LIEU DE MÉMOIRE, LIEU DE CRÉOLITÉ: THE PLANTATION AS SITE OF MEMORY

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In recent years, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, the writers that have come to be known under the designation of the Créolistes[1], with the occasional contribution of Jean Bernabé, have entered into the theoretical debates surrounding the question of Caribbean identity with the publication of *Éloge de la Créolité* (1989) and *Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature 1635-1975* (1991). In these texts, they acknowledge their debt to Édouard Glissant while attempting to differentiate themselves from him. One of the most important theoretical insights that the Créolistes have brought to light is the central place occupied by the habitation, or the plantation, in the history of Caribbean letters. In this paper, I will examine the role that the plantation, as a lieu de mémoire, or site of memory, plays in the theoretical apparatus set forth by the Créolistes[2], dealing especially with the literary genealogy that they establish. A close evaluation of the plantation as a signifier of Créolité, as well as the literary genealogy that accompanies it in the Créolistes texts, I will argue, offers an illuminating approach to the works of these authors.

The plantation as a socio-cultural entity has long received attention from historians and anthropologists, but has only recently become an object of study for literary and cultural theorists in the Caribbean. Unlike Glissant, who examines not only the cultural, but also the sociological, economic, and political legacy of the plantation system, the approach of the Créolistes is limited to the cultural sphere. They are primarily concerned with unearthing the link between the cultural production that took place on the plantation and the development of Caribbean literature. In fact, the main thrust of their theoretical project is the establishment of a genealogy of Creole literature which will link them to their enslaved forefathers on the plantation. To this end, they focus their attention on the conteur, or story-teller, who occupies a central role in *Lettres créoles*.

The conteur, in their theory, is "celui qui donne voix au groupe," the "gardien des mémoires" for whom "distraire" and "verbaliser la résistance" are the dual aims of his, and I use the masculine pronoun intentionally, literary activities (62-63). Thus the conteur, they argue, not only entertained the slaves, but more importantly, played a crucial role as the locus of resistance to colonial rule: "l'artiste du cri, le

réceptacle de sa poétique, le Papa de la tracée littéraire dedans l'habitation sera le Paroleur, notre conteur créole. C'est lui qui, en plein coeur des champs et sucreries, reprendra à son compte la contestation de l'ordre colonial, utilisant son art comme masque et didactique" (35). The "Father" of creole literature, then, will be the conteur, the oral story-teller referred to by the neologism oraliturain by the Créolistes.

The similarities between the role of the conteur on the plantation and their conception of the role of the writer are obvious and intended. This should indeed come as no surprise, for as I stated earlier, the project of this text is a genealogical one – the Créolistes make a claim of cultural authenticity as links in a chain of literature and resistance that is anchored in the plantation. But what is striking in their conception of the conteur and his relationship to power on the plantation is that he is seen as the only source of resistance. Thus the conteur replaces the nègre marron, the maroon or runaway slave, as the traditional heroic figure of resistance. Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny, and the other maroon warriors have been erased[3]. In fact, not only is the maroon no longer to be seen as a heroic figure, he is effectively eliminated from their model of plantation society altogether: "Certains s'enfuient [à l'arrivée aux Antilles] et transportent leur silence dans les hauteurs des mornes: ce sont les Nègres marrons . . . . et lorsqu'ils redescendront parmi les gens, aux heures de l'Abolition, il ajouteront aux phénomènes de la créolisation la poétique d'une Afrique de souvenirs, mythique et idéelle mythic" (34). While the image of maroons who escape at the moment of arrival and manage to maintain strong ties to African culture as they live in isolation in the hills might seem rather appealing, it has no basis whatsoever in the history of the francophone Caribbean. Rather, in this region, runaway slaves tended to practice what is referred to as petit marronnage[4]. As opposed to the grand marronnage that occurred in Jamaica, Surinam, and parts of Brazil, a practice in which the slaves took to remote areas in large numbers and established communities isolated from the plantation, petit marronnage existed on the margins of the plantations. "These maroons did not go very far from the plantation from which they fled, but remained on its edges, or hid in the house of a relative or a friend from the neighboring plantation," Gabriel Debien writes, explaining that, "This form of escape might be termed absenteeism" (111). And in the francophone Caribbean, as Richard Price argues, "*petit marronnage* was especially prevalent, a constant thorn in the side of the plantation enterprise; it was Frenchmen who

labeled marronage the 'plague' or the 'gangrene' of colonial society" (105). The *grand marronage* posited by the Créolistes simply did not take place in the francophone Caribbean, for reasons related to both the geography of the islands and the efforts of the colonial administration. Glissant (69) and Micheline Rice-Maximin (24-37) agree with Price who writes, "the relatively compact size of the islands prevented the formation of large-scale communities" (105). And Robin Blackburn adds that "the effectiveness of the maréchaussée," the rural police force, was also of prime importance (442).

Not only does the image of the maroon depicted by the Créolistes fail to correspond to the historical record, it also neglects the very real effects of petit marronnage that lead to its characterization as a "plague" or "gangrene": the reduction in the slave labor force; the theft of goods from the plantation owners; the transmission of information from one plantation to another, which allowed slaves to maintain contact with family members, loved ones, or plan revolts; and so on. Furthermore, the claim that maroons were not creolized and only held on to a "Africa of memories" fails to account for the fact that most maroons in the francophone Caribbean spent the majority of their time on plantations and were as important to the process of creolization as any other group -- certainly they would not have compared unfavorably to the field slaves that seem to be the ideal of the Créolistes.

Above and beyond the consistent attempts to marginalize the maroon, the Créolistes fail to account for the house slaves, many of whom were women. Indeed, this group achieved a higher level of creolization, both racial and cultural, due to their close contact with the békés. Some of the most spectacular acts of resistance, the poisoning of the masters, were the work of the house slaves, who alone had the trust of the békés and access to their food and drink[5]. "Poison and arson," as Blackburn reminds us, "were the forms of slave resistance most feared by French proprietors" (442). But even more prosaic forms of resistance, from the theft of household goods to the acquisition of literacy, played an important role in the overall picture of slave resistance on the plantation. These acts, as well, go unnoticed by the Créolistes in their focus on the conteur as the sole figure of resistance.

Perhaps the most remarkable element in the plantation constructed by the Créolistes is the total absence of women. Where are the slave women and their acts of resistance[6] ? During the failed slave revolt in Guadeloupe led by Louis Delgrès, for example, Bernard Moitt points out

that women "served as messengers, transported ammunition, food, and supplies, cared for the sick, acted as cover for men under fire, and changed revolutionary slogans which kept spirits high among the insurrectionary forces" ("Slave Women and Resistance in the French Caribbean" 242). And Arlette Gautier argues for a wide spectrum of female slave resistance ranging from marronage to infanticide in her *Les soeurs de Solitude: La condition féminine dans l'esclavage aux Antilles du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*. If one knew only the version articulated by the Créolistes, one might think that no women even existed, despite the fact that they played key roles in the cultivation of food on the provision grounds and the exchange of goods and information at the slave markets[7]. The importance of the agricultural and economic activities of slave women goes beyond the obvious material advantages, for as Dale Tomich notes: "By developing such proto-peasant activities, they not only improved the material quality of their lives, but also established customary rights to property and to free time. They thus fashioned a sphere of independent activity, at once within and against the slave relation, that allowed them to assert their own needs, purposes and cultural forms" (242). But the neglect shown toward slave women which represents a clear failure to deal in any meaningful way with the roles played by women on the plantation is characteristic of their work and finds a clear parallel in their history of Caribbean letters, a point to which I will return in a moment.

Finally, the choice of the plantation as the site of an authentic creole culture runs the risk of evacuating the elements of Caribbean culture that are not of European or African origin. Indeed, the Créolistes consistently downplay the degree to which Indian, Chinese, and Levantine peoples have contributed to creolized contemporary Caribbean culture. "[L]es Hindous qui remplacèrent les anciens esclaves noirs sur les plantations de Trinidad," they write in *Éloge de la créolité*, "ont adapté leur culture originelle à de nouvelles réalités sans pour autant la modifier complètement" (30). To their mind, while Africans and Europeans "creolize," Indians can only "adapt," and then not completely, for as they argue, the process of creolization "désigne la mise en contact brutale. . . de populations culturellement différentes: aux Petites Antilles, *Européens et Africains*" (30, emphasis mine). There is no room in their understanding of créolité for anyone other than Africans and Europeans, it would seem. Entire groups of peoples are thus quietly removed from the equation.

Returning now to the question of gender that I raised earlier, we see in the reconstruction of the history of Caribbean literature set forth in *Lettres créoles* only two women authors that receive serious attention: Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart. Condé is mentioned briefly in an account that highlights the nomadic nature of her travels, only to be dismissed as perhaps not having managed to adequately "assumer son identité créole" (151). Much more interesting for our purposes here are the passages devoted to Schwarz-Bart, one of only three authors to rate a section of her own, along with Frankétienne and Glissant. In this section, entitled "la magie de Télumée," we find a description that is tellingly evocative: "Rencontrer la romancière guadeloupéenne Simone Schwarz-Bart est toujours un contentement. Belle de manière inaltérable, la chevelure libre revenue d'anciennes tresses, la paupière blasée, le sourire large, une séduction toute en simplicité à l'instar de l'héroïne de *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée Miracle*" (182). The gender bias in this description is obvious and constitutes the sub-text of this entire section. Describing "la magie de ses textes," for example, they write:

> Il faut dire magie, car Simone Schwarz-Bart répugne à s'expliquer, à expliquer le choix de sa langue, à expliquer ses thèmes, à expliquer son intention. Elle dit écrire comme elle en a envie et selon la forme qui s'impose. Elle peut s'absorber dans les joies du métier d'antiquaire (elle tient un magasin au coeur de Pointe-à-Pitre) sans souci de produire du texte. . . . "Vous êtes trop savants!" reproche-t-elle aux critiques qui essaient par des questions insidieuses de mieux percevoir sa volonté secrète. Manière de dire: Laissez la création à la création, c'est-à-dire au mystère (182-183).

Schwarz-Bart, in their presentation, is the beautiful seductress who naively and intuitively manages to create art, as a hobby, of course, for her real occupation is "antiquaire." Neither a serious writer by profession, nor by temperament, she dabbles in writing and remains enshrouded in mystery, magic, and secrets. The extent to which this depiction of Schwarz-Bart embodies the most retrograde and masculinist images of women should be quite apparent. It is indeed difficult to imagine how the Créolistes could go farther without falling into self-parody.

Lest we be too hasty to judge the Créolistes, we should perhaps

consider the possibility of the claim that the Créolistes, as products of a society that tends to have views on women that are different than those found in the U.S., should not be held responsible for what would amount to only passing along images of women that are commonplace in their society. Continuing in this vein, one might suggest that the failure to accord any place to women, first in their understanding of the plantation then in their genealogy of important writers, is simply in keeping with Caribbean cultural attitudes toward women. And this argument is not entirely without merit. However, to accept that would be to ignore all the scholarly work done by writers from the region that contest these attitudes and provide counter-narratives to the masculinist narratives of theorists and critics like the Créolistes[8]. They have not remained silent on this question, nor should we.

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NOTES

[1] A serious investigation into the differences that might separate the versions of créolité practiced by the two writers remains to be undertaken, although perhaps the recent publication of Chamoiseau's essays *Écrire en pays dominé* and "Meditations for Saint John Perse" might serve as a useful starting point for such an inquiry. I would suggest that Chamoiseau's work would compare favorably with Confiant's.

[2] For an excellent treatment of the gendering of the Créolistes' literary works, see Arnold (1994), Burton, and the essays in the collection *Penser la Créolité*, especially those by Arnold, Condé, and Spear.

[3] Genovese's *From Rebellion to Revolution* is an informative general study of maroon revolts and rebellions in the Americas in their hemispheric perspective.

[4] For more on the petit marronage vs. grand marronage distinction commonly made by anthropologists and historians of the Caribbean, see Price, Debien, and Blackburn, among others. The essays collected in Price's *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* provide an excellent introduction to the various maroon traditions in the New World.

[5] For some examples of slaves' use of poison in order to manipulate their masters, see Moitt (1995 and 1996).

[6] Bush (esp. 51-81), Gautier (esp. pp. 220-257), and Moitt (1995 and 1996) all deal with the important role females played in slave resistance.

[7] For informative studies analyzing women's participation in the cultivation of food on the provision grounds, the selling of surplus food and other object in slave markets, and the considerable impact of these activities on plantation society, see Bush (esp. 33-50), Gautier, Moitt (1995), Marietta, Mullins, and Tomich.

[8] While a full listing of all these recent works written by both female and male Caribbean would constitute a large project in itself, I would refer readers to the following: Condé (1978, 1979, 1995, and 1998), Bébel-Gisler (1976, 1986, and 1989), Rice-Maximin, Davies, and the essays found in *Caribbean Women Writers* and *Out of the Kumbla*.

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