

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Cooper, Sara-Louise (2016) Writing Selves, Written Selves: Spiralling Paths from Past to Present in Patrick Chamoiseau's Une Enfance créole. *Wasafiri*, 31 (1). pp. 55-61. ISSN 0269-0055.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1112577>

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/63467/>

Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

Writing Selves, Written Selves: Spiralling Paths from Past to Present in Patrick Chamoiseau's Une Enfance créole

Sara-Louise Cooper

For publisher's version, see: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1112577>

Introduction

Born in 1953 in Fort-de-France, Martinique, Patrick Chamoiseau is one of the most prolific and influential writers in the French-speaking Caribbean today. Like his fellow Martinican intellectuals, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant, Chamoiseau sees literary thought as key to political battles for liberation from colonial power. Such battles have often been fought in Martinique, but never been won. Martinique remains paradoxically both a Caribbean island and part of France. French power in Martinique has grown rather than weakened in the last century, as from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, it shifted from being a producer economy to being a service economy dependent on the French welfare state (Price xiii). Chamoiseau argues that French modes of thought are now so embedded within Martinican life that they have become imperceptible. His writing investigates the modes of perception and imagination that arise under neocolonial power, and those which might challenge it. He has pursued this investigation in a range of genres: theatre; novels; essays; children's fiction; literary history; screenplays; books of photography. His autobiographical

writing, published as a trilogy between 1990 and 2005, explores his memories of childhood and adolescence in Martinique in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Une Enfance créole [A Creole Childhood], an autobiographical trilogy published between 1990 and 2005, bears out Michael J Dash's comment that Caribbean literature is 'a series of literary relationships' (20). Each volume of the trilogy, *Antan d'enfance* (1999, Childhood), *Chemin-d'école* (1998, School Days) and *A Bout d'enfance* [2005, Out of Childhood] engages closely with previous Caribbean autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works.

Chamoiseau's autobiographical writing reinforces the project elaborated in his fictional work: that of preserving the memory of Martinique's past in order to strengthen or create a sense of collective Martinican identity in the present.¹ The autobiographical genre is harnessed to this political project and, in the process, undergoes changes that range from the subtle to the radical. Through the use of the third person and the terms 'le négryllon' (the little black boy), 'l'homme d'aujourd'hui' (the man today) and the creolised term, 'l'homme d'à-présent' (the present-day man), as well as the use of the second person to address memory and a range of apostrophes to people who shared his childhood or influenced it, Chamoiseau undermines any expectation the reader has of autobiography as an introspective genre exploring a unified, Cartesian subject. The frequent apostrophes to 'frères' (brothers), 'répondeurs' (backtalkers) and 'partageurs' (sharers), the use of the indefinite article in the trilogy's title, and the dedication of *Chemin-d'école* to all those who suffered a colonial schooling underline the status of *Une Enfance créole* as an exploration of the nature of childhood in a post/colonial society, rather than the story of an individual life. The expression of collective identity has (often problematically) been seen as the defining characteristic of life-writing from colonial and postcolonial societies (Kelly 3). But I would say of *Une Enfance créole* what Jean Khalfa and Jérôme Game say of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1995, Notebook of

a Return to my Native Land) that, ‘more than identity, what is at stake in it is time, or rather, modes of experiencing time’ (43).

Chamoiseau installs unpredictable relationships between past and present in order to demonstrate that his childhood, the source of his Creole poetics, has not been irrevocably lost. The unusual quality of the temporality of *Une Enfance créole* has been noted by various scholars. Maeve McCusker observes that the trilogy is characterised by its lack of precise temporal markers and that, within the text, time is experienced as ‘an open continuum’ (48). Mary Gallagher points out that questioning the division of time into clearly defined periods is an important part of Chamoiseau’s autobiographical project (106). Gallagher also observes that the alternation between prose and fragments of poetry in the text’s first two volumes gives a sense ‘both of the unmastered relentlessness of time and also of the ruptures of that flow’ (106) and that Chamoiseau’s practice of intertextuality sets up relationships between different periods of Martinican literary history (144). Wendy Knepper writes that the text’s use of the past tense ‘reflects a subjunctive or conditional perspective’, because the text makes clear that accurate description of the past is not possible (132).

The portrayal of the difficulties of recovering the individual past in Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing is shadowed by the painful question of return to a collective past. The origins of contemporary Caribbean societies in genocide, colonisation and the imposition of slavery creates ‘an acute temporal anxiety’ where the quest for fruitful forms of memory becomes as pressing as it is fraught (Gallagher 1). This anxiety makes itself felt in the narrative structures of contemporary Caribbean writing, which are often non-linear, calling into question the possibility of stable beginnings or endings. Edouard Glissant evokes the overwhelming presence of the Caribbean past when he writes of ‘la foule des mémoires et des oublis tressés, sous quoi nous peinons à recomposer nous ne savons quelle histoire débitée en morceaux’ (126) [‘the crowd of memories and forgetting woven together, beneath which we

struggle to recompose we don't even know what history broken into pieces']. Yet though much recent Caribbean writing foregrounds the difficulties inherent in a relationship to the past, it places great value on the search for memory. Maeve McCusker writes that, in Chamoiseau's autobiographical trilogy, memory is 'a locus of struggle, due to the dialectical relationship between experience and narrative, between narrated and narrating self' (52).

Writing Selves and Written Selves

Writing selves have power over written selves. The power enjoyed by writing selves at the expense of written selves is complicated by the fact that, for an autobiographer, the writing self is usually an adult and the written self is usually a child. Colonised peoples were often described as infantile by colonising powers and, through a conflation of the lifespan of the individual with that of the species, as less evolved (Degraff 397). If Chamoiseau depicts the Creole language and culture as exclusively associated with his childhood and if he gives the impression that his French education has brought him above and beyond it, then he will be complicit with colonial thought which associates non-Western cultures with child-like states. This is why Chamoiseau is at pains to avoid a linear temporal mode that would see the present as moving ever further away from the past. Instead, he uses imagery of spirals to emphasise the past's presence in his current life. By drawing connections between marks on the body, marks on the soil and marks on the page, Chamoiseau opens up channels between corporeal memory and linguistic memory; individual memory and collective memory. This exploration of the interstices of written memory and bodily memory is necessary for the creation of non-linear temporal structures, because linear models of temporality are heavily associated with the traumatic acquisition of written language in school, which is in turn linked to the painful suppression of the body. The alienating nature of the experience of learning to read and write in French, which involves partially forgetting the Creole language, is part of what makes the

autobiographical project so problematic. The tension between the French written text and the Creole childhood it seeks to record is not easily resolved.

This anxiety about writing acting as a negative force is linked to the relationships texts establish between past, present and future. In Chamoiseau's novel, *Texaco* (1997, *Texaco*), the protagonist, Marie-Sophie, expresses concern about writing's deadening power and asks Oiseau Cham, an authorial alter ego, if there is a kind of writing which could capture life without destroying it:

Oiseau Cham, existe-t-il une écriture informée de la parole, et des silences, et qui reste vivante, qui bouge en cercle et circule tout le temps, irriguant sans cesse de vie ce qui a été écrit avant, et qui réinvente le cercle à chaque fois comme le font les spirales qui sont à tout moment dans le futur et dans l'avant, l'une modifiant l'autre, sans cesse, sans perdre une unité difficile à nommer? (413)

Oiseau Cham, is there such a thing as writing informed by the word, and by the silences, and which remains a living thing, moving in a circle, and wandering all the time, ceaselessly irrigating with life the things written before, and which reinvents the circle each time like a spiral which at any moment is in the future, ahead, each loop modifying the other, nonstop, without losing a unity difficult to put into words? (322)

This spiralling model of temporality is present in Chamoiseau's autobiographical work. The author moves into the future by retracing the lineaments of the past and circles around an origin he can never reach. Although the spiralling temporal structures of *Une Enfance créole* arise out of the problematic nature of direct access to individual or collective memory, they should not be seen only as marks of loss or as a compulsion to repeat arising out of trauma. Rather, the cyclical, yet open temporal structures of *Une Enfance créole* model a form of renewal that draws its strength from its connection to the past. In this respect they resonate with the view of the spiral articulated by Haitian writer, Frankétienne, for whom it is an exemplary figure for the process of literary creation:

This movement does not progress along a straight line which would symbolize the sterility of nothingness, nor does it follow a circle which would symbolize death. It is rather movement in the shape of a spiral which reproduces some aspects of the past but at an infinitely superior level. It is a movement from the bottom to the top, from the simple to the complex. And in each spiral structure, each new turn is deeper and richer than the last one. (Taleb-Khyar 389-390)

The echoes between the model of temporality found in Chamoiseau's life-writing and the Spiralist literary project elaborated by Frankétienne are points of contact in twentieth-century responses to the challenge of narrating Caribbean time. For both Frankétienne and Chamoiseau, the spiral offers a model for exploring the connections between past and present, speech and writing, developing and disappearing selves.

Time in the Domestic Sphere and Time in the Public Sphere

As part of the sustained criticism of ways of thinking which place value on distance, control and carefully regulated progress, Chamoiseau uses his earliest personal experience of time as a foil for official time. His child-self's sense of temporal passage arises out of interaction with nature and with other people and makes itself felt in the intimacy of his physical being and home. Musing on the elusive beginning of childhood, Chamoiseau turns to his mother, who proposes 'une soirée commencée en douleurs' (Antan 23) ('an evening begun in pains') (Childhood 4). The beginning of his life is thus linked to pains in his mother's body rather than any particular point on the calendar. Chamoiseau does go on to tell us that he was born on a Thursday on a stormy December night, but he does not give the date of his birth.

Knowing the year would allow the reader to situate his life in terms of public or official history, but Chamoiseau adheres closely to the temporal indicators which were important to his mother at the time — the seasonal weather and the day of the week. Throughout *Antan d'enfance*, the young Chamoiseau is shown to absorb his mother's sense of the passing of

time, which often sits uneasily with the movement of official time in Martinique. Her daily routine and mood change depending on the kinds of fish, fruit and vegetables in season. When the scarcer red fish is in season, she strives to make the most of the short season of the valuable product and is busier than usual, selling it on to her neighbours and trading with fishermen. When the more freely available (and thus less sought-after) white fish is in season, she is calmer (Antan 180–181). These changes in mood and routine become connected with the tastes of the various fish for Chamoiseau, so he has a connection to the passage of time through his sense of taste. While the temporal model he will encounter in school is one of domination, Chamoiseau's mother's relationship to time is characterised by responsiveness. Her sensitivity is emphasised in the text by a succession of verbs in the imperfect which describe the effects of the changing seasons on her daily life: 'Les saisons de l'igname, de la couscouche, de l'avocat régulaient son manger quotidien. Les saisons des fruits modifiaient les marchés, influençaient la ville et les journées de Man Ninotte' (Antan 180) ('The seasons of the yam, the couscouche, and the avocado regulated her daily meals. The seasonal fruits transformed the markets, the city, and the days of Ma Ninotte') (Childhood 113). She is compared to a jellyfish washed this way and that by the tide (Antan 180). Time is thus figured as a fluid and dynamic medium in which Chamoiseau's mother is totally immersed. The image of the porous, translucent outer membrane of the jellyfish illustrates the way in which his mother responds to the slightest variation in the natural and commercial world of Fort-de-France and Martinique. The reference to the tides resonates with an earlier image of cyclical temporality. Chamoiseau writes that his mother's body was 'branché aux saisons de la lune' (Antan 180) ('plugged into the seasons of the moon') (Childhood 113). This reference to menstruation once more places his mother at an angle to official time, which proceeds in a linear way, rather than following cycles of accumulation and loss. These intersecting models

of immersion, fluid movement and cycles of ebb and flow contrast with the approach to time Chamoiseau will encounter when he enters the public world of the education system.

It is only in school that the young Chamoiseau is introduced to the segmented model of time embodied by the calendar. Chamoiseau uses humour to emphasise the children's collective bewilderment at this foreign model, evoking the worried silence which falls upon the class when their teacher asks them the date for the first time (Chemin 57). Tellingly, this alienating temporal model is associated with the written word, as the schoolteacher asks the question while writing the date on the board. The abstract temporal model learned in school contrasts with the way the childhood model of time arises out of sensory experience. In school, the young Chamoiseau learns that there are four seasons although in Martinique, of course, there are only two. This denial of sensory experience is part of the overall ethos of the school, which separates the intellectual from the physical. The bodily is seen as associated with the past, and the schoolteachers transmit to the children the idea that bodily life must be ignored and even painfully repressed for intellectual development to take place (Chemin 106). The landscape of Martinique and its associated customs is also seen by the teachers as part of a past world which must be left behind. When Chamoiseau's teacher finds out that Creole customs remain part of the daily routine of one of his pupils, Gros-Lombric, he is horrified that habits he had believed to be consigned to the past still exist. Using free, indirect discourse to convey the teacher's thoughts, Chamoiseau writes of the rural past as if it is laying siege to the urban present, threatening the teacher's tooth-and-nail battle to drag the children out of the present and into the future: 'L'ancienne barbarie des champs de cannes-à-sucre ... l'indigence des cases ... la nuit de la négraille créole semblait avoir traversé les temps et s'être amassés aux portes de l'En-ville' (Chemin 165) ('The age-old barbarity of the cane fields ... the poverty of the shacks ... the dark night of Creole niggerdom: it all seemed to have travelled through time to come crowding around the gates of Downtown') (School Days 118). Once the

teacher knows about Gros-Lombric's daily life, he no longer asks him questions in class or takes an interest in his learning. He is unable to interact with someone who seems to him to belong to a different time. In the portraits of the teacher and the school's principal, Chamoiseau shows how alienation from the local past and landscape is intertwined with alienation from oneself (Chemin 101).

Embedding the Written Word in the Martinican Landscape

Paradoxically, Chamoiseau will go on to use the literacy he acquires at school to undertake a sustained consideration of modes of engaging with the Martinican past and landscape. We can see the tripartite movement where Chamoiseau's earliest temporal model is first threatened by the acquisition of literacy and then recreated within a literary text as one of the spiralling narrative structures that occur throughout *Une Enfance créole*. Chamoiseau's earliest model of time, based on interaction with plant-life, sea-life and his mother, can be seen as the first semi-circle of the spiral, while the entry into public time through school, which undoes his early temporal model, is the second. This second semi-circle of the spiral creates an open circle, placing a gap between origin and trajectory. The third twist of the spiral, Chamoiseau's return to his early model of time through writing, encompasses the original plenitude, while remaining connected to its loss. Chamoiseau cannot return to his childhood, but his literary career provides a way of translating its poetic and sensory richness into a new context. It is through opening up channels between the written word and the landscape of Martinique that Chamoiseau maintains a dialogue between the world of his childhood and the textual world.

Maeve McCusker has commented on the ways in which the classroom in *Chemin-d'école* holds some of the unprocessed memories of slavery, with the physical pain inflicted on the children, their fear of the schoolmaster and the obliteration of their collective voice (66–69). Chamoiseau and Confiant have written that, although the plantation was a place where

colonised peoples were stripped of cultural inheritance, it was also the birthplace of a new, syncretic culture of resistance (47). The schoolroom too is a concentrated space where cultural loss and rebirth go hand in hand. It is both the place where distance first appears between Chamoiseau and Creole culture and the place where he acquires the literacy that will eventually allow him to reclaim his cultural heritage. This link between destruction and survival is made clear in the last words of *Chemin-d'école*. Chamoiseau writes about himself from the point of view of Gros-Lombric, a composite character who represents Creole culture:

Il lui aurait fallu [à Gros-Lombric] un vieux don de voyance pour deviner que – dans ce saccage de leur univers natal, dans cette ruine intérieure tellement invalidante – le négriillon, penché sur son cahier, encait sans trop savoir une tracée de survie.

Répondeurs:

Conteurs, contez ... !

Oh, la place est belle! (202–203)

He [Gros-Lombric] would have needed the ancient gift of second sight to divine that – in this sacking of their native world, in this crippling inner ruination – the little black boy bent over his notebook was tracing, without fully realizing it, an inky lifeline of survival.

Répondeurs:

Storytellers, on your mark!

Ho: off you go! (School Days 144)

Here, the wounds inflicted by the Republican school system and the healing that occurred afterwards are fused. The French characters which Chamoiseau writes on his exercise book cut him off from the world of his childhood, but once his writing career begins, they will offer a way into a creative space where childhood and adulthood intermingle. The response of the ‘répondeurs’, a chorus which remains ill-defined but which seems to be composed of people who shared the experience of a Caribbean childhood in the mid-twentieth century, affirms the continued links between the writing project and the oral tradition in which it claims its roots. Maeve McCusker points out that we can read ‘encait’ (inking) as ‘ancrait’ (anchoring) here

(73), and I would like to examine in more detail the connection between the cerebral act of writing and rootedness in the physical world.

Chamoiseau links the outline of letters on the page with the tracées, the paths used by the dominated people of Martinique, whose significance he and Raphaël Confiant explore in *Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature, 1635–1975*. They see the tracées as preserving those parts of the history of Martinique which have remained unwritten. The communicative power of the tracées is emphasised and they function as a kind of alternative writing, one that does not carry with it submission to the values of the coloniser:

La chose est frappante: à côté des routes coloniales dont l'intention se projette tout droit, à quelque utilité prédatrice, se déploient d'infinies petites sentes que l'on appelle tracées. Élaborées par les Nègres marrons, les esclaves, les créoles, à travers les bois et les mornes du pays, ces tracées disent autre chose. Elles témoignent d'une spirale collective que le plan colonial n'avait pas prévue. (13)

It is striking that near the colonial roads whose trajectory is cast straight ahead, useful and predatory, little paths called tracées fan out endlessly. Fashioned by slaves, runaway slaves and creoles through the woods and hills of the country, these tracées speak of something else. They are witness to a collective spiralling which the colonial plan had not reckoned on.

This is explained in a footnote to the main text of *Lettres créoles*. Chamoiseau and Confiant thus lend their writing something of the spatial dynamic they are describing, where the essential is semi-hidden in marginal, out-of-the-way places. The description of the tracées in terms of a collective spiral connects them to the kind of writing that Marie-Sophie wishes for in *Texaco* in the quotation discussed above. The spiral of the tracées, like the spiral Marie-Sophie describes, is also the sign of 'a unity difficult to put into words' as it has been created through collaboration between 'slaves, runaway slaves and creoles'. In its emphasis on the collective work of the different elements of Martinican society, its attention to forgotten or repressed histories and its valorisation of the unpredictable nature of the resistance occurring

in the margins of colonial society, this footnote can be seen as embodying many of the concerns of the Créolité project outlined in the 1989 manifesto co-authored by Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant and Chamoiseau. This description of the tracées could also be seen as a polemical response to an image of ‘desperately shallow time, devoid of memory’ (Game and Khalifa 43) found in Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1995, Notebook of a Return to my Native Land). Césaire refers to the Caribbean islands as ‘ces pays sans stèle, ces chemins sans mémoire’ (92) (‘these countries with no stela, these paths with no memory’) (93, translation modified). For Confiant and Chamoiseau, the whole island acts as a stela and the paths which engrave it are imbued with memory.

By describing his childhood writing as ‘une tracée de survie’ (‘an inky lifeline of survival’), Chamoiseau opens up a channel between the marks he makes on the page and the marks made by previous generations on the soil. The creation of this relationship links Chamoiseau’s individual life with the collective life of Martinicans across time. It brings moments which are not consecutive on a linear temporal stream into dialogue, so that each acquires a meaning it does not possess alone. The child’s writing becomes a sign of integration within a larger tradition of memory, rather than a sign of his alienation from his original language and culture. The paths take on the role of testifying to the past, a role which otherwise would be confined to written texts. We can say of the tracées what Wendy Knepper says of the humorously named ‘petroglyphs’, the pre-linguistic scribbles the child makes on the walls of his home. Knepper writes that they represent ‘a desire for a form of self-expression that evades colonial memory by operating beyond its perimeters’ (136). The connection between the tracée on the child’s exercise book and the paths on the soil of Martinique situates textual space and physical space on a continuum and so acts against the ideology encountered at school, where a strict separation is maintained between linguistic, intellectual life and concrete experience.

Connecting the Written Word with the Body

Maeve McCusker and Wendy Knepper have each drawn attention to the way in which Chamoiseau opens up a dialogue between the corporeal and the linguistic through explorations of the sense of taste. Knepper notes how writing and eating are brought together in Chamoiseau's recollection of the way he used to eat the words his sister wrote in icing on cakes (136). McCusker looks at how the children's consumption of milk at school is connected with the question of assimilation to French culture (71–72). McCusker also examines the ways in which remembered bodily sensations and scars sometimes act as more reliable vehicles of memory than the mind (58–59). The figure of the *tracée* also works to bring language and the body into dialogue. The secrets of the *tracées* are transmitted to Chamoiseau and his friends by Jeanne-Yvette, who lives near Chamoiseau when he is growing up and who is connected with Creole, oral culture. She tells the children that the *tracées* embody a way of moving through space which the children should strive to echo. Her words are given here:

Aller tout droit n'était pas le meilleur moyen d'arriver aux endroits, et si les Tracées tournoyaient dans les bois, il fallait savoir tournoyer avec elles: était perdu l'emprunteur des routes droites que les békés-usiniers avaient déroulées pour eux-mêmes à travers le pays. Y marcher c'était les servir eux. Il fallait prendre les Tracées, gribouiller leur ordre d'une déraison marronne. Jeanne-Yvette nous enseigna une vie de sa méthode opaque. Elle permit au négriillon de pressentir en fait l'impénétrable stratégie de force de Man Ninotte et des manmans de ville. (Antan 126–127)

Going straight was not the best means to arrive at a place, and if the paths turned circles in the woods, often you had to turn with them: those who followed the straight roads, which the white mill owners had paved for themselves throughout the country, were lost. To travel them was to serve those people. You had to follow the paths, scribble their order of Maroon madness. With her opaque method, Jeanne-Yvette taught us about life. She gave the little boy a sense of the

impenetrable strategy of strength of Ma Ninotte, in fact, and of the other mamas of the city.
(Childhood 76)

Jeanne-Yvette advises the children to take the routes their forebears took to evade the colonial roads. The children's movements will thus echo the unrecorded, and now absent, movements of their ancestors in contemporary Martinique. Multiple kinds of transferral are operating in this paragraph. Jeanne-Yvette's spoken voice is translated into the written word and, because of the use of free, indirect discourse, it inhabits an ambiguous space between her voice and that of the author. Jeanne-Yvette's words about the *tracées* help Chamoiseau's child-self understand his mother's approach to life more clearly. The older generation has already translated practices of resistance developed in rural areas into the post-plantation context of the rapidly modernising town. In order to remain useful, the mentality behind the creation of the *tracées* must adapt to new contexts, and Chamoiseau's writing is part of this process of adaptation. As Louise Hardwick writes of the model of resistance embodied by the *tracées*: 'it must be taught and passed on: Chamoiseau's literature is itself performing this pattern of knowledge transferral' (71).

One of the ways Chamoiseau's work translates the *tracées* from one context to another is through the creation of a connection between them and the marks on his body. We see an echo of the image of the network of little paths in his description of his writing hands:

L'homme d'à-présent regarde ses mains. Elles écrivent. Stationnent sages sur un clavier. Elles se souviennent en cicatrices. Elles n'ont plus mémoire des douleurs d'un yo-yo qui écorche ou qui racle un os. (...) Elles se sont amollies, presque devenues précieuses. Seules de minuscules traînées blanchâtres ou de rose coquillage, de fines rayures, témoignent d'un temps d'intense humanité où elles se voyaient expédiées au-devant d'un yo-yo (A Bout 95)

The present-day man looks at his hands. They are writing. Pausing quietly on a keyboard. They remember through their scars. They no longer recall the way a yo-yo hurts when it grazes or scrapes a bone. (...) They have become soft, almost precious. Only tiny tracks and delicate

grooves, either whitish or shellfish-pink, witness to a time of intense humanity when they were sent ahead of a yo-yo.

The mention of scars suggests a connection with the *tracées* because they are both formed by cutting into something, either the soil or skin. ‘Tiny tracks’ and ‘delicate grooves’ echo ‘little paths’. Both the marks on Chamoiseau’s skin and the *tracées* are figured as fragile, with the delicacy of the paths thrown into relief by the predatory nature of the colonial roads. The verb ‘to witness’ recalls the description of the *tracées* quoted from *Lettres créoles* above in that it ascribes communicative power to non-verbal phenomena. The reference to shellfish is significant given that a shell, like the paths, is also a non-linguistic trace of life. The mention of the author’s hands pausing on the keyboard collapses the distinction between narrating and narrated self and so overcomes the splitting of the self normally required by the written form.

In this way, Chamoiseau interweaves his writing, his body and Martinique’s landscape and makes it clear that his autobiographical project does not set out to trace a straight line between past and present, but rather aims to reflect on the ways in which his present constantly echoes and renews aspects of his past and the wider history of Martinique. The identification of his first steps into the literate world as the inking (or anchoring) of a *tracée* of survival inscribes his writing as part of a continuum of resistance that is rooted in the earth, yet open to transformation and movement.

Conclusion

In *Une Enfance créole*, Chamoiseau mounts a sustained attack on linear conceptions of temporality which emphasise progress and development. Chamoiseau first introduces the reader to a cyclical model of time, arising from his relationship with his mother and the natural world, and then depicts the trauma of his encounter with the school’s more rigid and abstract temporal framework. The contrast between these two models of time makes clear to

the reader that the question of temporality is painful and highly politicised. In order to demonstrate that child and adult self are not entirely estranged, Chamoiseau must show that the education system's segmented model of temporality does not govern his literary life. Chamoiseau's autobiographical writing therefore works to soften the boundaries between past and present selves and communities, choosing to emphasise their inter-dependence rather than their separation. Imagery of spirals offers an alternative model to the atomistic model of time embodied by the calendar. The spaces opened up between linguistic, corporeal and topographical inscriptions of the past embed the author's literary project within a holistic context and undoes the separation between intellectual life and concrete experience that is installed at school. The connection Chamoiseau makes between the *tracées* in his writing and those on the Martinican soil suggests that transition between different times and places is essential to the kind of resistance they embody. Accordingly, Chamoiseau's translation of elements of his Creole childhood into a French, literary context comes to represent not a detachment from his past but, rather, another instance of adaptation of older models to the demands of the present. While acknowledging the impossibility of fully re-capturing childhood perception, *Une Enfance créole* nonetheless sets up a space where relationships between the self and the multiple beings, places and times that nourish it are explored. The three volumes of this autobiography work as an intricate demonstration of the author's belief that a reconfiguration of temporal models is necessary for economic and cultural renewal in Martinique.

Note

¹ I have used published translations where they exist and given a page reference to the translation cited in the bibliography. Where no page reference is given, the translation is my own.

Works Cited

- Bernabé, Jean, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. 1989. *Eloge de la créolité*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993.
- Britton, Celia. *The Sense of Community in French Caribbean Fiction*. 2008. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2010.
- Césaire, A. *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*. 1956. Bilingual ed. Trans. Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1995.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Antan d'enfance*. 1993. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- . *A Bout d'enfance*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.
- . *Chemin-d'école*. 1994. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- . *Childhood*. Trans. Carol Volk. London: Granta, 1999.
- . *School Days*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. London: Granta, 1998.
- . *Texaco*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- . *Texaco*. Trans. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov. London: Granta, 1997.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick and Raphaël Confiant. *Lettres créoles: Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature 1635–1975*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999.
- Chancé, Dominique. *L'auteur en souffrance: Essai sur la position et la représentation de l'auteur dans le roman antillais contemporain (1981–1992)*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000.
- Dash, Michael J. *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998.
- Degraff, Michel. 'Against Creole exceptionalism'. *Language* 79.2 (2003): 391–410.
- Gallagher, Mary. *Soundings in French Caribbean Writing since 1950: The Shock of Space and Time*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.

Game, Jérôme and Jean Khalifa. 'Pustules, spirals, volcanoes: Images and Moods in Césaire's Cahier d'un retour au pays natal'. *Wasafiri* 15.31 (2000): 43–51.

Glissant, Edouard. *La Case du commandeur*. Paris: Seuil, 1981.

Hardwick, Louise. *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013.

Kelly, Debra. *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2005.

Knepper, Wendy. *Patrick Chamoiseau: A Critical Introduction*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012.

McCusker, Maeve. *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2007.

Price, Richard. *The Convict and the Colonel: A Story of Colonialism and Resistance in the Caribbean*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

Taleb-Khyar, Mohamed B. 'Frankétienne' *Callaloo* 15: (1992): 385-392.