Lingua Cultura, 18(1), July 2024, 79-88
DOI: 10.21512/lc.v18i1.11517

P-ISSN: 1978-8118
E-ISSN: 2460-710X

BECOMING FRENCH IN SCHOOL: MEMORIES OF SCHOOL LIFE IN *CHEMIN D'ÉCOLE* BY PATRICK CHAMOISEAU

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Received: 18th April 2024/**Revised:** 18th July 2024/**Accepted:** 19th July 2024

How to Cite: Hayuningsih, A. A. C. (2024). Becoming French in school: Memories of school life in *chemin d'école* by Patrick Chamoiseau. *Lingua Cultura, 18*(1), 79-88. https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v18i1.11517

ABSTRACT

The research explored the theme of 'becoming French' in the novel Chemin d'école by Patrick Chamoiseau. The novel offered a unique perspective on the complex issues of identity, language, and colonial legacy within the Caribbean educational context. The central focus of the research was to examine how the mission civilisatrice was implemented through the education system in the French colonies. The French mission civilisatrice aimed to 'civilize' the colonies, exerting influence over the lives of children within these territories. In this postcolonial narrative, Chamoiseau challenged the erasure of Creole culture and identity as children were molded into the French mold. His work underscored the tension between the native language and the French language, serving as a commentary on linguistic and cultural colonialism. Incorporating Frantz Fanon's theoretical framework from "Black Skin, White Masks", the research illuminated colonialism's psychological and cultural impacts, revealing the enduring consequences of internalized racism and the complexities of 'becoming French' in a postcolonial context. A qualitative research design utilizing literary analysis was applied, involving systematic reading and coding of Chamoiseau's novel. The findings suggest that through its portrayal of the education system, language erasure, and cultural identity, the novel offers a poignant and thought-provoking narrative that illuminates the process of 'becoming French' in a postcolonial context, providing insights into the challenges and complexities faced by individuals subjected to the mission of French civilization.

Keywords: *Caribbean education, Chemin-d'école, mission civilisatrice, French civilization, Patrick Chamoiseau*

INTRODUCTION

French colonialism not only brought positive impacts on the development of the colonies but also negative impacts. Among the advances brought by French colonialism are in the field of infrastructure development, such as railways in Algeria in the 1900s (Maravall, 2019) and economic growth in the colonies due to a lot of investment and trade in goods and services from France (El Kallab & Terra, 2018). However, it also precipitates the establishment of numerous detrimental legacies that have become entrenched in the collective memories of these territories. A notable legacy lies in the influence of the French language, which functioned as the official language in its colonies until their independence, prompting subsequent linguistic shifts. The adverse effects of French colonialism on the suppression of indigenous languages in the colonies are documented in various research, such as in New Caledonia (Bihan-Gallic, 2021), Morocco (Boulahnane, 2018), Louisiana (Nicholas, 2021), Algeria (Rouabah, 2022), and Cameroon (Hodieb, 2020).

The presence of the French language in the colonies not only served as a 'bridge' of communication for the multiethnic communities residing therein but also manifested as a 'weapon of cultural erasure'. This aspect is vividly illustrated in an account written by Henry Louis Gates. In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a Haitian writer and prominent figure in the La Ronde movement, tragically ended his life by leaping from a bridge, having fastened a French dictionary, Larousse, securely around his neck (Cogeanu, 2022). Laforest's demise was not merely a loss to the Haitian

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literary community; rather, it symbolized the anguish of colonized peoples whose native tongues were 'murdered' and supplanted by the language of their colonizers.

The debate surrounding the primacy of the mother tongue versus the imposition of the 'stepmother' tongue in the dynamics between colonizing powers and colonized territories remains unresolved, persisting even after the attainment of independence by the colonies. Within the political framework of French colonialism, language emerges as a pivotal instrument for propagating the mission *civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) across the French colonies.

The term *mission civilisatrice* was first articulated in Jules Ferry's discourse on 28 July 1885. Ferry advocated for the noble duty of 'civilizing' the 'inferior race' through the dissemination of civilization by the superior race (Majumdar, 2007). At first glance, the *mission civilisatrice* appears reminiscent of the 'white man's burden' ideology that underpins British colonialism (Shehata, 2022). Both ideologies posit the superiority of the colonizers, predominantly white individuals, over the colonized, attributing various advantages to the former that purportedly enable them to achieve greater civilizational progress compared to their colonized counterparts.

The depiction of colonists as 'indigenous' and others in need of 'education' via *mission civilisatrice* is explicitly integrated into colonial policy and propaganda during Albert Sarraut's tenure at the Colonial Ministry in the 1920s and 1930s. Sarraut has delineated *mission civilisatrice* as the prerogative of the strongest to aid the weakest, where the notion of 'obligation' is overshadowed by the concept of 'right' aligned with strength (Majumdar, 2007). Furthermore, Sarraut contends that the inherent deficiencies of the indigenous populace, such as idleness and dishonesty, could only be rectified through *mission civilisatrice* (Majumdar, 2007).

The enduring memory of *mission civilisatrice* is immortalized through various media, including novels within the autobiographical genre. Patrick Chamoiseau is among the many francophone authors who have delved into France's endeavors to dominate through *the mission of civilisatrive* in its colonies. Born in 1953 in Martinique, he is renowned as an influential figure in the French Caribbean literary sphere. His oeuvre encompasses a diverse range of genres, including drama, short stories, essays, and novels.

Patrick Chamoiseau is also recognized as one of the progenitors of the *créolité* movement. This movement emerges as a critique of the *négritude* movement, which is perceived to excessively romanticize black (African) culture and seems to disregard the emergence of 'mixed' culture. Creole culture itself represents a culture rooted in survival strategies within Caribbean society. Its most salient characteristic lies in amalgamating diverse cultures to engender a new culture unique to the Caribbean region. *Créolité* underscores resistance to colonial oppression and dominant cultural paradigms (Colwill, 2023; Parvulescu & Boatcă, 2023).

Patrick Chamoiseau's critique of colonialism and the irony of eradicating Creole culture from the Caribbean is encapsulated in his trilogy of autobiographical novels entitled *Une Enfance Créole*. This trilogy comprises *Antan d'enfance, Chemin-d'école,* and *À Bout d'enfance*. Each novel chronicles Chamoiseau's life from childhood to adulthood, with the second novel, *Chemin-d'école*, forming the focus of this research.

Chemin-d'école narrates the tale of French domination through *mission civilisatrice* within a school setting in Martinique. The novel is partitioned into two segments, *Envie* and *Survie*, through which readers are immersed in the milieu of a French school environment in the Caribbean from the perspective of children. Through this narrative, Chamoiseau articulates his critique of the French education system, which effaces non-French identities, ultimately molding Caribbean (and other colonial) school children into individuals with French identities. Consequently, this research seeks to explore how *mission civilisatrice* is enacted through the educational apparatus in the French colonies.

The novel *Chemin-d'école*, recounted from the viewpoint of a child dubbed *le négrillon* based on Patrick Chamoiseau's childhood recollections, holds significance within francophone literature for several reasons. Firstly, childhood serves as a discursive terrain of memories and reflections that shape contemporary experiences, evolving in tandem with the construction of individual identities (Massantini, 2020; Ouma, 2020; Bouacida, 2021). Secondly, postcolonial theory has long acknowledged the import of "the metaphor of childhood in legitimizing colonialism and modernity" (Mills & Lefrançois, 2018). The French colonial narrative utilizes the analogy of the child to depict colonized populations as infantile and submissive, thus solidifying a framework of authority and reliance centered on the civilizing mission. This methodical indoctrination effectively converts French identity into a symbol of civilization (Matasci, 2021).

Patrick Chamoiseau's novel, *Chemin d'école*, has been subject to extensive analysis, serving as a tool in his resistance against European hegemony. This resistance is depicted through the 'battle' between characters le Maître and Gros-Lombric at school, which metaphorically represents daily life amidst Caribbean society (Hardwick, 2013). Johnson (2103) underscores the importance of understanding the impact of colonial education on language dynamics and narrative shaping in Chamoiseau's works, highlighting the influence of past domination on his writing. Belrose (2020) further explores this theme, illustrating the conflict between Creoles and French within the school environment, culminating in the perceived 'defeat' of the Creoles, symbolized by Gros-Lombric. Swanson (2020) examines how Chamoiseau's novel employs magical motifs to resist neocolonial pedagogies, challenging the dichotomy between Caribbean culture and Western rationality.

Furthermore, Genschow (2021) analyzes epistemic violence in Chemin d'école, which normalizes and 'civilizes' the students. Lastly, Thermes (2023) reveals an intricate relationship between French and Creole languages, providing a novel approach to literary fiction and storytelling in the postmodern context.

Considerable research has been dedicated to exploring the ramifications of French colonialism on education within its colonies. The extensive influence of French colonialism on educational systems is evident in various contexts. In Morocco, debates surround the pervasive presence of the French language in institutions and the public sphere, with divergent perspectives on its impact on the nation's identity and progress (Lmustapha, 2023). Similarly, in Lebanon, colonialism plays a pivotal role in shaping educational paths and curricula, strategically utilizing education as a means for societal control and transformation (Muhammad & Al Jubory, 2022). At the same time, French educational policies in North Africa influence the movement of international students, positioning France as a hub of contemporary advancement in regions marked by conflict (Luce, 2022). Within the French Antilles, the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods witnessed colonial schools marked by racial and sexual segregation, illustrating the intersectionality of power dynamics in colonial societies (Fayolle, 2022). Meanwhile, access to higher education in French Africa South of the Sahara from colonization until independence is limited, leading to a lack of political skills and reliance on French 'coopérants' for administration and education (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 2021). In Cameroon, the partition between France and the UK leads to distinct educational systems, with the British-administered sector demonstrating positive outcomes, while the enduring French legacy, characterized by high repetition rates, adversely affects dropout rates (Dupraz, 2019). Lastly, French colonization plays a pivotal role in shaping modern education in Vietnam, albeit at the cost of eroding national cultural identity and exacerbating social class disparities (Wang, 2023). Despite this extensive exploration, a critical research gap exists, notably regarding the implementation of the *mission civilisatrice* as a colonial policy in French schools in the Caribbean. Particularly, there is a lack of examination in the context of Patrick Chamoiseau's autobiographical novel, highlighting the need for further investigation into this specific aspect of colonial education.

The research draws upon the theoretical framework articulated by Frantz Fanon in his work, *Black Skin, White Masks*, which transcends conventional examinations of colonialism's political and economic dimensions. Fanon's concept of 'colonialism as a zone of being' (Fanon, 2008) provides a foundational lens for understanding colonialism's profound psychological and cultural ramifications on the colonized subject. Informed by Fanon's insights, this research acknowledges the invasive impact of colonialism on the inner world of the colonized, particularly within the constructed binary of the superior/civilized colonizer and the inferior/primitive colonized. The research also adopts Fanon's terminology, 'epidermalisation' (Fanon, 2008), to elucidate the internalization of the colonizer's gaze, leading to a corrosive self-judgment deeply rooted in racist ideology.

This theoretical framework informs the investigation into the enduring consequences of internalized racism, the process by which the colonized subjects adopt the colonizer's prejudiced perceptions and attitudes towards their own race, resulting in a devaluation of self and culture (Fanon, 2008). This theoretical framework points to the lasting consequences of internalized racism in the colonial system, which extends beyond superficial concerns to represent a profound psychic wound that diminishes self-worth and prompts attempts to mimic the colonizer. Fanon's humanizing approach to amplifying the voices of the oppressed further contributes to the theoretical underpinning of the research, emphasizing the need to recognize and address the enduring psychological and cultural legacies of colonialism in contemporary contexts. Consequently, the research utilizes Fanon's framework as a poignant and relevant lens for comprehending the multifaceted impacts of colonialism and engaging with contemporary struggles against racism and oppression across diverse settings.

METHODS

A qualitative research design is applied in the research, utilizing literary analysis as the primary research approach. The research procedures entail a systematic and comprehensive examination of the novel. Initially, a thorough reading of the entire text is undertaken to establish familiarity with the plot, characters, and major themes. Subsequently, the research focuses on identifying key passages concerning the representation of identity, language, and the impact of the *mission civilisatrice* in the Caribbean education system. A detailed coding system is developed to categorize textual excerpts according to themes such as cultural identity, language dynamics, and the *mission civilisatrice*. This coding system aims to provide a structured and transparent method for extracting relevant data from the novel. Each identified theme is assigned a code, facilitating systematic retrieval during the subsequent stages of data analysis.

Data summarization involves compiling thematic summaries for each identified code. These summaries facilitate data organization in a manner that preserves the nuances of Chamoiseau's narrative while enabling a systematic examination of the research themes. For the analysis phase, a process of constant comparison is employed. The thematic summaries are analyzed iteratively, comparing and contrasting instances of language erasure, negotiation of cultural identity, and the portrayal of the *mission civilisatrice*.

Connections between themes and patterns within the text are identified, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the novel's exploration of 'becoming French' in a postcolonial context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The concept of *mission civilisatrice* takes various forms, with education emerging as its most prominent and enduring effect. Through *Chemin d'école*, Patrick Chamoiseau vividly illustrates how schools and curricula serve as extensions of French colonial power aimed at transforming Caribbean children into Frenchmen.

In the novel, *mission civilisatrice* is executed through several means. Primarily, it manifests through lessons with a markedly Eurocentric orientation. The teacher, the Master *(le Maître*), cites instances of 'white' figures such as Christopher Columbus and Jules Ferry, who purportedly brought civilization to indigenous peoples considered uncultured (Chamoiseau, 2016). However, these lessons omit crucial historical facts regarding black slavery in Africa and French atrocities during their dominion over Africa.

Data 1

"En ce temps-là, le Gaulois aux yeux bleus, à la chevelure blonde comme les blés, était l'ancêtre de tout le monde. En ce temps-là, les Européens étaient les fondateurs de l'Histoire. Le monde, proie initiale des ténèbres, commençait avec eux. Nos îles avaient été là, dans un brouillard d'inexistence, traversée par de vagues fantômes caraïbes ou arawaks, eux-mêmes pris dans l'obscurité d'une non-histoire cannibale. Et, avec l'arrivée des colons, la lumière fut. La Civilisation. L'Histoire. L'humanisation du grouillement de la Terre." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 140)

("In those days, the blue-eyed Gaul, with hair as blond as wheat, was the ancestor of everyone. In those days, Europeans were the founders of History. The world, prey to the initial darkness, began with them. Our islands had been there, in a haze of non-existence, traversed by vague Caribbean or Arawak ghosts, themselves caught in the darkness of a cannibal non-history. And with the arrival of the colonizers, there was light. Civilization. History. The humanization of the Earth's teeming masses.")

Data 1 shows that historical education in the colonies is depicted as equivalent to that in the Metropole. The Master asserts that the ancestors of the world's peoples are blue-eyed, blond-haired Gauls, a narrative starkly at odds with Caribbean societal realities. Despite its absurdity, many students accept these teachings as truth due to the teacher's authoritative position.

The implementation of *mission civilisatrice* involves direct regulation of the curriculum by the 'Centre' or the Metropole. Additionally, teachers are appointed as government employees with equal status to those in the Metropole (Majumdar, 2007). The school's function is not solely to fulfill individual or national educational needs but to produce 'future' colonial citizens who serve the Metropole or the Fatherland (Harrison, 2019). All curricula are designed to be similar to that of the Metropole, aiming to achieve total assimilation of the colonies into French society. Therefore, although the history lessons presented in the novel for the Caribbean region may seem absurd, the Caribbean people must accept them as truth because they are included in the curriculum designed to mirror that of the Metropole.

Education *à la mission civilisatrice* is also imbued with moral education. For instance, *le Maître* employs the story of the poor farmer and his apple tree. In this tale, the apple tree serves as the poor farmer's source of income to sustain his family. One day, he finds the tree's branches, laden with ripe apples, dangling outside his yard. However, when he returns the following day to pick the apples, he discovers that they have all disappeared. It appears someone has stolen all the fruit. *Le Maître* then prompts his students to discern the moral of the story. When no one can provide an answer, he inscribes on the blackboard that the story's moral is not to steal what does not belong to them (Chamoiseau, 2016). By implication, this underscores the Western assumption that the colonized lack virtue and are prone to thievery, necessitating the early implantation of moral lessons by the French authorities. The absurdity of this moral lesson becomes glaringly apparent when considering the extractive nature of colonialism itself, which involves extensive appropriation of resources and labor from the colonized territories. This hypocritical stance reveals the profound contradictions in the colonizer's attempt to impose their moral framework while simultaneously engaging in systemic exploitation.

The concept of colonial 'kindness' is exemplified in *Chemin d'école* through the regular provision of milk for Perignon's students.

Data 2

"Les jours du lait, le Maître abandonnait l'idée d'enseignement. Il en profitait pour siroter ce lait avec autant de plaisir que s'il avait tété à l'une des mamelles civilisatrices du progrès. Les Maîtres d'ailleurs dissertaient sur ce lait universel qui nous provenait de France en concentré-nestlé et en poudre moderne." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 121-122).

("In the days of milk, the Master abandoned the idea of teaching. He took the opportunity to sip this milk with as much pleasure as if he had nursed from one of the civilizing teats of progress. The Masters, in fact, discussed this universal milk that came to us from France in condensed-Nestlé and modern powdered form.")

The school administration believes that Caribbean children are malnourished, attributing their

tired and lazy behavior at school to the consumption of non-nutritious Creole food. Milk distribution occurs once a week, typically on Mondays. The little negro (*le negrillon*) recalls that the glass of milk he receives at school tastes peculiar and lacks the freshness of the cow's milk provided by his mother, Man Ninotte. This disparity arises because the milk distributed at school is not cow's milk but Nestlé powdered milk, which, according to *le negrillon*, is infused with 'artificial' flavors.

The situation in Data 2 underscores the 'absurdity' of colonial claims of superiority, as the colonizers impose their standards and products, often artificial and inferior while dismissing and devaluing the local practices of the colonized. The insistence on the superiority of powdered milk over fresh cow's milk exemplifies the colonial mindset that sought to replace indigenous knowledge and practices with European alternatives despite their evident shortcomings. Such actions reveal the profound contradictions and inherent biases in the colonial agenda, which falsely asserts the superiority of Western norms and goods while systematically undermining and exploiting the very people they deem inferior.

Among the lessons and curriculum oriented towards the homogeneity of French values, the predominant element in the *mission civilisatrice* is the use of the French language. In the novel, teachers perceive Creole as a tether to a past associated with slavery that obstructs progress.

Data 3

"Plus que jamais le Maître abominait le créole. Il y voyait la source de ses maux et l'irrémédiable boulet qui maintiendrait les enfants dans les bagnes de ignorance. Il sommait les parents de soustraire leur engeance aux infections de ce sabir de champs-de-cannes en exigeant d'eux le français du savoir, de l'esprit et de l'intelligence. Sus au créole en toutes circonstances, et plus encore quand les enfants causaient entre eux. Il fallait immoler cette chienlit sur d'exemplaires bûchers de vigilance. Nous voir patauger dans ce problème de langue le raidissait de jour en jour. On le voyait aborder à nos rives insanes, le regard lourd ; on le sentait accablé quand nos accents créoles chantonnaient mollement dans notre français couché, récité et traînant." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 73)

("More than ever, the Master abhorred Creole. He saw it as the source of his woes and the irremediable shackle that would keep children in the prisons of ignorance. He urged parents to shield their offspring from the contagion of this field-of-sugarcane gibberish by demanding from them the French of knowledge, of intellect, and of intelligence. Down with Creole in all circumstances, and even more so when the children conversed among themselves. This disorderly language had to be sacrificed on exemplary pyres of vigilance. Seeing us flounder in this language issue stiffened him day by day. We saw him approach our insane shores, his gaze heavy; we felt him burdened when our Creole accents softly intoned in our laid-back, recited, and dragging French.")

Data 3 shows *Le Maître's* rejection of Creole and insistence on French language proficiency reflect the profound internalization of colonial values in the novel's educational system. His disdain for Creole as a 'source of woes' portrays how colonial education suppresses indigenous languages. Promoting French as the sole language of knowledge perpetuates a Eurocentric worldview, marginalizing local identities and reinforcing colonizer superiority. This mirrors Fanon's concept of internalized racism, where the colonized adopt colonizer values, eroding their cultural identity. *Le Maître's* actions typify colonial education's role in rejecting indigenous languages, fostering self-depreciation among colonized societies who internalize cultural inferiority beliefs.

The disparity between French and Creole languages further reinforces French dominance, resulting in the erosion of Creole from the lives of Caribbean people. French is viewed as superior and dignified, while Creole is stigmatized as the language of enslaved individuals and indicative of inferior social status (Ulysse & Masaeed, 2021). Patrick Chamoiseau highlights the reality in most French colonies, where students attend school with the primary aspiration of 'becoming' as cultured as the French. To achieve this aspiration, they are required to relinquish all customs and habits associated with Creole culture and language within the context of the novel.

Historically, the politics surrounding the French language in the colony trace back to the French King's decree of 20th July 1794, which prohibited the use of languages other than French. Interestingly, at the time of the decree, many residents still converse in regional languages. To enforce this decree, the French government initiates a ban on the use of regional languages in schools, imposing penalties on those who disobey (Spolsky, 2018). In the Caribbean context portrayed in the novel, Creole language and culture are perceived as impediments to the progress of the Caribbean population and, consequently, deemed necessary to be eradicated as they do not align with French values. This stance aligns with the rationale of *mission civilisatrice*, which aims to gradually eliminate regional linguistic and cultural differences through 'forced' uniformity via education.

Through the implementation of *mission civilisatrice* in schools, the French colonial government anticipates that students would integrate into the colonial administrative system (Salhi, 2019). However, the implementation does not always proceed as intended due to significant resistance from the populace, compounded by language and cultural barriers. Consequently, the colonial government enlists teachers from the colonies to facilitate communication and instruction with the students. The hope is that students would adapt more readily to the curriculum and educational system when taught by teachers from

their own society.

In the novel, teachers like *Man Salinière, le Maître,* and *le Maître-Indigène* exemplify the dual role of teachers as colonial agents in implementing the *mission civilisatrice* extended beyond merely teaching French language and culture. As argued by Majumdar (2007), indigenous teachers recruited by the French colonial government to teach in the colonies are expected to serve as exemplars of good morality and modernity. For these teachers, participation in the mission offers a pathway to social mobility within the colony. Harrison (2109) refers to these teachers as 'agents of alienation and deracination', highlighting their unintentional role in eroding indigenous identities by promoting assimilation into the dominant colonial culture. This portrayal underscores the complex dynamics of colonial education systems, illustrating how teachers become instruments of cultural transformation and marginalization in the pursuit of colonial ideals.

In his novel, Patrick Chamoiseau presents the 'agents' working for French interests in the school, namely *Man Salinière, le Maître, le Maître-Indigène,* and *le Directeur*. *Man Salinière* is the teacher at the kindergarten and the first person to introduce *le petit negrillon* to French education. She plays a role in acquainting the students with French culture at the most basic level of education. *Man Salinière* introduces French culture through the fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty* and all its characters, including the cursed apple and the seven dwarfs who accompany Sleeping Beauty. She also familiarizes them with the cold of winter and the falling of flowers and leaves in autumn. This narrative starkly contrasts with the reality in the Caribbean. Additionally, it is through *Man Salinière* that *le négrillon* learns to draw the Eiffel Tower and learn about trains (Chamoiseau, 2016).

The next colonial figure is *le Maître*, the teacher at École Perrinon, the primary school attended by *le petit negrillon* and his siblings. As depicted by Patrick Chamoiseau, although *Le Maître* shares the same racial background as his students as a black Caribbean man, he is deeply assimilated into French culture and exhibits behavior perceived as even 'whiter' than that of white individuals. One of his students derisively remarks on his black skin, contrasting with his hair slicked with Vaseline (Chamoiseau, 2016). *Le Maître* firmly believes that Caribbean people need to emulate French standards of knowledge and culture to progress, as seen in Data 4.

Data 4

"Le négrillon aimait entendre le Maître leur lire de petits poèmes magiques ou des textes choisis de George Sand, d'Alphonse Daudet, de Saint-Exupéry... À toute lecture, le Maître buvait un fin sirop. Il prenait plaisir à sucer lettre après lettre le français déployé sur des scènes bucoliques. Dévoué au concert des syllabes, il les détachait de manière emphatique, les rythmait selon une loi intime." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 138)

("The little negro enjoyed hearing the Master read them small magical poems or selected texts from George Sand, Alphonse Daudet, Saint-Exupéry... At every reading, the Master sipped a delicate syrup. He took pleasure in savouring letter after letter of French unfurled over bucolic scenes. Devoted to the concert of syllables, he detached them emphatically, rhythmically arranging them according to an intimate law.")

Le Maître introduces his students to classic French literature, including the works of Georges Sand, Alphonse Daudet, and Antoine de Saint Exupéry. While enriching the literary repertoire of the students at École Perrinon, this approach unfortunately leads to the gradual erosion of Caribbean folklore characters from their memories.

For *le Maître*, France symbolizes civilization rather than the 'savagery' associated with the Creole world. A vivid illustration of this mindset is evident during attendance in class. *Le Maître* insists that students use their *prénom* (first name) and respond to 'present' by raising their hands (Chamoiseau, 2016). According to him, this exemplifies the behavior of a cultured and civilized individual. Furthermore, *le Maître's* complete assimilation into French culture is further evidenced by his attire. He and the teachers at École Perrinon consistently dress in the style of the French, donning trousers, ties, and suits, despite the impracticality of such attire in the Caribbean's hot climate (Chamoiseau, 2016).

The next figure is *le Maître's* temporary substitute teacher, the Indigenous Master (*le Maître-indigène*). This character is described as the polar opposite of le Maître, both in attire and ideology. *Le Maître-Indigène* eschews the suit and tie commonly worn by le Maître and is reputed to be more accommodating when students blend Creole into their French.

Data 5

"Quand le Maître-indigène voyait Blanc, il mettait Noir. Il chantait le nez large contre le nez pincé, le cheveu crépu contre le cheveu-fil, l'émotion contre la raison. Face à l'Europe il dressait l'Afrique. Pour vivre son français, il s'appuyait sur un contre-français qu'il disait révolutionné. Il était en opposition. Nous n'avions pourtant pas le sentiment d'avoir affaire à une autre personne que le Maître. C'était comme si l'ombre d'après-midi de ce dernier s'était levée du sol, pour se mettre à vivre comme un diable-ziguidi. Il nous comprimait autant. Nous conformait autant. Les magiciens le condamnèrent sans sommation." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 148).

("When the Indigenous Master saw White, he presented Black. He sang wide noses against pinched ones, kinky hair against thin strands, emotion against reason. Confronting Europe, he elevated Africa. To live his French, he relied on a counter-French which he claimed to be revolutionized. He stood in opposition. However, we did not feel as if we were dealing with a different person than the Master. It was as if the

afternoon shadow of the latter had risen from the ground, to live like a devil-ziguidi. He compressed us equally. Conformed us equally. The magicians condemned him without warning.")

Data 5 aligns closely with Frantz Fanon's theory of internalized racism and the process of epidermalization within the postcolonial context. *Le Maître-Indigène's* response to encountering white individuals by presenting blackness reflects the internalization of colonial values and the adoption of a counter-narrative as a means of resistance. By contrasting wide noses with pinched ones, kinky hair with thin strands, and emotion with reason, he challenges Eurocentric beauty standards and rationality, asserting the value of African features and emotions. His elevation of Africa when confronting Europe symbolizes a reclaiming of African identity and culture in opposition to colonial domination. However, despite his efforts to resist colonial hegemony, he fails to break free from the colonial framework. The narrator's observation that *le Maître-indigène* is not a different person than *le Maître* suggests that his mimicry merely perpetuates existing power structures and reinforces the colonizer's gaze. Furthermore, his teaching methodology opposes the Creole movement, further confounding children about their place in society.

Chamoiseau's critique of the *négritude* movement is evident here, as he suggests that simply inverting the colonial binaries (white/black, reason/emotion) does not suffice to dismantle them. Instead, it often results in a re-inscription of the power dynamics and essentialism that the movement aims to contest, ultimately failing to liberate the colonized subject from the colonial discourse.

Among all the colonial agents depicted in the novel, the one most feared by *le negrillon* and the students of Perrinon is the Director (*le Directeur*). He consistently admonishes the children and refrains from casual or friendly interactions. *Le Directeur* maintains strict discipline, particularly towards disobedient or unruly Creole-speaking children. Upon *le Directeur's* arrival at the school, an immediate hush descends, bringing all activity to a halt (Chamoiseau, 2016).

The apprehension towards *le Directeur* extends beyond the children to include the teachers, notable *le Maître*, who evoke fear among the students. An incident illustrates this tension: when *le Maître* falls ill and is absent, *le Directeur* later summons him for a discussion on children's education (Chamoiseau, 2016). In the novel, *le Directeur* embodies the authoritarian figure typical of colonial education systems, instilling fear and strict discipline among both students and teachers. His intimidating presence and disciplinary actions, particularly towards Creole-speaking children, reflect a power dynamic that mirrors Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial oppression. The immediate silence and apprehension that accompany his arrival symbolize the pervasive control and suppression within the school environment.

In the novel *Chemin d'école*, Patrick Chamoiseau presents Gros-Lombric as a symbol of resistance against French colonialism. Gros-Lombric, the sole student at École Perrinon who refuses to assimilate into French culture, resists the dominance of *le Maître*, representing French colonial authority in the classroom, by insisting on using the name 'Gros-Lombric' at school. It can be seen in Data 6.

Data 6

"– Et quel est votre patrronyme, mon brave?
– Gros-Lombric, mêssié...
– Plaît-il?
– Gros-Lombric, mêssié...
Le Maître se rapprocha avec la lenteur des menaces. Il cherchait à déceler quelque ironie désobligeante. Mais il ne vit en face de lui qu'un petit-être épouvanté.
– C'est ainsi, je présume, que l'on vous appelle à la maison et dans les bois avoisinant votre case?
– Hein?..
– Suivez-moi sans plus attendrre...
Et, pour haute vérification d'état civil, il entraîna dans le bureau du directeur le petit bougre qui en matière de nom ne connaissait que son surnom créole" (Chamoiseau, 2016: 42)

"- And what is your surname, my lad?
- Gros-Lombric, sir...
- Excuse me?
- Gros-Lombric, sir...
The Master drew closer with the slow pace of threats. He sought to detect some disparaging irony. But he saw before him only a frightened little being.
- I presume this is what you're called at home and in the surrounding woods near your hut?
- Huh?..
- Follow me without further delay...
And, for a thorough verification of civil status, he led the little rascal who, in matters of name, knew only his Creole nickname, into the director's office."

Gros-Lombric, meaning 'big earthworm', serves as a metaphor for the Creole people's resistance to French hegemony. According to Patrick Crowley, Gros-Lombric embodies an earthworm that once inhabited Creole soil but is compelled to relocate to French territory (Crowley, 2004). Consequently, he fails to identify with the name recorded in French civil registries and on the school attendance list, considering the Creole nickname more meaningful than the surname imposed by the colonizer in official documents.

Patrick Chamoiseau's endeavor to resist French dominance is perceived as increasingly encroaching upon and eradicating Creole culture, as depicted through the character of Gros-Lombric, a theme reinforced through various symbols. One such instance occurs when Gros-Lombric is instructed to bring a snake's head into the classroom, leading to a sudden, uncontrollable uproar among the students. It can be seen in Data 7.

Data 7

"Les Maîtres alertés par l'émoi rappliquèrent, baguette dressée, et demeurèrent en panne face à la gueule qui ondulait au bout de la main ivre du petit-bougre. Certains poussèrent une damnation latine, d'autres, vraiment défaits, se retrouvèrent livrés à leur créole natal. ... Monsieur le Directeur lui-même apparut et, nonobstant sa surprise, parvint à souffler d'une voix morte à Gros-Lombric : Lâchez-moi cet ophidien sur-le-champ !... Gros-Lombric lâcha la tête. En basculant, elle suscita une onde de recul général. Monsieur Le Directeur saisit Gros-Lombric par une aile et l'emporta dans son bureau. Les écoliers et les Maîtres se reformèrent en cercle autour de l'épouvantable tête. Les Maîtres écartaient les enfants, apaisaient les criailleries, se retournaient pour arrondir des yeux incrédules sur la chose maintenant échouée. .... Le Maître, sans même donner l'ordre de s'asseoir, se lança une péroraison sur les manières créolo-nègres et l'irrémédiable perdition de ce peuple barbare." (Chamoiseau, 2016: 94-95).

("The Masters, alerted by the commotion, rushed over with raised sticks, only to be halted in their tracks by the serpent-like head swaying at the end of the drunken hand of the little rascal. Some uttered Latin damnations, while others, truly defeated, found themselves resorting to their native Creole. ... The Director himself appeared and, despite his surprise, managed to croak in a dead voice to Gros-Lombric: Release this serpent immediately! ... Gros-Lombric let go of the head. As it fell, it caused a wave of collective recoil. The Director grabbed Gros-Lombric by one arm and carried him into his office. The students and Masters reformed into a circle around the dreadful head. The Masters pushed the children aside, pacified the clamour, and turned with incredulous eyes to the now stranded creature. ... The Master, without even issuing the order to sit down, launched into a tirade about Creole-Negro manners and the irremediable downfall of this barbarous people.")

In Caribbean folklore, snakes are feared creatures associated with calamity (McElroy, 2020). Amidst the ensuing chaos and panic, *le Maître* juxtaposes Gros-Lombric with the 'barbarians', highlighting the inherent contradictions within Caribbean identity between Creole superstition and French modernity. This portrayal underscores the ongoing struggle between indigenous beliefs and colonial impositions, presenting an allegory for the broader clash of cultures and values in postcolonial Caribbean society.

On another occasion, Gros-Lombric is finally acknowledged by *le Maître* for his knowledge of jungle plants, referred to by Patrick Chamoiseau as 'the secret science of plants' (Chamoiseau, 2016). Ironically, this momentary recognition from *le Maître* does not elevate Gros-Lombric to the status of his peers. Throughout the narrative, he remains an anti-hero due to his limited proficiency in French and his inability to grasp and internalize French values. For Gros-Lombric, the lessons imparted at school are detached from his daily reality, which revolves around the flora and fauna of the forest.

The irony of the disparity between the French education system enforced in schools and the reality of Caribbean society is a point that Patrick Chamoiseau seeks to underscore (Swanson, 2020). Another illustration is found in the narrative of Petit-Pierre in one of *le Maître's* lessons. Petit-Pierre is depicted as nestled in his warm bed within a well-lit room in his spacious winter residence, a stark juxtaposition to the daily lives of the students at École Perrinon. In contrast, Gros-Lombric, part of a large family of ten siblings, shares a modest straw bed with his brothers and sisters in the single room of their hut. Each day, he rises before dawn to complete his homework, embarks on a several-kilometre run to school, and returns home to finish his assignments (Chamoiseau, 2016).

The depiction of Petit-Pierre's comfort and Gros-Lombric's adversity within the colonial education system encapsulates the French civilizing mission's viewpoint on education as a mechanism for societal stratification and cultural assimilation. Petit-Pierre embodies the triumph of the civilizing mission, where the French-educated elite are indoctrinated to preserve colonial hierarchies and reinforce French cultural hegemony. Conversely, Gros-Lombric's impoverished circumstances symbolize the marginalization faced by those diverging from colonial norms, thereby affirming the *mission civilisatrice* dichotomy of the 'civilized' versus the 'savage'. This contrast in educational opportunities underscores the inherent disparities perpetuated by colonial education systems, which sustain colonial power structures and entrench socio-economic inequalities within postcolonial contexts.

Throughout the novel, Patrick Chamoiseau portrays Gros-Lombric as a symbol of Creole cultural resilience against the ideological hegemony of the French education system. However, towards the conclusion of *Chemin d'école*, Gros-Lombric relinquishes his spirit of resistance. He ceases to narrate stories and loses his voice. The transformation of Gros-Lombric following the colonial agent's demand for conformity to French norms and procedures represents a clear endeavour by the colonial power to 'erase' the culture of the colonised people (Morris, 2016; Oyedemi, 2021). Furthermore, given the intrinsic connection between identity and language, attempts to eradicate language constitute a gradual erasure of identity as well (Duboc & Ferraz, 2020; Mohamed, 2020; Khawaja, 2021). The Creole culture and language represented by Gros-Lombric are perceived as a threat to colonial authority. Consequently, colonial agents seek to silence the voice of this 'big earthworm' to prevent the emergence of other 'worms' that could potentially disrupt French dominance.

CONCLUSIONS

In the rich landscape of Caribbean Francophone literature, *Chemin d'école* emerges as a significant

work addressing the complex challenges posed by the *mission civilisatrice* policy on Caribbean identity. The novel explores diverse reactions to the intricacies of cultural identity in an environment where two distinct cultures and languages coexist. Embedded deeply within the educational system, the *mission civilisatrice* seeks to reshape Caribbean society into a French entity through comprehensive assimilation. However, the narrative presents this colonial policy as a double-edged sword, evident in the characters' varied responses. While educators advocate for complete assimilation into French values, the character Gros-Lombric defiantly chooses to preserve his Creole identity, offering a poignant alternative perspective.

Chemin d'école not only illuminates historical struggles but also prompts reflection on the contemporary realities of Francophone communities. In today's globalized world, the reverberations of colonialism persist, affecting former colonies' cultural, social, and linguistic landscapes. Within Francophone communities, tensions between preserving indigenous identities and embracing French influences endure, often manifesting in debates over language policies, cultural heritage preservation, and national identity formation. By critically engaging with texts like *Chemin d'école*, contemporary Francophone communities can navigate these complexities and chart paths toward cultural empowerment and reconciliation in a postcolonial context.

The significance of *Chemin d'école* extends beyond the Caribbean, resonating with the broader reality of other French colonies. By exploring the impact of the mission civilisatrice on cultural identity, language, and the complexities of 'becoming French', the novel offers a nuanced understanding of the postcolonial struggle. Further research avenues could enhance scholarly discourse, including comparative studies on colonial educational policies across diverse French colonies. Additionally, investigating intersectionality within the *mission civilisatrice* could involve analyzing how identity markers, such as gender and socioeconomic status, intersect within this colonial framework. Such investigations promise to deepen the understanding of the intricate dynamics shaping postcolonial identities and experiences.

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