

Patrick Chamoiseau

The Old Man Slave and the Mastiff

(MARTINIQUE)

The fugitive—the African doomed to spend his life on harmful islands—did not even recognize the taste of the night. This unfamiliar night was less dense, more naked; it disoriented him. Far behind him, he heard the dogs, but the acacias had already carried him away, from the world of his hunters; and, a man of the open air, he entered thus a new story: where, without him realizing it, time had begun again for him.

—Edouard Glissant

The principle of bones, mineral and living, opaque yet providing clarity.

—Toucher, page 11

The mastiff was a monster. It had also traveled on a boat, endured weeks of a kind of terror. It had also experienced the abyss of a journey on a slave ship. The dark bodies huddled in the hold enveloped that sailing hell in a radiance that the enraged dog could sense and that the sharks pursued across the ocean. Like all those who came to the islands, the mastiff had suffered through the constant undulation of the sea, its unfathomable echoes, the way it swallowed time and irreparably destroyed all private space, and the slow drifting of memory it engendered—the sea that penetrated the body to torment the soul, or break it down and install in its place the petty rhythm of nautical seating survivals, of small deaths, of bitter habits, of the martyrdom of living corpses that must adapt to scattering cadences. The mastiff had also experienced brief moments of fresh air (hoisted up onto the bridge by a strangling chain), when, under the sting of the whip, it was forced, like the black captives, to turn in circles to stretch its muscles and to inhale a little iodine from the open sea. The wind itself, dizzying as a rush of shadows, only added to the devastation wreaked by the sea in the dark nights of the ship's hold. The dog moved unsteadily, as weak as a jellyfish. Then it was sent back to the abandoned corner of a back gangway, the hold that was a tomb (its cage).

The dog's look resembled that of the sailors. And worse: the rags that rose from the hold—burdened less by their chains than by their broken spirits, and who sometimes threw themselves overboard into the mouths of the sharks, or who suddenly, arching their bodies, swallowed their own tongues, or even fell

with hopeless rage onto the blade of the bayonet that protected a captain's throat—had the same look. Only the ship itself, with its rhythm of waves, the billowing majesty of its tall sails, seemed to live and to keep its prisoners alive. The mastiff was a monster because it had known this despair.

Who knows what European Gehenna it came from. No one even knows the exact color of its fur. It likely changed with the wind. The ship's papers listed the dog as white with a black patch between its eyes. The sailor who shipped its water and salted leather between the bars of the steerage hold described it as black with a white patch on its muzzle. At the Plantation, it seemed black, shimmering, almost a lunar blue, with several white spots that may have grown larger over time. But the slaves the dog caught sometimes saw it (as it tore the tendons out of their legs) as red, or blue-green, or even vested with the orange strength of the heart of a burning fire. Better not even to mention its eyes.

The Master-béke* paid for the dog without bargaining. Most likely he had ordered it directly from Europe. He placed the animal next to him in the carriage. The two young slaves, the little slave girl, and the pottery from Aubagne that he had bought that day were left to pile themselves into the back of a mule cart driven by the old man slave. He was the one who accompanied the Master to the slave auctions when the ships arrived in port in the big city. Those occasions were rare now that the slave trade had been abolished, but there had been a time when the Master went there often, not even always to make a purchase. He would breathe in the atmosphere of the sluggish ships, whose crews (of savages) had experience unknown lands and who sold melancholy objects and old sea maps behind the slaughterhouse. These arrivals filled the taverns with tar-stained tales of ghost ships and women with seaweed hair and senseless revolutions that annulled the blue blood of kings or of nameless tribes of people who threaded their lips with gold straws and drank pure blood in tribute to the sun.

Sometimes the ships entered the port in errant drunkenness. Their shackled cargo was soon discovered, emaciated by hunger and yellowing fever, the ship's steerage and guy ropes abandoned. The orphaned sails had become giant parched leaves, and the ropes untied themselves like hangman's nooses. The crew had been struck down mysteriously. Their barrels of oil, salted meat, or drinking water were all crawling with the same maggots, which seemed to be waiting for (or announcing) the end of time. From each bolt of the bridge small flames rose up, only to flicker out again, leaving behind the deadly smell of the basilisk. No one wanted to buy the abandoned creatures in chains who were pulled from the steerage. Without even feeding them, the Governor chartered a military steamer and shipped them off to some point of no return on the coast of Brazil.

It was, for the old man slave, a moment of confusion: seeing those men who looked so much like him leave the ship, all only half revived from the longest

**Béke*, a Creole word, indicates the white Creoles of Martinique, members of the old plantation class.

of deaths. The oil that coated their sickly skin blended with their sweat and traces of anguish. Their screams, companion to extreme suffering, had left permanent deposits of garlic-smelling foam in the corners of their mouths. They still carried the odors of the country of Before, its ultimate rhythms, its languages that were already almost lost. The old man slave sensed that they were still in thrall to the gods he remembered vaguely without words. And the ship also moved him. He no longer knew whether he had been born on the Plantation or whether he had known this crossing in the hold, but each tilt of a slave ship in the calm waters of the harbor triggered a primordial reeling inside him. Multiple creaks, muddy shadows, and liquid rays of light inhabited the depths of his spirit, which was drunk on the viscous seaweed and the ship's dances.

After the Master, the old man slave was the first to see the mastiff. The old man slave and the mastiff looked at each other. The mastiff suddenly started to bark. Worse, it jumped forward with a terrible rage, foaming at the mouth, its fur wild like a lion's mane. The Master-béké was delighted with this reaction, convinced that black flesh excited the dog's appetite. He rewarded the dog with a lump of raw meat and some water gathered specially for this purpose during a thunderstorm, and the dog calmed down enough to stop barking at everyone, including the old man slave—who, before the dog's enigmatic fury, had remained as he always was: more opaque and dense than a lump of charcoal burned seven times and then again as many.

They saw each other again every day after that because the Master had placed the animal in an enormous kennel, with wire fences on all four sides, between the main hut and the buildings of the sugar refinery. Everyone had to pass it at some point during the day or week. The monster was always there, at this strategic junction, this inevitable intersection. Stretched out on one side, panting, weary and persecuted, or anxious and high-strung behind the limits of its fence.

The Master-béké had other small Creole dogs. Six or seven. They kept guard over the main hut. They barked at every slave, every unfortunate bird, mongoose, or snake that passed by. They had a savage appetite because they were always kept tied up. When the pack of them escaped, they amused themselves by biting one of the house slaves or tearing apart the leg of an old slave woman who had tripped by the boilers, where they also lapped up the multi-colored crusts of molasses. The Master did not scold them for this. The slaves hated the dogs to an extent that is no longer possible to imagine. Despised them as well. They fed them old poisons that paralyzed them on the spot and prevented their bodies from rotting in their lime-covered graves (the heavy rains were always exhuming their doomed mummies in some corner of the Plantation). But their numbers were never depleted: determined to populate his surroundings with canine terror, the Master constantly bought more of them from an elegant mulatto who had lost all sense of shame.

The day the mastiff arrived at the Plantation, the Creole dogs started howling from a distance. As the carriage approached, they fell into a rage unknown in their breed. Then, once the carriage had entered the main courtyard and the

mastiff had jumped to the ground, the dogs were abruptly silent, suddenly overcome by an uneasy calm that would leave them only rarely from then on—when an unexpected slave wandered by the house or when their hysterical senses detected the early signs of an unusually wily hurricane or earthquake.

If the slaves feared those dogs, they were terrified of the mastiff. Its massive body, like a lump of sulfur, its muscles knotted like bubbles of lava, its unbaptized face, its sightless stare. The most terrifying was its silence. It didn't bark. It didn't growl. But there was nothing calm or peaceful about the dog. There was only, above its suspended breath, a searching stare, sharpened narrow cut sliced, with which it followed the living creatures that passed by its fence. When a Creole dog got loose and prowled around its cage, the mastiff didn't even get up. The prowler would soon lie down with an empty expression, moaning and submissive, bowing to the least blink of the monster's eye.

The Master-béké fed it in a strange and secret way. Quivering meat. Bones sizzling with marrow. Bloody carnalities that he himself had kneaded together in the skull of a Caribbean warrior. It was said that he ground up and added to the mixture wasps, hot peppers, hummingbirds' heads, snake fat, the powdered bones of madmen, the hair of crazy mattresses, the brains of a *maman-balou*,* and the bones of mother barracudas. The mastiff devoured it all, less with appetite than with sullen purpose. Within a few months, it had recovered the incredible strength the ship had drained from it. Its body had become even denser. Its muscles were as supple as cables when the Master took it running for hours tied to the end of a rope. The Master on his chestnut horse had to stick to a steady gallop just to keep up with the dog. And the horse, upset at having the dog so close to its hoods, soon lost even more of its *joie de vivre*.

People wondered what purpose the monster would serve. The answer wasn't long coming. There was soon, as there was almost every month, a young slave, convinced that he was more resourceful than his predecessors, who was suddenly hit by *the surge*. Let me tell you about *the surge*. The old slaves knew it well: it was an evil kind of impulse vomited up from a forgotten place, a fundamental fever, a curdling of the blood, a malicious seizure, a vibrant voice that threw you off track. You became completely disoriented by an impetuous presence inside you. Your voice took on another sound. You began to reel grotesquely as you walked. A religious tremor shook through your eyelids and cheeks. And your eyes carried the marks of fire seen in the eyes of angered dragons.

The surge could hit you at any moment. It was responsible for the desperate attacks inflicted on the commanders: the slave hands that suddenly clutched at the commanders' throats, the machete that sliced through air, despite the pistol with which the commanders would shoot the knife-wielding madman hopelessly down. The surge threw you into the woods in impossible flight, where the Master pursued you with his Arabian horse and his pack of yapping little dogs. He always caught these runaways, and rare were those

* A female needlefish.

whom the surge could dissolve into the damp shadows of the enormous trees. The Master confirmed this. He never said, "That one got away." He said, "That one evaporated in the woods"—confident that the fugitive had fallen prey to the zombies who, he claimed, infested the forbidden deep woods.

So this slave youth had his surge. And, rather than slitting a commander's throat, he took off, just like that, in the middle of the day, dropping everything with an interminable scream, and fleeing toward the closest trees. A *runaway!* . . . The commanders pursued him for an hour but couldn't pick up his trail. So they alerted the Master by blowing into a conch shell which brought him running. The Master was told of the escape, wrinkled his eyes toward the hills, and listened to the aphonia of the trees. Then he smiled (unexpectedly), but no one had time to wonder why: the mastiff, by the refinery, had begun to growl. Not a bark, but an ammoniacal growl, insidiously evil and acidic, that immediately made it clear to everyone what purpose the dog would serve.

The Master rode toward the fenced-in kennel and led the animal out at the end of a thick rope. The mastiff had stopped growling. It had become attentive, its eyes fixed on the hills as its head seemed to follow an invisible movement. It didn't pull on the rope or try to hurry the pace. In the fugitive's hut, the Master made it sniff some old bedclothes. Then, together, they headed for the silent deep forest that was leafed in permanent mist and lost dreams. The slaves watched as the terrifying procession disappeared. The Master, the horse, the dog: an age-old understanding seemed to tie them together. A melan-combination. They moved as one, with one fatal resolution. Nothing could distract them from their united forward charge.

The Master released the dog as soon as they reached the first bushes. The animal dove in, without barking, without growling. All that could be heard was the unbelievable energy of its paws that hammered down the soil while the Master followed calmly; his gun on his shoulder. What happened then? There wasn't really a then. They shot back out almost immediately. The young black man, a giant sore dragged out at the end of the rope, the dog alert and serious at his side. Everyone could see for themselves, from close up, the damage done by the animal's teeth. And the Master wanted everyone to see it before he tossed his own hot pepper sauce onto the wounds. The dog had torn the young slave apart more savagely than the fiercest of whips or the most hostile of planks with nails could have done. From then on he stuttered and walked like an old man, with a look of ruin on his face.

The mastiff returned to its place in the kennel, relaxed now, attentive and placid again. The old man slave saw it every day but never stopped to look at it, as did the slave children—thoughtlessly, of course. Because each of them, even the craziest, tried to avoid having his smell "taken" by the dog. With your smell in its nostrils, it could sculpt you in its dreams, taste in advance the splendors of your blood, and, worse, it could easily catch you should the surge ever cause you to flee. So people avoided walking near the dog, and the children, having watched slave after slave hunted through the woods, relinquished the idea that the dog was something worth seeing. But no one noticed that the old man slave often walked alongside the kennel. Et cetera times a

day, without ever looking directly at the mastiff. Without examining it. Sometimes he even passed by as the Master opened the cage, carried in meat and bloody organs, smiled at the dog, and petted it. And no one noticed that in the presence of this old slave guy, the mastiff became even more attentive, a touch more alert, a stitch more expectant, its iron carcass erect in a state of perfect tension. In Creole, we say: *véyatif o jandan*.*

The mastiff expressed the cruelty of the Master and his plantation. It was poisonously alive. When the old man slave walked along its fence, it followed him with a fery eye. From time to time, the old guy shot it a look, a furtive and dull look. And their eyes met for seven n^{ths} of a second. This confrontation lasted for several months. The mastiff brought six or seven runaway slaves back from the woods. It tore through the throat of a Congolese woman who had been hit by the surge. As time passed, it became even more harmful. And if the surges still happened (stray attacks, suicides, or volcanic fits of insanity), it became less and less common for someone to run for the woods. The mastiff kept terrifying watch over the spirits of the prisoners. Which is why everyone was stupefied to find out that the old man had defied it.

How could it have been possible, for such an old man, so close to death? I will, without fear of lies or truth, tell you everything I know. But it's not a lot.

The old man has never participated in the slave parties, nor in the evening storytelling sessions during which the speakers explain how to defeat the mastiff. He doesn't dance, doesn't talk, doesn't react to the ringing of the drum. He seems dull, but is able to decipher incomprehensible things. His presence reinforces the drummers' beat. It gives them a mysterious balance and fills them with lightness. Which the old man drinks down as well. The dancers—without realizing it—find, in his presence, a choreography they had never known. The songs surround him as they surround others. But the old singers who tremble with automatic memories (great purveyors of unspeakable words) are, unconsciously, happier when he is there, when he is listening to them. Everyone, without expressing it, suspects that he is a sun of remembrance and tries to live in his light. And he, undaunted, accepts this gift. He plays the drum without playing it. He dances animatedly without moving. He peoples his soul with scattered, crooked, reconstructed things that weave a shimmering memory for him. Often, at night, this memory cripples him with insomnia.

The Papa-Storyteller of the Plantation was a pretty insignificant fellow (a black man from Guinea with small eyes, a body like a plank, and a rounded back). He was transformed when he began to speak (big eyes, sturdy body, and a straight back). He breathed in the life around him in order to sustain his speech. And with this speech he roused life. He spoke and made people laugh. And laughter opened up people's chests, made them expand. His tongue expressed the hates, desires, lost cries, and silences that everyone experienced. When the Master suddenly appeared, with a commander at his side, and sat benevolently at the edge of the circle, with a gallon of rum as a

*Nose to the wind

special treat, and started to join in with the *Krik-Kraks*:⁹ the Papa-Storyteller's speech was not disturbed. He continued the same story, through which circulated things that very few people could evaluate. But the old man slave lives on those things. He untangles the obscure words of the stories; he understands hatred, desire, and fear; he knows a thousand stories from Africa, a thousand narrations culled from the forgotten Amerindians, from the Master himself, and from the mastiff, of course.

The Papa-Storyteller's words carry the old man toward strange borders. They give him a body in the bodies of others, memories that belong to everyone and that fill everyone with a wordless throbbing. The Master can't see it, but there are so many overwhelming spirits inside the old man that he must (like the other slaves) exaggerate the passivity of his skin, the helplessness of his gestures, the rhythm of his heart, the outlines of his face. He must *go on* with these forces inside him, disorderly beyond comprehension, which tell him nothing about himself nor about this vast life within such a narrow death. At night, unable to sleep, trapped inside himself, he faces incomprehensible absences, a suffocating weight, rhythms that are juxtaposed according to the muddled laws that kick out at uncertainty. Worlds are dying deep inside him, but these death throes offer him no respite, nothing but a confusion that only the dance, the drums, and the speech of the Storyteller (with its incomprehensible thrust) can soothe. Which is why he is always so still on those evenings, as he savors the balm that spreads across his wound in search of a meaning. The Storyteller's words do not come to him as words—they carry too many languages, too many cries, too many silences; the story floats like a creation song above his stomach. His throat tightens around impossibilities, and, without participating in the Storyteller's chorus, he *extends his presence to him* like a silent hand. He offers him his spirit, the specters of his memory, the prophetic pains that shimmer through every part of his body—his body, that motionless malignancy in which the Storyteller always finds what he wants.

The surge had shaken the old man many times. No one had known. Some felt it only once in their lives, but he had suffered through it almost every day. Day after day, and more often when it abandoned the others. The first time, it left him curled up on the floor of his hut, in the middle of the night, with an irrepressible desire to scream himself to death, to set off running, to go into spasms, to strangle something. He calmed himself by eating dirt and scraping his forehead against the wall. The friction released a throbbing heat that soothed his spirit. The other times it happened during the day, in the fields, as he was moving sacks, in the port, on the road as he was driving the cartilage, or in the grease of the boilers where his life was trickling away. And, each time, his body became a burning rock, an immense cacophony that could not be controlled. He had felt a sudden desire to dance, to pound on the drums, to shout out the incomprehensible sounds that were slicing through his head, but each time he held himself back, knotting together his gestures, his actions,

and his emotions, like vines around a demented body. In this way he became as serene as an African swamp. Calmer than a water lily. He had to live like a paralyzed man in order to control his constant surges. Not a gesture. Not an unnecessary word. No raised eyebrow, no raised voice. Nothing but an impeccable control over his movements, the slight murmur of his spirit and his gestures, the dance of his blood slowed to a minimum, an eruption that is matched only by the inertia of the most terrible of corpses or the most solid of substances. This is his only way of living and of being—which no one understands—catastrophically alive.

He recognizes in the mastiff the disaster that possesses him. A fury without eyes that attacks from far away. This internal chaos brings with it some things that are not an intimate part of him. He feels himself inhabited by spirits other than his own, while he cannot find himself, his own spirit, anywhere—no backbone of memory, no constructive paradigm, no nerve that remains from a time when he was someone distinct. Nothing but this seething violence, disgust, desire, impossibility: this magma that flourishes on the Plantation and that constitutes the most vital part of him. The mastiff is also like that. But in the animal's impressive ferocity, the disaster has found a convergence: it has transformed itself into a blind faith that is able to overcome the despair born on the ship.

The old slave man does not remember the ship, but he has, so to speak, lived in its hold. His head is filled with that overwhelming misery. He has the taste of the sea on his lips. He hears, even in the middle of the day, the sharks beating their dramatic jaws against the hull. He also has a memory of the sails, the helm, the rigging—as if he had been a member of the crew—and that memory blends with his visions of the country of Before, which are more than visions: women, beings, objects, things of beauty, ugly things that quiver inside him, that are him, and that add to the chaos he has already recognized. The mastiff is like him, but it has at its disposal a wealth of instincts that gives the illusion of meaning to it all. And that meaning mixes with the taste of bloody flesh that the Master has established as the principle of its existence. The dog is the Master's crippled soul. The dog is the slave's suffering double.

Our old man paces around the dog for these obscure reasons. As he copes with his own internal chaos, he is drawn toward the animal. He doesn't even need to look at it—the dog lives in him. The old man's air of absence and death has never fooled the mastiff. The monster sees in him a cartful of possibilities. It feels a bond with this old slave man from whom no wave emanates, nothing but the crude density of an unfathomable material, saturated with moisture and bridled sunlight. The mastiff's cruel vigilance senses them in confusion. With each approach, the old man slave feels the despair roll over him and the chaos drag him under. As he reaches the fence, he struggles with the forces that possess him. They awake, they begin to move, they devastate him even more. *Surge and resurge!*

He had seen the beast throw itself in pursuit of the runaways. Had seen it come back. He had seen the terror that it caused at the slaves' gatherings and

⁹In Caribbean storytelling, the speaker often finishes a phrase with the word "krik" to which the audience responds "krak."

how much its presence depleted the energy of their dances. He had heard the Storyteller describe it in terms that went beyond all proportion. This mastiff, he would say, keeps watch over the dead and over hell. He described it as a bird with fur, a horse with feathers, a one-horned buffalo, a voiceless toad man, or a carnivorous flower. Its body, made of mother of water and wounded moon, guarded precious gates. He explained that whoever overcame the dog would open the door to unknown happiness. He depicted the dog on underground journeys, flanked by suns that spat shadows. Sometimes he claimed that the dog was a jailer of a series of lights that were as fluid as the tears of a virgin. He described the dog dressed in palm leaves beside inconceivable tombs where rebirths flowered. He described it eating the undead that were cut into pieces by old men, in accordance with the position of the stars. He announced that the dog was able to sink its eye into the glassy eyes of the dead and awaken nine times three times seven souls. He saw the dog guiding pregnant women along the bridge of fate, leading them to term. He always placed the dog at turning points and fountainheads, at crossings and gulfs, on short-cuts and in passageways. He saw it clothed in leopard's skin, hovering above its master, offering its prophecies to those who would swallow its flesh. He saw it calling forth words that only the prophets were able to name. He saw it riding the solemn shoulders of high priests and fulfilling their liturgies with a cruel wisdom. He saw it swallowed by ghouls, by ogres, by grotesque chimera until it was transformed into a pure light, the most desirable of all possible lights. The old slave man listened to all of these stories without hearing them, understood without understanding. He could hear only the murmur they set off inside him.

Since the animal arrived, the surges have become terrible. He, who had thought himself in control of this chaos, finds himself submerged in it. He comes to fear the surges. Fears that they will force him into pathetic battle with the commander's trigger or the Master's rifle. Fears that he will no longer be himself and that he will appear before everyone as a runaway slave who did not have the courage to run. It does him no good to turn himself to blind rock before the dog; the dog stirs his tumult to extremes that leave him dazed. In this way, he soon comes to feel that he is dying: his soul chafing, chaos pushing him to scream, his scream his speech, and his speech his statement. So he decides to leave, not to run away, but to go.

So he prepares nothing. No salt, no oil, no water, no bit of boiled cabbage. He does not reflect, does not look grimly toward the woods. He becomes even more immobile than before, placid to the extreme. His gestures around the machines become more and more fluid as the chaos hardens inside him. On this day, the sudden, irrepressible force throws him against one of the boilers. His skin touches the hot metal. It sizzles. He believes that he is losing his mind under the force of pain that hits him from all sides. But his lifetime of control gains the upper hand. His skin emerges intact. He cannot see clearly, and he can only just make out the landscape that clouds his eyes. He sees quicksilver cocks celebrating evangelical nights, which molt into snakes before dissolving.

He knows that he is ready.
He doesn't know what for.

This time when he approaches the fence, the mastiff gets up. The old slave man stops. For the first time in so many years, he looks directly at the monster. The latter approaches slowly, looking straight ahead. Sizing him up. Ears stirring. Foam appearing around its mouth. Immobile in front of the old slave man who stares at it, even more immobile. The old slave man makes a gesture whose meaning he doesn't understand, an imperceptible movement that no one else sees, but that the mastiff follows with his icy pupils.

During the following night, the old slave man experiences not a surge but an explosion. His body falls into helpless convulsions. Heat drowns his limbs. Each object in his hut oozes flaming blood, and the waxed earth of the floor also catches fire. He is surrounded by lights that carve minuscule circles in the air. He battles against these nightmares. He is heard (by whom?) moaning. Then coughing as if in a fever, but no one worries because suffering no longer moves anyone here. Before dawn—as a medicinal light begins to rise from the earth, foretelling the appearance of an innocent sun—the old slave man sits up. He puts on his rough linen tunic. He places his old *bakoua*⁶ jauntily on his head. He picks up his stick and calmly leaves his hut, his steps vibrating with a sacred energy. He walks along the line of huts, the sugarcane rooms where the glowworms watch him pass. When he reaches the first trees, the mastiff stands up, attentive. Although he is already very far, the old slave man feels a shiver run up his spine. He turns around to look at the Plantation where he has worn out his existence. He sees the distant buildings, the chimney of the sugar refinery with its familiar torches. He hears, for the last time, the noise of the now-widowed machines. The shiver disappears when it reaches his neck. Then the old slave man dives into the deep woods. The mastiff's howl tears through the estate, setting off the usual thousand and twelve strange little circles that disrupt the science of slavery.

Translated from the French by Deborah Treisman

⁶ A handmade straw hat.

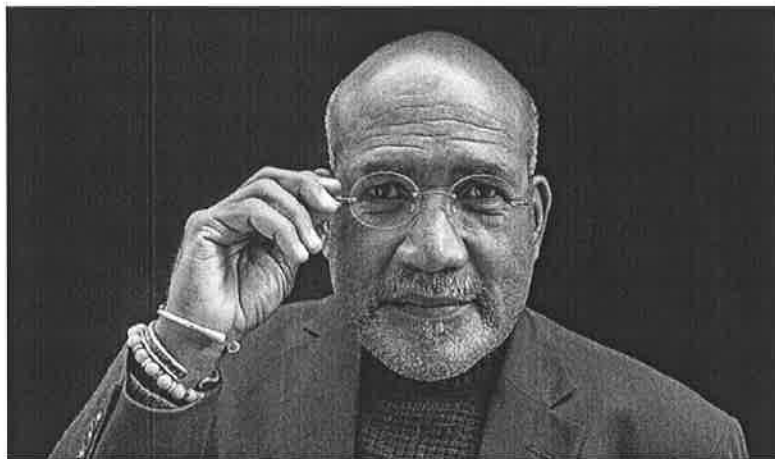
Patrick Chamoiseau

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Patrick Chamoiseau (born 3 December 1953) is a French author from Martinique known for his work in the créolité movement.

Biography^[edit]

Chamoiseau was born on 3 December 1953 in Fort-de-France, Martinique, where he currently resides. After he studied law in Paris he returned to Martinique inspired by Édouard Glissant to take a close interest in Creole culture. Chamoiseau is the author



of a historical work on the Antilles under the reign of Napoléon Bonaparte and several

non-fiction books which include *Éloge de la créolité* (In Praise of Creoleness), co-authored with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant. Awarded the Prix Carbet (1990) for *Antan d'enfance*.^[1] *Antan d'enfance*, *Chemin*

d'école and *À Bout d'enfance* form the autobiographical trilogy *Une enfance Créole*. His novel *Texaco* was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1992, and was chosen as a *New York Times Notable Book of the Year*. It has been described as "a masterpiece, the work of a genius, a novel that deserves to be known as much as Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*."^[2]

In 1998, Chamoiseau was honoured with a Prince Claus Award for his contribution to Caribbean society.

Chamoiseau may also safely be considered as one of the most innovative writers to hit the French literary scene since Louis-Ferdinand Céline. His freeform use of French language — a highly complex yet fluid mixture of constant invention and "creolism" — fuels a poignant and sensuous depiction of Martinique people in particular and humanity at large.

Writing Style and Approach^[edit]

Masculinity versus Femininity^[edit]

The dynamics and relationship between men and women has been a long-time subject of literature in the Caribbean. The concept of 'masculinity' versus 'femininity' is a literary theme that is indicative of Caribbean literature. Patrick Chamoiseau, like many other authors from the Caribbean, uses this theme in many of his literary works. However, as

there are a larger number of male writer that come out of the Caribbean, this topic of conversation is primarily male driven, and takes the 'masculinist' perspective.^[3]

Chamoiseau has often been criticized as being a somewhat patriarchal literary figure after having founded the masculinist Créolité movement in the *Antilles archipelago*. The founding of this movement was intended to bring pride and nationalism to the male Antillean population that had been emasculated for centuries by being barred from holding positions of power and authority by their European colonizers. The practice of slavery can be argued to have had a more detrimental effect on the male slave population than the female slave population, as white slave owners attempting to have sexual affairs with female slaves would often offer them more privileges compared to their male counterparts. However, his literary work in the children's book "Kosto et ses deux enfants" is in stark contrast to his typical patriarchal and masculine nature.^[4]

The representation of men in Caribbean literature is typically portrayed in a negative light; however, in Chamoiseau's children's book "Kosto et ses deux enfants," this theme is contrasted by the main male character becoming an upstanding and respectable father figure.^[5]

Créolité^[edit]

A question that many writers from the Caribbean try to answer is 'What does it mean to be Caribbean?'. This question is the subject of a search for identity, and the word that Chamoiseau and his colleagues used to answer this question is "Creoleness". Creoleness refers to how different cultures adapt and blend together on islands or isolated areas, which in the case of the Caribbean, refers to the blending of African, Polynesian, and Asian cultures with that of their European colonizers. This idea of Creoleness contrasts the idea of "Americanness" in that it existed prior to America, and that "Americanness" excludes it interaction with the indigenous population.^[6]

This relates to Patrick Chamoiseau's writing style in that his choices are purposeful as his overall goal is to express this concept of Creoleness. *Creole Folktales* is a prime example from his works. The collection itself takes place around the 17th century in the French Antilles and Chamoiseau casts storyteller-narrator and uses creole in order to recreate the tradition of storytelling in the Antilles that was primarily oral. Chamoiseau chooses these aspects to add to his writings as oral and historical accuracy are important in the representation of the Antilles and are crucial in bring awareness to Creoleness.^[7]

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