

SUBVERTING FRENCH CULTURE VIA CREOLE TEACHERS OF FRENCH: RAPHAËL CONFIANT'S *MAMZELLE LIBLELULE*

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ABSTRACT



The French language continues to be a tortuous issue for Martinicans and their peculiar reality of being both Caribbean and French. The island, along with Guadeloupe, still has not been able to wrench itself from the colonial grips of France. The process to independence is a difficult one since France showers the islanders with goodies equivalent to what citizens of mainland France receive. Martinique, like many areas in the Caribbean, has developed a Creole language overtime. This so happens to be the first language of developmental contact, and herein lies the problem: French is the official language and the language of sophistication and pedagogy. When students, who have learned Creole first at home, matriculate into the education system, it's a hurdle from some to master the master's language. The irony is, the gatekeepers of French, the teachers, are born Creole Martinicans who betray their loyalty to Creole and side with French, and oppress Creole speakers who find it difficult to master French. Authors, like Confiand, who have gone through the education system in Martinique, look back with an eye of revenge on these ruthless educators. However, his subversion and critique of French is in no way vulgar, since care must be taken in how he curses the French hand that feeds him and other Martinicans. Nevertheless, his project exposes the hypocrisies and inadequacies of the French system of education through clever literary devices and narrative techniques, in effect, camouflaged, like a chameleon, as he proceeds indirectly in his subversive agenda.

Keywords: *Subversion, Chameleon, Creole, French, Language, Martinicans, Indirect, Subtle.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Prolific Martinican writer, Raphaël Confiant, uncovers grave problems in acquiring French in the formal system of education in his island country. He goes on in his novel, *Mamzelle Libellule*, to expose an inept school system that ironically demands mastery of French before entry, when schools are the ones to equip students in French. Though psychologically down and out after the episode with Godmother Hermancia (the woman Adélise, the protagonist was sent to learn French), the mother, now out and about, still desires that her daughter master the master's language. The mother, in truth, struggles to save her struggling child from a system merciless to stragglers. With this reality in mind, she initially hopes to stem the problem by registering Adélise with madhead Hermancia. Despite the let-down, Adélise's mother, a *chestnut*, enrolls Adélise in the local school, hoping for better.¹

Confiant employs colonialism's own language to destabilise colonialism. By degrees, he magnifies colonial emblems with adjectives seen in a *huge* Médor, the dog that barked noisily and unstopably, outstanding *red* and *orange* bougainvilleas, *imposing* villas, *enormous* concrete structures of La Rosière, and Hermancia's *aggressive* perfume. Confiant now emphasises the fear the local school drives into pupils, a fear that overwhelms to the point of numbness (60). With the description of La Rosière and the massive villa, consider the author's depiction of this colonial institution! The school boasts "a *big yellow* building, with its *asphalt* courtyard dominated by an *enormous* tropical pear tree" (italics mine) (60). The tree, similar to the bougainvillea and hibiscus, satisfies the colonial agenda to replant the Antillean landscape. By solidifying France's *bétonisation* campaign, these asphalt structures become as faults in Martinique's land structure. Why, the school building even provokes didaskaleinophobia in Adélise. But instead of frontally attacking the school, Confiant focuses

crabwise on the child's fear, as well as subtle adjectives, prompting the reader to deduce the monstrosity in the school system.

SUBTLE SUBVERSION—THE LITOTE

Confiant subverts the French teacher through a litote by understating her ineptitude. He re-presents ambivalent language—a feature of Creole economics and of the *imbongi*, the African praise poet, who praises and chastises—to represent the teacher. The narrative voice in the novel, *Mamzelle Libellule*, compares to Chiuta/ God, who becomes chameleon by issuing contradictory messages. After getting enrolled in school on the first day, Adélise mentions that "my teacher wasn't a bad woman; she paid no attention, however, to slow pupils like me" (60). What does the author hope to accomplish by this imprecision, "wasn't a bad woman?" Ironically, *di teacha no care bout di tuff head pickney dem* [the teacher does not care about the dunce children. The reader cannot help but wonder how worst can a teacher get, who prejudices slow learners, since such bias universally contradicts best practices in teaching. No middle ground exists in this French system that is a steep learning curve for some and a steep learning curve for others. Hermancia's collecting money under false pretense and now the school's duplicitous claim to nurture the island's children constitute an elaborate *ignis-fatuus* that inheres in the education system.

SUBTLE SUBVERSION OF FRENCH VIA CREOLE

Through the teacher's creolophobia, Confiant reveals French as a monstrosity in the lives of Creole subjects. In other words, the elegant *langue* causes languishing for students. The teacher humiliatingly ties a black shoelace with a chicken bone around the neck of the child who communicates in Creole *pour encourager les autres* [to scare off others]. The child, in turn, supervises other children. The dreaded shoelace passes to the next victim who speaks Creole. French, as apple of discord, drives the abuse. When school dismisses, whichever child ends up wearing the necklace receives an excruciating twenty two smacks on the finger tips with a ruler. Compounding the punishment is that the child must write (with sore fingers) two hundred times: "JE NE

¹ A Martinican proverb calls women "chestnuts" and men "breadfruits," because a woman knocked down, like a fallen chestnut, always sprouts, whereas a man in the same situation rots on the ground like a breadfruit.



DOIS PAS PARLER CRÉOLE EN CLASSE” (61). Confiant’s deliberate capitalisation presents the once enchanting language as monstrous, symbolically screaming at the child. *Wat a hevvy wuck lode di poor Kreyol pickey dem mus carri!*

By depicting Creole as natural, Confiant alludes to the unnaturalness of French, and frees Adelise from justifiable punishment. This saying-one-thing-to-mean-the-other resembles chameleon camouflage. In the narrative, the students suffer for speaking their ‘natural language.’ Almost always, Adelise, in the heat of the moment, becomes classroom scapegoat, since those wearing the collar tease and infuriate her to the point where she speaks Creole. She emphasises her “caractère soupe-au-lait,” which causes her to “tombe[r] en colère,” and to end up being “la victime expiatoire...” (61) in the class. *Soupe-au-lait* [milk soup] derives etymologically from the tendency of the milk in soup to overflow during cooking if left without supervision. The expression treats ire as natural. By associating blood boiling with communicating in Creole, Confiant suggests the native dialect occurs spontaneously as opposed to French that Adelise can only scripturally copy from the teacher. Confiant’s vade *mecum* speaks why Adelise speaks in Creole: “We declare that Creoleness is the cement of our culture and that it ought to rule the foundations of our Caribbeanness” (891). Exegetically, “la victime expiatoire” [scapegoat]—another important expression in this classroom passage—corresponds to the scapegoat, a Greek term which translates “goat to Azazel,” or “a goat on him all the sins of Israel.” As Azazel, Adelise bears the cumulative responsibility for students who transgress French speaking rules. Like this goat that wanders off into the wilderness, Adelise suffers marginalisation. Her suffering indirectly faults the French system in four ways: for the severity of punishment, for failing to punish the student who goads her into speaking Creole, for unjustly punishing students who speak their maternal language, and for distastefully treating slow learners as below the salt.

With Adelise’s metaphorically obstreperous body, Confiant magnifies both the unnaturalness of French and cruelty of the education system. Despite punishment, she never masters French, as her body

perpetually resists the imposition of the language on it. Greek to Adelise, French torments the child who beta learns the language if she envisions self-actualisation. The reader sees the obstacles to speaking French in the classroom, when Adelise says that her “tongue tried to turn eleventy thousand somersaults in [her] mouth” (61). With no sound coming up, the child remains in tears. By painting a struggling child, Confiant elicits the reader’s sympathy. At the same time, he unveils a ruthless French system of education by exaggerating the child’s frailty, her linguistic incompetence, and her Sisyphean efforts to learn French. And yet, the teacher’s lovely French enchants the child! Adelise’s plight mirrors a larger national context in which Martinicans, including Chamoiseau and Confiant, struggle in a Creole and French tug-o-war. The language that enchants, disenchants. The Creole expression condenses the bitter-sweet reality: “Wat sweet yuh a go sour yuh” [What is good for you will be bad for you].

The author, by way of Adelise, hints at his own ambivalence towards French. Such chameleonic sitting-on-the-fence sees Confiant undermining French, while he valorises the language elsewhere in the novel. In fact, Confiant’s encomium for French lines the novel. One woman faints at a political campaign upon hearing the “loveliness” of Aimé Césaire’s French oration that lulls Adelise “on billows of sweetness” (110). Additionally, Adelise describes Féfé as “affect[ing] a French of overbearing pomposity” (61). Worthy of mention, too, is Adelise’s encounter with a mulatto in the Select-Tango bar in town. His “beautiful French dazes” her and causes her to “plunge headlong into happiness,” and this plunge “went on forever” (112). Confiant may not be head over heels for French, but he is surely careful not to bite too hard the hands that feed him since, as seen in Postnegritude discussions, his career in writing snowballed thanks to French. There is a way in which both Creolist authors and their characters cannot fully hate French. But *duh*: “Fish cyaan vex wid water!” exclaims the Creole proverb. As Mich_le Praeger establishes: “The [Creolists] enrich [French] and therefore protect it against...the American language...Confiant [has] tried uniquely writing in Creole and [has] returned to French” (155). The



Creolists, sons of France and Martinique, themselves admit to this complicated relationship with French when they cite, as example, a son of a German and a Haitian naturally torn between several languages and “caught in torrential ambiguity” (903).

ELEVATING FRENCH TO KNOCK IT DOWN

But wait! Before running with this commanding postulation that Confiant extols French in these passages, an equally strong, or even stronger, argumentation supposes that he undermines French through Adélise’s non-comprehension of the national language, which puts her in harm’s way. The author essentially employs the ‘wat-sweet-yuh-gonna-sour-yuh’ rhetoric, an irony, to uncover French’s two-edged sword. In one of the accounts, Adélise, enraptured by Féfé’s French, allows him to pimp her to top dogs. In reality, the speakers of French, like Hermancia and Giriane, are sinister and exploitative and shameless in their *embarras de richesses*. The Haitian aphorism cautions: “Li parle franse,” which means: “He speaks French or beware!” After citing that Adélise’s poverty-stricken boyfriend cannot help her in any shape or form, Féfé-la-prestance [Féfé the Fine], one of Martinique’s finest French speakers, coaxes her to sleep with one of these bulls that owns a huge, bougainvillea-guarded kennel. Féfé’s argument seems fine when, truth be told, it is the client’s hefty reward that drives this ‘concern’ for Adélise’s welfare. She must deal with severe compunction for being a bitch in her dangerous, extra-common-law dealings hidden from her mate. Confiant thus reveals how Féfé endangers Adélise’s life. The author further undermines the French-speaking man by associating him with homosexuality, arguably, the Caribbean’s most heinous lifestyle. No French speaker goes unpunished in *Mamzelle Libellule*.

French constitutes a double-edged sword for Adélise. A mulatto, who has a French similar to Féfé’s, sweeps her off her feet, nearly costing her her life. Without knowing the man, she dances with him to the ire of her *man* [partner], Homère. Unknown to Homère, Adélise goes off when the bar light goes off, engages in hot sex with the mulatto, and returns before the light returns. With scene after scene, Confiant paints the national language in a gloomy

scenery with people captivated by French. These examples with the mulatto and Féfé evoke an ambivalence towards French, an ambivalence the child feels even as her teacher, *de haut en bas*, throws her a deathly look that resembles a cock spur. The anonymous, not-so-bad teacher, who thumbs her nose at Creole, “darts one of those ferocious looks at Adélise when she fails to respond in French” (61).

DEFEATHERING THE TEACHER OF FRENCH

Through the imagery of the fighting cock, an embedded and enduring Caribbean cultural norm, Confiant uncloaks the true colours of the instructor Adélise introduces as “not a bad woman.” Cockfighting is one of Martinique’s national sports. While not all cockfights terminate in death, death terminates all cockfights. Depicting Adélise in a deathly fight underscores resistance to learning French: “If I’d been a fighting cock and her eyes spurs, I’d have been laid flat out on the ground” (61). Fighting gamecocks surface in other island cultures. In *Why the Cocks Fight* (2000), Michele Wucker *wuck* [works] the conventional cock image to account for the antagonism that characterises Haitian and Dominican relations. Confiant appropriates the symbol to represent the linguistic deadlock between French and Creole. Unless intervention takes place, a gory combat ensues with each contender mauling the other with spurs and beaks. Compared to spurs, the teacher’s eyes envision the death of Adélise and her Creole language. However, as fighting cock, Adélise remains resistant to the very end. The resistance also surfaces in the alienation between Adélise and the nameless school teacher.

Confiant defeathers the teacher and exposes her entrails for putting Adélise out of school. His rhetoric is a case of “cock mout kill cock” [being condemned by one’s admission]. Stated fabulously, the not-so-bad Fowl recommends that Chicken/Pullet leave the aviary, roost elsewhere, and start scratching for food. What a benignant brooder she operates! The cruelly kind Fowl is a Fowl Hawk! Mother Hen, aware that her Pullet cannot pee-pee nor cluck-cluck in French, visits the coop to ascertain her chick’s growth. Mother Hen’s squawk for help



falls to the ground. Fowl chickens out on her duty: “*Elle a trop de difficultés en français. Je pense qu’il serait mieux pour elle que vous l’enleviez de l’école et que vous lui cherchiez un travail*” [She has too many difficulties in French. I think it would be better for you to take her out of school and look s job for her] (italics in text) (61). Then Fowl, having greater concern for classroom presents than for positive classroom presence, clucks an accismus when Mother Hen, bowing and scraping, gifts her some yellow-fleshed bocodji yam and a bunch of dwarf tangerines:² “I couldn’t possibly accept such charity from you” (61). Imagine! As head of the flock, she culls Chicken instead of taking the fledgling under her wings and, without conscience, prepares her mature crop for food. The sky is really falling for Chicken Little, now put out in fowl weather. Hen dispatches her In-City for better, but if it ain’t feathers, it’s chickens; Chicken ends up perching with a flock of prostitutes in a bitter hen war In-City over Martinican cocks. Without saying, Confiant is saying that French causes many Martinicans, like Adelise, to brood. Since Fowl keeps crossing the line to side with French at the expense of Creole, the riddle challenger asks: “Why does Fowl always cross the line, roll in the dirt, and cross the line again?”³ O how Confiant wishes he could pluck these Fowl slavers: “School teachers of the great period of French assimilation were the slave traders of our artistic impulse” (899). Confiant, by presenting Fowl’s cacklings in italics, expresses a third time how foreign Fowl’s French sounds sound in a Creole roost.

Despite the focus on French acquisition, no pedagogically sound methodology emerges with this teacher nor Hermancia. Why, in terms of teaching, there is nothing—zilch, naught, zip, zero—taking place! How ironic! Teachers that do not teach! The only subject in the curriculum seems to be French. The non-mention of Mathematics or other core curriculum areas is a sine of a woefully wanting system. Confiant invokes meaning through the non-

² The bocodji yam and dwarf tangerines are popular Creole staples. By willingly accepting these humble food provisions, Confiant paints the teacher, as he does Hermancia, as able receivers who ably deliver in their areas of incompetence.

³ She was consistently a dirty double-crosser.

inclusion of an issue. In Édouard Glissant’s language of detour, Confiant is “saying by not saying.” The discussion, thus far, in this chapter privileges chameleon indirection in communicating meaning. Even in silence the author speaks. So, when mum’s the word for Adelise called upon to speak French time after time, Confiant is silently sidelining the all-important language. Such muteness communicates the child’s fear, ignorance, and refusal to engage an unnatural language despite her mother’s admonition to speak in French. For a certainty, *dum tacent clamant* [though they are silent, they cry aloud, or silence speaks volumes]. By the same token, the author’s silence on teaching methods, while painstakingly describing student marginalisation and teacher incompetence, clearly dashes against the education system in *Mamzelle Libellule*.

FURTHER INDIRECT ATTACK ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

As with *Mamzelle Libellule*, Confiant deconstructs anti-creole ideologies through indirection in *Ravines du devant-jour*. ‘Ravine,’ a French word, defines the pleasurable children’s space away from adults. *Devant-jour*, the Creole word for ‘dawn,’ communicates the children’s preferred outing times. This autobiography, therefore, celebrates space and time, and facilitates authorial doubling much like Chemille in Taylor Brown’s *Chameleon*. The Creole novel, which circumvents French rules and elevates Creole, follows Young Confiant between the ages five to nine in a countryside district of Macédonie with his grandparents and several aunts. He later moves to the capital, Fort-de-France, with his nuclear family. On the authorial level, Confiant’s *dépaysement*, due to his rupture with Creole at age nine, leads him to re-right and rewrite the wrong, avenging himself of past injustices. Confiant thus becomes Student Raphaël, escaping from his depressed reality to liberate his repressed and oppressed language, thereby finding a *ravine* in *Ravines*. Confiant admits that “it would be an impoverishment not to reinvest in this language [Creole]” (899).

In *Ravines*, Confiant rejects Creole stereotypes forwarded by the school mistress and Tante Emérante, while conferring on Creole the *Lettres de noblesse*. By employing subversive irony



and peripeteia, he removes Creole from the lowest rung of the ladder, and rubbishes notions of an inferior language. He creates everyday settings in which French speakers of Creole astonishes the reader in their natural use of the dialect, which they otherwise spurn. In other words, he causes those who hate to speak in Creole to speak in Creole. The naturalness in speaking Creole in *Ravines* compares to Adélise's blurting out in Creole when angry. The blurting now occurs with both Student Confiant's⁴ teacher and his aunt, the primary foci of this discussion that exemplifies chameleon-in-chameleon.

Come hell or high water, Confiant sets out to avenge his childhood mistreatment and to expose French-speaking Creole females as garden-variety. By demonstrating Creole as the natural language of Creole speakers of French, Confiant rags those boasting of their rags-to-riches story, those privileging French and undermining Creole. In *Ravines*, Confiant, now Student Raphaël, pays back a cruel teacher for lacerating the students' obsession with Creole. Young Confiant's account corroborates Adélise's story of teacher brutality to students who communicate in Creole. Both youths cite a collar on which hangs a sort of molar of a maniocou, in the Creole language, the opossum of the tropics.⁵ *Ravines* identifies a language ladder with Creole at the lowest rung, Français-France (French from France) in a position of ascendancy, and an equidistant French spoken in his family. And what better way to subvert language hierarchy than through Chemille-like, innocent eyes similar to what Confiant does through the eyes of Adélise: "A new look ...somewhat like a child's look, questioning in front of everything, having no postulates of its own, and putting into question even the most obvious facts" (890).

Through subversive irony, Confiant repudiates this language hegemony when he highlights the naturalness of Creole over French for

⁴ For critical purposes, Confiant is author while Student Confiant, Young Confiant, and Raphaël refer to Confiant's alter-egos.

⁵ The creature that features in the epithet, "pity the poor opossum," is a marsupial often reductively maligned as a giant, dirty, scavenging rat.

the dialect-hating mistress. Later on in the day, after the mistress curses a student for speaking Creole, Young Confiant describes her ironically uttering Creole during coitus with Parrain Salvie, his uncle. That evening, in a game of two equal halves, the upright schoolmistress celebrates her promotion by having sex upright right behind a door, disregarding the sacrosanct French language in the height of her pleasure, as she howls: "*Ba mwen dot! Dot! Dot!*" [Give it to me, my darling! Again! Again!] (83). *Blow wow* [Jumping Judas]! What a *fucks pass*⁶ the pupil's pupils witness! The putatively cultivated instructor swimmingly utters words in the Creole she claims may soil her reputation. How effortlessly the pedagogue falls victim to the tried and true Creole refrain: "Scawful dawg nyam dutty pudden!" The dialect-scorning canine pedant now wallows in the sludge of Creole. By stepping back three-letter spaces, the lettered defender of French or the vulgarian becomes the vulgar she detests. Contradictory thoughts surge through the pupil's mind since, in the pedant's sexual euphoria, she barks up realms she forbids her students to enter. *Cock mout kill cock again!* Her facility with Creole contradicts her own logic that this language is the sociolect of plantation Negroes. Through Student Confiant as *voyeur*, the reader sees privileged information on language hierarchy, similar to Confiant's description of Adélise's mother, who demands her daughter to speak French upon seeing Giriane in *Mamzelle Libellule*. Commenting on the passage in *Ravines*, Edgard Sankara states: "The visible [sexual] act subverts the hierarchy that elevates French above Creole, since the contradiction surfaces through the child's vision" (125). The teacher in *Ravines* differs little from an irate Adélise, since both females cannot repress Creole in natural human settings. Confiant explicates the pitfall of a Creole speaker, who hates being a speaker of Creole: "It is comparable to this snake which, though it has been chased around the hills, reappears in our huts without warning, because Creole is linked to our very existence, and because, in the final analysis... [Creole] is the language which more than any other language belongs to us" (899-900). Confiant essentially

⁶ How some Creole Jamaicans pronounce *faux pas*.



portrays a renascent Creole in these characters.

Through the teacher's second ironic utterance in Creole, Confiant undermines her and elevates the dialect. It bears recalling Stambuli, a political chameleon in Englund's *A Democracy of Chameleon*. When called to explain a gendarmerie's attack on a journalist, he ironically displaces the blame from the police onto the journalist. Confiant similarly shifts blame from students to teacher for educational underperformance in French and student marginalisation. By uttering Creole when angry, Student Confiant's teacher unwittingly proves that Creole is facile for Martinicans, not just for the *déclassé*. Through another switcheroo, Confiant Raphaël deconstructs language shibboleths. This lady of France, the teacher, described as black as mortal sin with pink powder on her cheeks in her high heels surprises the class when a student angers her: "We had never suspected that she could understand our Creole until the day when she slapped a student who insulted his neighbor with a resounding "Bonda manman'w!" [Your mother's bottom] (81-82). The Argus-eyed students, after this *gaffe*, take the "school teacher[s]"/ "slave trader[s]" words (899) *cum grano salis*, and reject French vocabulary, because Creole already boasts equivalent words, as *di teacha harself demonstrate*. Her actions deride French as the *soi-disant* language of distinction, and rather than being above the salt, the black, spike-heeled woman is as common *like* the commoners she does not like. She can never avoid her first language, because "nuh matta how Boar Hog hide unda Sheep wool, him grunt betray him" [People's true colours will always come to the surface]. Since the Caribbean's first language is Creole, on the authority of *Éloge*, even for those who consciously refuse to speak in Creole, "they dream in Creole, they resist in Creole, and they unconsciously think in Creole" (899). Confiant ridicules the teacher by representing the lady of France as black as sin.⁷ The two incompatible representations (lady of France and black as sin) again highlight the oddity of Creole Martinicans, who reject local culture for French

culture. Confiant blames departmentalisation for Martinicans' warped vision: "Assimilation, through its pomps and works of Europe, tried unrelentingly to portray our lives with the colors of Elsewhere" (900). On the character level, Student Raphaël capitalises on a rare occasion to mock a pedant. As if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, this jet-black woman, *à haut talons* and in pink powder, likely evokes any *monkey in makeup*, that is, a circus clown in the child's mind. Like Adélise's teacher and Hermancia, Student Confiant's teacher comes up in the French system, and prevents those coming in from coming in. These prim and proper *parvenus* evoke the pithy saying of the late, esteemed Jamaican Professor, Rex Nettleford: "A butu (lower class person) in a Benz is still a butu."

In the chapter, "Ange dépeignés," in *Ravines*, Confiant reworks Creole stereotypes and cast them onto French. In another game of two equal halves, Confiant details the failed wedding of the plantation master's daughter. A double-dealing groom and his brother targets De Cassagnac, the affluent plantation proprietor. The two siblings' conciliabule reflects irony as the brother communicates in a *patois* from France rather than French. This decision perturbs Young Confiant since the French dialect sounds similar to, yet different from, Creole. The conversation details a *consensus adacium* by the two brothers to purloin De Cassagnac's jewellery, then abscond without the groom marrying the plantation owner's daughter. By verbatimly detailing the *tête-à-tête* with its surreptitious and nefarious content, Confiant renders the *patois* from France humorous. The boy's eavesdropping from a treetop exposes him to a different French vernacular and unfolds the irony of the pejorative prescription 'patois,' which the French employ to denote Creole. In this scene, Confiant redirects the term, 'patois,' to name the local French dialect he derides in *Éloge*: "The French, so called 'Français-banane,' which is to standard French what vulgar Latin is to classical Latin, constitutes undoubtedly what is most stereotypical in interlanguage, and that by which it irresistibly conveys ridicule" (901).

⁷ Jamaicans often *cuss out* each other by saying: "Yuh black lakka..."



In another account, Young Confiant's Tante Emérante speaks Creole in a life-threatening situation, revealing the *poseur* she is. Both he and his aunt travel to Grande Anse, a town famous for prescriptivism. Like his and Adelise's teacher and Hermancia, Tante Emérante chooses French over Creole. During an impending cataclysm, he remarks the irony in his aunt's exhortation not to communicate in Creole. In a *coup de théâtre*, the aunt subconsciously utters the dialect before Young Raphaël when the unanticipated rise in the sea level menaces the lives of the town's sleeping inhabitants: "Yo pa pou konnèt, fout! [And they do not care] she says in a monologue...uttering without realizing it, the Creole language she was ashamed of" (165). *Cock mout...!* Through the explosion of Emérante's Creole tongue in an organic emotional situation, Confiant tantes her for derogating, painting a hypocrite woefully wanting in her *noblesse oblige*. *Éloge* reinforces why Creole speakers cannot avoid speaking Creole: "In [Creole], we resist...It is the initial means of communication of our deep self, or our collective unconscious" (899). In view of *Éloge's* pronouncement, Confiant rejects treating Creole as an antipode to French when both languages share a propinquity—coming from Emérante's mouth. For a fact, you can take the *butu* out of the ghetto, but you cannot take the ghetto out of the *butu*.

Via the authorbiographical novel, Creolist writers seek to uncover deficiencies in French and to elevate Creole, thereby defending and illustrating *Créolité*. Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique* views autobiography as a communicative medium between reader and writer. Written differently, the writer-autobiographer contracts with the reader to validate narrative authenticity. Confiant's evocation of pertinent historical accounts adds gravitas to the innocence of an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical narrative. His severance from Creole, his maternal language, at the tender age of nine, necessitates chameleonic deployment to 'autobiographise,' or 'semi-autobiographise.'⁸ *Éloge* laments: "The tragedy

lived by many of our writers comes from the castration which, linguistically, they were victims of during their childhood" (899). Confiant, *in effek*, takes off into these *annus horribilis* and takes revenge on life, defends *Créolité*, and redeems time lost away from the dialect. For Confiant, Creoleness is "a question to be lived" (892); hence, he re-invents life through narrative, allowing adults who blamed themselves as children for discrimination by adults to return and process these prejudices as prejudices. Behind the mask of childhood innocence, authors unmask and ridicule the devils in teachers seen as infallible then. One may conclude that the negative portrayals—Hermancia, Adelise's and Young Confiant's teachers—*vis-à-vis* Adelise and Young Confiant, create an outlet for Confiant to exorcise painful memories.

Confiant and Adelise, author and child narrator, share similar childhood experiences in the classroom. By employing a child to tease out language issues, Confiant projects the illusion of an unprejudiced narrative to camouflage his subversion. In a comparable way, Joseph Zobel, in his autobiographical *bildungsroman*, *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, creates the character double, José, to come to terms with colonisation. Jane Bryce, close to Zobel's model, works on works personal to her or semi-autobiographies such as *Chameleon: Short Stories*. *Mamzelle Libellule*, though not autobiographical, the novel, like Bryce's *Chameleon*, permits Confiant to conveniently relive classroom childhood experiences through Adelise. Apparently, Confiant, by acting like Ostrich, "know wen to play Bird an wen to play Camel," and how to rely on a child's innocence to give credence to his works.

Besides teasing out tortuous issues, Confiant gives Creole a second deserved look; he also gives it up for the language in *Ravines* and *Mamzelle Libellule* for ably communicating vital idiom. In an interview with René de Ceccaty, Confiant identifies

roles of Caribbean Indian, African on a slave ship to the Antilles, East Indian, Chinese, and Syrian-Lebanese to experience the impact of cultural diversity upon Martinican consciousness.

⁸ Sankara applies his expressions, "semi-essay"/ "semi-autobiography," to Chamoiseau's *Écrire en pays dominé*. In this novel, Chamoiseau occupies the



the anguish Creole Martinicans suffer in learning French as part and parcel of growing up.⁹ Confiant explicates how he raises Creole from marginalised status to one beside *the* French language. Juxtaposing French and Creole authorises the author to re-enact antagonism between both languages and manipulate them. The author also paints Creole scenes to paint French the odd one out. He ennobles the dialect by clarifying Creole sentences with French translation and a glossary in *Ravines*. Confiant's own phenotype, which *Ravines* chronicles, permits an intertwining of French and Creole to limn his complex childhood. Edgard Sankara avers: "Through the story of his childhood, Confiant portrays himself as an example of *Créolité* in practice, illustrating the theory presented in *Éloge de la Créolité*" (134). Through the unfair treatment of Adelise and Young Confiant, along with the teacher's hypocrisy in speaking Creole, Confiant absolves himself and other students of blame for not quickly mastering the foreign language. Moreover, by allowing Creole to override French in natural/ organic situations with Adelise and Young Confiant, Confiant puts himself *à l'aise* by rehashing and reconciling past mistreatment at school. By allowing Young Confiant *fi chat* Creole with pride, especially after the teacher's *faux pas*, Confiant proves "that there is nothing petty, poor, useless, vulgar or unworthy" in Creole. Young Confiant does what Confiant did not do in childhood, much as Chemille speaks in *Chameleon* for a mute Taylor Brown.

CONCLUSION

Language correctly constitutes a major thematic since language both reflects and enacts power relations in Martinican society (CD xxv). Adelise's experiences at Hermancia's, at school, and in her social life reflect ambivalence to language and Martinique's overbearing, hegemony-fostering

⁹ "We, Creole people, in general have a traumatic relationship with the French language. We are descendants of people who were deprived of their original languages (African) and who were summoned to invent a new language in the hell of slavery. We never accepted Creole as being ours, the more so since the Master scorned it much, regarded it as gibberish" (1-2).

diglossia. Those quarrelling with Student Confiant, like *di* Creole teacher, end up eating their words when they cannot help speaking Creole. Serve Alligator right; *him shudden call Hog long mout* [Don't belittle or criticise others when you have the same faults]! Confiant manipulates Adelise and the hegemonic guardians of French, who naturally speak Creole, to validate *Créolité's* thesis that Creole is Martinique's first language. To the contrary, the language master, Glissant, disagrees with the Creolists, stating a more balanced perspective: "Neither Creole nor French is the true language of the community" (xxv). Antillanism's founder warns against reductive extremes in adopting Creole or French; Creole leans heavily on folkloric literature while French heavily leans on realism and objectivity in reading Caribbean experience. Even though Glissant parts with Césaire's Negritude, both men agree on French as textual language. The Creolists interestingly dedicate their enchiridion to these luminaries, then go on to reflect the tension between *Créolité*, Negritude, and *Antillanité*.

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