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## **Mangroves and Marginality: The Use of Landscape as a Metaphor for French Caribbean Identity**

The French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe conjure up images of sun-kissed beaches, coconut trees and the sparkling blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. Underneath this exotic appearance, however, these islands bare the scars of a history marked by slavery, colonialism and oppression. As a result of their colonization by the French in 1635 and the operation of the plantation system until its abolition in 1848, Martinique and Guadeloupe suffered the erasure of their cultural identity. This lack of subjectivity is further exacerbated by the fact that the countries' indigenous population was almost entirely exterminated by the Spanish in the fifteenth century. From the twentieth century onwards, writers and intellectuals have sought to elucidate what it means to be a French Caribbean person and to identify a history and culture that is unique to them. A recent intellectual movement known as *créolité*, encapsulated in the manifesto *Éloge de la Créolité* by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant,<sup>1</sup> draws on the image of the mangrove in order to convey the future of French Caribbean identity. Offered as a way to counter Martinique and Guadeloupe's marginality, the mangrove embodies limitless possibilities in its appearance as a maze of interlocking roots with no beginning and no end. Patrick Chamoiseau's 1992 *Prix Goncourt* winning novel, *Texaco*,<sup>2</sup> provides a fictional counterpart to the ideals of *créolité* with its dramatic contrast between the endless lines of the mangrove and the restricted geometries of the city. This paper will therefore focus on both the theoretical and fictional aspects of this creative use of a coastal landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau & Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité*, Gallimard, Paris, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992.

Martinique and Guadeloupe have both been overseas departments (DOM) of France since 1946, sharing similar histories as a result of their colonization by the French in the 1630s and the plantation system that reigned on both islands until 1848, as well as the erasure of their indigenous population. The majority of the inhabitants of Martinique and Guadeloupe are descendents of the African slaves imported by France in the seventeenth century and are thus either black or of mixed race. As a result of their political, economic and cultural domination by France, Martinicans and Guadeloupeans have suffered deep alienation regarding their cultural identities. In the French Caribbean this identity crisis is exacerbated by the fact that France operates both as the Other (the islands are possessions of France) and as the Same (French Caribbean people have interiorized the values and language of France). The lack of definition of French Caribbean selfhood has left the people of Martinique and Guadeloupe with a conflicted sense of their own unique history and identity. This feeling of emptiness and rootlessness has given way to an impassioned and, at times, haunting search for origins. In the early twentieth century, intellectuals began to explore the Otherness of French Caribbean identity through literature. Writers from both islands have sought to elucidate a uniquely Caribbean identity, clearly distinct from that imposed by France. Literature is thus a vital source of material for an examination of the question of identity in the French Caribbean context.

The use of landscape as a metaphor for French Caribbean identity is not a novel concept in the intellectual circles of Martinique and Guadeloupe. One of the first thinkers to explore and revolutionize subjectivity in the region was the poet and politician Aimé Césaire. Along with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas, Césaire formulated the notion of *négritude*, which focused on reclaiming 'blackness' and looking to Africa to give contemporary Caribbean society a tangible history and motherland. First appearing in 1935, the journal *L'Étudiant noir* provided the vehicle for the development of this revolutionary intellectual movement, featuring the work of writers from Africa and the Caribbean. The

most influential text of this time and the one that best encapsulates the search for and celebration of a black identity was Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published in 1939.<sup>3</sup> This epic poem depicts in symbolic imagery the degradation of black people in the Caribbean and describes in exalted terms the rediscovery of an African identity – seen as a path to healing and pride. By likening *négritude* to the image of a tree, Césaire evokes the idea of a single root, Africa, which produces the abundant blossoms that are the Caribbean islands. For Césaire, the origins of the Caribbean are clearly located in the African motherland and it is only from this foundation that the specificity of the islands can grow and expand. His work draws a distinctive and continuous link between Africa and the Caribbean and Caribbean identity appears as a single branch.<sup>4</sup>

Césaire's *négritude* was followed by the concept of *antillanité*, exemplified in the work of Édouard Glissant, which shifts the focus from Africa back to the Caribbean. While proponents of *antillanité* point out that *négritude* merely replaces the outside gaze of France with that of Africa, *antillanité*, by contrast, looks to the Caribbean for the origins and specificity of French Caribbean identity. Glissant published a major theoretical text, *Le Discours antillais*, in 1981 and this work remains the central theoretical reference point of *antillanité*, enhanced by his later book, *Poétique de la relation*, published in 1990. In *Le Discours antillais* Glissant depicts the French Caribbean as a place of missed opportunities for self-definition and autonomy.<sup>5</sup> The only way in his eyes for the French Caribbean to move from a place of nonhistory to history is to consolidate all that is uniquely Caribbean in contrast to and in defiance of the alienating gaze of metropolitan France. While the tree is an effective symbol to conceptualize *négritude*, Glissant employs the image of a rhizome,<sup>6</sup> borrowed from Gilles

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<sup>3</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Présence Africaine, Paris, 1939.

<sup>4</sup> For the idea that Africa is the root and the Caribbean a branch that has broken off and grown again see Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Ti-Jean l'horizon*, Seuil, Paris, 1979, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*, Seuil, Paris, 1981, p. 17/*Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1989, p. 8. Translated by J. Michael Dash.

<sup>6</sup> The Collins English Dictionary defines a rhizome as a “thick horizontal underground stem of plants such as the iris or mint whose buds develop into new plants.” See J.M. Sinclair (ed.), *Collins English Dictionary*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2001, p. 1328.

Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Mille plateaux*,<sup>7</sup> as a useful way to consider *antillanité*.<sup>8</sup> "Submarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches."<sup>9</sup> In Glissant's view of Caribbean identity, French Caribbean people are not a simple derivation from Africa, but, rather, a complex cultural creation. While the nucleus of the Caribbean identity is African, in Glissant's view, there are important graftings of European, Indian and Caribbean influences which result in a distinct cultural entity. Importantly, moreover, Glissant argues that within this system of "multiple interrelated cultures, the Caribbean represents not a closed space but one that is open, both internally, within the archipelago, and externally, exposed to the continental mass of the Americas and the Atlantic Ocean."<sup>10</sup> Through his evocative employment of landscape, Glissant emphasizes the open and fluctuating notion of French Caribbean identity, an image that forms a stark contrast to Césaire's idea of a fixed arboreal root.

In the 1990s, *antillanité* was further developed into the concept of *créolité*. Encapsulated in the work of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant who published *Éloge de la Créolité* in 1989, *créolité* shifts the focus of Caribbean identity yet again, this time to the Creole nature of Martinique and Guadeloupe. "Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles."<sup>11</sup> This movement emphasizes the embracing of *all* races present in the Caribbean – including Chinese, Indians, Syrians, Lebanese, black and white people as well as the various *métis* groups. *Créolité* emphasizes the need to look to other islands in the Caribbean which are both linguistically and

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<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, Minuit, Paris, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Discussed in detail in Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997, pp. 11-35. Translated by Betsy Wing. Originally published in French as *Poétique de la relation* by Gallimard in 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> J. Michael Dash, *Édouard Glissant*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 146.

<sup>11</sup> Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant, *Éloge*, p. 75. Confiant and Ernest Pépin restate the vision of *créolité* in their article "The Stakes of Créolité" in Kathleen Balutansky & Marie-Agnès Sourieau (eds.), *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1998, pp. 96-100.

culturally related to Martinique and Guadeloupe as well as to Guyane and other Creole-speaking places such as Réunion, rather than confining themselves to their own small islands. Far from being closed and complete, *créolité* advocates a place that is open, forward-looking and constantly in flux.

Once again drawing upon the environment for an appropriate natural image, the proponents of *créolité* imagine French Caribbean identity as a mangrove,<sup>12</sup> thereby highlighting the French Caribbean's multiple origins and the impossibility of a single, all-encompassing historical root. In a mangrove it is difficult to pinpoint a beginning or an end and it sustains an ecological life of extraordinary richness. Emphasizing the fluidity and interconnection of identity in all its facets, *créolité* comes to embody a kind of harmonious chaos in its interlocking roots and dense coastal thickets. As one critic affirms, this chaos is not that of a "dehumanised disorder, but that of a mobility, a lightness where nothing is fixed or rigid".<sup>13</sup> Illuminating the hybrid, diverse nature of identity in the Caribbean, *créolité* represents "both order and disorder, unity and multiplicity, chaos and coherence."<sup>14</sup> Extrapolating from the image of the mangrove, Patrick Chamoiseau further likens Creole identity to a mosaic which has no core and in which multiple cultures are woven together to create something that is uniquely Caribbean. In his words, "it is necessary to understand that a Caribbean person is neither an African nor a European, neither an Indian nor a descendant of the Amerindians, but *is all of that at the same time*."<sup>15</sup> In the urgent quest to redefine French Caribbean subjectivity, it is clear that the islands' rich natural environment provides a means not only for its intellectuals to establish evocative theories of identity but also to inspire the physical process of taking root in one's land.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant, *Éloge*, p. 111, where French Caribbean identity is linked to "the deep mangrove swamp of Creoleness."

<sup>13</sup> Christine Chivallon, "*Texaco* ou l'éloge de la 'spatialité'", *Notre Librairie*, 127, 1996, p. 89. All translations from the French are my own unless otherwise stated.

<sup>14</sup> Chivallon, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Ottmar Ette & Ralph Ludewig, "En guise d'introduction: points de vue sur l'évolution de la littérature antillaise: entretien avec les écrivains martiniquais Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphaël Confiant", *Lendemain*, 67, 1992, p. 10. Original italics.

Chamoiseau's novel, *Texaco*, offers a fictional counterpart to the ideals of *créolité* through its study of the evolution of Texaco, a shantytown-like suburb on the margins of the Martinican capital, Fort-de-France. As one of the leading advocates of *créolité*, Chamoiseau's theoretical beliefs inform the aesthetic and thematic structure of the novel, evident, for example, in its proliferation of narrative viewpoints and its inclusion of a wide variety of colourful characters from different ethnic backgrounds. One of the most important elements to emerge from *Texaco*, however, is the fundamental role landscape plays in the construction of the story. Not only are the characters symbolically tied to the geography of the novel, but the physical setting of Texaco is also a vital component in unveiling the central philosophy of *créolité*.

Chamoiseau's portrayal of the opposition between Texaco, the peripheral suburb of Fort-de-France, and City, the bustling and powerful town centre, constitutes the principal theoretical framework for delineating his perception of French Caribbean identity. In one revealing description Chamoiseau depicts City as a place where all "the streets were straight, square-cut. Nothing evoked a city. Everything had been built with no regard for memory" (167).<sup>16</sup> By contrast, his portrayal of Texaco as a teeming mangrove conjures up images of diversity, chaos and vitality. In this manner Chamoiseau associates City with sameness, embodied in the ideals of *francité* or Frenchness, and Texaco with difference, exemplified through the philosophy of *créolité*. Chamoiseau's exploitation of the image of an urban mangrove swamp illustrates the way in which diversity creates extraordinary richness even if at first sight it appears to provide the breeding-ground for conflict. He also demonstrates the way in which the apparently chaotic merging and separation of different roots in a mangrove actually constitute a vital counterpart to the more stable City environment: "City draws strength from Texaco's urban mangroves...Texaco needs City to caress it, meaning: it needs consideration" (263). Through the contrasting images of

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<sup>16</sup> Quotations refer to the English translation of *Texaco* by Rose-Myriam Réjouis & Val Vinokurov, Vintage International, New York, 1997.

Texaco and City, Chamoiseau successfully employs a geographical metaphor to promote his idea of a world in which difference may flourish. According to Chamoiseau, unity can only be achieved through the recognition of human diversity. Coining the phrase *diversalité*<sup>17</sup> in opposition to what he perceives as the monolithic tendencies of universality, Chamoiseau situates the future of humanity in an exaltation of diversity. In his words, “the more this diversity is active, integrated and valorized, the more unity will be realized in a profound manner.”<sup>18</sup> These ideas designed to counteract Martinique and Guadeloupe’s marginality are embodied above all in his presentation of Texaco as one of nature’s most diverse and complex ecosystems: the mangrove swamp.

A simple illustration of Chamoiseau’s dramatization of Texaco’s success in supporting diversity surfaces in his depiction of the solidarity that exists amongst the inhabitants of this urban backwater. Despite the vast spectrum of human life that carves out its existence on the margins of the city, Chamoiseau underlines the interlocking roots of these characters and their need for each other in the quest for survival. The protagonist, Marie-Sophie, for example, writes of her birth: “And the baby was the Quarter’s. I had, before I was even born, a load of papas and just as many mamas” (188). On a more day-to-day level, the people who gather together to form Texaco are linked by a common desire to survive the harsh realities of life in the Caribbean, arriving at an approach in which “[h]elping out is the way things go” (132).<sup>19</sup> Texaco’s diversity thus emerges as a major player in its coming together in a spirit of unity.

The fact that the mangrove exists on the margins of land and coast reinforces the idea of the marginality of the characters that populate this novel. Critic Françoise duRivage argues that mangrove swamps are “foul and monotonous in appearance” and that this situation is mirrored by the rejected personalities that

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau & Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité*, Gallimard, Paris, 1993, p. 114.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Chamoiseau, Interview with Bonnie Thomas, Martinique, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Original italics. Chamoiseau returns to this idea of humanity on p. 281.



find their way to Texaco.<sup>20</sup> However, this same marginality in the case of the mangrove plays an important role in protecting the coast against sea erosion and in allowing marine life to thrive. Following on from this idea, duRivage suggests that “Texaco is that mangrove swamp...because it is a place rejected by everyone. It is the place where the city allows the refuse of its civilisation, both animate and inanimate, to accumulate” yet at the same it “plays an important symbiotic role for the city it borders.”<sup>21</sup> The mangrove thus becomes indispensable in the continued existence of the land around it, just as the Creole nature of the French Caribbean forms a vital component in its people’s identity, despite the sea of Frenchness that surrounds it.

The use of the mangrove as a metaphor for French Caribbean identity also contains within it the idea of a constant and successful adaptation to change. While this coastal feature must exist above tides and below tides, in salt water and fresh water, so too do the French Caribbean people have to learn to live with the French culture that encircles them, the Creole history that is their past and the future that is a combination of these vastly different cultures. The French Caribbean landscape has long provided the inspiration and poetic tools for intellectuals to examine the issues of their past, present and future identities. Chamoiseau offers one possible key to an understanding of the potency of this natural imagery, arguing that the Creole language and culture are rural entities and that nature in the islands has not yet been subjected to cultural objectification.<sup>22</sup> He cites as an example the fact that houses in Martinique and Guadeloupe have their terraces overlooking the street rather than facing the spectacular scenery that borders their dwellings. In his view, nature is just there, omnipresent and part of life, and therefore an ideal starting point for an interrogation of French Caribbean identity.

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<sup>20</sup> Françoise duRivage, “Texaco: From the Hills to the Mangrove Swamps”, *Thamyris*, 6(1), 1999, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> duRivage, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> Chamoiseau, Interview with Bonnie Thomas.

As this brief survey of the key intellectual movements in the French Caribbean reveals, the landscape has provided an important way to think beyond the marginal status of the islands' history and culture. The progression from *négritude* to *antillanité* to *créolité* also demonstrates a move from a more linear way of thinking, as embodied in Césaire's Caribbean tree with an African root, to one associated with the vast complexity of the mangrove swamp. This image of the chaotic but harmonious merging of roots and branches effectively captures the hybridity of contemporary French Caribbean identity.

**Dr Bonnie Thomas** completed her PhD on gender identity in contemporary French Caribbean literature at the University of Western Australia in 2003. After a year teaching French at Macquarie University in Sydney, she recently returned to Perth to take up a position at UWA. She will be teaching her first course on French Caribbean literature in second semester 2004.