

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

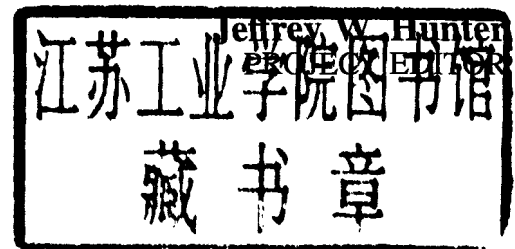
**CLC 268**



Volume 268

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

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



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# Patrick Chamoiseau

## 1953-

Martinican literary critic, novelist, essayist, autobiographer, playwright, and writer of folktales.

The following entry provides an overview of Chamoiseau's career through 2008.

### INTRODUCTION

Chamoiseau is a key figure in the literary movement known as *créolité*, or creoleness, which was launched with the manifesto *Eloge de la créolité* (1989), a collaboration between Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant. Like the Antillian *Négritude* movement that developed in the late 1930s, *créolité* denounces French political and cultural domination in the Caribbean, but challenges the earlier movement's formulation of a black/white binary seeking Creole origins on the African continent. The new movement posits a Francophone Caribbean identity that is emphatically Creole, yet fluid, reflecting the mixture of races inhabiting the islands, including: European, Asian, African, and American populations. As explained in the *Eloge*, the task of rediscovering and redefining creoleness is given over to aesthetic production: "[Full] knowledge of creoleness will be reserved for Art, for Art absolutely. Such will be the precondition of identity's strengthening." The principal literary objective of the movement is the recovery of historical consciousness through the Creole oral tradition, a task Chamoiseau has approached with skill and inventiveness in a number of critically acclaimed novels, including *Texaco* (1992). This novel is a fictionalized history of Martinique that was awarded France's most prestigious literary prize, the Prix Goncourt. Chamoiseau is also the author of several other seminal works of literary criticism, a three-part autobiography, and folktales.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chamoiseau was born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, to working-class parents. In the *Eloge*, Chamoiseau and his coauthors recall their early awareness of the power of language and their "linguistic castration" in the French school system in Martinique, which forbade the use of the Creole language: "[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 the first two parts of his autobiography, *Antan d'enfance* (1990; *Childhood*) and *Chemin d'école* (1994; *School Days*), Chamoiseau elaborates on these ideas, praising his mother for preserving the Creole language in their home and crediting her with initiating his writing voice by introducing him to the most important contemporary source of authentic Creole culture, the open-air market. Chamoiseau studied law at universities in Paris and Martinique, then returned to Fort-de-France, where he has been employed as a probation officer for young offenders for the past fifteen years. After celebrating Creole storytelling in his first two novels, *Chronique des sept misères* (1986; *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*) and *Solibo Magnifique* (1988; *Solibo Magnificent*), Chamoiseau joined with linguist Bernabé and novelist Confiant in extending his defense of the Creole language into the political and cultural aesthetic they termed *créolité*. Chamoiseau's early success as a writer made him an important personality in Martinique and his subsequent career has confirmed his status as a leading agent of change in postcolonial Caribbean literature.

### MAJOR WORKS

Chamoiseau's fiction aims to enact the goals of the *créolité* movement as formulated in the *Eloge* as well as in *Ecrire en pays dominé* (1997) and the *Lettres créoles* (1991), cowritten with Confiant. In his novels, Chamoiseau adopts the persona of an ethnographer, or "word-scratcher," who recodes and transcribes the memories of native Martinicans, directly addressing the reader as an oral storyteller would speak to an audience. The first of these, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, relays the rise and fall of market porter Pipi Soleil, the "master-djobber" of Fort-de-France, whose adventures bring him into contact with the various strata of Martinican society, including children, peasants, landlords, politicians, and police officers. His most significant encounter is with the ghost of a



murdered slave, Afoukal, whose reminiscences restore to Pipi memories that have been erased by the French presence in Martinique. Chamoiseau's technique in this novel is representative of his fiction in general: valorization of the Creole storyteller, or *conteur*; a blended language of French, Creole, and regional idioms; creative manipulation of actual historical events and persons free from the typical renditions in French historiography; and scrupulous attention to accuracy of locale and place, complete with the names of real streets, markets, and other public places. In *Solibo Magnificent*, Chamoiseau's second novel, the hero is a renowned storyteller who mysteriously chokes on his own words while speaking to a crowd in Fort-de-France. Solibo's death, an allegorical representation of the demise of the Creole oral tradition, is an invitation for Chamoiseau to restore orality through the written word.

*Texaco* is a chronicle of the development of a shantytown in Fort-de-France, named for its proximity to the gasoline reservoir along the banks of the river. *Texaco* is chiefly the story of Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the town's founder and the daughter of slaves. The narrative begins with the birth of Marie-Sophie's father, Esternome, on a nineteenth-century sugar plantation. The narrative shifts to recount the establishment of the town, and then proceeds to cover the arrival of an urban planner. As in his other fiction, Chamoiseau here diverges from reality—for example, both Marie-Sophie and Esternome have encounters with mystical African wise men known as *Mentoh*—but the inclusion of such folk beliefs is central to Chamoiseau's preservation of the Creole oral tradition. Marie-Sophie's struggle to convince the urban planner not to raze the town in the name of progress is considered by critics to be Chamoiseau's finest use of locale, in miniature, to symbolize the entire history of Creole resistance to French control.

In *Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1997), Chamoiseau again returns to plantation life in Martinique, in a story describing an elderly slave's escape from bondage while being pursued by his master and his hounds. The old man's communion with nature as he retreats deep into tropical forests becomes for Chamoiseau an opportunity to travel back in time to the precolumbian past in search of Creole origins. The main character in Chamoiseau's novel *Biblique des derniers gestes* (2001) is the "Old Warrior," who made an earlier appearance in *Ecrire en pays dominé*, providing memories of his involvement in anti-colonial struggles in Martinique and Africa. In the later work, the Old Warrior for independence is the dying Balthazar, who is surrounded by a group of people, including the story's narrator, wishing to pay their last respects. Drawing on Balthazar's incoherent flashbacks and the anecdotes

and memories of his friends, the narrator pieces together Balthazar's personal history, intended as a revisionist version of French histories of colonization in the West Indies. The locale of Chamoiseau's most recent novel, *Un Dimanche au cachot* (2007), is a former sugar plantation on which rests a stone vault containing clues to the life of a former slave rebel.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

In the years since the publication of *Eloge*, Chamoiseau has been a major participant in the theoretical debate concerning the role of Creole culture in Martinique—since 1946 designated as an overseas department of France—and in the Caribbean islands in general. Not surprisingly, Chamoiseau's fiction is invariably studied in conjunction with his literary criticism. In this respect, scholars point to a number of possible paradoxes, including whether his insistence on documenting place in his stories runs counter to *créolité* openness to globalization and Chamoiseau's own marketing of his writings to the world market; whether his search for Creole identity in a mythical past is antithetical to the notion of Creoles as a composite people with no pure lineage; and whether his focus on plantation life in Martinique perpetuates, rather than revises, French historiography for First World readers.

Critics have also pondered Chamoiseau's multilingualism, wondering why, given the *Eloge*'s pronouncement that orality is the "best chance for repressed authenticity," he did not write entirely in the Creole language. A. James Arnold, a specialist in Caribbean literature, takes up this point, remarking, "It has been well established that the literary language of Chamoiseau and Confiant is an "interlect" that flatters European readers who want to feel that they understand the West Indies. . . . *Créoliste* French is just foreign enough to convince the reader that s/he has been transported to the Islands, but not foreign enough to disrupt the reader's expectation of what the West Indies represent culturally." Yet other critics, among them Lewis C. Seifert, see a logical consistency between Chamoiseau's blending of French and Creole and the technique of slave *conteurs*, who masked rebellious messages in an opaque language unintelligible to their masters. Rose-Myriam Réjouis offers yet a different insight, arguing that Chamoiseau's multilingualism suggests his conviction that "a voluntary, literary, use of Creole, can rescue a Martinican text that is dominated by French norms by signaling a playful, polysemic, carnivalesque, interlinguistic space."

Theoretical considerations aside, critics have consistently praised Chamoiseau's exploration of the literary possibilities of the vernacular, including his reproduc-

tion of such aspects of oral storytelling as onomatopoeia, repetition, and call-and-response. And if, as some scholars charge, Chamoiseau's rewriting of Martinique's history falls short of the aims of the *Eloge*, he is nonetheless widely admired for publicizing the threat to Creole culture posed by unrestricted globalization and for bringing world attention to the lasting influence of colonialism in Martinique.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Chronique des sept misères* [*Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*] (novel) 1986  
*Solibo Magnifique* [*Solibo Magnificent*] (novel) 1988  
*Eloge de la créolité* [with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant] (literary criticism) 1989  
*Antan d'enfance* [*Childhood*] (autobiography) 1990  
*Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature—Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane 1635-1975* [with Raphaël 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  
*Bible des derniers gestes* (novel) 2001  
*A bout d'enfance* (autobiography) 2005  
*Un Dimanche au cachot* (novel) 2007

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## CRITICISM

Marc Lowenthal (review date summer 1998)

SOURCE: Lowenthal, Marc. Review of *Solibo Magnificent*, by Patrick Chamoiseau. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 18, no. 2 (summer 1998): 237-38.

[In the following review, Lowenthal considers *Solibo Magnificent* comparable to Chamoiseau's *Texaco* in its penetrating examination of Creole culture, but finds the earlier work less grand in scope.]

The publication of Réjouis and Vinokurov's translation of *Solibo Magnificent* firmly ensconces Chamoiseau in the English language. Last year saw their rendition of his magnum opus, *Texaco*, his depiction of three generations of Martinique history: the days of slavery and its abolition up to the present and uncertain predicament of Creole culture, embodied in the shantytown "countercity" of *Texaco*. Like *Texaco* itself, the book is both a hymn and a resistance to the entity known as "City" and the freedom it not so much offers as imposes.

Those with a taste for something less epic, though, might prefer Chamoiseau's earlier *Solibo Magnificent*, an allegory of the death of Creole oral culture. *Solibo*, the last of the great tale-tellers, dies in the midst of delivering his final public performance, mysteriously choking on his own words. Enter the police, upholders of proper procedure, which takes the form of a linguistic and cultural subordination to French. The resulting Keystone-cop episodes prove Chamoiseau to be strongest when his humor is: *Solibo's* [*Solibo Magnificent*,] high points recall Chaplin at his youngest and most physical, with the sobering difference that when Chamoiseau's characters get hit, they bleed and they die.

Both books describe the "un-clarity" of Creole life and language: what *Texaco* is to City, Creole is to French; counterresistances to the compromising freedoms offered by both. "Freedom is not given, must not be given. Liberty awarded does not liberate your soul." If anything, it is to be wrung out, in the same way *Solibo's* police wring their nonexistent murder case out of innocent witnesses. In the words of *Solibo*: "if someone gives *Solibo* words *Solibo* has no more words." But with the fading of the culture that he represents, what kind of words are left to the Martinique writer? Chamoiseau's novels are necessarily uneasy collages of different voices and conflicted forms (oral histories, for example, are accompanied by footnotes). The result, however, is a voice of his own: inventive, biting, sometimes precious, but individual in the face of the alleged universality of all official tongues.

Jeffrey DeShell (review date summer 2000)

SOURCE: DeShell, Jeffrey. Review of *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, by Patrick Chamoiseau. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 20, no. 2 (summer 2000): 182.

[In the following review, DeShell asserts that the *Chronicle of Seven Sorrows* contains all the necessary ingredients to ensure its contemporary popularity, but regrets the author's failure to take more risks with his material.]

It is impossible not to like Patrick Chamoiseau's first novel, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*. Chamoiseau, winner of the Prix Goncourt for his third novel, *Texaco*, has written a novel full of everything that would brand it a contemporary classic: rich, lyrical language (spiced with enough Creole to require the included glossary); an oppressed but colorful people (the *djobbers*, or porters of a Martinique market); and an oral, digressive style with enough screwing, eating, and talking to ghosts to keep us turning the pages. Nebraska [the publisher, university of Nebraska Press] added a brilliant translation by Linda Coverdale, a hand-some cover, and useful and interesting front and back matter, including the glossary, *djobbers* songs, and anecdotes and assorted sketches that didn't make it into the final version.

The framing story details the life of Pipi Soleil, the king of the *djobbers*, and his various exploits and escapades. The most moving and important adventure is his search for a buried jar of gold, protected through the years by the ghost of Afoukal, a murdered slave. Through his diligent attempt to dig up the treasure, he hears stories from Afoukal, stories that explain the plight of his people, stories that restore to Pipi his racial memory.

Still, with the danger of sounding the humbug, I found the novel a bit safe. The language, even in translation, is amazingly beautiful; the characters are attractive and the stories interesting, but somehow I would have preferred a book that took more risks, that perhaps gave more of an edge to Pipi's book of listening and remembering. Perhaps it's due to Chamoiseau's skill that no seams show, but I found the characters and story too good (almost in the sense of too sweet); not too good to be true, but too good to be memorable. I'm looking forward to reading *Texaco* to see if he's sharpened his dagger.

**Lorna Milne (essay date November 2001)**

SOURCE: Milne, Lorna. "Sex, Gender and the Right to Write: Patrick Chamoiseau and the Erotics of Colonialism." *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 24, no. 3 (November 2001): 59-75.

[In the essay below, Milne studies the writings of Chamoiseau in relation to the "masculinist" Creole theory of A. James Arnold, focusing on the relevance of colonial power structures to gender roles, the relationship between male sexual aggression and female artistic creativity, and the impact of the historical Creole storyteller, or conteur, on modern Creole writers of both sexes.]

THE CRÉOLITÉ MOVEMENT AND A. JAMES  
ARNOLD'S 'EROTICS OF COLONIALISM'

The French Antillean *Créolité* movement was launched in 1989 by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in *Eloge de la Créolité*, a manifesto proposing a repositioning of Creole identity and a consequent program of aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> In an important critique of this movement, A. James Arnold examines these writers from a firm grounding in postcolonial perspectives which theorize the hierarchical relationship between colonizer and colonized, an approach which is all the more appropriate because the Creolists themselves openly refer to the seminal work in this field of Fanon, Memmi and Glissant.<sup>2</sup> Arnold's study further demonstrates the value of creatively allying postcolonial theory to other theoretical perspectives, in this case (although not explicitly quoted) of theorists such as Judith Butler, according to whom genders and sexualities can be seen, just as much as colonized identities, as 'constructed through relations of power and (. . .) normative constraints'.<sup>3</sup> Arnold argues that psycho-social and cultural conditions arising from Antillean history, combined with powerful commentaries on these conditions by such prestigious predecessors as Césaire, Fanon and Glissant, have produced in the Creolists a particular construction of masculinity which in turn programs their sharply gendered, 'masculinist' outlook both as individuals and as authors and theorists of cultural activity. As I shall, in this article, bring aspects of Patrick Chamoiseau's fictional writing into interaction with the framework suggested by Arnold, it is worth setting out here in some detail the latter's position.

First, quoting both Glissant and Edward Said, Arnold recalls that colonial powers 'feminized' the cultures they colonized by constructing the subordinate culture as 'submissive, pleasure-giving, accommodating, and, ultimately, screwed' (8). Under the Plantation system out of which Antillean culture arises, the colonial European was thus placed—and his descendants remain—in the position of the 'normal' heterosexual and (re)productive man;<sup>4</sup> while the subordinated Black Antillean is forced to conceptualize himself as feminine, a situation that is clearly intolerable to him. Focusing principally on Chamoiseau and Confiant's *Lettres créoles*, a literary history of the Francophone Caribbean and a key Creolist text, Arnold then examines possible ways for the Creolist writers to break out of this 'emasculating logic' (Arnold, 8) in their reassessment of Creole identity, and in particular in their positioning of the Creolist writer within a given literary tradition.<sup>5</sup>

One possible expression of Black Antillean masculinity, which appears in texts by Césaire and Glissant, is the Maroon or run-away slave, who is defined in op-

position to the Plantation and appears in mythified form as an agonistic, super-male hero, more virile than the dominant Other.<sup>6</sup> This figure is however rejected by Chamoiseau and Confiant as a model man and literary ancestor, a dismissal Arnold explains in two ways. First, the Maroon is recognized as an imaginary construct because, historically, there are very few successful Maroons in Martinican history (13). Second, as *Lettres créoles* makes clear, the Maroon's absence from the plantation reduces his influence in the space where Creole society originates. I would add, thirdly, that he is eliminated as a masculine ideal for a writer because he does not *himself* produce literature. That duty falls to another figure from the plantation, whom the Creolists have explicitly elected as founder of their own literary lineage (35): the *Conteur*, or Creole storyteller, whom the Creolists see as the ancestor of the modern-day *Marqueur de paroles*, or ideal Creole writer.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the Maroon, absent by definition from the plantation, the *Conteur* unites his fellow slaves, for whom he assembles and transmits elements of the new culture evolving in the crucible of the colony. Where the Maroon is seen as reactive and unproductive of a new culture, therefore, the *Conteur* is presented as *pro-* actively shaping future Creole society, identity and—crucially, here—literature. Arnold notes that this figure is once again gendered as exclusively masculine, drily observing the absence from Creolist discourse of the grandmothers and aunts quoted as role models by many female Caribbean writers (11).<sup>8</sup>

In Arnold's typology, the *Conteur* is opposed to the rebellious Maroon, for he is described by the Creolists, as 'well integrated, more discreet than the others, less of a show-off in daily matters, possibly even more docile, and never a maroon' (*LC [Lettres créoles]* 61; Arnold, 12), a characterization in which Arnold sees the *Conteur* as 'the castrated male (. . .) producer of the cultural forms that would ultimately result in the créolité movement' (Arnold, 12). In Arnold's judgement, then, the male Creolist writer who claims descent from this *Conteur* ultimately identifies with an icon of impotence, and it is the resulting sense of threatened masculinity that leads, in his view, to compensatory masculinism in Creolist writings. For instance, in two principal Creolist texts—*Eloge [Eloge de la créolité]* and *Lettres Créoles*—'women and any woman-authored competing tradition are excluded, effectively silenced by an exclusively masculine historiography' (Arnold, 13).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Arnold contends that the production of aesthetic theory is in itself characteristic of the Creolists' masculinism, and further distinguishes them from Antillean women authors such as Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Ina Césaire and Dany Bébel-Gisler.<sup>10</sup>

There are however elements of Arnold's study which demand further investigation through analysis of the fictional—as opposed to the programmatic—writings of the Creolists, particularly of Patrick Chamoiseau. For instance, it is interesting to explore whether, in Chamoiseau's novels, the perspective condoned really is that of forceful male heterosexuality while 'women should concern themselves with reproduction or with venal sexual activity' (Arnold, 16-17). It is also worth testing whether the fictional texts support Arnold's hypothesis that 'in the minds of the *créolistes* cultural production is a *masculine* activity' (Arnold, 16). Readings of Raphaël Confiant's fiction may support such judgements, as other critics suggest;<sup>11</sup> in Chamoiseau's case, however, closer reading of the novels will not only shed more light on his work, but will modify some of Arnold's conclusions too. To this end, I shall start by considering male and female desire as portrayed in Chamoiseau's novels, in order to uncover the 'erotics' of gender relations in his fiction. I shall then discuss the relation between gender and literary production in the fictional texts, before concluding on the usefulness of Arnold's paradigm and its relevance to Chamoiseau.

#### EROTIC RELATIONS IN THE NOVELS OF CHAMOISEAU

While they are outnumbered by male protagonists in Chamoiseau's novels, female characters often appear as forceful subjects of social and political action in day-to-day life, while male ones frequently appear passive and weak. Women may also emerge as fully-fledged subjects of desire. In *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, for instance, Marguerite Jupiter exhausts the protagonist Pipi with her nocturnal gymnastics, before throwing him out when he fails her in other ways. Marguerite is indeed associated with venal sexuality and reproduction (she has numerous lovers and sixteen children), but she undoubtedly possesses sexual and personal autonomy.

The same could be said of Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the vigorous protagonist of *Texaco*, who in fact conforms to Arnold's favorable appraisal of female sexuality in texts by Condé and Schwarz-Bart, for she enjoys erotic relations throughout her life and, while she may be temporarily devastated by the loss of a loved partner, her life does not 'depend on the continuation of these same activities with the same or other men' (Arnold, 17); rather, it is her last partner, Iréné, who commits suicide when Marie-Sophie dies.<sup>12</sup> What is more interesting about Marie-Sophie, however, is that she has no children: knowing that a baby would only make her marginal existence more precarious (*T [Texaco]*, 239-40), she learns to induce miscarriages which eventually make her sterile. Some readers may