

6-1-2002

When I Means We: A Reading of School in French Caribbean Apprenticeship Novels

Pascale De Souza
SAIS-Johns Hopkins University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

De Souza, Pascale (2002) "When I Means We: A Reading of School in French Caribbean Apprenticeship Novels," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1533>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

When I Means We: A Reading of School in French Caribbean Apprenticeship Novels

Abstract

While most critics agree that the quest for identity which underlies much of post-colonial literature is illustrated in the thematic approaches adopted by writers, this study further the argument by suggesting that it also conditions writers' selection of narrative strategies. In its representation of subjectivity in process, the apprenticeship novel seems to offer an enticing model of self-completion. This narrative strategy, however, presents particular complexities when used to portray coming of age in a society divided along ethnic lines. Simon Gikandi argues with regards to the Caribbean that the probability of a quest for identity reaching fruition is nil, but other critics take a more hopeful stand when they see the apprenticeship novel as a "novel of initiation into the *methods of survival* in a context marked by 'the presence of the Other'" (Kandé 34; my emphasis). The acquisition of the French language and reading and writing skills through school offers a salient example of these opposite stands. An analysis of several French Caribbean novels which explore the role of school reveals the emergence of a rift as school enables young characters such as José in *La Rue Cases-Nègres* by Joseph Zobel or the narrator and her brother in *Le Temps des Madras* by Françoise Ega to achieve a certain measure of wholeness, but becomes a deadly lure for young girls such as Zétou in *Le Quimboiseur l'avait Dit* or Mélanée in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*. Though the rift often follows gendered lines, it is predominantly attributable to the existence, or lack thereof, of a strong support system which enables characters to retain their Caribbean identity while acquiring the skills needed to function in a French-speaking world.

Keywords

quest for identity, identity, post-colonial, post-colonial literature, narrative strategies, self-completion, ethnic lines, Simon Gikandi, Caribbean, quest for identity, the other, novel, Kandé, acquisition of the French language, reading, writing, salient, French Caribbean novels, school, *Le Temps des Madras*, Françoise Ega, young girls, Zétou, *Le Quimboiseur l'avait Dit*, Mélanée, *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*, gendered lines, gender, Caribbean identity, identity, French-speaking, French-speaking world

When I Means We: A Reading of School in French Caribbean Apprenticeship Novels

Pascale De Souza
SAIS -Johns Hopkins University

La question à poser à un Martiniquais
ne sera pas: qui suis-je? . . . mais qui
sommes-nous?

The question to ask a Martinican won't
be: who am I? . . . but who are we?¹
—Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais*

While most critics agree that the quest for identity which underlies much of post-colonial literature is illustrated in the thematic approaches adopted by writers, I wish to further the argument by proposing that it also conditions writers' selection of narrative strategies. In its representation of subjectivity in process, the apprenticeship novel seems to offer an enticing model of self-completion.² This narrative strategy which duplicates in literary form a cultural code aimed at governing social integration yet presents particular complexities when used to portray coming of age in a society divided along ethnic lines.³ It not only suppresses, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, the role of imperialism in the *Bildung* of human beings, but it often imposes the master's trope insofar as integration entails accepting the canons set by the colonial powers. Simon Gikandi even argues with regards to the Caribbean that the probability of such a quest reaching fruition is nil as "the repressed and marginalized Caribbean self can never

find wholeness and deep meanings in the world of the other” (173). Some critics, however, take a more hopeful stand, and interpret the apprenticeship novel as a “novel of initiation into the *methods of survival* in a context marked ‘by the presence of the Other’ (Kandé 34; my emphasis).

The acquisition of the French language as well as reading and writing skills through school offers a salient example of these opposite stands. Some critics argue that

[i]n acquiring certain forms of knowledge and above all in acquiring writing, each risks appropriating the myths of a society in which discourses of equality and brotherhood are contradicted by the reality of social institutions and prejudices. (Cottenet-Hage and Meehan 76)

Others conclude that, like Caliban, young West Indians can appropriate the master’s tongue to serve their own agenda. From *La Rue Cases-Nègres* by Joseph Zobel to *Le Temps des Madras* by Françoise Ega, from *Le Quimboiseur l’Avait Dit* by Myriam Warner-Vieyra to *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle* by Simone Schwarz-Bart, several French Caribbean apprenticeship novels explore the role played by school in the development of young post-colonial characters. An analysis of these novels reveals the emergence of a rift as school, on the one hand, enables some characters such as José in Zobel’s novel, or the narrator and her brother in Ega’s, to achieve a certain measure of wholeness, and on the other hand, emerges as a deadly lure for young girls such as Zétou in *Le Quimboiseur l’Avait Dit* or Mélanée in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*. Though the rift often follows gendered lines, it is predominantly attributable to the existence, or lack thereof, of a strong support system which enables characters to retain their Caribbean identity while acquiring the skills needed to function in a French-speaking world.

Cottenet-Hage and Meehan contend that “the francophone novel—which frequently takes the form of a *Bildungsroman*—often uses the passage through school as a strategy for exploring the crises and tensions of the protagonist’s psychological development” (76). *La Rue Cases-Nègres* comes readily to mind as a

however, differ widely, some arguing that it illustrates Gikandi's doomed perspective, others that it is indeed a novel of survival.

La Ruse Cases-Nègres is the story of a young boy named José who uses his scholarly aptitudes to map a path out of the Black Shack Alley where his ancestors have been the hapless victims of the cane for centuries. In so doing, José is faced with such threats as destitution, isolation, and the lure of apparently easily gained money. Hunger dominates José's childhood as his grandmother is barely able to eke out an existence in the cane. Attending the village school entails further difficulties such as long walks and exploitation at the hands of a heartless caregiver. The opportunity to earn some wages made through enrollment in the "small bands" (groups of children working in the cane) finally threatens to deter José from his course of studies. None of these obstacles yet succeeds in preventing him from obtaining his Certificat d'Etudes and pursuing his studies at high school level in Fort-de-France.

His success can be attributed to a large extent to his integration within a Creole community and his reliance on a mateship system. His grandmother Man Tine and his teacher Stephen Rose offer him their steadfast support, while the friends made along his path contribute to his feeling integrated first in the Black Shack Alley, then in school. José's first years on the Alley are characterized by the carefree freedom enjoyed by children left to their own means, while parents work in the cane. Zobel underlines the communal feeling which pervades childhood games through his frequent use of the 'we' pronoun: "Nous, les enfants" 'we, the children' (20), "nous sommes seuls, et tout nous appartient" 'we are alone and everything is ours' (22), "nous étions libres, seuls responsables de nous-mêmes" 'we were free and the only ones in charge of ourselves' (67). A sub-group made up of older children including José, "Nous autres, 'les grands'" 'We, "the big ones"' (20) asserts its leadership over the younger ones.

Once the children start working in the cane and José goes to school in Petit Bourg, a break occurs and the "we" pronoun gives way to "I," "me" and "them": "Depuis que j'allais à l'école, il n'existait presque plus de contact entre eux et moi" 'Since I started

going to school, there was hardly any contact between them and me' (132). This first loss could jeopardize José's ability to maintain his emotional balance and devote the energy needed to obtain good grades. Fortunately, José is able to compensate by forging new friendships. He meets other children who also come from the countryside to study in Petit-Bourg and makes new friends such as Michel, Ernest, Hortense, Sosso, Camille, Vireil and Georges Roc so that school becomes "la plus agréable, la plus hospitalière des maisons" 'the most pleasant, the most hospitable house' (127). José is keenly aware of the connection between his having numerous friends and his feeling integrated at school. As he concludes, "Toujours est-il que je n'en étais que plus heureux d'être à l'école. J'avais toujours de bons camarades, et tout y était sujet de gaieté et de joie" 'I was all the happier to be at school. I always had good friends and everything was a source of joy and gaiety' (157).

José's childhood contrasts sharply with Georges Roc's. Unlike José, Georges, whose nickname Jojo echoes José's name but also points to his being caught in a vicious circle, is raised apart from the other children as his parents wish to avoid contact with Creole-speaking uneducated cane cutters. He is compelled to remain on the veranda of his house after school and hence unable to make new friends. José is the only one who agrees to come and play with him. The contrast between their two experiences comes to the fore after Jojo is forbidden to play with José because they speak Creole:

Dorénavant, défense était faite à Jojo de jouer avec moi. Grand fut son désarroi de *ne plus avoir un seul camarade d'école*. J'en fus d'abord peiné pour lui, très gêné même. *Mais moi, les camarades ne me manquaient pas.*

Henceforth, Jojo was forbidden to play with me. He was most unhappy to *have lost his only school friend*. I was saddened at first for him and even very embarrassed. *But as to me, I had lots of friends.* (177; my emphasis)

Both Jojo and José wish to expose conditions of work and life on sugarcane plantations. Their diverging childhoods account for

their respective failure and success in this endeavor. Jojo becomes “un garçon lié et condamné au silence” ‘a boy unable to break free and condemned to silence’ (155) who will be arrested for revealing fraudulent book-keeping on a plantation. He will eventually dream of becoming a taxidriver, “un rêve trop tendre, trop *silencieux* et surtout trop *solitaire*” ‘a dream which was too tender, too *silent* and in particular too *solitary*’ (305; my emphasis). José, on the other hand, becomes a mentor to several friends and commits himself to telling the tale at the end of the novel.

The high school José attends differs markedly from the village school. While the latter “encouraged academic performance because of a certain social homogeneity and the militancy of the teachers,” the former is “impersonal and elitist” and “conditions the children of underprivileged classes [like José] to failure” (Kandé 44). Several factors contribute to José’s sense of alienation at high school. His mother was right in perceiving the school as an alien world. She refers to the school administrators, and more generally to the white plantocracy, as “*Ils*” ‘*they*’ (216), and yet commits herself to sending her son to “*leur lycée*” ‘*their high school*’ (216). José soon discovers that the focus there is indeed placed on studying metropolitan history and literature. As Gloria Parker underlines, “one of the greatest deficiencies of the educational systems in the islands was [to favor] servile imitation of French models and memorization of critical analyses of French literary works instead of development of their own critical faculties and perspectives as Martinicans” (180). Contrary to his primary-school teacher who offered him support, teachers at high-school tend to doubt José’s abilities to perform adequately within the given parameters.

As importantly, José is first unable to make new friends in a school that caters mostly to white children from wealthy families.

Je me trouve seul comme je n’ai jamais été. Personne que je connaisse, personne qui m’ait adressé la parole.

Personne ne me ressemble. Personne n’a d’ailleurs fait attention à moi.

I find myself alone as never before. There is no one I know. No one has spoken to me. (220)

Nobody looks like me. Nobody has even paid attention to me. (221)

Cut off from his grandmother and former friends, José soon loses interest in his studies. He is again aware of the connection between his reliance on a support system and his school performance: "C'est à cause de cet abandon sans doute que mon premier trimestre a été pauvre en résultats" 'It is probably because I was left on my own that my performance during the first semester was so poor' (222). To prove the point further, his second semester differs markedly from the first. He finds a new friend, Christian Bussi, who introduces him to all the school staff *and* his grades improve.

His mother's departure for Route Didier where she will work for a wealthy béké family, threatens anew his emotional balance and scholarly progress: "sans que je m'en fusse même aperçu, un chagrin me gagnait, et aussi un relâchement . . . en classe, aucune ardeur" 'without my even noticing it, I grew sorrowful and less diligent . . . in class, no drive'(244). José starts skipping class and eventually fails the first part of his final school exam. The pattern seen previously at primary school and during the first year of high school is repeated insofar as his summer holidays spent at Route Didier provide him with a new support system that enables him to start studying again. Three factors explain this new turn of events: he is now living with his mother, has renewed his bond with Georges, and made a new friend called Carmen. As a result,

[j]e connaissais mon programme pour l'avoir étudié pendant toutes les vacances avec beaucoup plus de goût que dans l'année scolaire et je n'avais eu à l'examen qu'à faire usage de ce que j'avais appris.

I knew my program because I had studied it all summer long with much more interest than during the school year and I only had to apply what I had learned to the exam. (292)

José has thus been able to balance the impersonal and elitist education Kandé denounces with a support system made of family and friends.

In *Le Roman Antillais*, Maryse Condé concludes that even when the Caribbean author who writes an autobiographical novel

“lui donne valeur d'exemple ou de symbole, dire 'je' pour lui équivaut à dire 'nous' ” ‘turns it into an example or a symbol, when he says “I,” he means “we” ’ (13). Scarboro indeed argues that *La Rue Cases-Nègres* focuses on the external life of the collectivity rather than on the protagonist's inner lives (15). Wylie further suggests that:

A central interest in Zobel's works is the nature of the social fabric of a community, what happens to it in a colonized society where most power and wealth are in the hands of distant others, and perhaps, how a torn social fabric can be restored. (63)

Unlike apprenticeship novels which generally focus on the main protagonist's fate and his ability to find closure through social integration, Zobel's novel uses José's “efforts to assert himself and achieve some degree of recognition” (Hezekiah 45) to tell the tale of a whole community seeking ways to loosen the colonial yoke.

José's acquisition of reading and writing skills would come to naught, it if were not for his commitment at the end of the novel to tell the tale. Several adults play an important part in helping him acquire and retain a sense of his origins but also in encouraging him through their example and expectations to become a *conteur*. Man Tine gives José an awareness of his island's bountiful nature and his family history as she takes him on long walks in the hills and tells him about life on the plantation (15). Médouze, the old man whom José considers as his closest friend on the Alley, provides him with an invaluable sense of his origins through his tales about his African ancestors and a first glimpse into the magic of language. Through word games and krik-krik tales, José discovers that “par la simple intervention de M. Médouze, le monde se dilate, se multiplie, grouille vertigineusement autour de moi” ‘through M. Médouze's mere intervention, the world dilates, demultiplies, vertiginously crawls with life around me’ (54). Unlike other children who receive gifts and sweet treats from their mentors, José argues that “mon grand ami ne me donne rien” ‘my great friend does not give me anything’ (51). He is not yet aware that through his gift of the word, Médouze has bestowed upon him a limitless world.

It is no surprise if after Médouze's death, José seeks out similar figures, first in Petit-Bourg and then at Route Didier. In Petit-Bourg, "le personnage le plus sympathique, le plus important à mes yeux, était M. Assionis, conteur, chanteur et tambourineur de sa profession" 'the friendliest, most important character to my view was M. Assionis who told tales, sang and played the drum by trade' (140). At Route Didier, he befriends Carmen who is full of gossip, always ready to tell a tale, to crack a joke that reveal his awareness of, and condemnation of, social realities in Martinique. Bussi also plays a part in opening up new horizons for José. The books he lends him indeed have the same effect as Médouze's tales. Thanks to them, "le monde commença à s'élargir autour de moi, au-delà de toute limite tangible" 'the world started to dilate around me, beyond any tangible limit' (231). Man Tine, Médouze, M. Assionis, Carmen impart upon José the importance of passing on his Caribbean heritage through tales. By the end of the novel, José is ready to take on this challenge, having gained experience both as a *conteur* and a mentor.

Man Tine and Carmen are in fact both mentors and students. Man Tine paves the way when she starts asking José to tell her about his life at school and read to her. Carmen broadens that experience when he asks José to teach him the three Rs. Both he and Jojo keep borrowing books from José, thereby confirming that José was right in preferring books which dealt with black people in the Americas and the Antilles to stories about numbered kings (292). If Jojo is a more avid reader, Carmen feels overwhelmed by such novels as *Batouala* by René Maran or *Banjo* by Claude McKay. Having acquired the Creole word through Man Tine, Médouze and M. Assionis, the ability to read and write in French through schoolteachers, José is able to combine both and make his experience accessible to his friends. At the close of the novel, he even commits himself to become, in Césaire's famous words "la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche" 'the mouth of the misfortunes which have no mouth' (22).

Some critics fail to see the end of the novel as indicative of a successful coming to terms with the complexities of post-colonial identity. They underline that this "psychological biography . . .

depicts the formation of colonial subjects” (Cottenet-Hage and Meehan 75), that José’s itinerary entails his alienation from his Caribbean world as nature becomes foreign to him, as he comes to see childhood friends as scruffy urchins, as “tenants of a traditional society” (André 56) like Man Tine and Médouze die away. I would argue that, contrary to Jojo, José succeeds in exposing the debilitating nature of the work in the cane and the alienation processes at play in a colonial society. José learns to rely on a whole support system which enables him to *calibanize*, “a French language space to recreate himself as a separate, but still fundamentally Caribbean individual” (Scarboro 22).⁴ *La Rue Cases-Nègres* thus not only celebrates the survival of the Caribbean self rather than its repression or marginalization, but brings back to life a whole community.⁵

One little-known novel further illustrates the importance of communal support for a successful *calibanization* of the Other’s tongue. *Le Temps des Madras* by Françoise Ega is “dans le sillage direct de *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950) de Joseph Zobel, mais resté dans son ombre” ‘in the direct wake of Joseph Zobel’s *Black Shack Alley* (1950), but hidden in its shadow’ ” (Johnson and Makward 311). It recounts the childhood of a Martinican girl who leaves her village to go and live in Fort-de-France following the eruption of Mt. Pelé. Similarities between the two novels abound. Like José, Ega’s anonymous narrator can rely on proximity to a bountiful nature as well as a whole support network dominated by strong role models to shape and retain her identity against the alienating threats of a formal education. Both her parents believe in sending their children to school, her father being the first to inquire about school (14) while her mother, like Man Tine, argues that reading and writing skills are one of the colonizer’s positive contributions to Caribbean society. Through her closeness to nature, her attachment to traditions and her strong will to endure, Auntie Acé represents another facet of Man Tine’s role. She shares with her niece the story of her great grandmother whose life was cut short by a selfish mistress, and thereby reveals to her another aspect of colonization. Through her tales, her proud wearing of the *madras*, she imbues the narrator with a sense of belong-

ing to a community which learns that a *madras* is not a piece of cloth just meant to adorn a pretty head but also to tie around one's waist for support.⁶ Ega underlines the importance of that message through dedicating the novel to her and choosing to refer to the *madras* in her title. Père Azou also plays a prominent role in shaping the narrator's appreciation of her Creole world. His tales, the conditions of his lonely death, and his departure for Guinea make him a father figure not unlike Médouze in Zobel's novel.

Both Zobel and Ega underline the connection between support systems and school performance. Ega's narrator is aware that "ma famille faisait tellement partie de ma vie que la pensée d'en être séparée m'épouvantait" 'My family was so much part of my life that the thought of being sent away scared me to death' (129). Her brother Armand experiences the loneliness and ensuing lowering of grades associated with being cut off from his family when he is sent to study in Fort-de-France. Only then does he complain that "Je n'ai pas de tableau d'honneur; c'est difficile, les racines carrées!" 'I am not on the merit roll. Square roots are hard' (170). Unlike José and Armand, Ega's narrator is never left to her own devices. When her turn comes to go to Fort-de-France and Mt. Pelé starts emitting smoke, the whole family moves to town. The mother thus ensures that the children will be able to pursue their studies but she is made to pay a dear price for her choice as her youngest child dies of malnutrition.

Like José's, Ega's narrator enjoys school but realizes the dangers of the education received. Though she never formerly questions the education material she is exposed to, she makes a few remarks that reveal her awareness of the differences between her Caribbean heritage and her textbooks. She points out how Martinican climate does not follow a four-season pattern.

Le plus sérieusement du monde nous apprenions à l'école qu'il y avait quatre saisons dans l'année: le printemps, l'été, l'automne et l'hiver. Nous, petits Martiniquais, nous n'y croyions guère! Quatre saisons seulement? Pour nous l'année commençait avec la saison des oranges, continuait avec celle des pois-doux, des pommes d'eau, des avocats, des pommes-cannelle, des fruits à

At school, we were most seriously taught that there were four seasons during the year: spring, summer, fall and winter. As young Martinicans, we hardly believed so. Only four seasons? For us, the year started with the orange season, continued with the season of the sweet running peas, then came the season of the pomegranate, of the avocados, of the custard apples, of breadfruit. (39-40)

She sees through the limitations of geography and history textbooks, arguing that her brother's geography book "était bien mal faite et qu'on n'y trouvait même pas une photographie du Mont Pelé" 'was poorly designed and did not even contain a picture of Mount Pelé' (86). She is at first fascinated with maps (11) but eventually sees a railway, one which "me faisait perdre l'appétit" 'made me lose my appetite' as she desperately tries to imagine what trains must be like: "Personnellement, je voyais des wagons biguiner sur des chemins pleins d'oiseaux siffleurs" 'As to me, I would imagine wagons dancing on paths full of whistling birds' (111). The image underlines her lack of first-hand experience with such technology and her naive attempt at visualizing it in terms she is familiar with. Like all French children, she learns about our ancestors, the Gauls, but recalls as well the serfs and "Rois Fainéants" 'Lazy Kings' (86), a mirror image of Martinican plantation society.

Though she decries geography and history books, she never stops enjoying school and seeing it as a positive environment:

Après les fêtes de Pâques, les écoles ouvrirent leurs portes et ce fut un nouveau plaisir. Je passais mes mains sur la balustrade entourant le préau: je dévorais des yeux les bambous remplis d'hibiscus. Les cartes de géographie me parurent plus sympathiques que jamais, les maîtresses plus belles et notre directrice, bien qu'elle eût déjà posé sa baguette sur son bureau, moins sévère.

After the Easter break, the schools opened their doors and it was again a real pleasure. I would let my hands run on the balustrade surrounding the covered playground: I would look eagerly at the bamboos full of hibiscus flowers. The geography maps would seem friendlier than ever, the teachers more handsome and our school director, although she had already put down her wand on her desk, less strict. (147)

Ega's narrator has thus apparently succeeded both in retaining a strong sense of her Caribbean heritage and acquiring the skills needed to enjoy and perform well at school. The question is whether she commits, as José does, to use her skills to tell the tale. The response is rather ambiguous.

Like her father who set an example when he volunteered his services as a scribe to help his community, the narrator learns to apply her reading and writing skills to a useful purpose. She writes the obeah woman's prescriptions for her customers, a role which places her within a female continuum and a Caribbean tradition. She thereby reconciles her two worlds and heeds her father's advice: "Ceux de notre race qui commencent à voir la lumière doivent la répandre!" "Those of our race who begin to see the light must spread it around!" (42).

Though these words echo the commitment made by José at the end of *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, Ega's narrator never endeavors to tell her story to those who do not know her Caribbean world. It may, however, be argued that the author of this autobiographical novel fulfills such a mission. If *Le Temps des Madras* exposes much more subtly than *La Rue Cases-Nègres* the colonial legacy in Martinique, *Lettres à une Noire* (1989), Ega's second novel, vehemently denounces the work conditions of Antillean women (ab)used as house staff in Marseille. Were we to assume the widely held view among critics that both *La Rue Cases-Nègres* and *Le Temps des Madras* are largely autobiographical, we might conclude that a strong community support in a post-colonial childhood leads to the writing of socially engaged texts.

Le Temps des Madras unfortunately remains an isolated example of an apprenticeship novel featuring a Caribbean girl who resists the alienating lure of school. Several other apprenticeship novels illustrate that:

Even the Western feminist critics who argue that the novel of development in the twentieth century is the most salient genre for the literature of social outsiders, primarily women or minority groups, have not yet mapped the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, geography, and history that constitute 'subjectivity' in the *Bildungsroman*. (De Lima 52)

A gendered analysis of French West Indian apprenticeship novels featuring female characters indeed reveals that the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and history need further exploring and that, more often than not, apprenticeship ultimately points to the failed “subjectivity” of the female character in a post-colonial setting. As Brenda Marshall notes, “ideally, the model is the male, European, propertied, Christian individual: women, children, and the propertyless, for example were excluded from the model” (85). Examples indeed abound in French Caribbean literature of little girls whose dreams of self-completion through school eventually lead them to mental wards or (self)-destruction.

In tracing the development of José from impoverished illiterate descendant of cane cutters to educated empowered young man, Zobel offers glimpses of life for girls in the Martinican society of the 1930s. Two episodes, which are tellingly dealt with succinctly in the novel, point to the impossibility for girls to pursue a secondary education. First, Man Tine was unable to send her daughter to school as none had yet opened in Petit-Bourg. She opted instead for some practical training to help her escape the cane. As a result, José’s mother will not be given a chance to become “la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont point de bouche” ‘the mouth of the misfortunes which have no mouth’ (Césaire 22) but rather will join the silent ranks of the house staff working for wealthy béké families. Secondly, of all the students who pass the *Certificat d’Etudes*, only one boy besides José pursues his studies. While Raphaël will attend the Cours Supérieur in Saint-Esprit, Laurette’s parents refuse to send her to that school because of the bad influences she could be subjected to (207). As for the other girls who passed, Merida starts working at the post office and two of her friends are apprenticed as seamstresses. Interestingly, the same prejudices surface in *Le Temps des Madras* when several boys petition a classmate not to lend his book to the female narrator and when the mother shares her dreams for her children: jobs as schoolteachers for her sons and as shop assistants for her daughters. These episodes reveal to what extent school opens few opportunities for females in colonial societies. Several French Caribbean novels focusing on girls further support such a conclusion.

In *Le Quimboiseur l'Avait Dit*, Myriam Warner-Vieyra presents her main character Zétou as the potential heroine of an apprenticeship novel such as Zobel's. Zétou hopes to escape the confines of her life in her fishing village and pursue an education in Paris. Failing to realize that she has already fallen back in her studies at the local primary school,⁷ she remains convinced of her ability to shape her future as she pleases, once in Paris: "A Paris, mon avenir était assuré: il suffirait que je me mette sérieusement à mes études: ma réussite ne dépendait que de moi, donc était certaine." 'In Paris, my future was settled; it would just be a matter for me to work seriously at my studies; my success only depended on me, hence was assured' (80).

She is unaware that success in school entails not only abilities, but also a strong support system. Unlike José and Ega's narrator who can rely on a whole community (family members, friends, obeh figures), Zétou has neither parents nor friends to support her scholarly ambitions. Her father is a poor fisherman who seems little interested in education while her mother leaves home to pursue her own agenda in France. Zétou fails to see that her mother's invitation to join her and her stepfather in Paris is nothing but a self-serving ploy. Alienated from her Caribbean heritage, the mother turns into an abusive parent, making Zétou work as a maid before setting her up as an easy prey for her stepfather's lust. Zétou only escapes final bondage (an arranged marriage to an older man) through madness and is eventually committed to a mental institution. Rather than empowering her, her search for further education has ultimately silenced her; the voice of the fool carries no social weight.

Michèle Lacrosil remains the French Caribbean novelist who has most convincingly denounced the alienating influence of the school system for a young girl. Unlike Zétou, Sapotille in *Sapotille et le Serin d'Argile* obtains excellent results in class, only to see her hopes thwarted by racially biased teachers. I wish to argue here that this novel is a "failed" apprenticeship novel whose narrative strategies and thematic approaches illustrate that there can be no linear progression leading to empowerment, no scholarly success leading to a law career for Sapotille.

Sapotille et le Serin d'Argile is a novel composed of entries in a diary kept during a voyage across the Atlantic. Two features contribute to it being a "failed" apprenticeship novel. First, the intradiegetic focus is placed on the past, memories being repeatedly described as a burden bearing upon the present, a "jardin d'ombre que j'emporte dans ma mémoire" 'a garden of shadows which I carry in my memory' (207). Though written by adults recounting childhood memories, *La Rue Cases-Nègres* and *Le Temps des Madras* differ in that they focus on the future of a child who goes through various stages of childhood towards adulthood. Secondly, *Sapotille et le Serin d'Argile* structurally follows a linear progression like *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, *Le Temps des Madras*, or *Le Quimboiseur l'Avait Dit* insofar as entries are organized in a strict chronological order. However, the novel is composed of stories pertaining to life on the ship interspersed with memories dating back to Sapotille's life at school, her affair with Patrice, and her marriage to Benoît. None of these memories are organized in chronological order, but are rather spurred by events and encounters on the ship. The structure reflects Sapotille's own lack of anchoring in adult life, her a-chronological reminiscences thwarting her opportunities to invest herself in the present.

Sapotille's experiences as a daughter and pupil confronted with constant rejection help explain not only her failure to pursue a career but her inability to reach self-completion. Sapotille's abilities, unlike José's, do not lead to gratification but rather arouse anger and frustration. Her failure may be ascribed not only to her being confined to a boarding school run by racially biased nuns but to "the marked absence of support from any community outside the school" (Cottenet-Hage and Meehan 80) and her own rejection of opportunities to create a circle of friends both within and without the school. Ega provides a revealing glimpse into life in a boarding school in *Le Temps des Madras* when the narrator contrasts her own freedom with "les hauts murs qui retranchaient les soeurs du reste du monde" 'the high walls which kept the nuns away from the rest of the world' (49). Unlike José in Zobel's novel and Ega's narrator, the girls educated in the convent "ne couraient pas, parlaient bas, marchaient les yeux baissés" 'did not run, spoke

softly, walked with their eyes down' (49). Only 100 yards separate the family dwelling from the convent. They yet represent an insurmountable barrier that severs the nuns and their boarders from the Caribbean environment and traditions.

As Lacrosil shows, the nuns play a foremost part in Sapotille's alienation through their racial slurs and segregation. They repeatedly remind her of how much a misfit she is in this school where the majority of the students come from wealthy white families. They refuse to acknowledge her scholarly success, constantly hand her misconduct cards and thwart her dreams of becoming a magistrate, suggesting instead that she consider sewing. In this context, the handing out of grade sheets and prizes is associated with searing pain: "Il n'y avait pas que les distributions des prix pour me laisser un souvenir insupportable; les lectures de notes du samedi soir aussi" 'The distribution of prizes was not the only event which left me with unbearable memories, so did the readings of grades on Saturday evenings' (37). Her situation recalls José's in several respects. He was also faced with isolation and rejection in high school. In the film version, he even saw his abilities to write an essay questioned by a teacher accusing him of plagiarism. However, his abilities are eventually recognized and he succeeds in passing his final school exam.

Nuns also punish Sapotille by relegating her to a closet under the stairs. As Cottenet-Hage and Meehan note, "at this stage, withdrawing and silence become established as the only two modes of resistance available to her as she is convinced that she has no sympathetic audience" (78). Sapotille recalls both Jojo, who was made to stay at home and eventually silenced and Zétou, who was first locked in her mother's apartment and then committed to an asylum where she would ramble mindlessly.

Unlike José and Ega's narrator, Sapotille finds no one to share her hopes, dreams, and challenges. Her mother is an elusive figure who reinforces the pernicious effects of schooling. Using the polite "you" form to her own daughter, she punishes her by grounding her at school and even wishes she had no daughter: "Il me suffit de vous voir à la fin du trimestre. Dieu, je voudrais n'avoir pas de fille!" 'It is enough for me to see you at the end of the

semester. God, how I wish I never had a daughter!’ (46). Sapotille’s grandmother plays a role similar to Man Tine’s or Aunt Acé’s in connecting her with her Caribbean heritage but fails to counteract the alienating effects of the nuns’ schooling. In a kaleidoscopic novel composed mostly of snippets from the past, the grandmother’s tale emerges as the longest and only complete narrative. Unlike José or Ega’s narrator, Sapotille does not retain from it a message of endurance and perseverance but only recalls the crack of the whip on the slaves’ back. Her only encounter with an obeah figure reminiscent of Médouze and Père Azou does not either lead to the forging of a strong bond. Quite to the contrary, Sapotille distrusts Athenais, the old man who charges 200 francs to read her fate in a pack of cards. She perceives him as a “vieil homme en transe qui gesticulait et adjurait, par L’Eau, l’Air et le Feu, les Esprits tout-puissants d’animer le jeu de cartes crasseux qu’il me tendait!” ‘an old man in a trance who jerked around and conjured through Water, Air and Fire, all-powerful Spirits to give life to the filthy pack of cards which he held out to me’ (93). She rejects his predictions as mindless wanderings, but comes back to get the talisman he promised her, illustrating, if need be, her inability to (mis)trust either the Caribbean tradition or the school system.

It cannot be denied that Sapotille plays a part in her own alienation as she rejects several opportunities to create a support system. Unlike José who compensates his isolation in high school through striking friendships with lower class characters and becoming a tutor for two of them, Sapotille turns down several offers of support and potential mentorship. A student named Colette de Monfort makes various attempts to defend her against the nuns, but her efforts elicit no gratitude. This attitude carries over into adulthood as Sapotille avoids contact with Denise Colas, the Mangiers, and other passengers aboard the *Nausicaa* who seek her out. Indeed, she states: “Je voudrais me fermer à tout contact, et comme la sensitive ne présenter que des épines” ‘I would like to close myself to all contacts and like the *sensitive* flower, only display thorns’ (25). Her attitude towards younger children points to a similar rejection of opportunities to undo the cycle of alien-

ation. On the one hand, she deliberately lets Régine, Denise's baby sister, fall from a tree while minding her. On the other hand, she sees the arrival of Yaya, a young black boarder, as an opportunity to play the nuns' role. She constantly rebukes and victimizes the little girl in a futile effort to find wholeness in the world of the other.

Whereas José, and to a lesser extent Ega's narrator, eventually use their education to serve the needs of their community, Sapotille loses all incentive and even ability to communicate, and feels as if she were dumb (44). In *Le Temps des Madras*, when Ega's narrator sees *serins* for the first time in Fort-de-France, she reflects on the exoticism of this bird species and wonders why they are kept in a cage (26). Her perception sheds some light on Sapotille who is made into a *serin* by the nuns, that is to say an exotic species kept in a cage. Critics have underlined the parallel between Sapotille and the *serin d'argile* [clay bird], which she is instructed to blow during a school play. Cottenet-Hage and Meehan further underline the link between *serin* in French and the verb *seriner* [to repeat mindlessly] and argue that Sapotille loses her voice as her speech becomes "devoid of meaning and superfluous" (78). Indeed, it may be argued that *Sapotille est le serin d'argile* 'Sapotille is the clay bird' might have been a more appropriate title for the novel.

Though her grandmother encourages her to tell the tale: "A ton tour, tu renseigneras, quand tu seras vieille, ton petit-fils" 'it will be your turn to inform your grandson, when you are old' (113), it is unlikely Sapotille will ever do so. Not only is she silenced but she refuses to have children for fear they might be made to learn "nos aïeux les Gaulois portaient la braie" 'our ancestors the Gauls wore breeches' (236). Unable to draw upon a community, Sapotille elaborates an intimate narrative, rather than a social text. Her writing remains a "more limited 'triumph' [than José's], for what Sapotille wants is forgetfulness, not social change" (Cottenet-Hage and Meehan 85). She does not opt to return to the Caribbean community as José and Ega's narrator did through their narratives. On the contrary, she seeks to escape her past and turns to France as a surrogate mother who, she believes, does not

Any illusion we may have entertained regarding the ability of the education system to pave the way for a female character's empowerment is met with the sobering reality of Cajou's fate in *Cajou*, the novel Lacrosil published a year after *Sapotille et le Serin d'Argile*. Like *Sapotille*, *Cajou* is made up of diary excerpts that are organized in chronological order but feature achronological memories. Though Cajou succeeds in securing the diplomas that should open the door to a brilliant future, she remains persuaded that her work will lead her nowhere and her self-completion remain impossible in a society where she will always be marginalized. She believes that

[d']autres chercheurs, mieux doués que moi, mieux placés dans une société qui les épaulerait et ne les considéreraient pas en éléments hétéroclites, continueraient jusqu'à la victoire. . . .

[o]ther researchers, more gifted than I am and better positioned in a society that would help them and not consider them as oddities, would continue till victory. . . . (199)

Cajou hence refuses honors and promotions and eventually contemplates suicide through drowning. What sets her apart from José is again the absence of any community support that could help her overcome her sense of alienation. Relatives are geographically and emotionally distant, friends prove elusive and unreliable, lovers violent.

From *Le Quimboiseur l'Avait dit* to *Cajou*, school emerges as a deadly trap for young Caribbean girls who are unable to draw upon a support system. Simone Schwarz-Bart further illustrates its destructive potential in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*, when she recounts Mélanée's fate.

Un soir, comme elle étudiaient les petites lettres, Mélanée demande à sa soeur de mettre la lampe à pétrole au milieu de la table, lui reprochant d'accaparer toute la lumière . . . garde-la pour toi, ta lumière, dit Eloisine en poussant la lampe d'un geste coléreux. Et tout était fini: la porcelaine était en miettes, le pétrole enflammé se répandait sur les jambes de Mélanée, sur ses épaules, sur ses cheveux.

One evening, as they were studying their alphabet, Mélanée asked her sister to put the oil lamp in the middle of the table, reproaching her with keeping all the light to herself . . . keep it for yourself, said Eloisine, pushing the lamp angrily. And it was all over: the china shattered, the burning oil spread on Mélanée's legs, on her shoulders, on her hair. (23-24)

Mélanée's request not only contributes to creating a rift between her and her sister but provokes her death. The light that was to illuminate her path out of illiterate darkness is thus revealed to be a deadly lure leading to her demise. Like Mélanée, Zétou, Sapotille and Cajou are hapless insects that fail to find inscription in a male world and insertion in a colonial one.

The best known female character to achieve self-completion in French Caribbean literature is Mélanée's sister, Télumée. She is not a successful pupil, but a girl who rejects school and learns to resist the daily alienating discourse and practices of a post-colonial society through her inscription in a Caribbean community. As was the case in *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, most of the obstacles Télumée is confronted with can be ascribed to alienating social structures inherited from the times of slavery. Her school teacher's lessons in self-debasement are a case in point:

Nous étions à l'abri, apprenant à lire, à signer notre nom, à respecter les couleurs de la France, notre mère, à vénérer sa grandeur et sa majesté, sa noblesse, sa gloire qui remontaient au commencement des temps, lorsque nous n'étions encore que des singes à queue coupée.

We were safe, learning to read, to sign our name, to respect the colors of France, our mother, to worship her grandeur and her majesty, her nobility, her glory which dated back to the beginning of time, when we were nothing yet but monkeys with cut tails. (81)

Contrary to her sisters, Télumée pays no heed to these words and soon leaves school. Faced with the threat of starvation, she has to leave Fond-Zombi and experiences other alienating discourses and practices as she hires herself first as a housemaid, then as a field hand. When her mistress, Mme Desaragne, keeps reminding her of the Black man's deprivation and depravity, Télumée chooses silence rather than confrontation. Contrary to Sapotille's,

her silence is not an indication of defeat but a weapon that enables her to preserve her identity by ignoring, rather than *calibanizing*, the discourse of the other.

Télumée is able to do so because she can rely on a whole network of female support. Her grandmother Toussine but also several other women from the village weave a tight net around her and ensure that her shack is never cut loose. Whereas in *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, secondary characters—most often female—sacrifice their own interest, if not their lives, to enable the male protagonist to reach his goal, in *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*, the survival of the individual is celebrated as an inscription into a continuum of female voices. The novel focuses on a Caribbean woman who no longer sees herself as marginal to the male white world, a world ruled by the *masculin singulier*, but rather places herself at the heart of a community based upon the *féminin antillais*. The alternative to school offered in Schwarz-Bart's novel yet appears doomed as, at the close of the novel, electricity poles loom up to change Télumée's village forever.

If school offered some form of empowerment to characters such as José, Armand or his sister, who relied on a strong Caribbean support system, the advent of electricity in rural and poor urban areas introduces a new threat to Caribbean identity in the form of television. Whether Creole traditions and communities will resist this new Prospero remains to be seen.

Notes

1. All translations are mine.
2. Though it can be argued that the French overseas *régions monodépartementales* have never ceased to be colonies and as such, have not entered into the realm of the post-colonial, French Caribbean literature articulates issues that are pervasive in the literatures of former colonies having attained independence.
3. This strategy embodies a modernist approach to writing that posits that the protagonist can exert conscious control over his surroundings to achieve social integration. Michael Dash argues that this concept of man as a free consciousness is in itself quite foreign to non-

occidental peoples as it is born of a logocentric tradition in Western thought. See Michael Dash, "Writing the Body: Edouard Glissant's Poetics of Remembering."

4. In this respect, it differs from *Mission Terminée* by Mongo Béti or *L'Aventure Ambiguë* by Cheik Hamidou Kane, two novels which underline the failure of Western schooling. Far from providing the African child with powerful tools, Western education condemns him to exile or death.

5. In *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, no return to an idyllic childhood is possible. Unlike Camara Laye in *L'Enfant Noir*, Zobel does not paint the picture of an organized society whose dignity "condamne silencieusement la politique coloniale absente de ses pages" 'silently condemns the colonial policy which is absent from these pages' (Julien 783).

6. Man Tine indirectly refers to this tradition in *La Rue Cases-Nègres* when she accuses the families who send their children to work in the cane of being "[des] nègres sans orgueil et qui ne savaient pas s'attacher les reins solidement" 'black people who had no pride and did not know how to tie up a cloth round their waist solidly' (79).

7. In *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, José likewise is the only one young enough to apply for a scholarship. All the other students are too old once they reach the Certificat d'Etudes to qualify for funding (206).

Works Cited

- Béti, Mongo. *Mission Terminée*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1957.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983.
- Condé, Maryse. *Le Roman Antillais*. Paris: Nathan, 1977.
- Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine and Kevin Meehan. "Our Ancestors the Gauls . . . School and Schooling in Two Caribbean Novels." *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 75-89.
- Dash, Michael. "Writing the Body: Edouard Glissant's Poetics of Remembering." *World Literature Today* 63.4 (1989): 609-12.

- De Lima, Maria Helena. *Decolonizing Genre: Caribbean Women Writers and the Bildungsroman*. Dissertation Abstracts International, University of Maryland, 1993.
- Ega, Françoise. *Lettres à une Noire*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989.
- . *Le Temps des Madras*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*. Ithaca. Cornell UP, 1992.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Le Discours Antillais*. Paris: Seuil, 1981.
- Hamidou Kane, Cheik. *L'Aventure Ambiguë*. Paris: Julliard, 1961.
- Hezekiah, Randolph. "Joseph Zobel: The Mechanics of Liberation." *Black Images* 4. 3-4 (1975): 44-45.
- Johnson, Ilona and Christiane Makward. "La longue marche des franco-antillais: fictions autobiographiques de Mayotte Capécia et Françoise Ega." *Elles Ecrivent des Antilles*. Eds. Suzanne Rinne and Joëlle Vitiello. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997. 309-21.
- Julien, Eileen. "La métamorphose du récit dans *La Rue Cases-Nègres*." *The French Review* 60 (1987): 781-87.
- Kandé, Sylvie. "Renunciation and Victory in *Black Shack Alley*." *Research in African Literatures* 25.2 (94): 33-50.
- Lacroisil, Michele. *Cajou*. Paris: Gallimard, 1961.
- . *Sapouille et le Serin d'Argile*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.
- Laye, Camara. *L'Enfant Noir*. Paris: Plon, 1953.
- Lima, Maria Helena. *Decolonizing Genre: Caribbean Women Writers and the Bildungsroman*. Dissertation Abstracts International, University of Maryland, 1993.
- Marshall, Brenda. *Teaching the Postmodern, Fiction, and Theory*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.
- Parker, Gloria. *Through the Eye of a Child: Their Societies Viewed by Five Black Francophone Authors: Zobel, Ega, Laye, Dadié, and Oyono*. Dissertation Abstracts International, Ann Arbor, MI, 1991.
- Scarboro, Ann Armstrong. "A Shift Towards the Inner Voice and *Créolité* in the French Caribbean Novel." *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 12-29.

Schwarz-Bart, Simone. *Pluie et Vent sur Télumée-Miracle*. Paris: Seuil, 1972.

Warner, Keith Q. "Introduction." *Black Shack Alley*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1980.

Warner-Vieyra, Myriam. *Le Quimboiseur l'Avait Dit*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1980.

Wylie, Hal. "Joseph Zobel's Use of Negritude and Social Realism." *World Literature Today* 56.1 (1982): 61-64.

Zobel, Joseph. *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950). Paris: Présence Africaine, 1974.