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Agency-achieving Shifts and Patterning form off Content: The Chameleon in Chamoiseau's *Texaco*

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Abstract:

*The chameleon is a trope many authors have found fascinating in articulating the contradictory and hybrid space of Caribbean identity and reality. Not only do characters teeter between an identity that draws from Africa and Europe and Asia, authors, themselves product of the same space, reflect this chameleon-like reality in the narrative strategies they employ in their novels. Patrick Chamoiseau, for example, in his magnum opus, *Texaco*, achieves agency by shifting between opposing emblems, representative of African and European ancestry. In reality, the author also conveniently mimics whichever ancestry he chooses, much as a chameleon in fable adjusts to the particular colour of its environment. This mimicking the author carries to the level of how he orders his novel, patterning form off content and using the disorderly structure of the novel (*Texaco*) to mimic the town's (*Texaco's*) structure and infrastructure. And yet the disorder proves to be a camouflage for ordering the novel much as, within the disorderly nature of the town, order can be found.*

Keywords: *chameleon, mimics, patterning, structure, infrastructure, order, disorder, Texaco, camouflage*

1. Introduction

Critics generally settle on *Texaco* as *Créolité's* most robust prosaic illustration (Prieto 146). The *œuvre's* linguistic manoeuvres celebrate density and the recounting of history through postcolonial lens. Chamoiseau's plot uncovers the plot of the City-sent town planner to extirpate *Texaco*, an insalubrious urban slum that a reticent Marie-Sophie Laborieux, protagonist-in-chief and *Texaco's* leader, seeks to preserve. After a blood-oozing hit to the head, the town agent faces *Texaco's* leader, who allegorises *Texaco* to him. The squatter-settlement hinders *bétonisation* and, *ipso facto*, affects progress. The town sits on land deeded to the multinational oil giant, hence the name, *Texaco*. The novel's eponymous title conveys the secret identity of a community emerging into existence. Through cunning oral and textual interplay, Chamoiseau's title, "*Texaco*," evokes the call and response mechanism of Caribbean folktale. The title reworks language in a deliberately roundabout manner, since "*Texaco*" comprises the Creole words 'teks' (signifying 'text'), 'a' (a prepositional indicator of the future), and 'ko' (meaning body). Their convergence, 'Tex'a'co,' details a textual embodiment of the future incarnation of a city brought into being by Marie-Sophie's magical repetition of the term (Knepper 112). The title's constitution, therefore, heralds the dialect's textual import. As town, *Texaco* comprises local and global, margin and centre, as well as individual stories alongside Martinique's history. The local shanty connects with the global for a future 'glocal' city, a work in progress. Via his title, then, Chamoiseau portrays antagonistic forces in coexistence, like ebony and ivory on a piano. This paper has unitalicized word plays redolent of a chameleon's playfulness, one of the features of the novel under consideration.

Chamoiseau's ambiguous title reveals how *Texaco* mirrors *Texaco*. This chapter demonstrates how patterning form off content summons chameleon with its ability to mimic its surrounding. The discussion examines how characters reflect a construction thematic, how the division of *Texaco* repeats *Texaco's* building materials, and how Chamoiseau's schambolic novel follows *Texaco's* disorderliness. Homi Bhabha's mimicry anchors the portion on content and form.

2. *Texaco's* Structure Mirrors *Texaco's* Structure and Infrastructure

2.1. Structure of the Novel

Another form of doubling forms from *Texaco's* form mirroring content. Chamoiseau's *Texaco* comprises five sections of chronological historical periods, each reflecting unique building materials. The novel contains two books. Book One (Around St. Pierre) divides into *Temps de Carbet et d'Ajoupas* [Age of Longhouses and Ajoupas], and *Temps de Paille* [Age of Straw]; Book Two (Around Fort-de-France) features *Temps de Bois-Caisse* [Age of Crate Wood], *Temps de Fibrociment* [Age of Asbestos], and *Temps de Béton* [Age of Concrete]. These older to newer materials trace the forces of modernisation upon earlier community types. As one generation builds upon the next, *Texaco's* bricolage comprises pre-Columbian, African, plantation, Creole, and modern methods.

Chamoiseau patterns the lives of his characters off these materials that divide each Age of the novel. Book One, the Age of Straw, showcases the Noutéka of the Hills, the first post-emancipation maroon settlement. The people heuristically win over the initially hostile land in this Age that features Longhouses and Ajoupas (Carib and Arawak huts built on piles and covered with branches, leaves, or rushes). Texaco's site contains but thickets and mangrove during this period. In the next period, the Age of Crate Wood, people age out of leaves and branches to crate sturdier board debris structures. As natural materials, crate wood and straw differ from artificially made asbestos and concrete. The first of these latter two materials gives rise to the Age of Asbestos in which villagers build hybrids of wooden hutches insulated with asbestos. Finally, in the Age of Concrete, cement cements itself as chief building block. In a basic sense, these different ages advance the text from introduction and body to conclusion. Noted critic of the *Créolité* movement, Maeve McCusker, makes a noteworthy observation: "The [Creole people's] trajectory from the relative insecurity of straw, crate wood, and asbestos to the 'Age of Concrete' provides an overarching structure to the novel" (47). Constructed otherwise, Texaco's building materials represent materials for building *Texaco*.

2.2. Builders to Build the Novel

Chamoiseau overtly structures *Texaco* off Texaco's construction thematic, much as chameleon imitates objects in the environment. Firstly, the author builds a novel of builders. He copies his esteemed Jamaican Creole comrade, Kamau Brathwaite, who declares every novel a house. Consequently, Chamoiseau's central caucus of characters comprises a carpenter, construction craftsmen, a Creole craftswoman, and a city constructor. The unfolding of *Texaco* largely surrounds Esternome, Marie-Sophie's father, a carpenter, who enriches her heritage. One critic labels Esternome the protagonist in Book One, claiming that "Marie-Sophie may be the heart of Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*, but it is her father, Esternome, who is the story's soul" ("In Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*"). For saving his master's life, Esternome gains freedom even before Abolition in 1848. After manumission, he flees the plantation into Saint-Pierre. There, he encounters Théodorus Koco-doux, a builder, who teaches him construction. Théodorus finds a quick fix for plantations in a fix after the destructive passing of a cyclone. Trained in France, he tailors his deftness to Martinican reality. He adds his "savoir norman aux enseignements offerts par les cases africaines et carbets caraïbes." And little by little, "sa science des constructions devint particulière...en ce pays de nouveauté" (69). Thanks to Koco-doux, these homes that once weather under storms now weather storms. With his *métier*, he familiarizes Esternome with bricolage construction, the melding of European and African building know-how within the Caribbean, and a metaphor for the "con-fusion of cultures" in Martinique (McCusker 55).

The carpenter's skills wood eventually work in his local village. Esternome hones building techniques by building on ancestral knowledge and the sweet lessons Koco-doux teaches. One day, he tells Marie-Sophie the source of his building expertise (53). Esternome's building genius leads him to self-sufficiency. Knowing the "qualités de cases" [characteristics of the hutches] affords him a "koudmen à telleheure" (150-1). The Creole expression, *koudmen*, not *coup de main*, defines diverse skill sets of Creole survival. The Creolists' building guide stipulates that "our writing must unreservedly accept our popular beliefs...and *koudmen* rituals" (897). An entire section, "Docteur-cases" [Doctor of Hutches], celebrates Esternome, simply a mason in remedying housing ills and prescribing building standards: "De terrassesenterrasses, mon docteurconstruisit pour les autres des cases de crécré." In addition to these hutches from "crécré" [turtles shell tree], he builds hutches from "bois-ravine" [ravine wood] and made "des cases de bois-murette" [low-wall hutches] (133). He learns well; when he gets it, he gets it. Doctor Esternome, the only doctor mentioned in the novel, and in relation to building philosophy at that, serves Chamoiseau's overarching construction thematic. In *Cases en pays-mêlés* (2000), Chamoiseau similarly valorises construction. His representation of the Big Plantation House [Grand-Case] in *Cases* and *Texaco* recalls a great oak tree that a tempest uproots. However, in the case of the easily dismantled, renovated, and rebuilt small hutches, they bounce back like blades of straw in a storm.

In the *quartiers* around Fort-de-France, the narrator-protagonist, *née* Laborieux, has her umbilical cord or 'navel string' "buried at the entrance of the hut" (189). This belief depicts Creole culture, which describes a person with a penchant for an item as having a navel string buried near the object of fascination. Chamoiseau employs the metaphor to predestine Marie-Sophie to a laborious life of hutch-building. *Texaco*, little wonder, follows Marie-Sophie's uphill determination to die for *Texaco*. The following Creole proverb supports her resolution: "Wat born inna Calf dedinna Cow" [Any quality at birth remains until death]. And indeed, regarding her life in a hutch, Marie-Sophie was born in a hutch; she grows up with her father in a hutch; she leaves him to live in a hutch; she inspires fellow Creole people to start life in a hutch; and she dies, living in a hutch. Like her father, who copies Théodorus, Marie-Sophie is clearly a chip off the old block.

The born Creole builder builds bridges with another builder of sorts, the town planner. Both the planner and Marie-Sophie negotiate to establish *Texaco*, much as their negotiations come to establish *Texaco*. Without the French-authorized builder expert and antagonist, *Texaco* reads like a book *sanstension*. His indispensability and anonymity prefigure Martinique's reliance on, and detachment from, French culture. Chamoiseau's confrere, Confiant, likewise undermines French torchbearers by his no-name representation of them. The anonymous urban planner centrally closes the chapter on the slum's existence. Upon sighting the site's unsightly sight, he cites clear contraventions to City's construction code. He wonders why these people, who cannot build houses, build houses. He represents City with its sprawling buildings and infrastructure *à la française*. Chamoiseau creates tension through the anticipation of conflict between the two builders, reflecting the antagonism between built-up areas and adjoining underdevelopments.

The Creole woman, knowing the planner's plans, plans for a *tête-à-tête* with him in a bid to save *Texaco*. She hammers home homeownership to him during their round-table talk: "To be is first and foremost to possess a roof" (275).

Building techniques passed on from Esternome to her means that he “transmitted to her a foundational claim to humanity,” according to Kimberley Bowman (51). The dissertator notes that if “to be was to posses [*sic*] a roof, the knowledge required to build an [*sic*] hutch implies... [a] right to human existence” (51). To possess a hutch is the correct thing for a female builder bent on survival. Marie-Sophie elevates Texaco’s survival over Texaco’s aesthetics before the City builder. In her Creole consciousness, she knows that “peel neck fowl bawl fi life, him no bawl fi fedda” [Outward beauty isn’t the most important thing]; rather, benefiting from a shelter constitutes her topmost concern. Marie-Sophie’s squawk for help to the planner to permanently build roost in Texaco preoccupies the narrative. The town agent, added to Texaco’s signal building dramatis personae—Esternome, Texaco’s inhabitants, and Marie-Sophie—contributes to Chamoiseau’s chameleon-like project of aligning form with his construction thematic heralded in the different Ages that divide the novel.

The construction thematic authorises memory retrieval that grounds Creole survival discourse. Critics blame the Creolists for pastifying literature through memory. The Creolists seem to embrace the saying of Jamaica’s first national hero, Marcus Garvey, that a nation without a past is like a tree without roots. Understandably, while Esternome relates his life story as a builder to Marie-Sophie, his statement that “craft is good memory” (59) ties present to past, and forwards the identity-building agenda of the Creolists. In his article on ecocriticism and the Martinican landscape, Eric Prieto comments on these building materials: “They were ambiently available at the time...they all reflect the need to make do with whatever materials are at hand” (242). The critic captures the Creole spirit of survival in an age *prieto de* [packed full of] inflexible laws on *bétonisation*.

The Creole spirit that builds Texaco builds *Texaco*. Texaco’s combined unlike building materials create unsightly hutches hobbled together for a Creole hotchpotch. ‘Creole,’ a complex term, has a long history with diverse meanings. Customarily, Creole defines customisation of things foreign. The term defines earthiness, vulgarity, popularity, genuineness, disorder, and localness, as opposed to metropolitan sophistication (Edgerton 43). Creole means derived, but different, from the original. Creole survives off copying anything and everything. This survival epitomises the proverb: “Before Dawg go widoutsuppa, imnyamCockroach” [Make do with what is available to you]. Hybridity forms from incoming and existing cultures also exemplify Creole.

2.3. A Disorderly Town Structure to Mirror a Disorderly Narrative

Following the definition of Creole as disorderliness, Chamoiseau’s novel novelly models Texaco’s untidy model. The jerry-built slum, among other things, threatens public safety and health due to no running water, poor garbage disposal, and no room to swing a cat. Such *chakka, chakka* [shoddy] settings and insanitary conditions precipitate several past demolitions of Texaco. Evidence of *Texaco*’s tangledness equally abounds. *Publishers Weekly* calls *Texaco* a teeming jungle of a book. Additionally, in “A Letter to Chamoiseau,” Walcott writes that “there is no plot in *Texaco*” (231) because of a non-linear narrative style of Marie-Sophie, who recounts history from a family perspective circa 1820 to the ‘present.’¹ The slummy story arrangement combines her father’s stories interlarded with excerpts from notebooks, letters, journals, and memoirs to include passages from a book called *The Urban Planner’s Notes to the Word Scratcher*. These scattered pieces, which also include information from the Schœlcher Library, make *Texaco* Chamoiseau’s *disiectamembra* that resists straightforward interpretation like the confusing shanty set-up that upsets the planner. Upon entry, *une miasma morbide* and tumour outgrowth greet the town agent. The slum’s undefined entry and exit points mirror *Texaco*, whose end starts at the beginning and flashes back in time. The novel’s *ad hoc* narration, reminiscent of the poorly bordered, slipshod, ghetto arrangement, begins *in medias res* in 1985 with Marie-Sophie meeting the *urbaniste*; the novel then reverts to 1823 to her grandfather and father’s story, and later advances beyond the story’s starting point.

The novel epitomises a palimpsest that recalls frequent rebuilding on Texaco’s demolished site. Oiseau de Cham, Chamoiseau’s novelistic double, records, edits, and reorganises Marie-Sophie’s oral testimony, one already given to the town planner, even as she tells stories on top of stories. Marie-Sophie outlays Texaco’s layout to the town planner, demonstrating how the town’s rugged history informs current reality: “Nos cases (reconstruites trente-douze fois) semblaient de déliant mosaïque” (367). The term, “mosaic,” recalls *Éloge*’s Creole-troping language tied to a Creole garden that has “multiplicity” and “diversity” that do not “resist the different forms of yam in [the garden]” (892). Like the flourishing Creole garden with all manner of provisions all about the place, *Texaco* is “jerry-built from fragments that draw from disparate fictional sources” (McCusker 110). In reality, *Texaco* constitutes a construction site with diverse textile building materials. Apart from the allusion to different construction materials, ‘three’ languages—French, Creole, and creolised French—build the text. Moreover, there are four narrators: Marie-Sophie; the Word Scratcher, alias Oiseau de Cham (a pun on Chamoiseau), who speaks to the urban planner; the urban planner; and finally, Ti-Cirique, the Haitian intellectual, whose name, a little circus, strengthens the roundaboutness of the narrative.

The narrators cut in and out of the already non-linear story line. For example, without warning, the town planner intercepts Marie-Sophie’s narration with lengthy quotations that stick out like jelly beans trying to ‘gel’ in jello. In opening, Marie-Sophie guarantees a cogent story with a “thread by thread” (21). In addition, the narrative, similar to Chamoiseau’s *Chronique des sept misères*, jettisons this promised commitment to linearity; both novels break “le fil” [the thread or story line] and upset the delicate stitch by stitch [*maille par maille*] through several flashbacks viewed, at times, through several eyes. The female narrator misleadingly warns against detouring at the outset of her story: “Le détourserait risqué” (25). Yet, the helter-skelter narrative opens with her “digression, permitting her to smuggle in from the margins the

¹ Another reader laments: “The novel meanders all over the place. It’s not always clear; sometimes, I don’t follow the action even though I’m enjoying the read.” See www.goodreads.com/book/show/949065.Texaco.

'illegitimate' and irrelevant, or the very stories she claims she wants to repress" (McCusker 90). The Creole novel *pills*² the reader by promising the story of Marie-Sophie, then presenting, instead, numerous accounts "cobbled together from versions presented to different audiences through time" (Knepper 115). Consider: Chamoiseau presents not one but three radically different versions of the town planner's arrival in Texaco. In one of the accounts, "The Christ's Coming according to Sonore," Marie-Sophie, after citing the riskiness of detouring, mentions that a detour "would be edifying" (15).

Texaco, the alternative shantytown, parallels *Texaco*, a non-standard novel. As Marie-Sophie invokes Texaco by magically repeating the slum's name and transforming the oil giant's site, Chamoiseau's composite of voices, from diverse sources—journals, reports, stories, and notes—overriding and contesting, situating and resituating each other, authorises his novel. Knepper compares Texaco's utopia to *Texaco*, the Creolist ideal of a novel reminiscent of Thomas More's *Utopia*. Chamoiseau thus envisions a slum that shares a global space with the oil giant and a local space. As a result, the author portrays a slum that circumvents City's building codes by employing foreign French and local Creole building materials, even as *Texaco* straddles the line between oral and written to defy language strictures. For example, *Texaco* raises the possibility of a language that eschews linearity and clarity, that organically identifies with the sensuous experience, and that feeds on the corporeal and the actual (Knepper 114-115). So, the harum-scarum treatment of languages does have an aim; in fact, within "dis-order-liness," one sees order. After all, the Goncourt panel would have lost a screw for conferring their prize on a mere Creole jungle book. *Éloge, Créolité's* construction manual, describes Creole, a key organising building principle, as "an edifice to be inhabited..., a central reference..., a suggestive explosion demanding to be aesthetically organized" (892). As the different building materials order the Creole town, so the epistolary nature of *Texaco* orders *Texaco*.

2.4. Disorder Camouflages Order

Texaco's disorderly narrative structure camouflages order, just as Texaco's disorder is orderly. The characters in Texaco live ordinarily although the town planner smells a *miasme morbide* amidst the *bitch up, bitch up* [bush-level] structures. Like factory workers accustomed to fetor, the inhabitants do not mind Texaco's stench. The outsider to Texaco easily finds it difficult to function in the mess; however, there is method to Texaco's madness, much like someone who organises himself in a disorganised room, and becomes disorganised when someone organises the room. Now, with an original arrangement, he no longer knows how and where to find what, as he did in the original arrangement. Comparably, regarding Texaco, Marie-Sophie explains away the sloppiness, allowing the agent to remark the tidy in the *slacky-tidy*/untidiness: "I suddenly realized that Texaco was not an urban slum"; rather, the favela-like set-up displays "rich[ness] with the depth of our stories" (170). The planner, surprised at the woman's revelations of Texaco as a town having "logics," earlier remarks "the new eyes" Marie-Sophie gives him (165). Like the planner's initial reaction to Texaco, the reader, ambushed by four narrative voices, voices that cut in and out of the narrative, narrative flashbacks to historical incidents, incidents a many among characters, characters as authorial doubles, and double entries from Marie-Sophie's personal journal and the planner's book, has to read carefully, and even more than once, so as not to be lost in unending confusion, convolution, 'poor' structure, and disorder. On one hand, the novel evokes a 'thick' or opaque narrative celebrated by the Creolists, who choose to exercise this Glissant-given right to *opacité* and not transparency. On the same track, McCusker labels *Texaco* a Post-modern fiction: "*Texaco* exemplif[ies]... principles of postmodernism in, for example, its questioning of any monolithic 'truth' or stable narrative perspective, its ludic disregard for narrative linearity and in its self-referential undermining of canonical History" ("Telling Stories" 25).

While some give Chamoiseau ducks for organisation, others believe he gets ducks in a row. Whereas McCusker sees postmodern disorder in *Texaco*, Britton reads *camouflage* (98).³ Described with an antigram, *Texaco*, not just a 'fluster,' provides readers 'restful' reading. Britton, after a fine-tooth-comb reading of the novel, reveals that "*Texaco* has a secret order, which organises the apparent disparate textual surface, and limits the fiction's overt commitment to multiplicity and diversity" (98). A recurring unifying theme permeates the seemingly disjointed narrative, primarily, the "conquêtes des villes" heralded by a series of *élans* [driving forces]: "Repères chronologiques de nos élans pour conquérir la ville" (13), a quote constituting "the initial chronological summary of the novel," according to Britton (99).

Also, *Texaco's* Book One and Book Two deliberately start with the epithet: "Conquête de l'En-ville." Conquering City signifies stonewalling urban-slum eradication and convincing City to legitimise squatter settlements. Marie-Sophie cites "conquest" as the cementing force between Esternome and her. Her father's story, a journey to freedom, includes several failed attempts at a self-sustaining village outside City. Marie-Sophie sums up her father's circuitous story "autour d'une volonté de conquérir l'En-ville" (italics mine) (249). Additionally, Esternome nearly conquers City with the establishment of Noutéka (123-132). However, unable to resist Saint-Pierre's forces, Noutéka fails. The failure of Noutéka prompts Marie-Sophie to rebuild Texaco over and over after demolition, to avenge the failure of Noutéka. She hopes to succeed where her father fails; in reality, she envisions conquering City. Later, when Marie-Sophie decides to construct Texaco, it is the spirit of Noutéka that resurfaces to propel her objective: "We behaved according to the Noutéka of the Hills...in spite of its failure, for it contains the seeds responsible for the germination of all the ideas found in Texaco" (317). The first 200 pages of Chamoiseau's novel, Britton notes, rambles around *Texaco's* goal to conquer City. Marie-Sophie sees this familial rambling as necessary to conquer City and save Texaco. She continues her frisbee-sailing story to the town agent: "Pour comprendre Texaco et l'élan de nos pères vers la ville, il nous faudra remonter loin dans la lignée de ma propre famille" (48).

²To tell a convincing lie in Jamaican Creole. The term derives from taking a pill, which many islanders believe mask the real issue.

³This section constitutes chameleon-in-chameleon: camouflage itself is chameleon, but so is seeing how one camouflage imitates another.

Though the story sails away, it reaches Chamoiseau's target to camouflage disorganisation in *Texaco's* organised, bi-partite division. Again, the slipshod story arrangement comes together by combining Books One and Two. More importantly, the titles of the two books narrow *Texaco's* thematic focus with similar epithets. Book One is entitled "Autour de Saint-Pierre (où l'esclave Esternome...à la conquête de L'En-ville...)" (italics mine) (41). "Autour de Fort-de-France (où la fille d'Esternome, porteuse d'un nom secret poursuit l'œuvre de conquête et impose Texaco)" (italics mine), Book Two's title, similarly pursues the City-conquering objective (177). Conquering City constitutes a central concern of *Créolité* since City symbolizes colonial culture and speech. *Éloge* describes the conquest: "We did conquer it, the French language" (900).

The arrival of the town planner, heralding the showdown of showdowns between builders, advances the all-important themes of survival and conquest, which themes Chamoiseau camouflages in narrative fluff. Marie-Sophie's story to the *marqueur de parole* is a second version to the story the town planner hears. She strategically highlights her City-conquering objective to the *marqueur* and not the urban planner: "[C]'était moi,... qui devrais mener seule—à mon âge—la décisive bataille pour la survie de Texaco [...] je commençai à lui raconter l'histoire de notre Quartier et de notre conquête de l'En-ville" (41). Couple this statement with her existential pronouncement on her all-important, informal dwelling, and one better appreciates the novel's unifying thread! Any seemingly irrelevant digressions in the 400-page story cleverly disguises her ultimate goal of Texaco's survival. Her storytelling recalls Shahrazad kept alive day by day by daylilying time by her dilly-dallying detours and delays. Shahrazad's *arrière-pensée* causes the king to fall for her cliffhanger and to yearn for her sequel to the previous night's story. After 1,001 nights and 1,000 stories, her gift of the gab ends, but the king, now enamored of her, spares Shahrazad's life, making her his queen. In effect, detour literally without 'tour' (a planned path or an *a priori* agenda) is impossible. Another camouflage surfaces with the slum that *palaav* [sprawls] around City, giving the appearance of a City under siege, when truth be told, Texaco survives off City in addition to the Africa-recalling countryside.

2.5. Shifting to Achieve Agency

As Texaco leeches off City (French culture) and the countryside (Africanity), *Texaco* toggles between French and Creole. Profiting from dialectics calls to mind chameleon, who maintains a level head when leveraging the power of Tiger and Crocodile. Similarly, rather than creating confusion, *Texaco's* multilingualism encourages a 'con-fusion' of languages that seizes Creole reality. *Texaco* presents a heterogeneous Creole culture and a powerful, orderly French language and culture. In this plot, Marie-Sophie focuses both on City and Texaco's characteristics, thereby allowing the agent to make an informed decision about the two areas. "Au centre de la ville," he remarks "une logique urbaine occidentale, alignée, ordonnée, forte comme la langue française" (220). After identifying City with French, the town planner notes City's opposition to "la langue créole dans la logique de Texaco." He next speaks of Creole as a new multilingual, multiracial, multihistorical identity "sensible à la diversité du monde" (220). Like the *shame-o-lady/ mimosapudica*, the Creole town ever adjusts to external stimuli such as the town planner.

In light of the town planner's previous pronouncements, he and Marie-Sophie respectively represent French and Creole ideals. Both interact for Texaco's preservation, just as Creole mixes with French to create *Texaco's* lifeblood. Lise Gauvin, critic of *Créolité*, comments on "une culture créole particulière qui a été investie, irriguée par la langue créole et la langue française" (25). Given Gauvin's comment, one understands Chamoiseau's conflation of hutch-building with text-building when, through Marie-Sophie, he identifies "unepoétique de cases au désir de vivre," which has the makings of a discourse on building. This quote comes on the heels of a series of hutch building by Esternome, after which he hints that these constructions end up constructing a language of their own, their own poetics. Gauvin remarks other language dynamics in the novel when she cites a "désordre de parole," a babel redolent of the post-deluge apostatising nation in the days of Nimrod (25). But the novel celebrates this babel as babble to the coloniser, yet cogent to Antilleans. In this regard, the slave addresses the coloniser in *Caribbean Discourse*: "You wish to reduce me to a childish babble, I will make this babble systematic, we shall see if you can make sense of it" (20). Chamoiseau fuses Creole with French and other languages to "unify him roman, et limns a realidadcaribéñaglobaal."

3. Conclusion

As Chamoiseau capitalises on the language olio, he sews his novel together with various narrative viewpoints. Despite *Texaco's* four apparently confusing narrative perspectives, they actually camouflage order since Marie-Sophie centrally unifies the narration. It is her life and that of Esternome that form Texaco's lifeblood. The Word Scratcher, urban planner, and Ti-Cirique must consult the stories she stores. The Word Scratcher, in doing patchwork, functions subordinately to Marie-Sophie, narrator-in-chief and "Source," until her passing. In the last chapter, "The Resurrection," he meets Marie-Sophie, who later dies. He remembers her fondly. But death heightens the storyteller's value to the Word Scratcher. Thanks to her mire of words and death, he has what to narrate. At the conclusion of the novel, the circular narrative comes together like a rich pumpkin or red peas soup. In transcribing his community, the Scratcher Cook confesses that he reorganises "la foisonnante parole de l'Informatrice" [the Source's burgeoning word] (426). "Riddle me this," says the riddle challenger, "What delightfully improves in quality after death?"⁴ The Word Scratcher (a double for Chamoiseau) takes over from Marie-Sophie and wallows in her words before he organises them in a delectable story. He thus preserves her words like cured ham that is much palatable than a live, dirty pig. The town planner, like the Word Scratcher, must interact with the "Source," Marie-Sophie. Ti-Cirique, Haitian intellectual and narrator, criticises the Word Scratcher for writing in creolised French. But again, the Haitian must thank the Martinican for the opportunity to have something to critique. All in all, Marie-Sophie's gives life to the Word Scratcher, and the Word Scratcher, in his turn, gives

⁴ The answer lies in nearby words.

life to Ti-Cirique so that Marie-Sophie may be all things to all. While her father figures importantly in the Age of Straw, she is the common figure, the glue Chamoiseau applies between the Ages of Straw and Crate Wood to the Ages of Asbestos and Concrete.

Chamoiseau as author functions as chameleon, an animal appropriated for its ability to shift from one colour to the other and camouflage. Digging deeper, one will find how the Age of Straw and Concrete are respective metaphors for orality and writing. This allows greater grounds for research that speaks to irresolution in authors torn between antipodal ancestries, but who are able to toggle between different colour realities, much as a chameleon does, for agency.

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