The novel Texaco by the Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau, belongs to the Creole literary movement founded in the 1980s by writers from the French Caribbean (the Départements d’Outre-Mer). This work, which was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1992, is a major part of Chamoiseau’s writings. His Eloge de la créolité/In praise of Creoleness, written in collaboration with two other Martinicans, and defined as a ‘cultural manifesto’, spells out this objective and commits its authors to dedicating their art to the exploration and revival of what the Martinican oral tradition says about Creole identity, and which has eluded Western historicist conceptions. Thus, testifying in writing to this ‘Creoleness’ means ‘to present insignificant heroes, anonymous heroes, those omitted from the colonial chronicle, those who resisted indirectly and patiently and who have nothing in common with the Western or French heroes’. They argue that it is the mission of Art, and of Art alone, to bind together the threads of this unusual Creoleness, which eyes too informed/deformed by Logos are unable to see. The manifesto contained in In praise of Creoleness is thus intended to follow the line indicated by the Martinican philosopher and essayist Edouard Glissant, who had already enjoined writers to act as ‘discoverers’ of a Creole complexity whose meaning is not where usual concepts suggest we look.

The novel Texaco makes explicit reference to this objective. What is more, it attempts to demonstrate the major thesis of In praise of Creoleness: namely the definition of Creoleness as chaos – not any indiscriminate chaos, not dehumanized confusion, but that of mobility, of lightness, in which nothing is fixed or rigid, but everything consists simply of traces, salient outlines... For the authors of the Creoleness movement, this new approach to identity means taking definite account of the baroque, diverse and complex nature of the Creole cultures arising from the intermixing peculiar to plantation systems. Caribbean
disorders', previously thought to be pathological, are now judged positively, as revealing a counter-logic to ordered, hierarchic society. Creoleness is both 'a mosaic', 'a kaleidoscopic whole' resulting from the contact of cultures, and also the refusal of 'monolingualism and purity', resistance to the principle of 'One' and 'the Same'. This concept of identity is innovative, inasmuch as it has developed from a twofold break: on the one hand with the sociological tradition which tends to consider Caribbean social issues purely from the viewpoint of alienation and incompleteness, and on the other with the search for authenticity, external or anterior to the formation of Caribbean societies, of which Aimé Césaire's Négritude is the most striking example.

For readers interested in Caribbean society, the novel Texaco can provide an approach to this new formulation of Caribbean identity. By way of the family saga which it recounts, the novelist takes up the challenge launched by In praise of Creoleness, managing to attach the theoretical definition of Creoleness to day-to-day expressions typical of the Martinican world. Here, literature opens up a fertile field, giving meaning to a convincing vision of Creole identity, by having recourse to the imagination. What is more, such literature concerns the whole of the Caribbean, not only because it demonstrates the desire to stop looking for the identity of the Caribbean people in a distant elsewhere (Césaire's Africa), but above all, because it proclaims diversity as a constituent part of Creole identity, separate from any particularist temptation. Here, the interest of the novel also transcends the one which might be accorded simply to the Caribbean region. Indeed, the notion of interbreeding, or métissage, and hybridity is fully dealt with. Moreover, the interbreeding in question is by no means preoccupied with the idea of a syncretism between cultural elements from different sources. It is more concerned with ways of negotiating identity and relationship to the Other, starting from a system of references always dynamic and open, ceaselessly subject to change. 'The Creole being' does not claim to draw on any Caribbean specificity. Rather, as Mireille Rosello so elegantly puts it, it poses the basic question of 'the being that does not belong anywhere, and of existence without legitimate community'.

In this article I offer an analysis of the novel Texaco which will attempt to highlight the different identifying images used by Chamoiseau to portray Creole diversity. However, my reading is geographical. An important aspect of Texaco's interest is that of a powerful geography lesson, which is astonishingly appreciative of the way identity comes to terms with space and place. From the plot of the novel, based on the occupation of a locality (reminding us that the question of identity is always tied up with that of place), to the use Chamoiseau makes of spatial resources to give meaning and force to the metaphors which shore up his vision of Creoleness, nearly every page deals with a space and also with what is possible in Creole terms.

I identify three major themes of identity in this novel, each of which I have associated with a geographical term. Root identity refers to unity and calls to mind the community whose continuity is linked to territorial belonging. Mobile identity, on the contrary, suggests an uncoordinated fragmentation, the absence of collective social norms. Finally, rhizome identity (I will deal with the choice of this
term later), which could be a sort of synthesis of the former two, helps to shape an open identity, without community rigidity, only interested in fostering the ties of mutual recognition. These three themes are present throughout Texaco, constituting different facets of a whole. The demonstration of Creoleness as diversity has recourse to each one of these registers of identity, which are presented somewhat as models only to be declined. However, it seems to be Chamoiseau’s aim to focus on the third pole, rhizome identity, which stands out as the image of Creoleness which he celebrates. I propose to explore the way he makes use of the spatial element, by means of these three themes, to arrive at a definition of the different aspects of identity in his novel.11

The plot

Texaco is an epic, and is, therefore a mixture of reality and fantasy. The narrator is its heroine, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, the founder-ancestor of ‘Texaco’, the restored shanty town on the outskirts of Fort-de-France (which does in fact exist). The narrative arises out of a continuing threat to demolish the area. Marie-Sophie confronts the town planner, who comes to visit the neighbourhood, with words – ‘her only weapon of persuasion’ – and she tells her story ... This embraces the history of Martinique, interspersed with actually recorded events: the habitations, the abolition of slavery, the establishment of the central sugar refineries, the eruption of Mt Pelée, urban expansion, the rise of Aimé Césaire, the declaration of Martinique as a French Département ... Based on what she has been told by her father, Esternome, the second heroic figure in the novel, Marie-Sophie starts the known story of her lineage on the slave plantations, from where her people began to drift away into the continous state of disarray, which she relates through the pathetic portraits of her grandparents. Esternome, freed as a reward for saving his master’s life, is helped to find a meaning to his freedom by following the initiatory words of a Mento, a mythical character driven by the Force, originating in Africa. He must set out to conquer the country, occupy the uplands, the Mornes, abandoned by the Béké or even seize the En-Ville, the geographical entity created by the same Béké but which offers a sort of promise to unravel destinies: such is the message the Mento gives Esternome. So begins the quest for a haven which will give a meaning to this century-long wandering. The attempt to gain possession of the Mornes proves abortive in view of the struggle exerted by the sugar refineries, which swallow up lands and workers. From now on, they will have to come to terms with the En-Ville (the city), a chaotic place of hopes and disillusionment. Marie-Sophie takes up the quest. She puts down her first roots in the grounds of an oil company (Texaco), which she is never to leave. But for all that, the struggle against the temporary existence is not over. They have to face the refusal of permanent settlement by the authorities and the Béké owner, who makes determined attempts to destroy the fragile little group of shacks. By dint of dogged persistency, Marie-Sophie succeeds in making the town planner understand the meaning inscribed in the confusion of the shacks. By obtaining a name, ‘Texaco’, the place also marks the advent of a collective ‘Us’, which will never be finally dispersed.14

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
Root identity: unity and coherence

The theme of root identity emphasizes adherence to a collective. This unitary construction of identity is seen as resulting from two main resources: those of memory and those of place. Memory offers the means to circumscribe a common trajectory in time, and so reinforce the feeling of belonging to a common destiny, always united in spite of the dividing action of time. Place activates the geographical symbolism of the interior and exterior, and gives meaning to the collective existence, being defined by recourse to the duality of ‘Us/Them’.

This theme of root identity surfaces throughout the novel. It is first seen in the genealogical continuity and the memory of the lineage whose roots go far back, to the ‘Country-Before’. The heroine’s grandfather, a slave and Guinea-man, is one of the men of force, the guardians of ancestral knowledge:

They were the people who knew things that one must not know. And they really did do things that cannot be done. They remembered forgotten wonders: the Country-Before, the Great Country, the speech of the great country, the gods of the great country . . . without differenciating them, and this subjected them to other demands. (p. 45)

The Guinea-man transmits these words to his companion, and at the same time teaches her a boundless complicity with nature.¹⁵

He revealed to her in particular his pleasure in the memory of an impossible land which he murmured Africa. While he communicated to her his hatred of the sea, he also taught her his holy wonder at the slightest tremor which runs through nature. (p. 50)

Immediately the symbolism of the nourishing earth is powerfully brought into play to suggest that the pivot of the most elementary of all freedoms is to be found in the mastery of the most essential resources of life. The plantation slaves, the ‘earth-niggers’, already understood that the earth offered the possibility of regaining their flouted dignity:

Having to choose between the uplands of exile, where the Békés lived, and the Mulattos’ enthusiasm for changing their destiny, the earth-niggers had chosen the earth. The earth to exist. The earth to feed themselves. The earth to understand, and earth to live on. (p. 96)

Chamoiseau firmly allotts to space and place the means to enable these people born in chains to succeed in gathering together the elements of a unity which the world of slavery had been at pains to fragment. As soon as he has acquired his legal freedom the hero, Esternome, sets out in search of a space which will promise the possibility of recovering a genuine freedom. The fact that this search originates from the words revealed by a mentor, the mythical initiator, reinforces a certain view of the part played by place and, beyond that, of the theme of identity. The intervention of a sort of foundation myth¹⁶ already bestows on place a memory, the memory of the origins, which derives moreover from the distant past and is recognized as sacred, since the Mentó is the one who knows the mysteries of far-off Africa. Through this account of the foundation, the reunifying role of the myth is also achieved, which enables the links

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
between men and women from the same people to be found in their common origin (coming from the same place). Thus the theme of identity already emerges fairly clearly, linked to the idea of memory and unity: root identity, for which place, linked to the idea of anthropological territory, appears to be unavoidable.

The collective experiment in the Mornes gives the author the opportunity to introduce us more easily to this first identification theme, as well as to his geographical formulations. Just after the abolition of slavery, the newly freed slaves set about occupying the high ground in the interior abandoned by the Békés. This powerful collective moment is defined as the odyssey of a ‘magical Us’ or again as ‘the Noutéka’ of the Mornes’. We learn of the odyssey by means of a legendary account, punctuated by the Noutéka, which marks the advent of the ‘Us’ which has been recovered:

We were going (…) But you see, for us, Marie-Sophie, it wasn’t running away, it was going. It wasn’t refusing, it was acting, all girding up our loins (…) (pp. 140-41).

Noutéka

Occupying the indented uplands, the summits of the peaks. It was building the country (not the Mulatto country, not the Béké country, not the Coolie country, not the Kongo country: the country of the earth-niggers). Building the country in Neighbourhoods, Neighbourhood by Neighbourhood, overlooking the little towns and the lights of the En-Ville…

To say Neighbourhood is to say: Negroes emerging from liberty and entering life in such and such a piece of land…

Learning that here the earth is richer than down below, newer, more sinewy not yet sucked dry by too many crops…

The main thing was to survive without having to go back down. We grew what the Békés call secondary plants, and we call eating-plants. At the edge of the eating-plants, you must have medicine-plants, and the ones that attract good luck and disarm the zombis. The lot all mixed together never exhausts the soil. That’s Creole-garden (pp. 145-6).

Creole Neighbourhood is permission from geography. That’s why they say ‘So-and-so Bottom’, ‘This or that Morne’, ‘This or that Ravine’… It’s the shape of the land which gives a name to the group of people…

Noutéka

Creole Neighbourhood obeys its soil, but also its grass that it gets its straw from. And also its woods that it builds its shacks with. And also the colours of its earth that it makes its bricks with. (p. 149)

Creole Neighbourhood is people getting on together. With one another, one hand washes the other, with two nails, one crushes the flea. It’s helping each other that leads. A Neighbourhood is even written like that. That’s to say…

A mayoumbé,19 that’s all you need. And the land, if you can get up to it, is your most fertile foster-mother. (p. 150)

Thus, the power of places is tackled head-on: ‘permission granted by geography’, the region of the Mornes gets its name from the shape of the earth and, at the same time, gives its name to the group of people. Thus emphasis is given to the semantic power of the signs carried by space. The assertion of identity seems to be at the heart of this task of marking out space by appropriation of the uplands which, while tracing the boundaries with the outside world, the low-

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
lands (the world of the plantations), at the same time suggests the symbolic lines of a supreme collective existence. Here the dual form between the interior/exterior, within/without, are clearly brought into play. Social ties are emphasized by references to mutual help and understanding, in order to suggest the idea of rebuilding an interdependent community, while it simultaneously allots to the earth its nourishing function. Here all the symbolism associated with the Creole garden is to be found: a rich vegetable kingdom, the expression of a luxuriant imagination, in which can be read a profound Creole respect for nature, already mentioned by Chamoiseau in his Chronique des sept misères (Chronicle of the seven miseries). The virtues of the nourishing earth are particularly explicit. Struck by ‘the load of possibilities’ offered by the Noutéka, the hero understands that the world to be created is ‘the world to be planted’ (p. 150). The prospect offered by mastering the earth is to become the subject of his story, since in the Mornes ‘it is no longer a case of refusing but of acting’ . . . It means, in fact, taking charge of one’s own destiny, putting one’s own plans into action by discovering the possibilities of a fully controlled space, finally exploring the break with the alienated space and the closed world of the plantations.

So, with the Noutéka the novelist effects a synthesis of the constituent elements of root identity: the founding myth, memory of the origins, conquest of a place and assertion of a collective unity, mastery of elementary resources and of the community’s destiny.

However, the Noutéka is only a brief experiment. The author does not linger too long over the failure of this collective epic, simply mentioning the development in the lowlands of the sugar refineries, which drained off manpower, and ‘pitifully swallowed up the great conquest of the Mornes’. The terms used to designate this unhappy outcome emphasize the ephemeral nature of this moment, linking it also to a collective failure. An ‘abortive’ experiment, ‘a weakened dream of the uplands’ (p. 157), submission of the Mornes to the Békés (p. 165), ‘the illusion of the Noutéka’ (p. 187), ‘a collective failure’ (p. 191), ‘bitterness of the Mornes’ (p. 193), ‘a wretched epic’ (p. 254), abandoning the conquest of the land (p. 275) . . . expressions which carry strong images of surrendering the possibility of an interdependent community, are probably attributable in the first place to the author more than to the Martinicans. For Chamoiseau’s objective seems to become clearer on this point. He is determined to tackle the idea of Creoleness which endlessly haunts Caribbean literature: the idea of dispersal and breaking up of collective practices, whence (to my mind) this elimination of the theme of root identity in the chronology of Texaco. And if this detour in the search for identity by way of the Mornes nevertheless continues throughout the novel to guide the conquest of the En-Ville, and if the novelist tackles this positively and presents it as exemplary, paradoxically he also uses it to reinforce the theme of wandering, and to show a people’s ability to exist differently or to construct itself according to other plans than those attached to the idea of root identity. The rest of the novel then teaches us what this identity consists of when deprived of its ability to achieve permanency of place.

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
Mobile identity: praise of confusion and multiplicity

Chamoiseau will give meaning to this idea of a mobile, chaotic Creoleness with the geographical entity of the En-Ville. But what is this En-Ville? Esternome, one of the heroes, provides the answer:

The En-Ville is a shock. Strength Where everything is possible and everything is bad. The En-Ville carries you along and carries you away, never abandons you, lets you into its secrets which come from far off. You accept them in the end without ever understanding them... An En-Ville is times gathered together, not only in the names, houses, statutes, but in the not-visible. An En-Ville preserves joys, sorrows, dreams, every feeling, it makes all this into a dew which clothes it, which you sense without being able to show it. (p. 192)

This poetic view of the En-Ville already allows the idea of multiplicity to be seen as a unifying factor. Its entity is in fact presented in contradictory images. It is the place of every promise, ‘founded on those scarce goods which improved one’s existence’ (p. 347). It’s a place where you can take your chance (p. 208) and ‘harvest its windfalls’ (p. 191) providing opportunities for ingenuity by resorting to a thousand tricks in order to cope with the temporary nature of existence. It fascinates by its beauties and lights, by ‘its blessed play of lights and shadows’ (p. 122). It ‘acts as a torch in the closed night of the chains’ (p. 193). But the En-Ville is also a foil, a force which employs military strategies, which attacks and launches an assault against the shanty towns which it does not tolerate (p. 404). It is ‘a fragmented solitude... in which all the characteristics of the Mornes fade into the cold at the centre of the En-Ville’ (p. 282). It is also a danger, a ‘blind beast, multiplying but incapable of surviving’ (p. 244). With its mulattos and its Békés, this En-Ville knows how to make itself inaccessible and give the ‘age-old refusal’, the stakes in the ‘ancient battle’ (p. 327).

Chamoiseau presents urban space as an enigma (p. 131), a complex riddle, in which it is impossible to distinguish truth from falsehood, good from bad, the right side from the wrong side. As the novel progresses, the plan contained in this concept of the town is clarified. The Creole town, the En-Ville, must be seen as a melting-pot, ‘a calabash of destinies’ (p. 322), ‘a collection of odds and ends’ (p. 88), a meeting-place like an ‘open bottle-neck’ where ‘all histories meet’ (p. 322). For the En-Ville, as the ‘Old Negro of La Doum’ says, a legendary character personifying the resurgence of the sacred Speech in the urban chaos, ‘this En-Ville binds over and over again... sets in motion, ties together, makes fast, blends continually, mixes as fast as possible’ (pp. 322–3).

By perceiving the town as a mobile entity, in which everything seems to move in a multitude of connections, the writer brings us to another aspect of identity, to some extent opposed to that of ‘root’, which gradually substantiates his praise of interbreeding. Chamoiseau puts this praise into the mouth of the town planner initiated by the heroine:

The Creole town restores to the town planner, who would like to forget this, an understanding of the roots of a new identity: multilingual, multiracial, multi-historical, open, sensitive to the diversity of the world. Everything has changed. (p. 243)

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
There are certainly many occasions when one is tempted to assign the values of multiplicity only to the peri-urban belt around Fort-de-France, where the confusion of the shanty towns spreads. Thus, the centre of the En-Ville is seen as in the grip of a ‘western, urban logic, aligned, ordered, strong, like the French language’ (p. 243). The proliferation of popular districts embodies the antithesis to this ordered centre, bringing to the En-Ville ‘a different poetry’ (p. 161), that of ‘beauty pulsating in the horror’ (p. 203), in the insanitary conditions of this ‘tumour on urban order’ (p. 296). But this dual concept, order versus disorder, reveals more of the third image of identity, as will be seen. It is the image of the En-Ville, tending to embody immense chaos, which gives a more important account of multiplicity. Here again, the ‘enlightened’ town planner speaks:

But the city is a danger; it becomes a megapolis, it never stops; it petrifies the countryside with silence, just as in former times the Empires stifled everything around them; the city rises on the ruins of the nation-state, monstrously plurinational, transnational, supranational, cosmopolitan – crazily Creole, in a way, and becomes the only dehumanized structure of the human species. (p. 390)

The Creoleness which emerges, combined with this disconcerting space, is equally new. The reader, moreover, is warned: although it is in fact a question of one people, the Caribbean people, they will not be seen to act in the usual ways. Whence the elliptical expressions used to refer to them throughout the epic of Texaco: an ‘almost people’, a people that is still to be born (p. 389), ‘the damned of Texaco’ (p. 360), a ‘band of still unorganized Maroons’ (p. 346), recognizable by their ‘attempts to exist’ (p. 378). For this form of Creoleness is born in that world of impermanence, in the world without anchorage which is its fate. But let there be no mistake: this dispersed people is able to cope magnificently with its nomadic existence. We are told of their resourcefulness and how they learn to survive, here salvaging a packing case, there a fork, a cracked plate, a bottle, a length of string, a piece of sacking, a medallion, an old hat, two rusty nails . . . We share the ephemeral romances in the hut on the rubbish dump. We get to know the fate of the drifters, who are so bewitched by the allure of a life of wandering, that they can no longer stop. We are drawn into the daily succession of a dozen little jobs undertaken. We are told of a well-loved father or of disrespect shown to a mother. We are shown the belligerence of a Creole woman who has been insulted, or invited to witness affection and gentleness. We are introduced to these composite families which include as many fathers as children. We become familiar with a number of strange fates, those of men and women in whom there is not one ounce of uniformity.22 So Chamoiseau’s characters form a portrait gallery which gives substance to this multiple Creoleness. Although the two main protagonists (Esternome and Marie-Sophie) stand out as positive heroes, they are never presented under one single aspect: during the period of slavery, Esternome retains a certain admiration for the Békés. He goes so far as to kill a Maroon (a fugitive slave) to save his master’s life.

While developing these aspects of Creoleness, the author still does not break with the idea of the division of collective practices, practices essential for survival, and which Edouard Glissant said were not enough to constitute a real col-
lective cement. On the contrary, he seizes on them, not in order to find in them symptoms of the alienation of the world of slavery, but to show the unknown riches linked to the values of openness, flexibility, plasticity, which are eventually set against the rigidity and enclosure that result from Western order. To arrive at the virtues of multiplicity, perhaps it is necessary to understand this sort of leitmotiv of the novel, namely that History and Truth cannot be written in the singular, nor with capital letters which announce their claim to universality, but in a ‘circumspect plural’ (p. 65), for ‘stories lie underneath History’ (p. 136). Creoleness, like the En-Ville, is simply the ‘hazardous merry-go-round of the living’ (p. 283), in which ‘lives have no meaning’, but ‘often come and go like tsunamis’ (p. 340).

Naturally, the space of the districts on the outskirts of Fort-de-France is put to full use to outline this disorder, while attesting also to the connection between space and identity which the novelist continually senses. The destiny of the shanty town ‘Texaco’ is alone enough to reinforce the paradigm of mobility, with the ceaseless destruction and rebuilding of the shacks which camp as if in a permanent state of impermanence. By turns, ‘an extraordinary mosaic’ of huts (p. 367), pyramid-like chaos (p. 351), ‘a collection of spider’s webs’ (p. 304), ‘a draft version of the En-Ville’ (p. 305), the outlying districts, with ‘Texaco’ in the lead, reproduce in their architecture and produce in people’s conscience, schemata of identity-disorder, as if the task of defining identity needs this geo-symbolic writing. However, the most remarkable illustration of the way this second image of Creoleness conforms to its space is contained in the description of the passes, the alleyways which run between the shacks. The novelist demonstrates here his undoubted ability to give a spacial dimension to his concept of the Creole world. He shifts the viewpoint, as it were, to tackle multiplicity horizontally, thereby leading to overlapping connections, a host of brief situations, linked by the system of passes. We are then in the heart of this simple ‘hazardous whirligig of the living’. Here are some extracts from the passage in question:

I have always had a liking for the alleyways of Morne Abelard, through which I had to pass when there was an emergency call for help. The only memories I have are of sensations. There was the alley of black mud where ducks rested from their weariness. The alley of miseries where the saucepans shone. The alley of ox-foot soup on hot ashes. The alley of the heart sinking into a rust of memories. The alley of 60, 55, 50 where the degrees of the rum are fired over pink throats. The alley where feverish eyes pierce the shutters over the windows.... The alley of plentiful fibro-cement, where municipal fates escaped from their bad luck. The alley where hunger sharpened everyone’s teeth.... The cold alley of silence. The alleys of piccaninnies playing with rain-water. The alley of the Syrians, who came through on Saturdays with their huge bundles. The alley of holy water every Friday 13th. The alley of washing blowing in the wind to dry. The alley of the privies, smelling of bitter old age. The alley where a Chinaman had strayed – waiting for what boat? – standing in his loose shorts. The alley of Amélie-sewing-thread, whose machine stitched the fringe of her slumbers. The dark alleyway where the foot stumbles and is suddenly twisted. The alley of insults where fifteen Negresses gave Jesus a piece of their minds. The alley where the Adventists met on Saturdays, seated on canteen chairs with red numbers, to read psalms from the Bible in their own special way. The alley where the general...
counsellor held meetings on the idea of happiness... All this mixed up together, changing with the advent of deaths, good fortunes, successes, bound us together like ropes linking the oxen. (pp. 306–7)

Rhizome identity: unity and multiplicity

The metaphor of the rhizome suggests a multiple root. The manner in which the alleyways are traversed gives an insight into this form of the third image of identity expressed by it. For the theme of disorganized Creoleness is never in fact retained in an absolute way. As with root identity, it is presented in order to give full prominence to the theme of wandering, and to give rise to that state of impermanency, beyond which a people is able to create its identity. This identity then allows the social link to emerge in a new way, in which a sort of synthesis is seen between cohesion and collective dispersion. On this point the motif of the cord, repeated several times in the novel (pp. 193, 307, 422), gives meaning to a kind of unity which transcends dispersal. In the cluster of fragmented elements, links or solid connections stand out. First there is the sharing of the same destiny, illustrated by the end of the passage through the alleyways, in which all are linked by the intimate knowledge of a thousand shared daily tasks. Then there is Speech, this other cord which, while said to be light (p. 189), or 'a vertigo of worlds, a clamour of languages and peoples' (p. 365), is nevertheless the one which is inscribed in the duration of an unsuspected collective time. Then comes the memory which runs through this Speech, forming the collective mortar which restores the common origin and itinerary, memory which supports the Singular and is defined as 'the glue, the spirit, the sap' (p. 197). Another solid bond is formed by the Mentôs, the repositories of Speech and memory, the two hallowed sources of unity in the heart of the dispersal. These Mentôs are always present in the bustle and confusion of the En-Ville, and through them the novelist provides us with the key to this third image of identity:

In the scattering of Caribbean, African, European, Chinese, Indian, Levantine beliefs... they [the Mentôs] had renewed the fibres and knotted them together to form a strong rope. (p. 422)

Thus the Creoleness, whose authenticity it is Chamoiseau's intention to demonstrate and detail, takes shape where the two preceding themes meet. At the risk of stating a facile formula, it is 'the union of unity and multiplicity' which finally emerges as symbolic of the Creoleness to which Texaco pays tribute. The author eventually focuses on unity, even if he sometimes appears to want to be free to explore uncompromisingly the untamed worlds of chaos. He puts a warning into the hero's mouth, which tells us of this desire for coherence:

That is why my Esternome said this country was like an anthill in disarray, but woe to him who did not understand that under this strangeness there was a people which would defy dictionary definition. (p. 88)
The presence of the people scattered at random in the *En-Ville* is confirmed in several ways. Of course it is evident in the well-nigh sacred search for the place of collective inscription, a search which unites individual existences throughout the novel. From this point of view, unity does not appear as achieved or effective, but as latent, at the stage of a deep desire to affirm their identity. Moreover the experience of the Noutéka or root identity serves to give a meaning to this search. As in the uplands of the *Mornes*, what has to be conquered in the *En-Ville* is not the place for itself, but the place to conquer oneself. The author, speaking directly, ends the novel with these words:

I wanted it to be sung somewhere, so that generations to come could hear that we fought with the *En-Ville*, not to conquer it (for it did indeed swallow us up), but to conquer ourselves in the new Creole way for which we had to find a name – within ourselves, for ourselves – until we achieved our full authority. (p. 427)

The itineraries through the *En-Ville* can in fact be understood in the light of the glorious past of the *Mornes* which had offered a fleeting glimpse of the benefits of re-establishing a community. The memory of the epic is so exemplary that the heroine can eventually define the project in the urban space as imposing on the *En-Ville* a way of ‘living in the spirit of the *Mornes*’ (p. 348). The organization in the outlying shanty towns is gradually shown to be a replica of that ‘of a real Neighbourhood in the *Mornes*’ (p. 301), which even manages to make ‘little Creole gardens’ (p. 207, 407) and which functions according to ‘the laws set up by the Noutéka’ (p. 305), to which everyone seems to conform:

We behaved like we did at the time of the Noutéka in the *Mornes*, which my Esternome had described to me at length, as he talked untiringly of the open spaces approaching the huts, a rhythm subjected to the seasons of the moon, the rain and the winds. And, confronted with the *En-Ville*, we wanted to live in the spirit of the *Mornes*, that is relying solely on our own resources, and even better, solely on our own knowledge. (p. 348)

Thus the unity of the people arises from these spaces ‘of new solidarities’ (p. 352), created around the urban centre, a unity moreover which it is easy to identify by the frequent mention of the practice of mutual assistance which gives shape to an *Us* ‘bound together by misfortune’ (p. 367).

To illustrate the re-emergence of the theme of root identity in the very heart of the urban chaos, we must also insist here on the highly symbolic presence of a Mentô living in a luxuriant vegetable world, in the very place where the shanty town *Texaco* will be built. Through this Mentô and the mythical place he inhabits, the Doum, depicted as ‘the vegetable heart of *Texaco*’ (p. 320), the synthesis of two worlds clearly takes place: the fragmented world of the *En-Ville* and the re-assembled world of the *Mornes*. In this regard, too, the group is inscribed on a long time-sequence, linked to its origin as well as its future, since the Mentô is both the guardian of *Speech*, the custodian of memory (and memories) and spiritual guide in the search, from its point of departure to the point of arrival.

So what form does this Creoleness assume, which is neither entirely that of a root, nor entirely that of mobility? The answer to this question seems to be contained in the scattered reflections which here and there suggest we squint at the
world with a sort of double vision, so as to grasp that things are never completely unambiguous. For ‘in the culture of peoples, there is darkness and light’, as one of the characters tells us (p. 357). This postulate of the double nature of things eventually dominates the novel Texaco, possibly even at times without the author’s knowledge. The characters’ natures all seem to be based on the principle that the novelist puts into his heroine’s mouth:

People are strange. From the worst of them I have seen celestial treasures emerge. From the most exquisite, I have seen filth leap out. (p. 227)

This principle is also the driving force behind Creoleness: it is simultaneously order and disorder, unity and multiplicity, chaos and coherence. In its relationship to space, it also unites these two opposing faces: that of taking root and that of wandering. And the better to convince us, the novelist emphasizes the division between the sexes, placing the women under the sign of stability (‘putting down roots’, p. 302) and the men under that of mobility (‘drifting’, p. 391), these men who, ‘retained for all eternity a temporary contact’ (p. 369) with this earth.

In addition to the relationship with places, reconciling the mobile and the fixed, space also becomes the way to decode this new image of identity through the structure of the En-Ville and Texaco itself. The former is often described through its two-headed framework: its centre and its outskirts, the first embodying order, Logos, geometry, and the other, disorder, imagination, poetry. But although bipolar, the Creole town is nevertheless the union of these two opposing forces:

In the old heart of the city: clear, organized, normalized order. All around: a bubbling, indecipherable, impossible circle, masked by poverty and the darkened burdens of History. If the Creole town only possessed the order of its centre, it would be dead. It needs the chaos around its fringes. (p. 203)

Whatever scale is favoured, space always has its double. This is also true for the shanty town of Texaco. Under the disorder which the latter opposes to the centre of the En-Ville, there are ‘balances’ (p. 351), ‘coherences’ (p. 269). We are even told that laws, by-laws, rules for settlement and construction are reintroduced. But, above all, Texaco also has its own centre, the symbol, if anything, of an order of things. And the shack, built by the heroine who is also ‘the ancient founder’ of the shanty town, forms this centre:

He seemed flabbergasted to see the incredible density of the constructions all round my shack. It was clear that people had settled around me: a living space, larger than anywhere else, made my home into the radiant centre of Upper-Texaco. (p. 397)

Rhizome-Creoleness and postmodernity

I have associated each of the identificatory images in Chamoiseau’s novel with a generic term which emphasizes the links between space and identity. While the root illustrates the identifying theme of unity created in collusion with a place, and mobility embodies the image of collective dispersal in a shifting space,

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
the rhizome can be thought of as the symbol of a Creoleness which is both one and multiple. The novelist seizes on this metaphor in a specific way to tell us of spreading roots that are neither deep nor rigid, in accordance with a multiple root system:

Here, in the surrounding circle, people survive on memories. In the centre, they are lost in the modern-ness of society; here they bring very old roots, not deep and rigid, but diffuse, profuse, spread over time with the lightness that speech confers. These poles, linked according to social forces, structure the faces of the town with their conflicts. (p. 189)

It seems that Chamoiseau’s concept of Creoleness can be in fact understood through this image of light, spreading roots. This metaphor indicates the wish to escape, on the one hand from a totalizing, monolithic unity and, on the other, from a meaningless disorder, which does not know the strength of social ties. A third course is opened up, in which the intrinsic virtues of unity are positively linked: a people which resists dispersion and finds its identity in a shared destiny; and the virtues of wandering: fluidity or chaos with no rough surfaces on which the tyranny of order can obtain a grip.

Recourse to the term ‘rhizome’ can be better understood when the affinity of Chamoiseau’s concept with that of the Martinican poet and essayist, Edouard Glissant is known. One of Glissant’s most recent essays opens with an explicit reference to the rhizome, directly inspired by the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have criticized the notions of root and possibly taking root. A root is a single entity, a stock which takes everything upon itself and kills everything around it; they contrast it with a rhizome which is a multiple root [une racine dimultipliée] which spreads out in a network . . . Thus, the notion of the rhizome retains the fact of taking root, but challenges the idea of one all-embracing root. The concept of the rhizome would then be in theory what I call ‘Poetics of Relation’, by virtue of which any identity spreads in its relationship with the Other . . . What has happened in the Caribbean, which we can sum up in the word ‘Creolization’, gives us the nearest possible idea of the concept of the Relation.17

So the pathway to the comparison of Chamoiseau’s conception of Creoleness, by way of Edouard Glissant, with the metaphor of the rhizome, as understood by Deleuze and Guattari28 is not simply a matter of chance. For philosophers, it is a question of breaking with the logic of the ‘tree-root’, another metaphor given the responsibility for signifying the authority of the dual thought, in order to discover the extent revealed by the principles of connection, heterogeneity and multiplicity. It is a question no longer of dealing with the ‘One’, but of dealing with the multiple in the manner of the rhizome which spreads out and multiplies in a disordered fashion. However, it is essential to bear in mind that such a concept is never intended to replace one absolute by another: ‘The rhizome cannot be reduced to either the One or the Multiple’.29 It is simultaneously ‘territorialized, organized, signed’ and also comprises ‘lines of deterritorialization by means of which it can endlessly escape’.30 And if Glissant retains this idea of the rhizome to discuss ‘Creolization’,31 it is probably because he sees in the Creole world a fantastic mixture of values enabling traces of the constituent
elements of the community to be found, together with the signs of a permanent mixing of references to identity:

[C] not only an encounter, a shock (as defined by the Senegalese L. S. Senghor), a cross-breeding [un métissage], but a new dimension which enables everyone to be here and elsewhere, rooted and unenclosed, lost in the mountains and free under the sea, being in harmony and wandering. 32

Texaco is a wonderfully poetic, fictional version of this Creoleness, ‘of being rooted and unenclosed’ or ‘of harmony and wanderings’. This literary transcription is very close to certain contemporary sociological works, in particular those of Stuart Hall, who invites us to consider the ‘Black Caribbean identities as “framed” by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity, and that vector of difference and rupture’. 33 It is also possible to see here fortuitous correspondences with Paul Gilroy’s propositions, which set out to define the identity of the ‘Black Atlantic’, the black diaspora, by referring to a double register, inextricably tied to the modernism of Western nations and at the same time challenging the principles of the ethnic particularism of this same modernism. A diasporic identity both within and without the modern configuration of ‘Them/Us’: ‘a changing same’ as Gilroy says. 34

The fact remains that the application of such a concept to Chamoiseau’s novel could definitely tell us also of the difficulty in recognizing the double participation of these vectors of continuity and change. There is absolutely no doubt that the novelist is greatly tempted to yield to the appeal of disorder, and to restore Creole society to the ‘maelstrom’, the hurly-burly already mentioned in In praise of Creoleness. Moreover, the novelist has, on several occasions, reiterated his desire to subscribe to the idea of chaos:

The poet is much more relevant when reality becomes complex. Chaos has always been considered as something which has to be reduced. But, without chaos, how can we understand the world of today? When we speak of Creoleness, we mean the state we are in, when in a chaotic place. 36

This appeal of chaos echoes the one which inspires recent social science debates with this same desire to give identities a fluid, permanently flexible content, which, moreover, can be imputed either to what is typical of our postmodernity or to the postmodernist way sociologists or geographers now look at the question of identities. It is also important to note the extent to which the authors of the ‘Creoleness movement’ persist in speaking of Creole society as a prefiguration of postmodernity. 37 Just as there is a correspondence between Creole and postmodern situations, so there are converging procedures for bringing the question of identities out of a fixed [fixiste], essentialist framework. Yet this search for the diversity lodged in the very heart of cultures seems, in both cases, difficult to reconcile with the recognition of everything which contributes to variety, including unity and continuity. The paradigm of multiplicity seems to lose its coherence as soon as we recognize that part of it which refers to unity – whence this extremely contemporary rhetoric which appears very sensitive to the notions of chaos and disorder, and simply reverses the hierarchy of values contained in the old dualism of ‘one’ and ‘multiple’.

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
The whole of Texaco is in fact built around this dilemma: how to succeed in giving shape to diversity without ignoring a component which is opposed to it and yet essential, including naming the identity of the diversity. It is in fact the plot of the novel which overcomes the main difficulty of praising chaos while at the same time revealing coherence, equilibrium. With, on the one hand, the Noutèka of the Mornes proving abortive, reduced to one fleeting moment, and, on the other, the foundation of an urban locality, which will only occur at the end of the novel, the author has left himself room in his writing to be free to sing the praises of disorder. But, one may ask, what will become of these praises, without the emergence of the concept of root identity, the image which the author uses curiously as the expression of a desire or collective aspiration, to give an insight into this people which would in fact risk disappearing in an uncompromising surrender to the principle of disorder?

This praise of chaos, which is never really given the chance to develop, and is in any case never total, sends us unexpectedly back to our difficulty in grasping the unity and coherence of multiplicity, and in thinking in terms of triads rather than dichotomies. In this respect, Chamoiseau’s novel has much to teach us. Whatever the processes by which he reaches his conclusions, he ends up highlighting that form of identity which cannot finally be categorized: neither that of the root nor of wandering. Such a concept invites us to recognize the dynamism of cultures without any attempt at allocation to a definite form. But it also gives the possibility of keeping in view that identity is a way of existing with others, of negotiating a necessary relationship with others, just as it is the place where all responses to the imposition of the violence of others are formulated. It is possible to associate Creoleness, thus defined, with certain images of postmodernity, not those of elusiveness or any non-significant disintegration, but those which recognize in our own times an essential compromise between movement and multi-adherence on the one hand and anchorage and stability on the other. In this case, Texaco can inspire geographers to discover spatial formulations that are more contemporary than ever: those of open spaces, midway between the mobile and the sedentary, spaces where settlement and movement, memory and the temporary, come to terms with each other.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Denis Cosgrove and two anonymous referees for their constructive comments. The original French version of this article was presented at the annual conference of ASCALF (Association for the Study of Caribbean and African Literature in French), London, 25-7 November 1994. A slightly different version of the original French text was published in L'Espace Géographique 2 (1996), pp. 113–25.

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
Maison des Sciences Humaines d'Aquitaine
Talence
France

Ecumene 1997 4 (3)
Notes


5 ‘Because historical memory was too often erased, the Caribbean writer must “search” this memory, starting from sometimes latent traces which he has located in real life. Because the Caribbean conscience was marked out by sterilizing barriers, the writer must be able to express every occasion when these barriers were partially broken down. Because Caribbean time stood still in the void of an imposed non-history, the writer must contribute to restoring its tormented chronology, in other words, to expose the lively fertility of a dialogue re-initiated between Caribbean nature and culture’; E. Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris, Seuil, 1981), p. 133. *Texaco* is dedicated to Edouard Glissant. Moreover, the epilogue to the novel (p. 421) takes as its epigraph an extract from the above quotation from Glissant.


8 Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet, intellectual and politician, was one of the founders of the Negritude movement together with the Senegalese poet, and first president of the Republic of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. *Negritude*, the word, which first appeared in Césaire’s long poem, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939), can be briefly defined as reclaiming the African cultural heritage, as a reaction to the assimilation policy of the French colonizers.

9 Creoleness is defined as ‘the interactional or transactional aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asiatic and Levantine elements, which the yoke of history has united on the same soil’ or as ‘a maelstrom of signifieds in a single signifier: a Totality’ (Bernabé *et al.*, *Éloge*, pp. 87–88).


11 Before starting on this analysis, I think it advisable to warn readers about the difficulties they may encounter. Patrick Chamoiseau’s style is complex. Although written in French, the novel nevertheless makes use of a new language which is largely based either on Creole vocabulary or on Creole constructions and words applied to French. The difficulty of translating such a style into English can readily be imagined. On this point I am extremely grateful to Dorothy Blair, the translator of the present article, for her precision, together with her appreciation of the problems involved in the translation. [While working on Dr Chivallon’s article, I discovered that the projected English translation of *Texaco*, which was to be published in 1995, had been abandoned, presumably when the translator commissioned found the work impossible. The English versions of the extracts from the novel, quoted below by Dr Chivallon, are my own, the page references being to the French edition of the novel. – DSB.]

12 *Mornes*, in Creole, refers to a region of low hills – by extension, to the interior of the island, traditionally the home of peasant farmers.

13 *Béké*, the Creole term for the White settlers and their descendants [cf. the term *Backra*, used in the English-speaking West Indies. – DSB.]

14 Throughout the novel, the author presents himself as ‘The Marker of speech’, sup-
posedly having simply transcribed the testimony of the woman whom, in the manner of anthropologists, he calls 'his informant'. He is helped in his task by the 'countless note books' which Marie-Sophie has entrusted to him, in which she has inscribed the thousands of sentences 'retrieved from her memory'. The body of the novel thus consists of this account, punctuated here and there by extracts from 'The Notebooks of Marie-Sophie Laborieux' and jottings submitted by the town planner. This narrative process, which claims as its basis 'true-written evidence', has been criticized as a contradiction in Chamoiseau's approach. See M. J. Jolivet, 'Les cahiers de Marie-Sophie Laborieux existent-ils? Ou du rapport de la créolité à l'oralité et à l'écriture', Cahiers de Sciences Humaines de l'ORSTOM 29 (1993), pp. 795-804.

Is it not to illustrate this 'boundless complicity' that Chamoiseau gives Marie-Sophie’s grandmother (The Guinea-Man’s companion) a most strange destiny, making her spend the end of her life lying in the grass watching the red ants which will permanently destroy her eyelids?

Here, briefly, are the essentials of this 'myth': the Mentô appears to Esternome as soon as he has obtained his freedom, and shows him the path he must follow. He speaks to Esternome 'in a different Creole from that of the Béké, not differing in the words but in the sounds and the speed of the speech. The Béké spoke the language, the Mentô handled it... This speech, at all events, this at least was certain, breathed into his heart the courage itself to depart. It also set up the Mentô at the source of our difficult conquest of the country. To occupy, the Mentô would have told him... to occupy with the utmost urgency what the Békés had not yet occupied the Mornes, the dry south, the misty uplands, the depths and the ravines, then take possession of the places they had created, but whose History no-one could judge our ability to unravel in our one thousand one hundred stories. And what were those places?... The En-Ville by God: Saint-Pierre and Fort-Royal' (pp. 65-6).

This is probably debatable, as the principle of a myth is to enable its general application, from which individual stories are eliminated. Here the myth, of which the hero Esternome is also the protagonist, remains attached to the paths followed by the heroes of the novel.

Noutèka could be translated as 'We were...'. Té ka is the mark of the imperfect tense in Creole.

Mayoumbé, Creole word for an agricultural tool, a sort of spade [DSB].


The enumeration of the population of the Texaco neighbourhood, given in the first pages of the novel, tells us a great deal about its heterogeneous nature. The men are 'backward fishermen, odd-job workers on building sites, dockers, strong men working in sheds and warehouses, anonymous dreamers of unknown origin whose sole identity is the label of their favourite brand of rum, exiled Caribbeans, Mulattos down on their luck, travellers leading one of their seven lives in Texaco, with a concubine and a string of children, plus two or three special ones that I shall have time to deal with in detail.' The women: 'Beringed madams, nègresses who've seen endless struggles, red as the earth of Vert-Pré, creatures whose sole aim is to get pregnant and show off bunches of kids in their arms, wrinkled, dark-eyed girls, buxom matrons with
long lashes, whose abundant curves threatened to burst the seams of a shrunken garment, plus a procession of individuals in curlers, smiling and worried, about whom I shall manage to offer more details.’ (p. 33).


24 Tsunamis, Japanese word for a tidal wave on the Pacific coast, caused by an earthquake or hurricane [DSB].

25 In the novel there is the following footnote here to indicate the nature of these ‘calls for help’: ‘For a difficult confinement, an illness, a sudden death, a bloody fight’ (p. 306).

26 One of the questions vital to the geography or the anthropology of space again emerges: the question of centricity, and, echoing Françoise Moncomble (‘La centralité: invariants anthropologiques’, Actions et Recherches Sociales 3–4 (1993), pp. 45–50), we may ask if this is not a necessity and a constant in the social (and spatial) exercise, which actually involves extricating oneself from undifferentiated, continuous chaos, which thus becomes insignificant.

27 E. Glissant, Poétique de la relation (Paris, Gallimard, 1990), pp. 23 and 46 (emphasis added).


29 Ibid., p. 31.

30 Ibid., p. 16.

31 Glissant prefers to speak of Creolization, rather than Creoleness, the better to emphasize the idea of movement and opening, which the suffix ‘ness’ might tend to negate.

32 Glissant, Poétique, p. 46.


35 Bernabé et al., Éloge, p. 88.


37 What Raphaël Confiant has to say in this respect is very significant: ‘The term “Creole” is eminently modern, not backward-looking and colonial, as some people might think, and even post-modern, inasmuch as it indicates the emergence of a new identity model, which could be termed “multiple” or “mosaic”, that is developing under our eyes, everywhere in the world, especially in the western megapoles. Creolization has been, as it were, the prefiguration, in the course of the last three centuries, of this irreversible phenomenon’; R. Confiant, Aimé Césaire: une traversée paradoxale du siècle (Paris, Stock, 1993), p. 266.

38 I am tempted here to question the novelist’s approach, since reducing the life in the

Etemene 1997 4 (3)
mornes in this way to a ‘collective failure’ involves the risk of completely removing this collective experience from any concept of the Creole identity. The social project of this collectivity, considered too poor according to colonial ideology, and as ‘incomplete’ by those denouncing colonial oppression, is now seen to be becoming insufficiently disordered to merit being referred to by the upholders of theories on chaos. On this point, see C. Chivallon, ‘Space and identity in Martinique: towards a new reading of the spatial history of peasantry’, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 13 (1995), pp. 289–309; and ‘Du territoire au réseau’.

Here I would want to mention Sylvia Ostrowetsky’s fine article which compares the town to a cruise, with, on the one hand, the assembling, the permanence, and, on the other, the opening up, the departure, the uprooting: ‘Civilités passagères’, Actions et Recherches Sociales 3–4 (1993), pp. 79–87.