

Téluée Miracle and the Creole Experience

J. DAVID DANIELSON, *University of Hartford*

Simone Schwarz-Bart began her literary career almost by accident, early in 1964, with an *aide-mémoire* written in Guadeloupe for her spouse André, who was then in Paris working on the manuscript which ultimately became *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes*, published in 1967 under both their signatures.¹ Announced at that time (*Un Plat de porc*, p. 4), her own novel, *Pluie et vent sur Téluée Miracle*—the subject of this essay—did not appear until much later (Paris: Seuil, 1972). As of the latter date (*Téluée*, back cover), she was preparing a “recueil de nouvelles”—which has not yet been published.²

Pluie et vent sur Téluée Miracle is a remarkable book for its stylistic grace and poetic containment of an often brutal reality (a case of what is known as *realismo mágico* in Spanish America),³ for its example of persistence in the face of injustice and misfortune, and perhaps most of all for its strikingly vivid and authentic evocation of the Antillean Creole world—especially as represented by that of the rural blacks of Guadeloupe.⁴ In what follows I propose to consider primarily this latter achievement, which has a linguistic dimension we must examine briefly before moving on to our central concern: the themes, attitudes, and culture patterns typical of the black experience in the Caribbean region.

Novels of the French Antilles are normally written in French, yet French is a second language for most of the islanders, whose mother tongue is Creole—a language related to French, especially in its lexicon, but also in debt to several African languages, Portuguese, and perhaps ultimately Sabir, the medieval (and subsequent) *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean.⁵ French and Creole are not, generally speaking, mutually intelligible—a state of affairs somewhat attenuated by continuing contact between the two, which has produced widespread bilingualism, language mixing, and a certain amount of leveling: Antillean French reflects the presence of Creole, and Creole, it seems, is becoming more and more Frenchified, at least in the cities.⁶ The principal language of instruction, officialdom, and the mass media is of course French, but Creole as well is used for broadcasts and written advertising, and has been the medium of a fair amount of folk literature, both oral and written, for more than a century.⁷

This situation presents the novelist with a number of options. He or she may choose to write in Standard French, some more or less Creolized variety of French, or some variety of Creole—an option fraught with difficulty, but not without its supporters, especially in the neighboring Creole nation of Haiti. Or the writer may employ some combination of these approaches, as did the Haitian master Jacques Roumain, in his durable *Gouverneurs de la rosée*, completed in 1944.⁸ But there is still another strategy—not, by the way, unfamiliar to Roumain. The option of using Standard French may be said to allow for a suboption: that of “finding” the novel in Creole, but then, in the act of redaction, translating or transposing it into French. In this case the resultant French is structurally standard, but the underlying sensibility is unmistakably Creole.

This latter course is the way of *Téluée*, which contains no Creole at all, nor any French structurally modified in the direction of Creole. Yet the Creole world, the Creole culture, is present on every page. The whole thing sounds and feels Creole. This is of course partly due to the author's closeness to her material. The story is told from within, from the point of view of an elderly black woman with little schooling—*Téluée* Lougandor—who has lived her entire life in one sector of the Guadeloupean countryside. At every turn we feel close to the earth and often the sea, to the elements and all living things on the island. But equally significant, if not more so, is the fact that Mme Schwarz-Bart can think and feel in Creole, capture the essence—the “deep structure” of that experience, and map it to the surface in French. This transposed Creole is her most characteristic medium, and has much to do with the book's stylistic coherence, with the smooth, even flow of the story—which also depends upon the acquired wisdom, strength, compassion, and ultimate serenity of the narrator-protagonist, and of her grandmother before her.

The story of *Téluée* begins with that of Minerve, her great-grandmother, liberated from slavery as a young woman and later the mother of Toussine, who comes to be known as Reine Sans Nom. One of Toussine's daughters is Victoire, the mother of *Téluée*. After the latter's father has been killed Victoire takes up with a “zambo-caraïbe décidément amateur de chair féminine” (p. 66), and thus is anxious to “écarter ma petite chair de dix ans pour s'éviter la peine, quelques années plus tard, de danser sur le ventre qui l'aurait trahie” (p. 46). *Téluée* goes to live with her grandmother Reine Sans Nom, grows up, works for a time for a family of whites whose ancestors were notorious slaveholders, and has a young love—which comes to fruition, lasts a few years, and then collapses when bad times hit the island. At this point the narrative is two-thirds complete. It continues with the death of Reine Sans Nom, *Téluée*'s retreat to the wilds of La Folie, her work in the cane fields, her second lover, and his death as the sugar mill owners turn hot steam on the workers during a strike action. In her old age she adopts a girl whom she also loses, through the machinations of a spiteful old man. Yet she achieves tranquility, and prevails: “. . . je reste une femme sur mes deux pieds, et je sais que le nègre n'est pas une statue de sel que dissolvent les pluies” (p. 248).

Téluée is above all a personal tale, lyric, nostalgic, even sentimental at times—though not offensively so—and ultimately reassuring. In the life of its characters, evil is tempered by good, suffering by joy, despair by pertinacity and folk wisdom, and we are left with a sense of veneration for those who can keep the faith in such circumstances: “*Téluée*, nous avons été battus pour cent ans, mais nous avons du courage pour mille ans, je te dis, je te dis . . .” (p. 218). But at the same time, as suggested by this last citation, it is a work of considerable social significance, an impressive compendium—to borrow a phrase from another Antillean language—of *toda la problematica negra*: slavery and its persistence in modern dress, poverty and misfortune, ambivalence and alienation, black identity and black culture, role-playing for whites, desperation and revolt, Guadeloupe versus France, and so on.⁹

Slavery appears in several forms, notably as a quandary, still present as the story ends: “J'essaye, j'essaye toutes les nuits, et je n'arrive pas à comprendre comment toute cela a pu commencer, comment cela a pu continuer, comment cela peut durer encore, dans notre âme tourmentée, indéçise, en lambeaux et qui sera notre dernière prison. Parfois mon coeur se fêle et je me demande si nous sommes des hommes, parce que, si nous étions des hommes, on ne nous aurait pas traités ainsi, peut-être” (p. 244; cf. 190). The old seer Man Cia

compares slaves to “les volailles ficelées dans les cages, avec leurs yeux d'épouvante,” recalls a master (“le Blanc des blancs”) so ruthless he would crush a black in his arms and burst his spleen, and implies that God is white: “C'est depuis longtemps que pour nous libérer Dieu habite le ciel, et que pour nous cravacher il habite la maison des blancs, à Belle-Feuille.” But she adds that now the fire is out, “le Blanc des blancs” long dead, and furthermore, “la cendre elle-même n'est pas éternelle” (pp. 60-61). There are also references to songs and stories of slavery, “de batailles sans espoir, et les victoires perdues de notre mulâtresse Solitude” (p. 227). And to the obstinate bigotry of the descendants of “le Blanc des blancs”—manifest is this reaction to a comment on Télumée's attractiveness: “Ne vous fiez pas aux apparences, disait froidement Mme Desaragne, le nègre est le nègre et depuis que la musique du fouet a quitté leurs oreilles, ils se prennent pour des civilisés . . .” (p. 109).

In the Caribbean the old order persists, by and large, because plantation agriculture has persisted—and the classic crop is sugar.¹⁰ So we are not surprised to find that for Télumée and her people “la canne” is tantamount to “la malédiction” (pp. 84, 199), that they dread the world of “l'usine Galba, la raffinerie et ses caves à vesou, ses quatre gargouilles, sa cheminée blanche dominant un paysage de champs de cannes appartenant à l'usine, de cases appartenant à l'usine et de nègres à l'intérieur de ces cases, appartenant à l'Usine, eux aussi” (pp. 188-89). At one point Télumée feels sure she will have to work in the cane to avoid starvation, but her fear is such that she first tries to live on wild fruits, “qui me jaunissaient le teint et me donnaient des lubies étranges, des hallucinations” (p. 195). Finally she succumbs, and finds herself at dawn among the haggard workers, some of them women with children, on their way to the fields. Here we find a number of vivid pages on the hazards of life in the cane: the heat, the insects, the volume of work, the legs wrapped in rags and the hands in bandages—which are no match for the nasty *piquants*, “[qui] voltigeaient, s'insinuaient partout, dans mes reins, mon dos, mon nez, mes jambes, pareils à des éclats de verre” (p. 199). First an *amarreuse*, Télumée adapts quickly, becomes a cutter, takes on “le roulement des hommes.” She starts smoking a pipe and drinking rum, first a little, then a lot, to help the perspiration flow, and joins in Sunday revels with coworkers, who scandalize “les bonnes âmes” in town after Mass. But after work she is sometimes so exhausted she collapses on her pallet without even undressing, and at dawn it all starts anew: “Et le jour se levait, et je reprenais ma route avec la sueur de la veille, les piquants de la veille, et j'arrivais sur la terre de l'usine et je brandissais mon coutelas, et je hachais ma peine comme tout le monde, et quelqu'un se mettait à chanter et notre peine à tous tombait dans la chanson, et c'était ça, la vie dans les cannes.” (p. 201). All this for “quelques pièces de zinc aux initiales de l'Usine, morue sèche, huile, sel, farine France et rhum de l'Usine, mélasse de l'Usine, sucre brut de l'Usine au prix obligatoire de l'Usine, passe-passe, deux sous pour un” (p. 200). And when prices go up and the workers can no longer feed their families, when the strike comes, the owners refuse to negotiate, the workers move to sack the mill, and the steam jets go on, killing three and blinding one. It is here that Télumée loses her second lover, the strong and wise Amboise (pp. 220-23).

Other violent events which underscore the insecurity of life include her encounter with Ange Médard, who has alienated her adopted child, Sonore (pp. 233-39); the multiple beatings and other indignities to which she is subjected by her first lover, Elie, after he has been broken by misfortune (pp. 148-66); a rape attempt by her white employer before her union with

Elie (pp. 110-11); the wound Ti Paille asks for, gets, and seems pleased with (p. 54); the murder of Télumée's father Angebert (p. 39); and the spat between twins which results in the death by fire of Méranée, who would have been her aunt (p. 24).

Along with man, the elements conspire—in the case of Elie, just mentioned, and later, following the death of Amboise (p. 225)—to promote misery and affliction, and there are frequent allusions to ill fate, as in these words which foreshadow the death of Méranée: “Malheur à celui qui rit une fois et s’y habitue, car la scélératesse de la vie est sans limites et lorsqu’elle vous comble d’une main, c’est pour vous piétiner des deux pieds, lancer à vos trousses cette femme folle, la déveine, qui vous happe et vous déchire et voltige les lambeaux de votre chair aux corbeaux . . .” (p. 23).

Furthermore, the characters in the novel often make references to the plight of blacks on earth—of which the following are representative: “. . . ah, nous les nègres de Guadeloupe, on peut vraiment dire que nous sommes à plat ventre, ah, ah (p. 50); “un nègre? un crabe sans tête et sans gîte, et qui marche à rebours” (p. 89); “le coeur du nègre est une terre aride que nulle eau n’amendera, un cimetière jamais rassasié de cadavres” (p. 148); “dans la bouche de sa grand-mère, Amboise avait appris que le nègre est une réserve de péchés dans le monde, la créature même du diable” (p. 215); and finally, “dis-moi le frère, quel élan sauvera du couteau le cabri attaché au milieu de la savane?”—which brings on this reflection: “. . . nous savions que la vérité de notre sort n’était pas en nous-mêmes, mais dans l’existence de la lame” (p. 219).

But, as we have seen, these same blacks have remarkable inner strength and resiliency. At work in the cane, Télumée comes upon a mature definition of their lot: “Et je compris enfin ce qu’est le nègre: vent et voile à la fois, tambourier et danseur en même temps, feinteur de première, s’efforçant de récolter par pleins paniers cette douceur qui tombe du ciel, par endroits, et la douceur qui ne tombe pas sur lui, il la forge, et c’est au moins ce qu’il possède, s’il n’a rien” (p. 200). She has learned to be strong as her forebears were strong, according to the formula of Man Cia and Reine Sans Nom: “. . . sois une vaillante petite négresse, un vrai tambour à deux faces, laisse la vie frapper, cogner, mais conserve toujours intacte la face de dessous” (p. 62; cf. 66). Thus when faced with the contempt of Mme Desaragne—“vous vous vautrez dans la fange, et vous riez” (p. 94)—she knows how to react, and makes her way through the words as though swimming in the clearest of water. The whites may rule the earth, but not the hearts and souls of the blacks. Here of course the whites are French, and evoke, in part, the distant motherland which Elie and Télumée have studied in school, learning to venerate her grandeur, majesty, nobility, and glory, “qui remontaient au commencement des temps, lorsque nous n’étions encore que des singes à queue coupée” (p. 81). At Belle-Feuille, where Télumée works, nothing is left to chance, everything has its time and place and “raison d’être bien précise” (p. 91), and she finds the atmosphere stifling, from time to time is suddenly sad and thirsty for a burst of laughter. When she visits home she is reluctant to talk about it since, “en vérité, tout Belle-Feuille tenait dans un dé à coudre” (p. 101).

Similarly Amboise, who spent seven years in France, finally came to look upon whites as “des bouches qui se gavent de malheur, des vessies crevées qui se sont érigées en lanternes pour éclairer le monde” (p. 216). In jail in Guadeloupe for attacking a gendarme during a strike, he had begun by doubting himself, had been told by his cell mate that “un blanc est blanc et rose, le

bon Dieu est blanc et rose et où se trouve un blanc, c'est là que se tient la lumière" (p. 215), had been taken aback by the "blackness" of his soul, and thus got the idea of going to France in the hope of washing it clean. But of course he fails, finds himself within a nightmare peopled by "esprits malins" who watch him pass with complete indifference, as though he did not exist. An invisible man, he was always warding off invisible blows from whites who struck, it seems, "sans y penser" (p. 216). In the words of Frantz Fanon: "Littéralement nous pouvons dire sans crainte de nous tromper que l'Antillais qui va en France afin de se persuader de sa blancheur y trouve son véritable visage."¹¹ So it is with Amboise, who overcomes his alienation and returns to Guadeloupe, wanting only to walk barefoot in the sun, talk as he had in the old days, in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, "et puis de se plonger dans l'eau profonde des femmes d'ici, de caresser nos courtes chevelures en crise et qui ne grandissent pas" (p. 216). But he is later plagued by the urge to kill a white, caught between the desire and his horror of acting on it. A sorcerer tells him he is possessed by Satan and thus beyond help, so he goes into the hills, away from all whites, and becomes a sawyer in the woods of Fond-Zombi, where Reine Sans Nom has her hut.¹² Ultimately he mellowed, and is left with a calm and quiet wonder toward "la fantaisie du nègre, sa beauté de chose inachevée, en perpétuel jaillissement." Only one who had crossed the sea and known the temptation to stay away from his homeland, to view it with foreign eyes, to repudiate it, could look upon his fellow blacks this way. "Il disait que des mains ennemies s'étaient emparées de notre âme et l'avaient modelée afin qu'elle se dresse contre elle-même" (p. 219).

Just as Amboise works out the riddle of his identity, so Télumée endures the rain and wind in her life and reaches the point where she can claim to have "bien failli ravir tout le bonheur de la terre" (p. 241). Both are attached to the land, to "cette terre perdue de Guadeloupe, qui avait tant besoin d'être aimée" (p. 218), and continue the tradition of folk wisdom represented by Man Cia, Reine Sans Nom and others. According to that tradition—already conspicuous in many of our citations—"les biens de la terre restent à la terre, et l'homme ne possède même pas la peau qui l'enveloppe" (p. 77); he has nothing but the feelings in his heart. And three paths are bad for him: to see the beauty of the world and say it is ugly, to get up early to do something he is incapable of, and to give free rein to his dreams, for the dreamer falls victim to his dream (p. 51). Man cannot escape his destiny: ". . . la rivière a beau chanter et faire ses méandres, il faut qu'elle descende à la mer et se noie" (p. 115). But he must live his life fully, counting on neither happiness nor misfortune, "pareil . . . aux feuilles des tamariniers qui se ferment la nuit et s'ouvrent le jour" (p. 121). As for blacks and whites: "Les canards et les poules se ressemblent, mais les deux espèces ne vont pas ensemble sur l'eau" (p. 111). And finally, as Man Cia declares in homage to Reine Sans Nom, "il y en a dont la vie ne réjouit personne et il y en a dont la mort même apaise les humains" (p. 179).

Such a death has meaning for all who knew the deceased, for the whole *community*, the importance of which has been pointed out by Reine Sans Nom herself. In response to a query from Télumée, who, during her first days with Elie, has felt something new and subtle being woven about her, the Queen comments on her own spider-web sketch of Fond-Zombi, drawn in the dirt at her feet, as follows: "Tu le vois, les cases ne sont rien sans les fils qui les relient les unes aux autres, et ce que tu perçois l'après-midi sous ton arbre n'est rien d'autre qu'un fil, celui que tisse le village et qu'il lance jusqu'à toi, ta case" (p. 127). And much later, after Elie has evicted her in favor of her

rival Laetitia, and Reine Sans Nom has helped her break the spell of "hébétude" caused by that event, it is the attentions of others that bring her back for good: "La folie est une maladie contagieuse, aussi ma guérison était celle de tous et ma victoire, la preuve que le nègre a sept fiels et ne désarme pas comme ça, à la première alerte" (p. 169). Returning to the death of Reine Sans Nom, we are able to observe another significant community activity:

L'homme n'est pas un nuage au vent que la mort dissipe et efface d'un seul coup. Et si nous autres, nègres des Fonds perdus, vénérons nos morts neuf jours durant, c'est pour que l'âme de la personne défunte ne subisse aucune brusquerie, qu'elle se détache progressivement de son coin de terre, de sa chaise, de son arbre préféré, du visage de ses amis avant d'aller contempler la face cachée du soleil. Ainsi avons-nous causé, chanté et somnolé neuf jours et neuf nuits, jusqu'à ce que l'âme de Reine Sans Nom s'allège du poids de la terre et prenne son envol. (p. 183)

Here, as on many other occasions, we note the presence of song, in *Téluée* the most pervasive of the folk arts, which also include dancing, storytelling, and instrumental music. Singing occurs at wakes (as above), during the celebration of Christmas (pp. 123, 163), and especially during work, in which case it serves to express joy (p. 135), give heart and relieve distress (pp. 92, 201), and no doubt also—particularly in the canefields—to promote proletarian and black solidarity (p. 201, quoted earlier). Amboise, who had always said "que ce n'était pas sa sueur qui engraisserait la terre des blancs" (p. 203), goes to work in the cane because *Téluée* is there, and breaks into a *caladja* especially as a way of approaching her. Similarly Elie, when he has finished building their hut, goes to serenade *Téluée* at Belle-Feuille, his melancholy reflecting their long separation: "Pourquoi vivre Odilo / Pour nager / Et toujours sur le ventre / Sans jamais / Sans jamais / Se mettre sur le dos / Un moment" (pp. 113-14).¹³ And Reine Sans Nom is presented as an accomplished folk artist who sang "des mazoukes lentes, des valse et des biguines doux-sirop" about "Yaya, Ti-Rose Congo, Agoulou, Peine procurée par soi-même et tant d'autres merveilles des temps anciens"—and also old slave songs which she rendered with particular feeling: ". . . la fine voix se détachait de ses traits de vieille et s'élevant dans les airs, montait très haut dans l'aigu, dans le large et le profond, atteignant des régions lointaines et étrangères à Fond-Zombi" (pp. 51-52).

As a teller of tales, Reine Sans Nom "ouvrait devant nous le monde où les arbres crient, les poissons volent, les oiseaux captivent le chasseur et le nègre est enfant de Dieu. Elle sentait ses mots, ses phrases, possédait l'art de les arranger en images et en sons, en musique pure, en exaltation. . . . avec une parole, on empêche un homme de se briser, ainsi s'exprimait-elle." She knew her stories thoroughly, and would tell five each Thursday to the young *Téluée* and Elie, but the fifth and last was always the same, "le conte de l'Homme qui voulait vivre à l'odeur" (p. 76). This story, which appears in the text, goes back to the time of the creation and early man, when "le diable était encore un petit garçon," and deals with a certain Wvabor Hautes Jambes, led astray by his disillusion with the perversity of other men. Its moral is as follows: ". . . si grand que soit la mal, l'homme doit se faire encore plus grand, dût-il s'ajuster des échasses." And further: ". . . le cheval ne doit pas te conduire, c'est toi qui dois conduire le cheval" (pp. 77-79).

Among the instruments the flute has a special role, extending to metaphors such as “ma petite flûte” (p. 47), “deux jambes deux flûtes” (p. 179), and “quel beau bambou au vent tu deviens et quelle bonne flûte tu feras, celui qui jouera de ta musique aura bien de la chance” (p. 100), but especially evident in the author’s portrayal of one of those lost souls of La Folie, the Egarés, who live outside the money economy, up the mountain from the community of “nègres errants, disparates, rejetés des trente-deux communes de l’île” who call themselves “la confrérie des Déplacés” (pp. 186-87). “Le plus mystérieux d’entre eux était un certain Tac-Tac ainsi nommé à cause de son vour-tac, l’énorme flûte de bambou qu’il portait toujours à l’épaule, suspendue pour l’éternité. C’était un vieux nègre couleur de terre brûlée, avec une figure un peu plate où venaient s’ouvrir deux yeux perdus, qui roulaient sur vous avec surprise et précaution, toujours émerveillés, dans l’étonnement de retrouver bêtes et gens.” He lived farther up than the others, at the very peak of the mountain, in a little tree hut with a rope ladder, came down the slope no more often than every two months—to trade crayfish, game or wild fruits for rum—and in the meantime did not like to be visited. But every morning at dawn the Déplacés would hear an ululating flute high in the trees: “. . . c’était Tac-Tac qui commençait à parler, selon son dire, toutes les langues de la terre. Et il soufflait de tout son corps par saccades . . . qui traversaient la voûte de la forêt tout droit pour venir s’engouffrer dans nos poitrines, en frissons, en sanglots, en amour et ça vous soulevait comme ça de terre tout droit, quand vous ouvriez les yeux” (pp. 187-88).

Tac-Tac is especially admired by Télumée’s friend and fellow cane-worker, Olympe, who says of him: “. . . ah, celui-là peut vraiment dire qu’il connaît toutes les langues de la terre, les langues comme elles doivent se parler, les langues . . . au moins, quand il prend sa flûte de bambou ce ne sont pas des mots de chien menteur qu’il jette dans l’air, c’est des vérités mêmes qui montent au ciel, je te dis . . .” (p. 197). And it is worth noting that this theme also appears in *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, where the heroine’s mate and fellow *marron*—the Mozambican Maïmouni, called “le divagant”—is not only a flute player but also one with a language problem, in that he knows little Creole and cannot communicate much in his native tongue.¹⁴ Music, clearly, is unlike language (though it may well be a kind of *langage*), for it cannot convey what all natural languages readily convey, yet seems to convey things largely inaccessible to language (manifest in thousands of autonomous systems)—presumably “universals” of some sort, at (or indeed beyond) the level of “toutes les langues de la terre.”¹⁵ Perhaps this is one level at which it is meaningful to speak of the Black Experience, as distinct from the myriad experiences of blacks within their cultures throughout the world.¹⁶

As we have seen, Télumée defines the black man as a “tambourier et danseur en même temps” (p. 200), and as a girl was urged to become “un vrai tambour à deux peaux” (pp. 62, 94). One is hard put to imagine black culture without drums, figurative and/or playable, so we are not surprised to find that the redoubtable Raymonique of *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes* was a fervent drummer: “Il vous battait Raymon le gros tambour N’goka aussi bien que ses ancêtres d’Afrique, c’est-à-dire: avec la fougue d’un amant; la délicatesse, douloureuse. d’un Vray-homme pour sa fille; et le respect qui fait hésiter les doigts, au bon moment, quand la peau du tambour rendue toute chaude, odorante, se met à vibrer toute seule, dirait-on, et que le batteur devient l’instrument de la musique secrète qui coule dans les veines des hommes, dans les branches des arbres et le contour sinuex des rivières.”¹⁷ And it is natural that Amboise, the strongest male figure in *Télumée*, be

similarly skilled. On the day set for their union in La Folie, a troupe of friends and neighbors arrives at Télumée's hut, "Amboise en tête, battant à coups légers un tambour de poitrine. Derrière lui venaient un violon de campagne, un sillac ronronnant et plusieurs chachas" (p. 208). After greetings from the others and verbal flowers from Amboise,

Les gens se mirent à rire, des verres, des bouteilles s'échangeaient et les diseurs de haute volée coulaient des regards attentifs à la ronde, calculant, soupesant l'assistance afin de ne pas se tromper dans le choix de leurs blagues.¹⁸ Tout était à sa place, la fête pouvait commencer. Amboise se mit à cheval sur un tambour et renversant la tête, il leva son bras droit avec effort, comme si tout ce qu'il avait vu, entendu, tout ce qu'il savait d'aujourd'hui et d'hier se tenait au bout de ses doigts tendus. A cet instant, nous disparûmes aux yeux de l'homme et ce fut pour lui un moment de solitude parfaite. Puis sa main se rabattit avec force, cependant que sa gorge s'ouvrait sur l'appel traditionnel aux esprits, aux vivants et aux morts, aux absents, les invitant à descendre parmi nous, à entrer dans le cercle creusé par la voix du tambour. (pp. 208-09)

Among the most vivid passages in *Télumée* are those describing the dancing at this celebration. First to perform is Olympe: "Toute ronde, emplie . . . elle fut le fruit à pain qu'une gaule a jeté de l'arbre et qui se met à rouler du haut du morne, dévalant traces et sentiers, descendant et remontant sous un puissant élan, au point de nous faire oublier que la terre sous ses pieds était plate." Her skin shines, her cheeks light up, she looks skyward, seeking, and loses herself, gets free of her body and voice, "de tous les hommes qui avaient piétiné, lacéré, déchiré sa charité. Elle tournait, se baissait, se relevait, d'un geste subtilisait nos tourments, portait nos existences aux nues pour nous les rendre, dépouillées de toute fange, limpides" (pp. 209-10). There are other dancers, then finally, as dawn approaches, it is the turn of Télumée, who acts out a journey from initial insecurity to reassurance—

Saisissant les deux pans de ma robe, je me mis à tourner comme une toupie détraquée, le dos courbe, les coudes relevés au-dessus des épaules, essayant vainement de parer des coups invisibles. Tout à coup, je sentis l'eau du tambour couler sur mon cœur et lui redonner vie, à petites notes humides, d'abord, puis à larges retombées qui m'ondoyaient et m'aspergeaient tandis que je tournoyais au milieu du cercle, et la rivière coulait sur moi et je rebondissais . . .

—and then to identification with those she has known and loved:

. . . et voici que mes mains s'ouvraient à la ronde, prenant les vies et les refaisant à ma guise, donnant le monde et n'étant rien, une simple spirale de fumée, accroché dans l'air de la nuit, rien que les battements du tambour qui sortaient sous les mains d'Amboise, et cependant existant de toutes mes forces, de la racine des cheveux au petit orteil de mes pieds. (pp. 210-11)

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the folk tradition is present in a fascinating aggregate of rites and beliefs. These are occasionally Christian, as in the case of the death of Reine Sans Nom (p. 177), the celebration of Advent and Christmas (pp. 160-63), references to church attendance (pp. 99, 201), and old Elie's desire to be buried in the cemetery, in the hope that

some fellow black might remember and pray for him, on All Saints' Day (p. 245). But it should not be forgotten that the Christian God is, in the first instance, the God of the whites, as we were told long ago by Roumain's Simidor Antoine: "Le Bondieu est bon, dit-on. Le Bondieu est blanc, qu'il faudrait dire."¹⁹ The more authentic heritage is suggested by the "appel traditionnel aux esprits" undertaken by Amboise, which is just one of a great many invocations of the world of spirits, demons, zombies, prophecies, spells, hexes, omens, stigmata, sorcery, conjuration, exorcism, folk and witch medicine, and the metamorphosis of humans into animals. There is nothing here so elaborate as the system of Haitian *vodù* so movingly exemplified in *Gouverneurs de la rosée*,²⁰ and it is doubtless safe to say that on the whole Guadeloupe has been more thoroughly Europeanized than Haiti. Yet it is equally clear that we are faced with a creole mix including elements descended from a number of African cultures, from the indigenous peoples of the region, and even from Asia.²¹

Early on we note the case of Jérémie, who has fallen in love with Toussine, later to be called Reine Sans Nom, and whose absent air leads his friends to suspect he is "sous l'emprise de la créature maléfique entre toutes, la Guiablesse, cette femme au pied fourchu qui se nourrit exclusivement de votre goût de vivre, vous amenant un jour ou l'autre, par ses charmes, au suicide" (pp. 14-15). Later we read of consultations with sorcerers (pp. 66, 217), words taken as prophecies (pp. 136-37), the belief that Télumée has been "transformée en zombie que les chiens reconnaissaient" (p. 151), the claim of Reine Sans Nom that after her death she will be Télumée's constant and invisible companion (pp. 174-75), the date of the alliance of Télumée and Amboise, set to coincide with "la lune montante, toujours favorable aux nouvelles unions" (p. 207), and the split skull of "l'Homme à la cervelle qui danse":

C'était un jeu de langue humaine, mais qui révélait le secret d'un être créé pour le mal. Dieu avait fait l'ange Médard pour corrompre le monde et c'est pourquoi le monde l'avait marqué, avait posé sur lui un coup de griffe définitif. . . . Un jour, à la suite de sordides chicanes, son frère lui avait porté un grand coup de coutelas, ouvrant et démantelant tout un côté de son crâne, juste là où de vagues tressautements étaient perceptibles, encore, sous le cuir chevelu. On disait que si sa tête avait été entière, et si la tige de ses cuisses avait pu se dresser, lancer quelque traînée brillante dans un ventre de femme, la propagation du mal n'aurait pas eu de fin. (pp. 230-31)

But it is above all Man Cia, sorceress and friend of Reine Sans Nom, who embodies the tradition, and she who passes it on to Télumée, as a girl always interested "lorsque les hommes se mettaient à parler d'esprits, de sortilèges, du compère qu'on avait vu courir en chien, la semaine passée, et de la vieille man Cia qui toutes les nuits planait au-dessus des mornes, des vallons et des cases de Fond-Zombi, insatisfaite de son enveloppe humaine. . . . cette femme . . . qui côtoyait les morts plus que les vivants" (pp. 54-55). Man Cia plays a dual role, as one feared and also appreciated: thus she is said to have inflicted a wound on Elie's father one night when she appeared as a great bird, then as a huge horse which slashed him with a hoof—but is nevertheless sought out for her skills as a healer (pp. 55-56). She is also an interpreter of dreams (p. 59) and of aberrations such as that of Elie, who she claims is possessed by an evil spirit. Here Reine Sans Nom addresses Télumée:

La première chose, c'est de désenchanter la case où tu te trouves, pour que l'esprit n'ait aucune prise sur toi. Je vais m'y mettre dès demain à fumer des herbes . . . [que man Cia] m'a données, afin que cet esprit s'en retourne dare-dare chez son maître. . . . Le lendemain à la première heure, grand-mère se munit de récipients de coco et les disposant autour de ma case, y fit brûler de l'encens, du benjoin,²² des racines de vétiver et des feuilles magiques qui produisaient une belle fumée verte, lente à se dissiper dans l'air, et qui entourait bientôt ma case d'un halo protecteur. (p. 157)

Later, after the death of Reine Sans Nom, Man Cia's faith in the efficacy of herbs is further illustrated by the bath she regularly prepares for Télumée, who goes to visit her on Sundays: the earthenware tub is filled with "une eau violacée par toutes sortes de feuillages magiques, paoca, baume commandeur, rose à la mariée et puissance de satan" (p. 189). And it is from her that Télumée learns not only the secrets of the plants, but also about the human body, "ses noeuds et ses faiblesses, comment le froter, chasser malaises et crispations, démissures. Je sus délivrer bêtes et gens, lever les envoûtements, renvoyer tous leurs maléfices à ceux-là mêmes qui les avaient largués. Cependant, chaque fois qu'elle était sur le point de me dévoiler le secret des métamorphoses, quelque chose me retenait, m'empêchait de troquer ma forme de femme à deux seins contre celle de bête ou de soucougnant volant, et nous en restions là" (p. 190). One evening Man Cia tells her not to be surprised "si au lieu de me trouver en chrétien, tu me trouves en chien" (p. 191), for she is tired of her human form. The metamorphosis takes place, and Télumée is disturbed at first, but then gets used to the black dog who still resembles her former self, and continues to visit her, till one day Man Cia is gone, and little by little her hut is taken over by wood lice and termites (pp. 192-93).

After the death of Amboise, Télumée withers to the point of becoming "cireuse, cadavérique," and is urged to "descendre sur la tombe de l'homme avec des branches piquantes d'acacia et de la fouetter tant que je pourrais, tant que je pourrais" (p. 223)—which she finally does, with the help of an appeal from Amboise in a dream. Shortly thereafter the elements strike—"ce n'étaient plus que trombes d'eau suivies d'un soleil rougeâtre, qui détachait la peau par plaques" (p. 225)—and she is called upon to practice the arts of Man Cia, first on animals, then humans, for she is thought to be a "dormeuse," "devineuse," and "sorcière de première." People bring to her "le malheur, la confusion, l'absurdité de leurs existences, les corps meurtris et les âmes, la folie qui hurle et celle qui se tait, les misères vécues en songe, toute la brume qui enveloppe le cœur des humains." One of her cases is Sonore, "une fillette de quatre à cinq ans, le corps envahi de plaies purulentes" (p. 226), whom she treats, and cures, as follows: "Je commençai à soigner l'enfant au séné, au semen-contra, au jus d'herbes. Je lui donnai des bains de cassia-lata, je l'humectai d'ail aux jointures, la frottai doucement des pieds à la tête" (p. 227). Later, when she tries to get rid of her reputation, she is thought to have lost most of her powers, "comme il arrive" (p. 228), and, having abjured sorcery, "certaines femmes du morne m'accusaient de conjurer les volontés, d'enlever les produits du ventre de leurs vaches, bref, j'avais inventé et créé la souffrance des hommes, j'étais l'effrayante" (p. 229). Finally, it is such charges on the part of Ange Médard which cause her to lose Sonore, after some eight or nine years of caring for her (pp. 229, 234-35). But she nevertheless helps Médard to die decently, and for this is given the name Télumée Miracle. Among her concluding reflections we find the following: "Et même si les étoiles se couchent, elles ont brillé et leur lumière clignote, encore, là où elle est venue se déposer: dans votre deuxième cœur" (p. 241).

While this survey of black themes, issues and attitudes is by no means exhaustive, it is presumably complete enough to show that *Téluée* is an absorbing social document as well as an appealing and stylistically innovative novel. Furthermore, like *Un Plat de porc* and *La Mulâtresse*, I take it to be an important feminist text, well worth attention from scholars of that persuasion. (Matrifocality is the rule in all three novels, Mariotte and Solitude are militants, and the young *Téluée*, unaware of her "victoire de femme" over M. Desaragne (p. 112), is later perplexed by what it means to be a woman on earth [p. 159].) The work certainly deserves consideration from a number of other points of view not taken here; meanwhile, it is hoped that these remarks have clarified some of the questions posed by the work of Simone Schwarz-Bart.²³

NOTES

¹Simone et André Schwarz-Bart, *Un Plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). On the genesis of this work, and its position in their Solitude cycle, see André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *La Mulâtresse Solitude*," *Figaro Littéraire*, 26 January 1967, pp. 1, 8, 9—as well as *Un Plat de porc*, p. 4 and back cover. The title of the *Figaro* piece refers to the whole cycle, which embraces André's later novel, *La Mulâtresse Solitude* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

²While not part of the Solitude cycle, *Téluée* is not entirely unrelated to it. Let two examples serve to show that links can indeed be found: In his *Figaro* memoir André refers to the cycle as "un collier de sept pierres"; this same figure, variously applied, reappears in *Un Plat de porc* (p. 112), *La Mulâtresse* (p. 56) and *Téluée* (p. 54). And Solitude herself is a background presence in *Téluée* (p. 227), as well as *Un Plat de porc* (wherein the protagonist Mariotte is her granddaughter).

³This could be a lesson learned in part from André, whose *Mulâtresse* is at once "one of the most exquisitely wrought lyric novels of recent years and an utterly convincing representation of the reality of historical suffering." From the review of Robert Alter, *Commentary*, May 1973, p. 94.

⁴Thus, when I visited Guadeloupe after completing an earlier version of this paper, I was not surprised to find that it looked and felt almost exactly as I had expected it would.

⁵A great deal of information on this field is gathered in Dell Hymes, ed., *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

⁶On French and Creole in the Antilles, see Wilson Lima, "Recherche de l'antillanité," *Présence Africaine*, 76 (1970), 43-62.

⁷Michel Leiris, *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe* (Paris: Unesco and Gallimard, 1955), p. 110. This is far and away the most revealing book I have so far seen about the people of these islands. Also useful is Bertrand Edouard and Germain Bouckson, *Les Antilles en question: Assimilation et conflits de culture dans les DOM* (Fort-de-France: n.p., Imprimerie Antillaise St-Paul; n.d., Preface dated 1972)—which lists a number of recent sources (pp. 253-55).

⁸*Gouverneurs de la rosée* (Paris: Editeurs Français Réunis, 1946). Roumain occasionally supplies a gloss or translation in a footnote, a device not used by the Schwarz-Barts in *Un Plat de porc*, which is also a linguistically hybrid work, and, like *Gouverneurs*, admirably innovative.

⁹Yet it is worth noting that there is not a single reference to Africa, nor to the horrors of the sea voyage from there to America. These are masterfully evoked by André in *La Mulâtresse*, however.

¹⁰On this subject see D. R. Hoy, "Changing Agricultural Land Use on Guadeloupe, French West Indies" (1962), reprinted in M. M. Horowitz, ed., *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean* (Garden City: Natural History Press, 1971), pp. 267-90, and, for an especially competent account of sugar monoculture, M. Moreno Fragnals, *El ingenio*, I (La Habana: Unesco, 1964), tr. Cedric Belfrage as *The Sugarmill: The Socioeconomic Complex of Sugar in Cuba* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

¹¹Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952; rpt. Paris: Seuil, Collection Points, No. 26, 1971), p. 125, n. 16. For a recent account of the "internalization of white values," see David Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 250-64; quote from p. 258.

¹²Though I have elected not to discuss them here, the novel presents other cases of shaky identity, despair, and extreme response, notably those of Germain, killer of Angebert (pp. 37-41); Elie, who becomes a violent drunk (pp. 144ff.); Télumée herself, who slips to a state of "hébétude totale" after losing Elie, and in her old age prepares to kill Ange Médard with a pair of scissors (pp. 166, 235-37); and also Médard, who has lived his whole life with a "poche de fiel posée sur son coeur" (p. 237).

¹³Note the tight metrical structure of this little song, which has the scheme a6 b3 c6 b3 b3 a6 c3.

¹⁴*La Mulâtresse Solitude*, pp. 113-25.

¹⁵Assuming that music is the least referential, most purely formal, of the arts, we are still left with the question of whether its form is most analogous to *langue* or to *parole* (performance), and further, to linguistic or paralinguistic communication. These issues are considered by Charles Keil, who claims that "the vast majority of cultures the world over have musical styles that are performance-oriented, dance-derived, and at least partially improvised"; these styles are wedded to modes of response more motor than mental, and communicate less like language than like kinesics, proxemics, etc. See his "Motion and Feeling through Music," in Thomas Kochman, ed., *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), pp. 83-100; quote from p. 100.

¹⁶On the latter, insofar as the New World Blacks are concerned, see N. E. Whitten, Jr. and J. F. Swzed, eds., *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1970). It should not be forgotten, of course, that musical structures arise in specific culture contexts, as do linguistic ones, though the latter correspond to smaller units of culture.

¹⁷*Un Plat de porc*, pp. 126-27; cf. 223, n.3.

¹⁸The behavior alluded to here recalls that investigated by several contributors to the Kochman anthology (note 15 above). For a review of this book see *Language*, 51(1975), 243-47.

¹⁹*Gouverneurs de la rosée*, p. 187.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 67-76 and *passim*. Much has been written on *vodú*; one easily accessible account is that of G. E. Simpson, "The Belief System of Haitian Vodun" (1945), reprinted in Horowitz (note 10 above), pp. 491-521.

²¹See Leiris, *Contacts*, pp. 44-70.

²²A reminiscence of Baudelaire's "Correspondances"? Tongue in cheek?

²³*Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* has appeared in English, tr. Barbara Bray as *The Bridge of Beyond* (New York: Atheneum, 1974).