . [T]he postcolonial is the hybrid—or creolizing—moment of formerly colonized cultures. . . . "As scholars stress, the very name of the town, Texaco, subverts a symbol of global capitalization by attaching it to an indigenous community. The rejection of capitalist structures inherent in Chamoiseau's notion of créolité has left him open to charges of inconsistency, with critics questioning why he chooses not to write entirely in the Creole language, instead marketing his books to a global audience. Nonetheless, critics have consistently praised Chamoiseau's playful explorations of the literary possibilities of the vernacular, including his reproduction of such aspects of oral storytelling as onomatopoeia, repetition, and call-and-response. As Susan Rodgers commented, "Texaco . . . is much inflected for the 'un-serious,' all the while making the deadly serious point that language can re-envision history in counter hegemonic ways. . . . "

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Chronique des sept misères [Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows] (novel) 1986

Solibo Magnifique [Solibo Magnificent] (novel) 1988 Éloge de la créolité [with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant] (literary criticism) 1989

Antan d'enfance [Childhood] (autobiography) 1990 Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentals de la litterature—Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane 1635-1975 [with Confiant] (literary criticism) 1991 Texaco (novel) 1992

Au temps de l'antan [Creole Folktales] (folktales) 1994 Chemin d'école [School Days] (autobiography) 1994 Ecrire en pays dominé (literary criticism) 1997 Esclave vieil homme et le molosse (novel) 1997

Elmire des sept bonheurs: Confidences d'un vieux travailleur de la distillerie Saint-Etienne [Seven Dreams of Elmira: A Tale of Martinique, Being the Confessions of an Old Worker at the Saint-Etienne Distillery] (fiction) 1998

Biblique des derniers gestes (novel) 2001 A bout d'enfance (autobiography) 2005 Un Dimanche au cachot (novel) 2007

CRITICISM

Françoise DuRivage (essay date spring 1999)

SOURCE: DuRivage, Françoise. "Texaco: From the Hills to the Mangrove Swamps." Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present 6 (spring 1999): 35-42.

[In the following essay, DuRivage discusses the topography of Texaco and the metaphoric underpinnings of the novel.]

Space is how we define our identity. It can also define a literature as is the case with Caribbean literature and particularly Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*. It may seem at first that Texaco, the shantytown on the edge of Fort de France that gives the novel its title, is far from the natural spaces of the Caribbean island: the hills and the mangroves swamps. However, for Chamoiseau, Texaco is both a hill and a mangrove swamp and, in this space, the Caribbean people can find hope. It is here that they can discover both their origins and their identity.

Texaco, a slum named for a nearby oil refinery, is the main character of the novel. The space is both marginal and mythical. Chamoiseau contrasts a realistic description with elements of fantasy, myth and history. Texaco is a real place and a space that the author wants to be neither picturesque nor exotic, but it gets its beauty and its value from history and myth. Chamoiseau creates the myth of Texaco by telling us of its origins. Through the history of this marginal place, he introduces us to the history of Martinique. Through this mythical story, he takes us to the archetypal spaces of the island: the plain, unholy site of the cursed plantation, the city called "L'en-ville" by the Creoles which attracts and rejects the Negro, and, most importantly, the Hills and the mangrove swamp, rich with symbolic value.

It is through the myth of the Hills of Noutéka that Chamoiseau first lays the foundation of Texaco. Historically it was the Mentoh, the African sorcerer who, at the time of abolition, had suggested that black people settle in the Hills as they had not yet been settled neither by the békés nor the mulattos. The békés would then occupy the lowland with the plantations of sugarcane, the mulattos would have the city and the Negroes would move to the Hills. It is at that time that Esternome, the father of Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the narrator, settles in the Hills of Noutéka with his common-law wife, Ninon. The Hills of Noutéka are the ancestor of Texaco. By creating Noutéka, Chamoiseau is creating the prototype of Texaco, a space where the Caribbean people will be able to blossom, a place that they will call their own: "Sophie, it was like leaving their stories to go and leave our own. But their stories went on and ours was just taking another curve" (122). From the beginning, the Hills are seen by the characters in the novel as an ideal place that will allow them to find wealth and happiness. As always in the creation of a myth there is a tendency to idealize. As Esternome says to Ninon: "up there the land will be ours, two innocents in paradise, and life will make tall yams grow in our garden." (121)

The value of Noutéka lies in its symbolic meaning. For Chamoiseau, as for Glissant, landscape is meaningful: "Passionnément vivre le paysage, le dégager de l'indistinct, le fouiller, l'allumer parmi nous. Savoir ce qu'en nous il signifie. Porter à la terre ce clair savoir." (219)

Noutéka already contains some of the themes of Texaco. First of all, the hills are virgin land, an unexplored space where the Negroes will find a home and where they will be able to start a new life. The hills are also a place of freedom for it is where the maroons, the slaves escaped from the plantation, used to go and hide. For them, freedom has another meaning than for the emancipated slaves, for whom they have only contempt. "They did not give it to us, we took it . . . Thank god this piece of history was ours."

(125) Even for the emancipated slaves, the Hills, because they are far from the plantation, are a space where they do not have to submit to the authority of the béké, a place where they belong to themselves alone. In the Hills, work is not what they are ordered to do but what they choose to do and what allows them a creative freedom.

Most importantly, in the Hills, the Antillean finds a unique place where s/he will be able to create a community. The value that the people of the Hills give to the community is unique and for Chamoiseau contrasts with that of the inhabitants of the city.

The Creole Quarter is people who get along. From one to the other, one hand washes the other, two fingers smash lice. *Helping out* is the way things go.

(132)

However Noutéka will not succeed as a community. There are three reasons that the characters will not find their anticipated happiness.

First of all, Esternome, Marie-Sophie's father, is ignorant of the history of the Hills. Therefore, he believes them to be without a past, a virgin land. However, when he and his companion begin the ascent of the Hills, they soon discover the trails, little paths created by all those who preceded them. (126) Those paths are the perfect metaphor for the unofficial history of the island, an unwritten history but necessary to the Caribbean people to understand their country and themselves in order to take charge of their future. The Hills are also a metaphor for writing. To find a voice, the Caribbean writer must take into account not only written and oral history, but also the history of literature.

Secondly, to find the freedom and solitude they seek, Esternome and Ninon will always have to go higher. However, survival depends on the possibility of cultivating the ground. If they climb too high crops will not grow. Because the island is a small closed space, freedom seems impossible to achieve. The Hills are never as isolated as they seem. Already in the time of Noutéka, the hills could be divided into two areas: the wild and free neighborhoods at the top of the hills and the neighborhood at the bottom, closer to the plantations, and later the sugar factories. When Ninon decides to leave their Creole garden to work in such a factory. Esternome realizes that freedom is escaping them. The island is small and the hills, at least the fertile domesticated areas, are never very far from the white world. Near Noutéka, there is the factory; near Texaco, there is l'En-ville with all its trappings.

Finally Noutéka fails because the characters choose the pursuit of individual happiness over community well-being. Esternome's adventure at Noutéka is foremost a personal adventure, but it is also a love story. Esternome climbed the hills to find happiness with Ninon, not to establish a Creole community.

During these evocations, ardent vanity flowed in my Esternome. To see him thus, master of the hills, he who knew nothing of the earth, made Ninon happy, and maybe a little proud. That of course wouldn't prevent his misfortune to come; but for the moment, my Esternome was wallowing in his "I." I this. I that . . .

(133)

Preoccupied by his love he ignores his surroundings:

He didn't see the world change. He didn't see his quarter make new trails, submit to the great roads. He didn't see the hill people submit to the békés at harvest time, nor lose themselves in the great factories one season at a time. He didn't see the quarters of the cloud set their compass by the lowlands . . .

(147)

Because Noutéka is primarily the story of two people, before it becomes the story of a collective, the failure of one character is enough to bring down the entire community. In a land where native history does not exist, the story becomes history, and fiction and reality coincide. Nothing will be left of the Noutéka experiment but the tales that her father tells Marie-Sophie, and they will form the roots of Texaco. Texaco is the legacy of Noutéka:

We behaved according to the Noutéka of the Hills that my Esternome had described to me in detail, in communion with the open spaces right outside the hutch, to the rhythm of the moon's seasons, the rain, and the wind. And we wished, confronted with City, to live in the spirit of the Hills, that is: with our single resource, and better: our single knowledge.

(317)

Therefore Noutéka is a necessary myth, in spite of its failure, for it contains the seeds responsible for the germination of all the ideas found in Texaco.

Like Noutéka, Texaco gives the Negroes a virgin land where they are allowed to be themselves, to be their own masters: "In our mind the soil under the houses remained strangely free, definitively free." (329) Private property has no meaning for the inhabitants of Texaco for, as in Noutéka, there is "No private land, no collective land, we weren't the landowner, so no one could pride himself on anything beside the number of hours, minutes, seconds of its arrival." (318) It is both this freedom and this lack of structure that allows its inhabitants to be creative and build a community that does not resemble any other.

"We from Texaco, last to join the wreath of the old Quarters, we reinvented everything: laws, urban codes, neighborhood relations, settlement and construction rules." (317) In this border of the city, the inhabitants of Texaco try to recreate the country and plant the same type of crops that were planted in the hills:

When we came we brought the countryside with us: carts of lemon trees, swaying coconut trees, bunches of papaya trees, tufts of sugarcane, tatters of plantains, guavas, peppers, leeches, the blessed breadfruit, the avocado trees, and a mixture of this grass and that grass to cure the aches, the heart's sufferings, the soul's wounds, the dreamy flowerings of melancholy.

(317)

In other words, in Texaco, as in Noutéka, they plant a Creole garden, "what the békés call secondary crops and what we call food crops" and "Near the food crops, (. . .) medicine plants, which bring luck and disarm zombies." "Growing them all tangled up with each other never tires the soil. That's Creole gardening." (128)

Noutéka is also a place where people live in harmony with nature.

Upper Texaco looked as if sculpted in the cliff. Battered by the rains and the winds, the crate wood and the asbestos had taken on the hue of the rocks and the opaque stillness of certain shadows. Seen from the sea, the cliff seemed to grow mineral hutches, wind sculptures, barely more accentuated than the humps of dacite.

(319)

In the Hills people have learned to build their homes taking into account the slope and the terrain, and the finished product, with its mineral quality, seems blended with the natural landscape. The harmony between nature and human creation is part of the philosophy of survival of the Creole people. The houses, balanced precariously on the edge of the cliff, seem ready to collapse. However, thanks to the builders' talents, the local topography is used to keep the huts solidly upright.

It is also this talent for survival at any cost that is at the root of the community spirit that energizes the inhabitants of Texaco, like those of Noutéka.

In other words, (. . .) a life without witnesses, like life downtown, was a difficult wish. All was known to all. Miseries shouldered miseries. Commiseration intervened to fight despair and no one lived in the anxiety of extreme loneliness.

(19)

This community spirit shows itself primarily in the help that the inhabitants of Texaco give each other in time of hardship: "Nothing was given, everything was to be wrung out. We spoke to those who looked like us. We answered their calls for help and they answered ours." (316)

Contrary to the inhabitants of Noutéka, the people of Texaco have no illusions. Texaco is not a paradise. In the low quarters, the water from the swamp infiltrates under the homes and rots their foundations. Garbage accumulates, attracting flies and mosquitoes, menacing the population with disease. However, Texaco succeeds where Noutéka failed because the Creole community spirit is built on combat. Texaco is truly a Creole hill. It is a space inhabited by maroons, a space of resistance and survival. The confrontation with the béké, who works for the oil refinery and has the help of the police, is a symbolic reenactment of the ancestral confrontation between Negroes and békés on the island. This conflict never takes the shape of open warfare for the fight is not equal. "We had tried to set up barricades on the slope: broken bottles, sharpened bamboo, bundles of thorns (. . .) the seyaress2 would pass through our not-so-historical obstacles without even noticing them." (338) But what counts here is resistance at all costs, for the very sake of resistance. The inhabitants of Texaco: "would close up the doors with coffin nails, if only to delay their obligatory visit of notification before the destruction—gain some time, swindle some time from them." (337) This is the thinking of the maroons. The fight, the resistance, is not of the body but of the mind; it is a question of never losing hope and constantly rebuilding.

We worked together in Upper Texaco, in Lower Texaco, until broad daylight. And by the time the oil béké arrived, he'd lost his guardian angel. Our hutches had bloomed from the rubble with more stubbornness than the tough wild grasses.

(340-1)

The fight against the oil béké is not the only fight for the inhabitants of Texaco. The area is also under attack from the sailors. They symbolize all the sailors in the history of Martinique: the explorers who seized the land, those participating in the slave trade. These sailors, similar to the previous generations, come to rape the women of Texaco. Women have become the heart of Texaco and represent hope for the Creoles. Only women are able to understand the hills and go beyond, while men have become their victim. For Chamoiseau, men unable to find freedom in the hills become aimless. Their rebellion, pushed to the bitter end, is an end in itself and turns to madness. To find freedom one has to always go higher in the hills, among the clouds where nothing grows. The men must refuse everything in order to refuse the culture of the white man: work, love, marriage, all creation, in a sort of madness that forces them to wander aimlessly throughout the island. Dispossessed of its original culture, rejecting that of the people who colonized them, they become empty, hollow shells, drifting through life without a compass. Because the men have