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## “THE FACETS OF OUR DIGLOSSIA”: NATIVE SPEAKERS AS MULTILINGUAL STORYTELLERS

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### **Abstract**

Can we read novels as language memoirs of particular characters? Beyond the issue of writing style or literary creativity, postcolonial literary texts can help us theorize different kinds of speaker-legitimacies, as they depict native or colonized subjects who use language to negotiate their own positions in relation to violently normative colonial bureaucracies—whether on the margins of these, in opposition to them, or by infiltrating them. This article compares the speaker-legitimacies entailed through practices of storytelling in Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel *Solibo Magnifique* (Martinique, 1988) and Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s semi-fictional narrative *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (Mali, 1973). The multilingual strategies and tactics of these texts’ characters exert symbolic power in order to displace or subvert colonial power relations. After examining speaker-positions within each text, the study turns to the speaker-positions entailed by the texts as whole utterances. Both entertain a complex relationship with the discipline of ethnography, in relation to whose authority their hybrid uses of storytelling, voice, and register constitute another form of alternative legitimacy. By juxtaposing two heroic but very different literary storytellers from francophone writing, we can compare how different speaker-legitimacies are forged and performed as norms, and as alternatives to these norms, within colonial contexts.

**Keywords:** storytelling ♦ ethnography ♦ legitimacy ♦ style ♦ Wangrin ♦ Solibo

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The most classic question in francophone literary studies might well be what francophone—i.e., non-French<sup>1</sup>—texts do to the French language. How, scholars have been asking since the 1960s, do African and Caribbean writers make a language their own that was forced upon them by colonialism? One of the best-known reference points for this question is Amadou Kourouma’s novel *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1970 [1968]) / *The Suns of Independence* (1981), made famous for its “Maninkization” of the language of hexagonal masterpieces. According to Kourouma himself, “J’ai planté une case africaine dans la maison de Molière” (“I have planted an African hut in the house of Molière”, quoted in Voisin 2015: 381). *Soleils*’s use of relexified vocabulary, syntactic borrowings, calqued turns of phrase, and proverbs from the Maninka language into French made for a defamiliarizing, alienating effect on the metropolitan reader. If the objective of postcolonial literature, especially in its earliest stages, was to allow the empire to “write back” to the colonizer in the latter’s own tongue (Ashcroft et al. 2002 [1989]), then books like *Soleils* worked their contestation into their very style, where style is understood to be an individual work’s set of “deviation[s] from the linguistic norm” (Bourdieu 1991: 38). In the case of Kourouma, an especially deviant set of stylistic choices replaced classic conventions of literary French with African linguistic features. Chantal Zabus’s analysis went the farthest in the study of this kind of Africanized literary style, examining in pointed detail a variety of ways in which Sub-Saharan writers Africanize English and French, spanning the whole stylistic range from the relatively classical (Achebe or C.A. Kane) to the relatively subversive or less easily accessible (Kourouma, Tutuola, Saro-Wiwa) (Zabus 2007 [1991]). In the context of the francophone Caribbean, the landmark statement on the language issue is the *Eloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness* (Bernabé et al 1993 [1989]), which outlined prescriptions for how to create a responsible literary style in Creole languages, or in French. That manifesto claimed French as part of the

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<sup>1</sup> The entrenched distinction between hexagonal France and the rest of the francophone world, a term which I use here as a shorthand, was problematized by the *Littérature-Monde* manifesto of 2007, which was itself subsequently contested on a number of grounds. For a recent overview of this debate and its ramifications, see Forsdick (2010). For a variety of in-depth perspectives, see the volume edited by Hargreaves et al. (2012).

heritage of Creole writers and recommended the use of an “interlect,” that is, openness not only to writing in Creole but to Creolized French, but only insofar as the latter could be done without reproducing the pejoratively comical effects of “français-banane,” the stereotyped spectacle of nonwhites sounding like Tarzans (Bernabé et al. 1993: 49 and 109). Emily Apter describes several writers’ positions in the wider language debate in which the *Eloge* was embedded: Raphaël Confiant moved from an “orthodox Creolophone agenda” to “Creole-inflected French” in his own novels, while Maryse Condé criticized the whole Creolist project as essentialist, arguing instead that writers should follow Caribbean discourses and migrations in their movement “beyond the archipelago” (Apter 2006: 165–166). Condé’s argument has found echoes in other criticisms of the *Eloge*’s totalizing prescriptivism (Tcheuyap 2001: 44).

These moments in literary history have been foundational. They have generated a rich range of authorial stances that enable us to trace, over time, the evolving relationship between literature and its medium, language. In this essay I would like to build on this history while proposing a different emphasis. Literary studies might do well to take a cue from applied linguistics by thinking about multilingualism not just in terms of literary style, or even “writing back,” but in terms of power relations being negotiated in the styles of individual characters—that is, the ways of speaking that are deployed within the text. Conceiving a legitimate speaker to be one who has the right to speak and be heard—that is, “not only understood but also to be believed, respected, obeyed, distinguished” (Bourdieu 1977: 648)—linguists have turned to the nonfiction genres of the language memoir or multilingual autobiography, as well as to qualitative research on language learning and use both in and out of the classroom, in order to examine how speakers claim legitimacy and take up subject-positions within institutional constraints in real-world contexts.<sup>2</sup> What, I ask, can literary depictions of multilingualism add to that conversation? Can we read novels not just as laboratories for their authors’ styles, but as language memoirs of particular characters? In the case of fiction, rather than asking again what a francophone text does to language, creative writing can provide a thought experiment to see what fictional or semi-fictional characters do with words, to recall a famous phrase (Austin 1962). While literature of immigration, with its abundance of code-switching characters, has been one fertile ground to try this approach, the colonial context itself also offers an apt and surprisingly underexplored territory as well. Beyond the issue of writing style or literary creativity, postcolonial literary texts can help us theorize different kinds of speaker-legitimacies<sup>3</sup>, as they depict native or colonized subjects

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<sup>2</sup> See Kramsch (2009: 3–4) for a review of this scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> By speaker-legitimacy, I mean the various strategies and tactics that speakers use to claim legitimacy

who use language to negotiate their own positions in relation to violently normative colonial bureaucracies—whether on the margins of these, in opposition to them, or by infiltrating them. The multilingual strategies and tactics of such characters exert symbolic power in order to displace or subvert colonial power relations. By juxtaposing two heroic but very different literary storytellers from francophone writing, one from a Caribbean setting and the other from an African one, we can compare how different speaker-legitimacies are forged and performed as norms, and as alternatives to these norms, within colonial and paracolonial contexts.<sup>4</sup>

The two case studies I propose are Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) / *Solibo Magnificent* (1997) and Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s semi-fictional narrative *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1992 [1973]) / *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (1999 [1987])—a generically mixed text often referred to, with good reason, as a novel, in spite of the author’s insistence that it is pure nonfiction.<sup>5</sup> Both texts were written in French<sup>6</sup>; Chamoiseau’s Creole-inflected style, in particular, has been studied at great length. *Solibo* is about a botched police inquest into the death of a street storyteller in Fort-de-France in the 1980s. The magnificence of *Solibo*, whose name means “fall” in Martinican Creole<sup>7</sup>, stems from his dynamic performance

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in discourse. For Bourdieu, legitimate discourse “is uttered by a legitimate speaker, *i.e.* by the appropriate person, as opposed to the imposter (religious language/priest, poetry/poet, etc.); it is uttered in a legitimate situation, *i.e.*, on the appropriate market (as opposed to insane discourse, *e.g.*, a surrealist poem read in the Stock Exchange) and addressed to legitimate receivers; it is formulated in the legitimate phonological and syntactic forms (what linguists call grammaticality), except when transgressing these norms is part of the legitimate definition of the legitimate producer” (1977: 650). The colonized speakers under consideration here create, or fail to create, different legitimacies in particular contexts by alternately subverting, mimicking, or instrumentalizing colonial norms of legitimate speech.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the term “paracolonial” from Burton, who uses it to describe Martinique (1993: 468). Chamoiseau’s essay *Ecrire en pays dominé* (1997) explores in depth the continuities between colonialism and the state of domination in which departmental Martinique finds itself.

<sup>5</sup> Bâ always insisted that he had merely committed to writing and translated into French the historical Wangrin’s oral narrative, recounted in Bamana, of his own life. See Bâ’s foreword and 1986 afterword (*Etrange destin* 7–9 and 359–366; *Fortunes of Wangrin* xvii–xix and 257–260). See also Austen’s historical scrutiny of the text (2007 and 2015). Austen concludes that “Wangrin is a historical figure who [...] ‘inspired’ what now must be called Hampâté Bâ’s novel” (2015: 45).

<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I refer to the narratives as *Wangrin* and *Solibo*. Because I present all quotations in French original first and English translation second, I give separate parenthetical citations for each version: *Solibo Magnifique* (original), *Solibo Magnificent* (translation), *Etrange destin* (original), and *Fortunes of Wangrin* (translation).

<sup>7</sup> The novel glosses the nickname *Solibo* as meaning “nègre tombé au dernier cran—et sans échelle

style and wide repertoire of material, which we are made to understand is delivered mostly in Creole but also in French. But this magnificence also stems from his ethical commitment to the community around him. The storytelling bond between bilingual—or, one might say, interlingual—performer and listeners implies a giving of oneself in both directions: Solibo takes care of his neighbors in a time of need, both spiritually and physically, and his stories reflect the daily lived experience of the community around him. Solibo’s magnificence is, in turn, reflected in his audience-turned-witnesses’ storytelling vigil in his honor, and in their testimony to the police, following his sudden death in mid-performance. His and their stories, and their stories about his stories, come together to form an idealized representation of the Martinican Creole collective voice, an aggregate speaker-legitimacy that stands as a marginalized but beautiful alternative to the injustice of colonially inherited institutions including the police, who wield the symbolic power of French like a brutal, if imperfectly mastered, weapon.

As a point of contrast, *Wangrin* recounts the money-making schemes of a shrewd black colonial interpreter across a number of French West African colonies from 1906 to 1932. It is loosely based on real people and events (Austen 2007 and 2015). The narrative is centrally concerned with the struggle between French, Muslim, and non-Muslim indigenous claims to power within the colonial political landscape. If individual characters are to get ahead, they—and most dramatically the heroic figure of Wangrin himself—must mediate between competing cultural and linguistic norms, outwitting the colonial administrator, the indigenous elite, and religious authorities all at once. Wangrin, as a gifted interpreter who speaks perfect French in addition to several African languages, has an unrivaled “translingual / transcultural” mobility that makes him the best player at this game (see MLA 2007). Of all the text’s multitude of characters, whether black or white, powerful or marginal, he alone is able to use all the languages and cultural codes at play in order to consistently advance his commercial and political interests. The speaker-legitimacy that he represents is muddier than Solibo’s, representing, as it does, an appropriation of colonial institutions that is somehow subversive and supportive of them at the same time. The comparison to Solibo becomes even more pertinent when, at the end of the narrative, Wangrin becomes a storyteller in his own right, drunk and penniless in the street, telling stories to passersby in a mix of Bamana and French. These stories of Wangrin’s life, of which the book itself claims to serve as a kind of

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pour remonter” (*Solibo Magnifique* 78) / “Creole for blackman fallen to his last peg—and no ladder to climb back up” (*Solibo Magnificent* 46). See also Confiant (2007: 1255).

collection, aim not so much to celebrate the community as to celebrate the art of the trickster and to laugh at human folly.

In spite of the differences between *Solibo* and *Wangrin*'s historical settings, a comparative reading of these two texts is warranted for a number of reasons. First, the racist premises and effects of colonial domination are palpable in both contexts: both are set in oppressive, exclusionary states that privilege the power of white French-speakers while disenfranchising nonwhites and non-French-speakers. Intermediate positions, notably those occupied by multilingual blacks, represent how speakers attempt to move up the racial and linguistic hierarchy, how they maintain themselves and others in place, and how they choose to travel between different positions at different moments. Given both texts' concern with storytelling, this common racial and linguistic power structure allows us to ask an important question: How do colonized subjects use practices of multilingualism, particularly multilingual storytelling, to displace colonial power relations? The comparison is all the more productive because, at first glance, the two heroes' multilingualisms appear to contrast sharply: *Solibo*'s, the communal storyteller and good neighbor, altruistic and solidary, versus *Wangrin*'s, the devious interpreter and trickster hero, selfish and complicit. But an overlapping concern for communal bonds and day-to-day survival in both texts reveals the complexity of the interplay between claims to normative legitimacies, which are usually aligned with colonial power, and to what I call alternative legitimacies, which cannot always fall into narrowly defined categories like resistance or complicity. In both of these very different settings, departmental Martinique and colonial West Africa, to be a legitimate speaker in any official, administrative, or legal sense is of course to be proficient in French, with all of the cultural baggage that that involves. But to assert an alternative speaker-legitimacy conjures up, particularly in the case of *Wangrin*, a tangled mess of competing norms of which colonial power is only one. As such, both protagonists express a stance of "oppositonality" to colonial power in language<sup>8</sup>, but they accomplish different things with that stance: the practice of collective storytelling in *Solibo* forges a bond of communal care in opposition to state violence, whereas *Wangrin*'s

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<sup>8</sup> Ross Chambers, following Michel de Certeau's discussion of *la perruque* ("stolen" work) and tactics (Certeau 1984: 24–42), defines oppositonality as a set of "survival tactics," derived from within a power structure, that make the structure "livable" while ultimately keeping it in place—in contrast to resistance, which brings external change to bear on power structures (Chambers 1991: 1). Richard Burton (1993 and 1997b: 149–177) and Adlai Murdoch (2001: 200–206) see oppositonality, particularly through the figure of the maroon or escaped slave, as characterizing both Chamoiseau's literary style and figure of the storyteller. Burton also discusses oppositonality in a wider Caribbean context (1997a: 6–8).

stories of his tricks shuttle between a similar communal ethic of solidarity, his own economic self-interest, and the sheer pleasure of hustling the powerful. By conducting a series of close readings comparing speaker-positions in *Solibo* and *Wangrin*, we can complicate our understanding of linguistic opposition in literature.

After examining speaker-positions within each text, I will turn to the speaker-positions entailed by the texts as whole utterances. Both entertain a complex relationship with the discipline of ethnography, in relation to whose authority their hybrid uses of storytelling, voice, and register constitute another form of alternative legitimacy. This shared engagement with ethnography serves as a final justification for reading these texts together. The speaker-legitimacies that these texts stake out in relation to colonial discursive norms will lead us through different and complex visions of the native's relationship to structures of power.

### ***Solibo* and Collective Storytelling**

While *Wangrin* celebrates its protagonist's exceptional status as master performer, manipulator, and language speaker, *Solibo* hovers between magnifying the uniqueness of its storytelling protagonist and reflecting on the diversity of language speakers in society. In doing so, it emphasizes the disconnect between the official French language and the average Creole-speaking member of the public, demonstrating that the relationship between the two is one of domination and exclusion. But at the same time, it emphasizes the multiplicity of alternative linguistic positionings in society, rather than erecting Creole or even Creolized French as a monolithic alternative to the violence of colonial monolingualism. *Solibo* offers two portraits of speakers demanding legitimacy on conflicting grounds: those who rely on official French to violently enforce bureaucratic norms, on the one hand, and those whose voices together stake out an alternative legitimacy through a collective, multilingual practice of storytelling.

The clash between francophone empowerment and creolophone disempowerment is made especially visible during interrogation scenes, such as when a monolingual Creole-speaker named Congo is interviewed by Chief Sergeant Bouaffesse of the Fort-de-France police:

Afin de coincer ce vieux nègre vicieux, il fallait le traquer au français. Le français engourdit leur tête, grippe leur vicerie, et ils dérapent comme des rhumiers sur les dalles du pavé. En seize ans de carrière, le brigadier-chef avait largement éprouvé cette technique aussi efficace que les coups de dictionnaire sur le crâne, les graines

purgées entre deux chaises et les méchancetés électriques qu’aucun médecin (assermenté) ne décèle.

[Bouaffesse:] “Bien. Maintenant, Papa, tu vas parler en français pour moi. Je dois marquer ce que tu vas me dire, nous sommes entrés dans une enquête criminelle, donc pas de charabia de nègre noir mais du français mathématique...” (*Solibo Magnifique* 105)

The best way to corner this vicious old blackman was to track him down with French. The French language makes their heads swim, grips their guts, and then they skid like drunks down the pavement. The Chief Sergeant’s sixteen years of career policework had roundly shown this technique to be as efficient as blows with a dictionary to the head, balls minced between two chairs, and nasty electric treatments that no doctor (officially) ever divulges.

[Bouaffesse:] “Good. Now, Papa, you are going to speak in French for me. I’ve got to write what you’re going to tell me, this is a criminal inquiry now, so no black Negro gibberish, just mathematical French...” (*Solibo Magnificent* 66–67)

In this scene, the colonial language is one of violence and intimidation, used explicitly as an interrogation technique, alongside physical torture, to subdue what the Sergeant believes to be a recalcitrant witness. The use of the French language and of writing, beyond any referential content of what is said or written, carries a symbolic power, a performative force which by the very fact of being used functions as a tool to enact domination over a powerless subject. The statement “you are going to speak in French for me,” while perhaps seeming anodyne at a referential level, is in fact a threat, since Bouaffesse and his victim both know that the latter cannot speak French and therefore will get a beating; as it turns out, he will also die. The contrast between “mathematical French,” the language of Pascal and Descartes, and “black Negro gibberish” explicitly racializes the power differential between the two characters. The name “Congo” makes this racialization all the more salient, being a Creole racial label designating either an especially dark-skinned person or a person who traces his ancestry to post-1848 African roots (see Confiant 2007: 685).

The case of Doudou-Ménar, Bouafesse’s ex-lover who first reports Solibo’s collapse as a medical emergency, explores the fragile possibility of a blurred line between legitimate and disenfranchised speakers. Aroused by their old flame, she and Bouaffesse have a surreptitious sexual encounter in the police station when she arrives to make her report, after which he escorts her back to the scene to commence the investigation:



Entre les uniformes de police, elle fait irruption dans une existence légitime, elle comprend avoir vécu comme nous tous, en décalage, sur ces sentiers qui tracent un autre pays que les routes coloniales. Alors il faut comprendre: dans le car qui roule vers Solibo et nous, Doudou-Ménar, légalisée, est fière. (*Solibo Magnifique* 67)

Between the police uniforms, she has broken into legitimate existence, suddenly realizing that she had been living like all of us, on the margins, on those paths which trace a country other than that of the colonial roads. Therefore, one must understand: in the van heading toward us and Solibo, Doudou-Ménar is legalized and proud. (*Solibo Magnificent* 39)

The very fact of having access to an official space, the police car, and of finding herself amidst its accoutrements, the police uniforms, is novel to her. For a fleeting moment, she has the feeling of being a legitimate citizen, the kind recognized by the colonial system and its departmental avatar. The narrative voice’s insistence that “one must understand” this feeling highlights its pathetic, even absurd dimension: she is, after all, just going for a ride, not being ceremonially endowed with unalienable rights. But soon after, Bouaffesse resumes his role of violent authority, rebuffs her, and dismisses her back to her place among the band of ragtag witnesses. This humiliation provokes an outburst of violent confrontations between her and the police which, in spite of the comedy with which they are narrated, eventually lead her to a tragic end. For Doudou-Ménar and her peers, holding a legitimate place in the French citizenry is, at best, a momentary and soon-to-be shattered illusion. Their desire for inclusion, which the system runs roughshod over, can only explode as frustrated energy where it will, however inopportune the time and place may be.

Together with Bouaffesse, Congo, and Doudou-Ménar, the novel’s characters represent a cross-section of nonwhite, mostly impoverished Martinican society. All live and operate at the margins of French institutions: try as they might, the police and other nonwhite French-speakers always seem to fail at reproducing the legitimacy of hexagonal French. Nevertheless, as the above examples show, the witnesses to Solibo’s death are further marginalized by governmental operators at the Martinican level, especially the police. These characters exemplify a wide range of linguistic positions of which I offer a sampling in the table below. Each pair of citations refers first to the French text, then to Réjouis and Vinokurov’s English translation.

Sergeant Bouaffesse	Bilingual, but prefers to use French as an instrument of intimidation (see above).
Congo	Monolingual in an archaic dialect of Creole, which is “en disparition par ici”

	(40) / “near extinction around here” (19).
Doudou-Ménar, Bouaffesse’s ex-lover, and the first witness to die by police brutality	Creole-speaking, but more a woman of action than of words: “An Kay chaché un jan mèdsin!... (Là, c’est Doudou-Ménar qui tranche à la recherche d’un médecin)” (41) / “I’ll get a medical man!... (Here’s its Doudou-Ménar who breaks off to search for a doctor)” (19).
Inspector Pilon	Bilingual, with contradictory attitudes: “pétitionne pour le créole à l’école et sursaute quand ses enfants l’emploient en s’adressant à lui” (118) / “petitions for Creole in the schools but jumps when his children use it to speak to him” (76).
Sidonise, Solibo’s lover, a sorbet-maker	Creole-speaking with a stylistic specificity: “nous écoutâmes sa voix dans le vieux créole du souvenir” (72) / “we listened to her Creole voice in eulogy” <sup>9</sup> (41).
Didon, who tells a story of Solibo saving the market from a snake	Creole-speaking with Guadeloupean cadence: “un créole qui souvent rappelait la Guadeloupe. Son débit un peu monocorde s’en allait sur le vent, et il fallait se pencher pour comprendre ses mots” (74) / “in a Creole which often brought to mind Guadeloupe. His elocution, almost a monotone, slipped away on the wind, and you had to lean in to understand his words” (43).
Charlot, a saxophone player	Speaks in “un créole de ville” (80) / “a city Creole” (47).
Oiseau de Cham, i.e. Patrick Chamoiseau as character in his own novel <sup>10</sup>	Speech in both Creole and French is colored by highly educated French. Solibo remarks on his vocabulary: “Dérivoire. Joli français” (82) / “ <i>Ludicrous. Pretty French</i> ” (49).
Diab-Anba-Feuilles, a brutal policeman assisting Bouaffesse on the investigation scene	Bilingual, slipping into Creole when angry: “sa gueule mousseuse débitait d’inlassables malédictions dans un créole qu’il ne pouvait plus réprimer” (94) / “his frothy mouth let out a torrent of ever-vibrant curses in a Creole he could no longer hold back” (58).
The “Syrian,” who is really of Lebanese origin (170 / 116)	Self-consciously represses Creole phonetic traits while speaking French, using “une voix posée, qui appuyait les r et pourchassait les i créoles” (172) / “a composed voice, which leaned on the r’s and ran after the Creole i’s” <sup>11</sup> (117).

<sup>9</sup> The French description of Sidonise’s speech—literally, “we listened to her voice in the old Creole of memory”—suggests that the language itself, not just the voice, is different when the speaker is in a mode of reminiscence or longing, or perhaps simply when the speaker is older in age. But Réjouis and Vinokurov’s English translation attributes Sidonise’s stylistic uniqueness to her voice. I read the original as highlighting the diversity of idiolects or stylistic registers of the Martinican Creole language, more than commenting on this character’s voice *per se*, although there is of course an overlap between voice and style or register.

<sup>10</sup> I use the nickname “Oiseau de Cham” to distinguish Chamoiseau the character from Chamoiseau the author.

<sup>11</sup> The case of the “Syrian” represents a well-known phenomenon of linguistic overcorrection. The two sounds that he fixates on—emphasizing the French uvular *r* [ʁ] and not just avoiding, but chasing away the Creole *i* [i]—correspond to French phonemes that are notoriously difficult for many Creole-

This is how Solibo’s listeners, and investigators, speak. The diversity of their speaking styles runs the gamut from Creole to French, from nonliterate to highly literate, and from self-composed to self-conscious to passionate. Each of them is developed as a variation on a particular trait or type. Spoken Martinican Creole can be nostalgic (Sidonise), archaic (Congo), urban (Charlot), profane (Diab-Anba-Feuilles), inflected with Guadeloupeanisms (Didon) or Gallicisms (Oiseau de Cham), repressed in favor of French (all the police characters)—and even detected latently in spoken French (the “Syrian”).

Beyond their stylistic diversity, this set of characters illustrates the contrast between normative and alternative speaker-legitimacies. At one level, those who speak French—mainly the police—have a claim to authority and to power, grounded in the dominance of French institutions. In contrast, those who speak Creole also demand a certain right to speak and be heard, but outside of that official space. This clash of legitimacies reflects a clash of identities, captured in the (otherwise unused) legal names that are so dear to the police, and the plural, communally agreed-upon identities expressed in the nicknames that abound everywhere (Oscherwitz 2007: 146; Tsaaïor 2011: 133). The community’s stories about Solibo are important because they render homage not only to his memory once he is dead—how he cared physically for others, and therefore deserves a proper act of remembrance as an expression of gratitude—but also to the social bonds that tie the community together more generally. A vigil for a deceased loved one is something that *ought* to be done. And yet, in spite of the clear contrast between the legitimacy of French power and the illegitimacy of those excluded from participating in it, no characters occupy the position of legitimate speaker in a normative sense well or with confidence. Here, French power consists not just of the symbolic capital emanating from the supreme bureaucratic authority in Paris, but also of

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speakers to produce: [ʁ] gets converted to [w], and the French *u* [y] as in *tu* gets pronounced as [i]. This description recalls Fanon’s portrayal of the black Martinican at the beginning of *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) / *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008 [1967]), who goes to France and practices the French *r* over and over at home in a pathetic attempt to sound white by contradicting the “mythe du Martiniquais qui-mange-les-R” or “myth of the *R*-eating man from Martinique” (1952: 16; 2008: 11). In keeping with the *Eloge*’s explicit multiracialism (Bernabé et al. 1993: 13 and 75), in *Solibo* it is a Martinican of Arab origin who is doing the overpronouncing, reminding the reader that a Creole-speaker of any race can be affected by this complex. For Fanon, by contrast, the phenomenon of overcorrecting Creole phonetics in French is specifically related to the condition of being black and colonized.

racial difference, as revealed in the treatment of Congo as abject. By extension, even Bouaffesse, who is confident in his ability to brandish French as a bludgeon, has but a tenuous grasp on his power, given that as a black Martinican he is far below the source of that power both administratively and racially. As he struggles to remember how to handle a crime scene from his correspondence courses, he is well aware that the loss of clues and abuse of witnesses, not to mention his men's fistfight with the fire-and-rescue crew, could have serious consequences for his own career (*Solibo Magnifique* 86–97; *Solibo Magnificent* 52–61). His performance of the legitimacy of law enforcement is improvisational, always depending on last-minute tricks to patch up his department's disastrous police work and to save his own skin.

The most important point about the characters who form Solibo's audience, before becoming witnesses to his death, is that the diversity of their speech is reflected in the speech of Solibo himself, the virtuosic storyteller. This is how Oiseau de Cham recalls Solibo's storytelling style:

Solibo m'aborda un matin, avec comme bonjour la question épuisée: Chambzibié ho, écrire ça sert à quoi ?..., puis il me parla de tout et de rien, de la parole et du reste, sans même reprendre son souffle il me raconta l'origine du marché, dix-sept contes indéchiffrables, il me donna des nouvelles (que je ne demandais pas) du capital santé des marchandes gâteuses, puis il me parla de charbon, d'ignames, d'amour, de chansons oubliées et de mémoire, de mémoire. Cette énergie verbale me séduisit là même, d'autant que Solibo Magnifique utilisait les quatre facettes de notre diglossie : le basilecte et l'acrolecte créole, le basilecte et l'acrolecte français, vibronnant enracinement dans un espace interlectal que je pensais être notre plus exacte réalité sociolinguistique. (*Solibo Magnifique* 45)

One morning, Solibo addressed me with the exhausted instead-of-hello question: Chamzibié-ho? what's the use of writing?..., then he chatted with me about everything and nothing, the word and the rest, without taking another break he told me of the origin of the market, seventeen undecipherable tales, gave me news (unasked for) of the senile merchants' financial health, then he spoke to me of charcoal, of yams, of love, of forgotten songs and memory, of memory. This verbal energy seduced me even then. Especially since Solibo used the four facets of our diglossia: the Creole basilect and acrolect, the French basilect and acrolect, quivering, vibrating, rooted in an interlectal space that I thought to be our most exact sociolinguistic reality. (*Solibo Magnificent* 22)

Oiseau de Cham's use of the word "diglossia" emphasizes the separateness or gap between realms where one speaks French and where one speaks Martinican Creole<sup>12</sup>, a claim which is illustrated throughout the numerous scenes of non-comprehension or translation gone awry between witnesses and police. In addition, rather than assigning Creole to the position of basilect (lowest prestige) and French to position of acrolect (highest prestige), the text emphasizes that each language includes both of these positions on its own.<sup>13</sup> Solibo's unique ability to move between all of these forms of speech becomes an "interlectal" position of speaking that derives its legitimacy not from its capacity to wield power, as French does, but from its "rootedness" in the real linguistic practices of the community.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Solibo casually brushes off as useless the act of writing in French, and the normative legitimacy that comes from it, which Oiseau de Cham uses for purposes of ethnographic documentation. Even so, because Solibo's interlectal performances reflect the variety of speaker-positions in the community around him, both in Creole and in French, they can be seen as bridging the gap between these separate languages and their various "facets"—a word which evokes the facets of a diamond, flat planes which intersect at the edges but which face in different directions. This ability to work on the edges, to create intersections that might otherwise not exist, celebrates the dying art of storytelling as community-building, as creating a kind of communal intelligibility in spite of the incomprehension that reigns between French-wielding police and mostly Creole-speaking civilians.

As such, Solibo's legitimacy as a speaker is both asserted and, in a certain way, effaced. Like Wangrin, he speaks all the languages and dialects in play; but unlike Wangrin, what matters is not so much his status as master manipulator of languages, but rather an ethics of listening.

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<sup>12</sup> The word "diglossia" refers to the notion of two separate language communities coexisting together. In the most frequently given example, Haiti is cited as an example of diglossia, since most people speak Creole and only a powerful minority speaks French, whereas Jamaica is cited as an example of continuum, since there are different levels of mutual intelligibility along the continuum from deep Jamaican patois to Standard English, and an individual speaker can fall anywhere along that line (Bachmann 2013: 440–441).

<sup>13</sup> It is debatable what the French basilect would be here, since a footnote of the *Eloge*—which Chamoiseau helped write—oddly forbids Caribbean writers from using French slang, denouncing it as "a powerful cultural alienation" (Bernabé 1993: 67 n40 and 126 n38). Perhaps Solibo's French basilect is what has been referred to as "Regional Antilles French" (Telchid 1997).

<sup>14</sup> In doing so, *Solibo* illustrates verbatim the linguistic prescription of the *Eloge*, which praises "interlect," or the ability to shuttle through the whole spectrum of Caribbean languages as a medium for literature, in opposition to the fetishization of either European or Creole languages on their own (Bernabé et al 1993: 48 and 109).

His legitimacy as a speaker is derived from that of the people around him, rendering homage to what he has heard them say. In contrast to the interrogations conducted by Fort-de-France police, who demand that their witnesses give the answers that they want to hear, and violently punish and even kill them when they fail to do so, Solibo's practice of storytelling flows from a compassionate ear which allows him to preserve and retell the stories of survival that he has gleaned from others. His performances trace their roots back to friends, lovers, elders, and market ladies:

Comme cela se fait dans ces situations-là, les vieilles, aux heures de pause, lui offrirent des paroles, ô paroles de survie, paroles de débrouillarde, paroles où le charbon du désespoir se voyait terrassé par de minuscules flammes, paroles de résistance, toutes ces qualités de paroles que les esclaves avaient forgées aux chaleurs des veillées afin d'accorer l'effondrement du ciel. [...] [C]hez Solibo [...] cela se germa, se déploya [...] Sa parole était belle, dit-on, elle connaissait le chemin de toutes les oreilles et ces portes invisibles qu'elles détiennent sur le cœur. (*Solibo Magnifique* 78-9)

As is done in such situations, the old women on lunch breaks offered him tales, oh words of survival, stories of street smarts where the charcoal of despair watched small flames triumph over it, tales of resistance, all the ones that the slaves had forged on hot evenings so the sky wouldn't fall. [...] In Solibo it all sprouted, spread [...] They say his words were beautiful and knew the road to all ears, the invisible double doors which open on the heart." (*Solibo Magnificent* 46)

Solibo's tales are tales of the community. As Adlai Murdoch writes, "language allows the conteur to vitalize a collective voice of protest and parody that speaks to metropolitan domination in the name of the people" (2001: 206). This protesting communal voice not only retains the traumatic collective memory of slavery, but hints at a certain continuity between that experience and what Chamoiseau elsewhere calls "valeurs dominantes" ("dominant values"), that is, the exclusionary violence of French domination in Martinique, personified here by the police (Chamoiseau 1997: 311). And yet, the *Magnificent's* tales flow both from the community's tales, and back into them: the novel is dedicated far more to stories *about* Solibo than to Solibo's stories. The community's tales about him after his death are, in fact, tales of themselves. The acts of telling one's own narrative, of listening to the narratives of others, and of cultivating a sentiment of compassion are intimately bound up: the ears, as the text says, lead to the heart. The description of the market ladies' stories in this quotation illuminates the description of Solibo's stories by Oiseau de Cham in the quotation above it. Whereas Solibo's yarns about the origin of the market, charcoal, and yams may seem random

and rambling, the importance of memory in them reflects and retransmits the market ladies' remembrances of survival, which in turn retransmit legends of survival told by slaves, the ancestors of much of Martinican society and the creators of the Creole language.

Thus, storytelling in *Solibo*, like the concept of oppositionality more generally, is eminently tactical, following Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactic. Whereas strategy refers to "the calculus of force-relationships" made by an empowered subject in a "proper" place—that is, a distinct, well-defined "spatial or institutional localization"—a tactic is deployed in the absence of such a proper place, having "at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances" (Certeau 1984: xix). Certeau celebrates at some length the ability of tactics to become at least partial "victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong,'" via "clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things," etc.: tactics subvert and displace, at least temporarily, the strategic norms imposed by powerful institutions and bureaucracies, even though they are usually powerless to change them at a systemic level. Although stories can be marked off from other kinds of speech through genre indices like *Krick! Krack!*—a formula which carries its own symbolic power—it happens spontaneously, in any location: in markets, pool halls, rum bars, church courtyards, stadiums, fairs, parties... and at the foot of a tree on a fatal Carnival night. (*Solibo Magnifique* 26–28 / *Solibo Magnificent* 9–10). Storytellers'—whether *Solibo*'s, the market ladies', the slave ancestors', or Oiseau de Cham's as narrator of the novel—emphases on survival, on getting by (*débrouille*), on makeshifts (*bricolage*), on recyclings of previous stories, on unasked-for news, all form a practice of fashioning art out of the scraps of marginalized lives.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, Bouaffesse's use of French as an instrument of intimidation is strategic. That language carries with it a legacy of domination that has taken the forms of slavery, colonialism, and contemporary governmental "proper places" like police stations—which include, to be precise, the rigid roles of authoritarian officer and submissive civilian wherever they are performed, as these always harken back to their original proper place. And yet, as we have seen, Bouaffesse is not an entirely empowered representative of the bureaucracy himself. He must buffoonishly improvise to cover his tracks, to get away with things as best he can; for him, strategy devolves into tactic. In contrast to his enforcement of exclusion through the application and misapplication of legal norms, the collective tactic of

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<sup>15</sup> On *bricolage*, see Certeau (1984: xvi) and Lévi-Strauss (1966: 11–22). On *débrouille*, note the text's use of the word *débrouillarde* (*Solibo Magnifique* 78); see also Burton (1993 and 1997b); for an exploration of the "économie morale de la ruse et de la débrouille" ("moral economy of ruse and getting by") in postcolonial African studies, see Banégas and Warnier (2001/2: 8).

multilingual, or interlectal, storytelling constitutes an alternative speaker-legitimacy because it gives meaning to the lives of people who are *de facto* barred from the rights and privileges of citizenship.

### **Wangrin, Interpreter of Norms**

Wangrin's strange destiny unfolds in a very different world from Solibo's, at the classic height of French colonialism in West Africa, during and following World War 1. Unlike *Solibo's* Martinique, which is entirely under the domination of the French power structure, the playing field of interwar French West Africa is crisscrossed by a patchwork of competing norms, of which the colonial administration represents only one—though certainly the most powerful one. In *Wangrin's* world, indigenous aristocracies (of different ethnicities), initiation societies, and magic beliefs, as well as Islamic law—each of which have a different language and institutional baggage associated with it—vie with the French administration for the loyalties of colonial subjects. *Wangrin* celebrates its protagonist's ability to move in and out of these competing normative positions, that is, to tactically appropriate each one's linguistic and rhetorical strategies, and often to play their interests against one another. Indeed, we might think of the double meaning of the French word *interprète*, which can mean not only interpreter, but performer. Wangrin incarnates both meanings. His practice of translingual / transcultural mobility is significantly different from the clear-cut alternative speaker-legitimacy that *Solibo* constructs through collective storytelling. Because Wangrin uses his employment in the colonial administration as an interpreter to undermine both his French superiors and his African competitors, his political and commercial schemes cannot be read as opposing colonial domination as directly as Solibo's stories can. The alternative speaker-legitimacy that he represents is more ambiguous, always bobbing and weaving, by turns within and outside of a given norm, simultaneously subverting and collaborating with the powers that be.

Like Bouaffesse, Wangrin derives what is probably his most potent normative speaker-position by occupying the French language. His French is not merely grammatically perfect, but accompanied by a hyperbolic display of linguistic competence and symbolic power:

[Wangrin] avait si bien, paraît-il, appris à parler la langue française que, lorsqu'il s'exprimait dans ce dialecte de mange-mil, les blancs-blancs eux-mêmes, nés de femmes blanches de France, s'arrêtaient pour écouter.



Il ne fallait pas, disait-on, moins de dix ans pour apprendre, imparfaitement d'ailleurs, les gestes supports du parler français, dont voici les plus caractéristiques: tendre de temps à autre le cou en avant; tantôt écarquiller les yeux, hausser les épaules, froncer les sourcils; tantôt tenir les bras en équerre, paumes ouvertes; croiser les bras sur la poitrine et fixer son interlocuteur, imprimer à ses lèvres des moues diverses; toussoter fréquemment, se pincer le nez ou se tenir le menton, etc. Ignorer comment ces gestes se combinent pour souligner les mots que la bouche égrène, c'est tomber dans le ridicule dit de "vieux tirailleur"<sup>16</sup>. (*Etrange destin* 26)

[Wangrin] had learned to speak French so well that when he used that red-tailed-quelea-idiom<sup>17</sup> even the real Whites, born of real white French women, hearkened to the sound. It is said that ten years at least are needed to learn the mannerisms that adorn French utterances, the most typical being as follows: stretching one's neck forward from time to time, as well as staring, shrugging, and frowning; now and then folding one's arms at right angles to the torso with the palm of the hand turned upward; crossing one's arms and looking intently at one's interlocutor while pouting one's lips in many different ways, having little spasms of cough, pinching one's nose, or holding one's chin, etc., etc. ... Not to know, however, how these gestures should be timed to emphasize the words that tumble out of the mouth of the speaker is to be the object of pitiless ridicule. (*Fortunes of Wangrin* 12)

This hilarious litany of stage directions for speaking French emphasizes how well Wangrin has mastered the subtleties of the whites' language. More importantly, it demonstrates that he has mastered them better than other colonial interpreters—in particular, Racoutié and Romo Sibédi, whose jobs he successfully usurps, one after the other. Both of these men speak the pidgin known as *tirailleur* French, which contrasts sharply with Wangrin's own "français tout neuf, couleur vin rouge de Bordeaux" (*Etrange destin* 33) ("beta beta faranse laik den wain wey jus commot from Bordo!", *Fortunes of Wangrin* 16), as Racoutié calls it. Here, Wangrin's symbolic power flows from his masterful imitation of whiteness in language.

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<sup>16</sup> This reference is unfortunately deleted in Taylor's English translation. *Tirailleur* (lit. "sharpshooter") French, also pejoratively called *petit-nègre*, refers to the pidgin created by African soldiers in the French colonial army to communicate among each other. *Wangrin* refers to this pidgin by its Bamana name *forofifon naspa*, in which "les verbes n'avaient ni temps ni mode et les noms, prénoms et adjectifs, ni nombre ni genre" (*Etrange destin* 29) ("verbs had neither moods nor tenses, and nouns, adjectives and pronouns, neither number nor gender", *Fortunes of Wangrin* 14).

<sup>17</sup> Bâ tells us in a footnote that these birds, which he calls *mange-mil* in the French original, "gazouillent à tue-tête sans s'écouter mutuellement" (*Etrange destin* 368 n14) ("warble as noisily as they possibly can without listening to one another", *Fortunes of Wangrin* 262 n2).

But more than outwitting his competitors, Wangrin’s French also allows him to outwit his bosses. This is how he ostentatiously performs proficiency in an interview with a future employer, the Commandant de Bonneval:

[Bonneval:] “Dis donc,” fit le commandant, “où as-tu appris à parler si bien le français?”

[Wangrin:] “A l’Ecole de Kayes, et aussi à force de lire Dumas, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, Voltaire, La Fontaine, Alfred de Musset et Boileau. Je connais par cœur la phrase célèbre de Victor Hugo qui m’offre le moyen mnémotechnique de retenir la liste de mes auteurs préférés.”

[Bonneval:] “Et quelle est cette phrase?”

[Wangrin:] “La voici, mon commandant: ‘Corneille, perché sur les Racines de La Bruyère, Boileau de La Fontaine Molière.’”

[Bonneval:] “Eh ben, mon cochon! Tu es plus qu’un interprète...” (*Etrange destin* 220)

[Bonneval:] “I say!” broke in the Commandant. “Where did you learn to speak such faultless French?”

[Wangrin:] “In the School for Hostages at Kayes<sup>18</sup>, and by dint of reading over and over again Dumas, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, Voltaire, La Fontaine, Alfred de Musset, and Boileau. I also know by heart Victor Hugo’s celebrated phrase, which provides a mnemonic means of holding in one’s head the list of one’s favorite authors.”

[Bonneval:] “What phrase is that?”

[Wangrin:] “Here it is, Sir: *Corneille, perché sur les Racines de La Bruyère, Boileau de La Fontaine Molière.*<sup>19</sup>”

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<sup>18</sup> This school was “then the only serious base for French education in the colony of Haut-Sénégal-Niger. [...] Pupils [...] were supposed to be the sons of chiefs (the official name of the Kayes school in the 1890s was the ‘Ecole des fils de chefs’)” (Austen 2007: 151). It is mentioned several times in *Wangrin*.

<sup>19</sup> This mnemonic loses its rhyme and double meaning in English. It plays on the names of famous French writers to create a sentence that makes approximate sense when read aloud: “Crow, perched on the roots of heather, drinks water from the Molière fountain.” The Molière fountain is a real monument in Paris.

[Bonneval:] “Well, I’ll be damned! You’re a lot better than an ordinary interpreter...”  
 (*Fortunes of Wangrin* 154)

Not only does Wangrin speak perfect French, but he again uses the figure of the litany to exuberantly perform a surplus of cultural and linguistic knowledge. Just as he mastered a list of supposedly typical French gesticulations in the previous quote, here he deftly name-drops the hexagonal literary canon of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, covering no fewer than twelve authors in two sentences—the second of which not only impressively cites Victor Hugo, but, for further rhetorical effect, rhymes. His linguistic skill is performed as literary prowess in a way which is titillating for Bonneval, who exclaims, “Tu es plus qu’un interprète”—literally, “You are more than an interpreter.” Wangrin’s excess of knowledge makes him recognizable as something other than a mere subservient subaltern: he is inserting himself into the role of clever adviser, so as to pursue his stratagems with the trust of his superiors. His educational excess, like the gestural description of the French language above, has a definite parodic quality: the text repeatedly and ironically reminds us that Wangrin’s French is not just good, but over the top. Part of the comical effect comes from his obvious overqualification for a mundane job in the colonial hierarchy, suggesting that Bonneval and others are foolish for believing that such performances prove Wangrin’s trustworthiness as a subordinate. Wangrin’s speaker-legitimacy within the colonial administration comes from his ability to mimic the product of French literary education.

Moreover, Wangrin possesses unparalleled legitimacy in other forums of power in the colonial African context. The text of *Wangrin* is centrally concerned not with the description of any one culture, much less the place of the French language in the colonies, but rather with the struggle between competing factions’ claims to power, which are often articulated through appeals to the legitimacy of a particular cultural norm—whether French law, Muslim law, customary law, oral tradition, ethnic rivalry, or noble status. Wangrin stands out precisely because he can shuttle through all of these normative codes, and the languages associated with them, outwitting both blacks and whites, in order to convince them that he is whatever they want him to be. The question posed to Wangrin by another of his chiefs in the administration reveals the all-importance of cultural versatility:

[Quinonel:] “Je vois dans ton dossier que tu es intelligent. Tu parles correctement le français et cinq langues africaines. On ne saurait demander mieux pour un interprète. Quelle est ta religion?”

[Wangrin:] “Je n’en ai pas de bien défini,” répondit Wangrin. “En tant qu’interprète, je dois ménager tout le monde. Aussi suis-je autant à mon aise dans la mosquée que dans le bois sacré des villages animistes.” (*Etrange destin* 112)

[Quinomel:] “I see from your file that you are intelligent. You speak French fluently, and five African languages as well. What more can one ask of an interpreter? What is your religion?”

[Wangrin:] “I don’t have any special religion,” answered Wangrin. “As an interpreter, it’s my job to get on with everybody; I am as much at ease in a mosque as I am in the sacred groves of the animist villages.” (*Fortunes of Wangrin* 74)

Wangrin’s enigmatic answer, an apparent celebration of syncretism and hybridity, intimates a deeper awareness of cultural mobility as a means to power. The obligation to “ménager tout le monde” or keep everyone satisfied—even if it requires tricking them into feeling satisfied—indicates that Wangrin’s refusal to define himself in an exclusive way is a means of accommodating the demands of powers and exigencies outside the colonial administration where he is seeking continued employment. This suppleness appears advantageous for the administration, whose job of imposing colonial control depends on its subordinates’ ability to navigate the mire of indigenous politics; and yet the very enunciation of such a flexible religious identity allows Wangrin to gain his bosses’ trust and exercise power in their name, giving him an edge in the power play he is entering. Thus the colonial hierarchy itself joins the mosque and the sacred forest as one more domain in which Wangrin is totally at ease. He speaks its language perfectly, along with five African languages—plus two more, “passably”—specifically: “le bambara, ma langue maternelle, le peul, le dogon, le mossi, le djerma, le haoussa et, passablement, le baoulé et le bété” (*Etrange destin* 221) (“Bambara, my native tongue, Fulfulde, Dogon, Mossi, Djerma, and Hausa, and reasonably well and Bete”), *Fortunes of Wangrin* 154). This list of languages spans huge swathes of West Africa, from Nigeria to Ivory Coast to Senegal, making the feat of speaking them that much greater. This heroic multilingualism is further complemented by a long list of African magics that Wangrin is capable of mustering in his combat with Romo, who becomes his archnemesis after Wangrin swindles him out of his job: the devious hero, in his quest to thwart this enemy’s plots of vengeance, consults “les plus grands dignitaires de la sorcellerie bambara, peule, dogon, marka, yarsé, samo, bobo, mossi, gourma, gourounsi, pomporon, etc.” (*Etrange destin* 296) (“the greatest exponents of Bambara, Fulbe, Dogon, Marka, Yarse, Sama, Bobo, Mossi, Gurma, Gurunsi, and Pomporon sorcery, and a few others besides”, *Fortunes of Wangrin* 210–211). Indeed, one wonders how many “few others besides” could be hiding behind that

seemingly trivial word, “etc.” In both of these descriptions, the figure of the litany returns again, like a cascade, overwhelming the hero’s adversaries and superiors with the sheer number of items in each list, each category of codes he has unequivocally and preemptively mastered. No one else in French West Africa could aspire to speak so many tongues, mobilize so many magics, perform so many gestures, cite so many authors, or glide seamlessly between as many sacred spaces. In short, no one can hope to marshal so much symbolic power from as many different sources. Whereas Solibo *inhabits* the several dialects of Creole and French that he speaks, deriving his storytelling authority from his and others’ experiences of life and listening, Wangrin *collects* the languages and codes of French West Africa, storing them in an arsenal of masks for future use, just in case.

Thus far Wangrin might come across as amoral to some readers, ready to do or say anything, in the language of the person listening, in order to get ahead. But even this understanding of him is tenuous, since the text ascribes to him a certain Robin Hood-like quality: his “tours pendables” were “toujours au détriment des colonisateurs ou des chefs de canton ou des gros commerçants qui, à ses yeux, n’étaient que des exploiters de la masse paysanne” (*Etrange destin* 229) (his “outrageous tricks” were “always to the detriment of colonizers, local chiefs, or rich traders, for he considered them exploiters of the peasant masses”, *Fortunes of Wangrin* 160). Such a generous take on the hero’s corruption as charitably motivated, which Bâ repeated many times elsewhere in an apparent attempt to protect the historical Wangrin’s reputation, situates the hero as an enemy of the colonial system rather than a perpetrator of it. Whether or not we believe in this Robin Hood ethics that Amadou Hampâté Bâ wanted Wangrin to incarnate, he is at best an almost-resister, an “opposer” rather than a systematic resister against colonialism: “Wangrin’s defiant acts, which are so satisfying to his friends and the reader, are mere dents and scratches on the carapace of colonialism, which remains firmly in place” (Julien 1992: 66). This relegates the possibilities for political transformation through social change to the horizon, as a possible future that might be imagined if the whole racist structure of French West Africa, which enabled a person like Wangrin to take advantage of its blind spots, were to be abolished, as it eventually was.

At the end of the narrative, the issue of storytelling is brought into relief, placing *Wangrin* once again in striking dialogue with *Solibo*. After a dramatic fall from the heights of his success, Wangrin becomes a makeshift storyteller for anyone in the street who will listen:

Moi qui fus tout, et vivais en riant, je devins rien, sans cesser de rire. Je rirai des hommes et des choses. Je rirai de ceux qui ne savent ni rire ni faire rire, car celui qui

ne rit pas est un malade ou un méchant. Or moi, Wangrin, je ne suis pas celui-là et encore moins celui-ci. (*Etrange destin* 352)

I, who was everything, whose life was laughter, was reduced to nothing, yet I go on laughing. I shall laugh at men and things. I shall laugh at those who neither know how to laugh nor how to make others laugh, for he who doesn't know how to laugh is either sick or evil. Now I, Wangrin, am neither! (*Fortunes of Wangrin* 252–253)

As a storyteller, Wangrin embraces an aesthetics of laughter in the face of misfortune. On the one hand, there is a continuity between the laughter provoked by his outrageous tricks and that of his reminiscences as a storytelling old man, as though he were still laughing at his victims. Perhaps more importantly, the text describes laughter as necessary for health, and for goodness: “He who doesn't know how to laugh is either sick or evil.” Regardless of the ethics we assign to Wangrin as hustler or hero, it is somehow healthy for us as readers, or as listeners to his storytelling, to laugh. By giving us a substantive story that provokes a healthy laughter, we might see an overlap between Wangrin's multilingualism as tool of deceit and Solibo's as incarnation of the bonds of care holding his community together. Furthermore, if laughter is key to health—survival—in the cruel world of colonial West Africa, we might see an ethical overlap between Wangrin's *débrouillardise*, or skill at getting by, and the stories of slave survival that continue to animate the tales told in Solibo's Martinique.

### **Ethnographic Authority and Literary Legitimacy**

As a final step in this analysis, let us think of these two texts not just as settings where characters' diverse speaker-legitimacies can be imagined, but as utterances in their own right, with their own claims to legitimacy. In addition to storytelling as theme and narrative structure, *Solibo* and *Wangrin* share a rich investment in ethnography. Both writers were deeply engaged in ethnographic projects: Chamoiseau's interest in documenting the social processes at work in the markets of Fort-de-France colors *Solibo* and its predecessor novel, *Chronique des sept misères* (1988 [1986]) / *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows* (1999), while Bâ famously devoted much of his professional life to the dissemination of ethnographic information and oral texts from across West Africa. As noted above, Bâ always claimed that *Wangrin* was just such an oral text, duly collected and translated from an informant, with only names changed. Nevertheless, the overwhelming scholarly consensus is that this text represents a hybrid of genres. For Justin Izzo, *Wangrin* is an “ethnographic biography,” also straddling the genres of transcribed oral performance and novel, which consists of “rigorous documentation and explanation of oral traditions and indigenous customs, in addition to a rich

portrait of everyday life under colonial rule in French West Africa” (2015: 2); its “native” documentary gaze on both colonized and colonizer reverses the power relations of colonial ethnography.<sup>20</sup> This hybridity has enlightening ramifications when we consider both *Wangrin*’s and *Solibo*’s relationships to ethnographic authority. If we read ethnographic authority as a discursive strategy that draws its persuasiveness from an author’s experience of professionalized fieldwork and participant observation (Clifford 1988: 34–35), then we ought to read both Bâ and Chamoiseau as reworking this normative speaker-legitimacy by combining it with other genres and registers to forge an alternative speaker-legitimacy of ethnographically thick, polyvocal storytelling.<sup>21</sup> This mix of registers retains the extraordinary authority of the ethnographic speaker who is able to say “I was there” (Clifford 1988: 35; Geertz 1988: 4–5; Izzo 2015: 6), while simultaneously exploding it into a palimpsest of multilingual, dialogical voices.

An extended passage in *Solibo* acknowledges Chamoiseau’s alter ego Oiseau de Cham’s failed attempt at rigorous fieldwork among the market *djobbeurs* or “jobbers”:

J’avis beau, durant mes éclaircies lucides, m’imaginer en *observation directe participante*, comme le douteux Malinowski, Morgan, Radcliffe-Brown, ou bien Favret-Saada chez ses sorciers normands, je savais que nul ne s’était vu dissoudre dans ce qu’il voulait rigoureusement décrire. Je n’étais plus dans ce marché qu’une sorte de parasite, en béatitude stérile, dont les notes s’apparentaient (et *s’apparentent* puisque aujourd’hui je n’y comprends hak) aux armes miraculeuses des chantres surréalistes. (*Solibo Magnifique* 44)

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<sup>20</sup> Much has been written on ethnography’s role as a colonial tool of power in which a colonial subject objectifies native others in order to more effectively dominate them. See, among many others, Asad (1973) and Miller (1990: 10–29).

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Debaene (2014: 1–12) and Christina Kullberg (2013: 9) acknowledge the relevance of ethnography and literature as categories in spite of the difficulty of defining either term in a universal way. For both writers under study here, a clearly identifiable ethnographic register of positivistic description or documentation contrasts with the individual authorial license and creativity that are the hallmarks of literary writing. In the case of Chamoiseau, the celebration of a hybrid collective storytelling voice contrasts overtly, as noted below, with Bronislaw Malinowski’s empiricism in the landmark monograph *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). In the case of Bâ, *Wangrin*’s multigeneric qualities challenge the parameters of his own more rigorous collection-transcription-translation work, such as in *Kaïdara, récit initiatique peul* (1968), or his formal work on oral history in *L’Empire peul du Macina* (1975); it is worth noting that this ethnographic *œuvre* flowed from, and challenged in its own ways, colonial Africanism (Aggarwal 1999: 198–227).

Though I tried during lucid moments to picture myself as a *participant observer*, like the doubtful Malinowski, Morgan, Radcliffe-Brown, or Favret-Saada with his [*sic*] Norman sorcerers, I knew that not one of them had seen himself dissolve thus in what he wanted oh so rigorously to describe. In this market, I was but a kind of parasite, swimming in sterile bliss, whose notes were more like (and still *are*, since I don't understand jack) the miraculous weapons of the surrealist enchanter. (*Solibo Magnificent* 21).

Oiseau de Cham is so busy participating in his subjects' lives that he cannot write down his observations; his indecipherable field notes devolve into "surrealist" literary preparations.<sup>22</sup> The dissolution of his voice into his informants', and vice-versa, contrasts explicitly with the sharp distinguishability of data from analysis that is essential to ethnography's claim to scientificness. Oiseau de Cham's ineptitude at properly textualizing his fieldwork (see Clifford 1988: 38–39) violates, seemingly word for word, Bronislaw Malinowski's prescription that "only such sources are of unquestionable scientific value, in which we can clearly draw the line between, on the one hand, direct observation and of native statements and interpretations, and on the other, the inferences of the author, based on his common sense and psychological insight" (1922: 3). As such, Oiseau de Cham's failure at ethnography results not only from a breakdown of the critical distance required for participant observation (Kullberg 2013: 106–111), but also from the impossibility of what we might call "transcriptionality," the ability to correctly represent informants' speech in writing through an apparatus of quotations, typography, and footnotes—as opposed to a surrealist pile of papers where everyone's voice is mixed up. Rather than fashioning a scientific voice *à la* Malinowski, which would not only carefully distinguish ethnographic analysis from native speech or views, but also elide the insecurities of the writing self (Clifford 1988: 103–113), Chamoiseau writes a novel celebrating the impossibility of such an authoritative voice and its ultimate replacement by the collective storytelling voice of the people, within which individual voices are dialogically imbricated. In this way, the literary supplements the ethnographic: the failure of ethnographic representation gives birth, for Chamoiseau, to the

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<sup>22</sup> The allusion to surrealism here indicates, on the one hand, that Oiseau de Cham's field notes are difficult to understand, but it also recalls Aimé Césaire, the Martinican surrealist poet and co-founder of Negritude. It gives the impression that Chamoiseau's attempt at ethnography mutated into literature even at the earliest stages of writing, the taking of field notes.



novel, a literary genre that is informed by this discipline while being freer to experiment with representations of dialogism.<sup>23</sup>

This analysis is confirmed at the novel's end, which presents a final document of Solibo's last performance entitled "Les Dits de Solibo" (*Solibo Magnifique* 233) / "When Solibo Spoke" (*Solibo Magnificent* 164). At first glance, this appendix seems to be the only place in the novel where the hero's speech is recorded directly and extensively, in the manner of an ethnographic transcription, rather than reported as snippets through the memory of others. In fact, its veneer of authenticity is avowed as fiction, for the transcription is based on Solibo's listeners' hopeless attempts at *recreating* the Master's last performance:

Certains manquaient de souffle, d'autres de rythme, pas un ne réussissait à marier le ton et la gestuelle [...]. Papi, maître-djobeur, par un désir aigu de sauver les mots du Magnifique, approcha la performance, sur plus de trois heures, à l'allure des chevaux de bois de nos manèges créoles. Il fut enregistré, et je passai la saison des quénettes à traduire l'ensemble sur tout un lot de pages, tourbillonnantes et illisibles. Si bien, amis, que je me résolus à en extraire une version réduite, organisée, écrite, sorte d'esatz de ce qu'avait été le Maître cette nuit-là [...] (*Solibo Magnifique* 225-6)

Some lacked breath, others rhythm, not one succeeded in wedding the tone to the gesture [...]. Papi, master jobber, taken with a pronounced desire to save the Magnificent's words, tried to perform for more than 3 hours at the rate of the wooden horses of our Creole merry-go-round. I taped him and then spent the rest of the season *translating* the whole thing onto a whole bunch of whirling and unreadable pages. So

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<sup>23</sup> For Christopher Miller, postcolonial literature has needed to assume this burden of polyphonic representation—in Bakhtinian terms, a mission to celebrate dialogism and heteroglossia—as a corrective to the discursive violence of colonialism, including colonial ethnography. This specifically literary imperative was pursued by postcolonial writers regardless of the literary dimensions that ethnography had incorporated into itself throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Debaene 2014), and regardless of the dialogical or polyphonic turn in ethnographic writing since the 1970s (Clifford 1988: 41-54). Because colonial literary and anthropological institutions "vitiat[e] dialogism within the substance of history," dialogism became a powerful tool for literary writers to decolonize the representations generated by these institutions while speaking for themselves (Miller 1990: 27). Even expressly polyphonic styles of writing ethnography, such as that of Jeanne Favret-Saada, mentioned in *Solibo* alongside Malinowski (see Kullberg 2013: 110–113), fail to serve Chamoiseau's purposes because they still rely on a practice of reliable transcriptionality. As Clifford writes, "Ethnographic discourses are not, in any event, the speeches of invented characters. Informants are specific individuals with real proper names—names that can be cited, in altered form when tact requires" (1988: 51). Chamoiseau turns to the novel because his informants' voices blend into each other and into his own.

then, friends, I decided to squeeze out a reduced, organized, *written* version, a kind of ersatz of what the Master had been that night [...] (*Solibo Magnificent* 158-59)

Like the novel, the written documentation of Solibo's last performance is itself a dialogical palimpsest. As direct transcription of Solibo is impossible, the failed ethnographer Oiseau de Cham gets his fellow witnesses to reproduce, in a kind of performance that is itself foredoomed to failure, Solibo's last magnificent performance (Murray-Román 2016: 67–68). The text that this experiment generates is a summary made from a transcribed recording of Pipi—the larger-than-life, Soliboesque jobber at the center of *Chronique des sept misères*—and influenced by the other witnesses-turned-performers who attempted it before him. Multiple voices, including the authorial license of Oiseau de Cham / Chamoiseau as transcriber-turned-writer, are inextricably entangled with each other. The transparency of the ethnographic document is replaced by the ineffability of the collective storytelling voice. Transcriptions and notes, once again, devolve into literature.

*Wangrin* lends itself to a similar analysis, in spite of Bâ's repeated denials that this text is anything other than a faithful translation of the historical Wangrin's speech. Its use of oral traditional motifs, such as the supernatural account of the hero's birth (*Etrange destin* 11–22; *Fortunes of Wangrin* 1–9), its mixing of historical fact and creative fiction, and its suggestive parallels between Wangrin's life and Bâ's own (Aggarwal 1999: 236–239) all demonstrate that the text we have is indeed a generically hybrid palimpsest of multilingual voices: the historical Wangrin's (irretrievable) autobiographical narrative in Bamana; Bâ's colonially trained expertise as documenter of oral texts in Bamana, Fulfulde, and other languages; the colonial novels in French that *Wangrin* seems to echo or dialogue with (Pondopoulo 2010: 230); the many griots, storytellers, and singers in various languages charged with retransmitting oral traditional heritage throughout the areas of West Africa where both Wangrin and Bâ traveled; and, not least, Bâ's authorial license as francophone writer. Intriguingly, whereas Oiseau de Cham / Chamoiseau renounces the possibility of reading his text as an ethnographically rigorous and transparent document, Bâ always insisted on precisely that reading of *Wangrin*. And yet, there is clearly much more to this text than the near-transcriptionality that Bâ claimed for it. This conclusion leads us to a paradox: the authority that Bâ claimed for *Wangrin* as a precise, ethnographic-style translation explicitly attempts to preclude the hybrid literary legitimacy that the careful reader of this text must attribute to it. Might we see Bâ, then, as an authorial double of Wangrin, the ultimate mystifier, perpetually slipping away when we try to pin him down?

## Conclusion

Multilingual storytelling in *Solibo* represents a tactic to forge a collective speaker-legitimacy that serves as an alternative to disenfranchisement by the Martinican heirs of French colonialism. In contrast, Wangrin's multilingual mobility, his tactical mimicry and deviation of the strategies of authoritative entities, is neither quite within nor quite outside any one of the several normative codes in competition in French West Africa. His speaker-legitimacy as a storyteller comes from his thrilling ability to thwart the powerful, thereby constituting a kind of alternative to the norm of French supremacy—though he is also, at the same time, an instrument of colonial domination. In effect, *Wangrin* blurs the distinction between norm and alternative, just as it does between colonizer and colonized, resistance and complicity, solidarity and opportunism. At another level, both texts claim a literary legitimacy which simultaneously flows from and subverts ethnographic authority: an ethnographic register is at work in both texts, but it inevitably fails to capture all of the multilingual, palimpsestic voices teeming beneath and around it. This hybridized, ethnographically-thick strategy of storytelling in both novels constitutes an alternative legitimacy to the normative structure of ethnographic authority. Beyond the classic issue of how authors use style to appropriate or subvert the French language in their writing, these two case studies illuminate how colonized speakers and writers use practices of multilingual storytelling to exert agency, subvert the colonial power relations encoded in bureaucratic, linguistic, and racial norms, and construct alternative forms of legitimacy as speakers.

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