

Ô manioc-roi !: Community, Commensality, and Communion in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*

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Set in the final throes of a carnival on the island of Martinique, Patrick Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique* offers a provocative reflection on the notions of community and justice, and the ways in which an ethical manifestation of the latter can help to preserve the former even under the most devastating—and *unjust*—of circumstances. In this early novel, Chamoiseau clearly contrasts the mean-spirited police force of Fort-de-France with a community of well-intentioned carnival-goers, a community defined by its giving nature. Indeed, one way the community maintains its identity is through the sharing of food—commensality—in such a way as to experience communion, a state of intimacy that transcends simple proximity at a table.

In this article, I will examine Chamoiseau's navigation between, on the one hand, the carnival community marked by its consumption of primarily Martinican foodstuffs, and on the other hand, the French-imported practices that have come to bear on that consumption. The juxtaposition and intermingling of these two worlds results in a composite culture existing in a state of tension, wherein the complexity of creolization is valorized even as it offers challenges to the practice of justice. Food in all its myriad forms is a significant nexus of *Créolité* throughout Chamoiseau's *œuvre*.¹ To examine its role in the ongoing evolution of a common Creole identity in *Solibo Magnifique* is to engage, as Chamoiseau himself does, with competing notions of justice at their most profound level.

Chamoiseau's exploration of community and justice occurs within the context of the ludicrous investigation of a hypothetical crime: the supposed murder of the eponymous storyteller Solibo by his avid listeners, the ordinary, lower class citizens of Fort-de-France. Briefly put, on the final day of the carnival, Solibo the storyteller drops dead right in front of his audience. The latter, caught up in the animation of the story, imagine at first that his fall is a valid part of the spectacle, and it waits patiently for Solibo to rise again. When he fails to do so, the police intervene, with tragic results. Myriad contrasts between the brutally inept French-trained police force (representing the Law with a capital "L") and the carnival revelers that comprise Solibo's final audience point to cultural chasms between

¹ Indeed, as Valérie Loichot has explored in *The Tropics Bite Back: Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature*, food as a site for identity construction, whether cultural, political, or linguistic, permeates a wide swath of francophone Caribbean literature (*passim*).

the two groups: chasms spanning time and trust, food and fellowship. The police are stronger and more *eloquent*² than the population they accuse of having killed Solibo, and their interrogation tactics deprive their suspects of almost any semblance of human dignity, leaving them battered and confused, and of trusting any authority, especially any French-imposed authority. Indeed, due to the police's inept conduct, two of the accused will be dead by the end of the novel. All of which, of course, points to a complete parody of justice by the so-called "Law," a disfigurement of the ordinarily life-preserving properties of law enforcement. Yet the novel is not merely a tragic one, for in it Chamoiseau offers a representation of "ethical"³ manifestations of true justice, where justice is defined, in the Biblical sense, as that which is life-giving.⁴ Throughout the novel, the carnival audience constantly reiterates the life-giving value of community, life-giving in its most basic manifestation, that of sustenance: food, metaphorical *bread* broken with and for the other.⁵ When every other connection is shattered or erased, an underlying message of hope persists thanks to the characters' embrace of commensality, the act of eating together, such that alienation is banished through the redemptive sharing of food and food narratives.

Solibo Magnifique* in the Context of the *Éloge de la Créolité

Solibo Magnifique occupies an interesting position in the chronology of Chamoiseau's *œuvre* as it appeared only one year before *Éloge de la Créolité* (1989), the author's collaboration with Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant, an essay that grapples with the notion of syncretic cultural identity in a region whose population is a *métissage* or mixing

² That is, they speak grammatically correct French, which counts for a good deal in Solibo's universe. I use the word with a certain irony.

³ I use this term following Nicole Simek in *Eating Well, Reading Well: Maryse Condé and the Ethics of Interpretation*.

⁴ I believe that Chamoiseau's sense of justice is firmly grounded in the traditional biblical sense of the word as it is used in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, one Hebrew word for justice is *mishpat*, which involves "giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care" (Keller 25). A related term is the Hebrew word that translates as "being just," *tzadeqah*, which "refers to a life of good relationships," that is, "day-to-day living in which a person conducts *all* relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity" (Keller 31; emphasis in original). If *mishpat* involves "rectifying" or "retributive" justice, *tzadeqah* includes "primary" or "distributive" justice, that is, the equal distribution of goods and opportunities. Taken together, the two terms offer a sense of justice not unlike the modern use of the phrase "social justice," justice that is life-giving. As Timothy Keller argues, a similar understanding of justice underpins the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament as well. Chamoiseau's novel itself might be said to be an effort at pointing to, and ultimately changing, the conditions of life of the poor and oppressed in Martinique: "In general, to 'do justice' means to live in a way that generates a strong community where human beings can flourish. Specifically, however, to 'do justice' means to go to places where the fabric of shalom has broken down, where the weaker members of societies are falling through the fabric, and to repair it. . . . How can we do that? The only way to reweave and strengthen the fabric is by weaving *yourself* into it. . . . Reweaving shalom means to sacrificially thread, lace, and press your time, goods, power, and resources into the lives and needs of others" (Keller 200; emphasis in original). Reweaving himself into the fabric of his community through the writing of this novel is one eminently significant and life-giving gesture of Chamoiseau in *Solibo Magnifique*.

⁵ Although the term *bread* is apt (albeit somewhat cliché) given the communion-like nature of meals shared in *Solibo Magnifique*, I insert *metaphorical* here because it is precisely the creation of a desire for products such as imported flour to make bread that threatens traditional Martinican livelihood (*Solibo* 204). The denizens of the carnival culture, in fact, share sweets and sorbets and shark stew, not French bread.

of African, indigenous, European, Asian, and other influences.⁶ *Créolité* proposes a new way of seeing, a “*vision intérieure*” (*Éloge* 23; emphasis in original) that would embrace culture and identity as being more than the simple sum of its constitutive elements, a kind of dynamic product (in the mathematical sense of the term), hybrid by its very nature: “La Créolité est l’agrégat interactionnel ou transactionnel, des éléments culturels caraïbes, européens, africains, asiatiques, et levantins, que le joug de l’Histoire a réunis sur le même sol” (*Éloge* 26; emphasis in original).⁷

The culinary arts are one domain among many⁸ referenced explicitly in the *Éloge de la Créolité* as areas for fruitful exploration of Creole dynamism (29, 31, 41). In essence, the *Créolité* movement purported to celebrate what the authors term “ce formidable « migan »” (26) or stew that resulted from the mixing of cultures, the term *migan* referring to a Creole dish in which breadfruit or plantains are stewed with salted fish or pork, a hybrid recipe resulting from the first contact of Europeans with the indigenous peoples of the islands in the seventeenth century (MIGAN).

Yet while such mixing of cultures is fundamental to the notion of *Créolité*, it can also prove problematic, particularly under the conditions of colonization and its aftermath. Thus, the *Créolistes* were very critical of the highly controversial dependency of Martinique on French imports after the island’s departmentalization in 1946, and literary texts born of *Créolité* would often depict the nefarious effects of the *modernization* of the island, including the potential cultural losses such a phenomenon would entail.⁹ *Solibo Magnifique*, which depicts the loss of the storyteller, has long been counted as one such work. Maeve McCusker suggests that cultural memory itself is at stake in the novel: “In *Solibo Magnifique*, . . . the situation described in the present is freighted with a sense of impending and irrevocable loss and degeneration. . . . [M]emory is located in the quotidian and the local, and is undone by the imported, the imposed, the mass-produced” (79).

Indeed, at first reading, Chamoiseau’s novel does appear to offer a devastating verdict for the *traditional* Martinican culture as embodied by Solibo and his audience; the demise of the storyteller would thus be a harbinger for the erasure of an entire culture already under threat due to modern-day consumerism encroaching on the island from without. Yet I believe Chamoiseau’s goal in composing *Solibo Magnifique* is not to write that culture off as entirely lost any more than he aims to posit French cultural elements as irrevocably

⁶ According to the authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité*, “La Créolité . . . implique le double processus :
— d’adaptation des Européens, des Africains et des Asiatiques au Nouveau Monde ;
— de confrontation culturelle entre ces peuples au sein d’un même espace, aboutissant à la création d’une culture syncrétique dite créole” (31; emphasis in original).

⁷ The authors also use the words “mosaïque,” “maëlstrom,” “chaos,” “magma,” and “notre soupe primitive” to describe the phenomenon (26-28 and *passim*).

⁸ Also referenced are the literary, linguistic, religious, artistic, architectural, medicinal, economic, vestimentary, and musical domains.

⁹ The authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* speak of the “attrape de dépendance culturelle, de dépendance politique, de dépendance économique” of the francophone Creole world on France (14). Related sentiments can be found in countless works of Caribbean literature, including Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Chamoiseau’s *Chronique des sept misères*, Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Téliumée Miracle* (cf. béchamel sauce), Gisèle Pineau’s *L’espérance-macadam* (cf. refrigerators and more), Ernest Pépin’s *Toxic Island* (with reference to cocaine, for example), and even Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove* (in the mouths of some of the narrators).

dominant. If the Martinican community is to move forward, in spite of devastating loss and cruelly inhuman treatment, and if indeed, as Confiant has suggested, there is a way that *Créolité* can “deconflictualize French and Creole—the two cultures to which we lay claim” (Taylor 132), perhaps it is through that most humanizing of all human institutions: the shared meal.

A careful reading of the story demonstrates that, in the chaotic and carnivalesque universe of Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique*, food—its procurement, preparation and consumption—plays a crucial role in the on-going evolution of a common Creole cultural identity, one that is hybrid and composite, distinguishable from its African and European counterparts but also encompassing some aspects of both. Such an endeavor is not without potential pitfalls, as Simek has pointed out: “Viewing *Créolité*—a movement that claims to value hybridity, *métissage*, and fluidity—as identitarian is a contested stance, and one that calls for closer scrutiny if we are to understand how hybridity can be renewed, or altered, through globalization . . .” (32). However, in an interview published several years after the *Éloge de la Créolité*, Confiant suggests that the presence of conflicting cultures in close proximity requires that *Créolistes* “think both of them anew, so that neither dominates the other” (Taylor 132). In this very process of rethinking lies hope.¹⁰

Chamoiseau's work, it is true, has been accused, both directly and indirectly, by René Ménénil, Maryse Condé, and others, of trivializing or stereotyping Martinican cultural identity because of (among other things) Chamoiseau's incorporation of what such writers consider to be overwrought celebrations of traditional agricultural and culinary references. According to Ménénil, in his text “Le folklore sans folklorisme,”

Qu'un romancier, qui est censé faire un roman, c'est-à-dire un récit où, à travers des personnages imaginaires, il doit être question de révéler des aspects inconnus de notre angoisse de vivre et de notre destin final — que ce romancier tienne à m'apprendre comment on prépare le « touffé requin », les fureurs du carnaval antillais, la ferveur de la Toussaint — tout y passe, dans une manière d'inventaire ethnologique tantôt culinaire tantôt agricole et jardinière, tantôt zoologique avec des colibris et des papillons — alors le langage littéraire nécessairement déchoit et tombe dans une pédagogie à l'usage des touristes. . . . (279)

While Ménénil does not mention Chamoiseau by name, the reference to shark stew—a key element in *Solibo's* history—is unmistakable, and what McCusker has called “the ideological charge of self-exoticism” (82) is worth noting.¹¹ Yet, as McCusker also states, Chamoiseau is “well aware of the temptations of a spurious nostalgia, and yet . . . is resolutely turned toward the past as a way of understanding the present” (82). Such an understanding involves a carefully chosen representation of elements taken from all parties involved; the authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* speak of an ever-evolving, dynamic

¹⁰ Likewise, in reference to Chamoiseau's *Chronique des sept misères* (1986), Heidi Bojsen indicates that it is not a question of positing “authentic” Creole experiences so much as it is recognizing that those experiences, too, are constitutive of modernity (238).

¹¹ The authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* explicitly reject *doudouisme*, that form of writing that celebrates above all the most exotic elements of Creole culture, indifferent to the true nuance and complexity of that culture (16). One wonders if it is not without a certain irony that Chamoiseau nicknames the fruit vendor in *Solibo Magnifique* “Doudou-Ménar.”

“totalité kaléidoscopique” whose multiplicities cannot be resisted “pas plus que ne résiste le jardin créole aux formes des ignames qui l’habitent” (28).¹²

Moreover, as Lynn Marie Houston has asserted,¹³ in Caribbean literature, food politics are inextricably linked to identity politics: “. . . food constructs subjectivity, [and] functions as a medium for expression of Caribbean identity . . .” (105). This is very much the case in Chamoiseau’s work. On the one hand, in *Solibo Magnifique*, French culinary hegemony is at times challenged by the local community’s explicit embrace of traditional Martinican cuisine having its origins in what the author terms “cette façon de marronnage de notre vie” (78). Unable to combat the Law on a legal level, the small group of suspects nevertheless reaffirms its identity—and its innocence—through the pronounced valorization and representation of a network of local foodways that serve as the metonymy for the sustainability of that community whose very identity is threatened by “[l]es importations made-in-france [sic]” (204). On the other hand, as Chamoiseau makes very clear, that *Made-in-France stuff* is not about to disappear. To the contrary, it is part and parcel of the hybridity to which Martinican culture—and *Créolité* itself—tends.

Community Identity

As Loichot has amply demonstrated in her study of Chamoiseau’s *Creole Folktales*, “food constitutes one of the privileged sites of creolization” (*Tropics* 30). Perhaps it is not surprising then that, while Solibo’s audience is populated with individuals of various professions, the tie to the world of food links many of them. They include, among others, a “marin-pêcheur,” a “commerçant,” a “vendeuse de fruits confits,” a “fabricant de râpes à manioc,” an “ouvrier agricole,” a “marchande des sorbets,” and two or three so-called “maître[s]-djobeur[s] au marché aux légumes” (29-32). Chamoiseau, himself a character in the novel, punctuates his own ethnographic research at the market with manual labor, to wit, “charroi d’ordures, nettoyage de légumes” (43), his contribution to their communal existence. Indeed, it is at the markets first and foremost that this crowd has come to know one another, and to know Solibo as well, whether that be “[s]ur le marché aux poissons où il connaissait tout le monde” (26) or “au vendredi du marché-viande, à l’arrivage du boeuf” (27)¹⁴ or simply at the daily vegetable market where so many pass, either at work or seeking work. Not that the police believe that said individuals actually exercise the professions they claim. To the contrary, the police report offered only pages into the novel questions almost all of the above-mentioned attributions: Bête-Longue is qualified as “se disant marin-pêcheur, très certainement sans profession” (30), Didon and Pipi both “se disant maître-djobeur” (31, 32), la Fièvre “se disant ouvrier agricole” (32), and Congo’s designation as “fabricant de râpes à manioc” is followed by a question mark in parentheses (31).

¹² The dynamic nature of this project is solidified in the concluding pages of the *Éloge de la Créolité*, where the authors refer to culture itself as “une dynamique constante chercheuse de questions inédites, de possibilités neuves, qui ne domine pas mais qui entre en relation, qui ne pille pas mais qui échange” (54).

¹³ Houston writes in reference to M. NourbeSe Philip’s story “Burn Sugar.”

¹⁴ Chamoiseau the character/narrator witnesses Solibo telling stories “parmi les étals” (45); Solibo speaks to the ethnographer “de charbon, d’ignames, d’amour, de chansons oubliées et de mémoire, de mémoire” (45). McCusker notes the symbolic significance of the marketplace in Chamoiseau’s universe as also seen in *Chronique des sept misères* (McCusker 21-46). “Comprendre les marchés aux légumes” is offered by the authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* as one among many valued projects for Creole writers to explore (40).

Only those whose work involves an actual exchange of money for a concrete and viable product (retailer, street vendor, sherbet vendor) are spared this devaluation of their job status. The lines are clearly drawn. The French-trained police, a by-product of the colonization of the islands, have the power, by means of words and violence, to construct a reality utterly divorced from the common experience of their fellow Martinican suspects. This divergence of perspective is eminently clear throughout the novel.

Additional evidence that the police and their suspects perceive the world differently may be found in Chamoiseau's meditation on time, an abstract notion that has varied connotations according to the social status of the individuals involved. The police are concerned because no one seems to have given any thought to the time that was passing while Solibo lay prone on the ground under the tamarind tree where he gave his last performance. For them, time is measurable, quantifiable; it ticks inexorably "en secondes, en minutes et en heures" (145). To their question, Chamzibié (one of the author's many sobriquets in the novel) responds with another question, based on a food metaphor: "Le temps c'est des graines de riz?" (145). Theoretically countable yet elusive, a grain of rice is an insignificant, inexact measure of a life experience, and it cannot be applied to Solibo's life or death. Other suspects similarly evoke food images in an effort to demonstrate a knowledge not only of the passing of time, but of its mutation; what once seemed to make sense as a way to give concrete reality to an abstract notion by linking it to food and foodways no longer holds: "Richard Cœurillon et Zaboca parlèrent d'un temps de récoltes et d'usines qui fumaient, en ce temps l'un maniait une machine, l'autre serrait un coutelas, c'était un temps, mais aujourd'hui si les champs sont déserts, que les sifflets d'usines ne rythment plus la journée, . . . où passe le temps d'ici, inspectère ? On dit qu'il est en France, que là il y a du temps" (146). A once organic sense of time, linked to the cultivation and processing of food, is in danger of being lost, the farmworker and factory worker suggest, by the soul-crushing, clock-centered paradigm of the erstwhile colonizer.

The story of Sidonise, the sherbet maker, chronicles a similar dissonance: "... il fut un temps où sa sorbetière lui donnait le temps, le temps de parfumer le laitage au coco, le temps de tourner la manivelle dans la glace et le sel, mais là, à ce jour, le sorbet se faisait à l'ailleurs, elle l'achetait dans des boîtes en plastique et le présentait dans sa sorbetière pour le genre, depuis elle glissait sur les heures et le reste" (146). While, at first glance, this development might seem to contradict the examples given above, it is not the loss of her sherbet maker that causes Sidonise to lose her sense of time, but rather the loss of a hands-on process, lovingly cared for, an organic connection to her own handiwork that is less clock-dependent than chef-specific, an innate sense of timing rather than the ticking of a mechanical timer. Ready-made sherbet, on the other hand, is clearly a product of the mechanization that Aimé Césaire associated with the conquering peoples of Europe: "Écoutez le monde blanc / ... / ses raideurs d'acier bleu transperçant la chair mystique / ..." (68). Ironically, Sidonise herself claims no responsibility for her inability to gauge time's inexorable march.

Most poignant, perhaps, is Congo, whose very livelihood as a manioc grater maker has been undermined by French planes bringing French flour to the islands: "Congo créolisa d'un temps de manioc, du temps où l'on en mangeait par-ici, il voyait bien pousser la plante et comptait ses saisons, mais aujourd'hui il ne savait du temps que l'élan des avions aux abords de sa case, en ciel d'aéroport" (146). Of all of the traditional foodstuffs that

contribute to Martinican identity, manioc is perhaps,¹⁵ for Chamoiseau, the most central, as he explains near the end of *Solibo Magnifique*:

Solibo était de la parole, mais Congo du manioc. Le culinaire balise aussi notre histoire. Les salaisons de porc disent l'époque maritime : les bateaux nous alimentaient dans les labours des premières plantations. Vint l'époque des colonats durant laquelle, à l'ombre des habitations, le béké toléra des parcelles de jardin pour nous-mêmes. Le manger fut alors d'igname, de dachine (et de ses feuilles), de petit élevage, de pois et de manioc — ô *manioc-roi* !... Il nous prenait juste après le sein, dans le lait et les crèmes. Nous le mangions en cassave, en pain, en gâteau, en galette. Il accompagnait les haricots, saupoudrait la fricassée et toutes les sauces du cochon-planche. Il se mariait au sirop et donnait la féculé et l'amidon. (203; emphasis in original)

Manioc, for Chamoiseau, represents the glue that bound the colonized one to another, the all-purpose plant that nourished generations of Martinicans until “Les importations made-in-france [*sic*] défirent le manioc des habitudes, et même des mémoires. Il fallut désormais de la farine de blé au pain” (204). The apotheosis of Congo in *Solibo Magnifique*, the consequence of his moving sacrifice in the name of dignity, points us back to the time of *king manioc*, back to a rather nostalgic sense of the purity of culinary roots, the epitome of Caribbean gastronomical history; its ostensible loss, the reader senses, might well be regretted.

In any case, the disruption of traditional food pathways has sown temporal consternation among the food workers of Fort-de-France as evidenced by their lengthy musings about time; they dread (and resist) the possible passing of the culinary touchstones that have given structure and meaning to their lives. In their idyllic, community-centered culture, farm time, cooking time, and meal time are more meaningful than the to-the-minute accuracy of the clock time of the Chief Inspector. Not surprisingly, such an “asymmetrical encounter with figures of alterity” quite precisely focuses our attention upon “the ethical response to other” involved (Simek 166). For the community that is Solibo’s audience, that response must first and foremost be framed in terms that are just and life-giving. If food is that which nourishes the community, then taking the time to grow, harvest, prepare, and serve that food is still a goal worth striving for, the suspects suggest.

Thus, although manioc may have lost its prominent place in the Caribbean kitchen, Martinican identity continues to be wedded to the food consumed at a table, or at a carnival. At a very general level, many of the civilian characters in the book maintain a traditional diet. The jobber Pipi, for example, eats “de[s] carreaux de fruit à pain” for lunch (184). At carnival time, traditional foodstuffs consist (in part) of the sherbet, candied fruit, and rum consumed during the festivities. Significantly, for example, although she no longer makes her own sherbet, Sidonise’s icy confection guarantees her place in the community, and her ability to maintain the ties that bind. When she wanted to hear her former lover tell

¹⁵ Interestingly, Chamoiseau chooses to foreground manioc as the quintessential Martinican foodstuff, rather than sugar cane, a choice that sets him apart from other Caribbean writers in this decade and before, who highlight their characters’ roots as slaves with an emphasis on cane. A few years later, Édouard Glissant would place attention on the Indian spice masala as the “privileged example for the constitution of Martinican—and Whole-Worldly—identity” (Loichot, “Between” 132).

his tales, for example, Sidonise recounts that she would trade her tasty treat for information: "... je me renseignais à gauche, à droite, offrant un sorbet à qui savait où entendre Solibo. Ah, Sucette, tu m'as soutiré des sorbets avec ça !" (123). Here, Sidonise acknowledges the power of food to open the lines of communication, and Sucette, Solibo's occasional drummer accompanist, obligingly chimes in with his agreement: "(Mais tes sorbets sont bons, Sidonise...)" (123). Confronted with Solibo's inert body, Sidonise will lean heavily on her sherbet maker, and through it, on all the friends who have shared in its delicious product.

If Sidonise has opted for factory-made sherbet, the same cannot be said of the candied fruit vendor Doudou-Ménar. Although it means an exhaustingly long workday, Doudou devotes ample time to the preparation of her product, "réveil au chant de l'oiseau-pipiri, chadecs à échauder, la case à balayer avant de réveiller le fils Gustave . . . , et vente de fruits confits à la faveur des fêtes" (47-48). In spite of "la sévère concurrence des marchandes-gâteaux, docounes,¹⁶ sorbets ou bien quilibibis" (48),¹⁷ Doudou perseveres, garnishing compliments, particularly from Solibo, who relies on her sweet syrup to "donne-descendre derrière ma dent gauche sillonne mon gosier . . . et allume mes boyaux comme une étoile du berger allume le bout du ciel à l'heure où les nègres prennent un rhum-montant pour la foi en Jésus" (241). To Solibo, Doudou's candied fruit, like the rum in the demijohn his listeners pass around, wets his whistle, allowing him to continue to feed his audience with his own kind of food, the stories for which he has been dubbed "Magnifique." Yet, for all that, the candied fruit appears to be eminently traditional, that very tradition has embraced at least some elements of the island's European roots as well, as evidenced by the religious imagery—"étoile du berger," "Jésus"—that reminds us of the pervasive role of Christianity throughout the islands in the colonial era and beyond. Moreover, the very process of candying fruit had long before been detailed profusely by seventeenth-century French missionary Jean-Baptiste Labat in his *Voyage aux isles*, further cementing the French connection (62). Wedding island foodways with European tastes, over the centuries, candied fruit has become a hybrid product of creolization.

Just as the sharing of traditional food strengthens the ties that bind producer to consumer and friend to friend, so *tafia*—the white rum of the islands—play a crucial (albeit problematic) role in the social interactions of the community. At her wake, for example, one of the mourners will "donner un quart de mot sur Man Gnam" (a friend of Solibo's): "Mes enfants, elle aimait téter trois choses : sa pipe chaque soir, le vermouth chaque dimanche, et le rhum tout le temps !" (157-58). The local bar *Chez Chinotte* serves as a watering hole for many of the characters, including Pipi, Sucette, and Congo, to name just three. Solibo himself follows the midday tradition of "son rhum de midi" at the bar (189). For Solibo, this beverage takes a variety of forms: "... alors que chaque rhumier se fixe, Solibo, lui, papillonnait dans les rhums. Pour telle gorgée c'était du blanc, pour telle autre il hélait la bouteille de vieux ou exigeait le rhum paille. Là il demandait du sucre clair, par ici du sucre brun, de ce côté un sanglot de sirop, ici une goutte de miel ou un punch sec toujours inattendu" (191-92). It is here, too, that Solibo's devotees often congregate (outside of the

¹⁶ A "Guadeloupean sweet doughnut" (*Solibo Magnificent*, trans. Réjouis and Vinokurov, 188).

¹⁷ A "candy made from sugar, powdered cocoa, corn, and/or nuts" (*Solibo Magnificent*, trans. Réjouis and Vinokurov, 188).

carnival) to hear the storyteller speak: “Au *Chez Chinotte*, sanctuaire du punch, on s’assemblait pour l’écouter alors que pas un cheveu blanc n’habitait sur ses tempes, et le tafia n’avait même pas encore rougi ses yeux (seul le premier jaune sale avait touché le blanc) qu’un silence accueillait l’ouverture de sa bouche : par-ici, c’est cela qui signale et consacre le Maître” (27).¹⁸ For better or worse, *tafia*, whether straight up or in a *ti-punch*, thus clearly serves as a focal point around which the community establishes its identity. In the context of the carnival, a traditional audience, listening to a traditional storyteller, will pass around a demijohn. Solibo’s audience, waiting for him to rise from his presumably momentary pirouette to the ground, keeps on drinking: “. . . béate comme une chique-chien dans un pied de malpropre, la compagnie avait patienté, d’autant plus patienté qu’une dame-jeanne de tafia s’offrait à la moindre soif . . .” (34). In the end, after Solibo’s body has been removed, the communal demijohns are deemed “séchée[s] comme une pierre ponce” (35) that will be “emballé[e]s comme des trésors de Madone” (131) by the investigators. Brought together in the carnival, the audience solidifies its identity through the sharing of sherbet, candied fruit, and Martinican rum as Solibo’s stories flow freely.

The Law and Food: Disconnection from Community

Perhaps not surprisingly, the police station’s own trash contains empty wine and rum bottles (178), a fact that might suggest a certain commonality between the Law and its victims, or at the very least a sense of community among the officers themselves.¹⁹ However, although they themselves were born on the island, Pilon, Bouaffesse, and their subordinates have apparently little to no apparent connection to the *traditional* foodways described above that unite ordinary Martinican civilians around a shared culinary identity. No stranger to nightclubs, Bouaffesse now primarily drinks “whiskey-coca arrosé d’une bière blonde” (59), and he is even nicknamed “Ti-Coca” after the shape of that globally recognized beverage’s bottle (56-57). The District Attorney is said to eat “steak-frites” (97),

¹⁸ Not everyone looks kindly on the sharing of *tafia* in the spirit of community, however. Chamoiseau’s passing reference to the less than salubrious consequences of excessive alcohol consumption—the yellow-red eyes of the aficionado and addict—points to the potentially harmful effects of a beverage that has its island origin in colonial efforts to dominate the slave population. In the seventeenth century, alcohol was used explicitly as a tool of colonial conquest. Historically, slave masters subjugated their workers through their manipulation of the alcohol supply, encouraging the consumption of rum while condemning its effects. For more information on this practice, see my article “Navigating the Sea of Alterity: Jean-Baptiste Labat’s *Nouveau voyage aux îles*.”

¹⁹ In *Solibo Magnifique*, the police denounce excessive drinking: the Chief Sergeant Bouaffesse recalls past criminal investigations, including the discovery of the body of “quelque vieux cuit au tafia” (86). He also takes delight in revealing to Chief Inspector Pilon that all of the suspects in the Solibo case had “tété la dame-jeanne de rhum tandis que Solibo mourait” (141). Pilon will then cite all of them—“tafiaté[s]” (37), “rhumiers” (86)—for public drunkenness. Each suspect in custody will be interrogated on his or her drinking habits: “Il nota les bars où ils avaient bu, les noms et surnoms de ceux qu’ils avaient rencontrés, les rues où ils avaient erré, les bancs où ils avaient dormi” (182)—and each assertion will be fact-checked: “Les dépositions s’avérèrent : oui un tel est venu boire ici, oui un tel a fait ceci, un tel a ait cela . . .” (212). Yet even Sergeant Bouaffesse has been known to partake of communal *tafia*, albeit in the long-distant past. During a period of unemployment, he notes, “qu’au hasard je me trouvais branché sur un tambour gros-ka, dix mille ans pouvaient défiler et on pouvait même me couper les graines sans que je ne bouge, oui ! En plus, si y’a une dame-jeanne de tafia qui circule...” (147).

a singularly symbolic French-French production,²⁰ while the investigating officers consume french fries (173) and drink copious amounts of black coffee (119, 167) brought in by Bouaffesse along with “un sachet de victuailles” (169).

It is noteworthy that Chamoiseau does not entirely eschew the positive aspects of these additions to the Martinican culinary scene. Completing his evolutionary tale of the island's gastronomical history, Chamoiseau notes (perhaps ironically?), “Le bien-manger fut de steak-frites” (204). Consequently, it is perhaps not shocking that the police offer their prisoners “du café et des sandwiches” (213) during the latter's confinement at the station. Indeed, coffee is of central importance to funeral rituals in the novel, as we will see below, for over time it has become a beverage of blurred Creole origins more than specifically European or Martinican origins. Yet there is a crucial difference between the culinary choices of the “traditional” Martinican community and those of the police: nowhere in the police station is there room for healthy fare, let alone home-prepared meals.²¹ While at work, the police consume no green vegetables, no yam or dasheen or peas, no pork, salt or otherwise, and certainly no manioc. More significantly, since “[l]es importations made-in-france [sic] défèrent le manioc des habitudes” (204),²² to the Fort-de-France police officers, manioc can represent one thing only: a potential source of poison contributing to the death of Solibo.²³

²⁰ According to Delphine Perret, the public “verra sans doute clairement dans la mort du conteur, non seulement l'effet d'une modernité qui tend à écraser partout les cultures locales mais aussi la responsabilité de la France qui s'importe brutalement aux Antilles sous toutes ses formes, de sa langue à son steak frites, continuant sous une autre forme une oppression cruelle dont l'histoire doit être gardée” (834). Generally speaking, meat is associated with wealth in the novel; it is a treat the poor enjoy only on holidays (such as Christmas). One minor character, Man Cyanise, is said to prefer white men because they provide “de la viande au canari chaque jour” (180).

²¹ Readers are not often privy to details of the police officers' private lives. Yet the “djobeur” (“coolie”) Didon, who soils himself during his first interrogation, emitting “des effluves d'haricots rouges fermentés au rhum vieux dans une décomposition de viande-cabri et d'ignames bouillies” (173), nonetheless waxes eloquently on another culinary difference: noting that Solibo sold charcoal to earn a living, Didon says, “Tu n'as pas pu le connaître, inspectère, car tu dois manier des cuisinières à gaz. Mais la compagnie qui cuit son manger autrement l'a connu” (181). Bouaffesse will establish another distinction between the two groups based at once on language, education, and culinary knowledge; he demands of Congo, “Tu ne sais pas parler français? Tu n'es jamais allé à l'école? Donc tu ne sais même pas si Henri IV a dit « Poule au pot » ou « Viande-cochon-riz-pois rouges »?...” (105). Any French-educated schoolchild would immediately know the difference.

²² An interesting suggestion that things of a culinary nature are more important to the carnival-goers than to the French-trained police occurs in the battle between Diab-Anba-Feuilles and Doudou-Ménar. In the Creole text, Diab-Anba-Feuilles threatens: “Me I'm going to pound you into the ground, yep! I'm going to grate you like a piece of manioc and pound your spine with my heel into a sauce for rice! You're cursed! where I touch you, you're cursed! There isn't a thing that can get you out of the grip of the Devil who's going to break your bones one by one! I've got superpowers, and I'll poison your soul, your body, your sex!” (trans. Réjouis and Vinokurov, 58). Chamoiseau's French translation of this Creole passage, located in a footnote, is greatly abbreviated: “[O]h, j'aimerais te détruire, te piétiner! tu es maudite! maintenant que je t'ai touchée, ton corps, ton foie, ton sexe sont soumis à ma malédiction! aucun sacrement n'y pourra rien désormais! tu es maudite!” (94). Note the elimination of the culinary in the author's translation for his French-French readers (as well as the odd insertion of the reference to a “sacrement” where the Creole text refers, instead, to getting “out of the grip of the Devil” (“pon labé pé ké tiré'y ba'w é dyab”; trans. Réjouis & Vinokurov, 58).

²³ Interestingly, it is the Law itself that is most harmful (one might even say *poisonous*) to the local community, a fact that may be seen in the author's copious use of food similes and metaphors when referring

Indeed, the Law, apparently satiated with ostensibly unhealthy European-influenced fare, will systematically situate several of the traditional island food items within its own problematic culinary framework by attempting to redefine certain elements of Martinican cuisine as “poison.” Congo’s profession thus immediately qualifies him as the prime suspect: “N’oublie tout de même pas qu’il se dit fabricant de râpes à manioc. Or le manioc, dont il possède la science, recèle un des plus violents poisons du pays. Le docteur Lélonette va en extraire une forte dose du foie de Solibo” (199). According to Bouaffesse, Congo is, after all, “du genre à connaître les vieilles plantes qui empoisonnent les gens plus vite que les serpents jaunes” (202-03). And what of the delivery of the manioc poison? Pilon is convinced that Congo has supplied his co-conspirators with *two* doses of poison: “. . . une pour le touffé-requin avec lequel Sidonise devait le piéger,²⁴ l’autre pour les chadecs que Doudou-Ménar avait chargée d’offrir sous le tamarinier” (198). European references abound as Sidonise, Doudou-Ménar, and Congo are referred to respectively as “Borgia” and “Brutus” (with Sucette thrown in as a luring “Judas”) (198), while the criminal act itself echoes a classic European fairy tale: “comme pour Blanche-Neige et la pomme fatale” (198). Prioritizing such references while ostensibly remaining distanced from their Martinican roots, the Fort-de-France police represent everything that is anathema to their prisoners. The latter, however, embrace and valorize traditional Martinican foodways, thus holding to their identity as a community, an identity predicated upon a common culinary history, yet threatened by a disembodied notion of the Law.

Solibo and Communion

In Chamoiseau’s account, Solibo Magnifique had himself been a true *foodie* prior to his death, his life grounded at once both in the celebration of oral food consumption and in *oralité*, the aural consumption of traditional stories. It is a habit that began young. Years past, when Solibo’s mother Florise²⁵ lost her fortune, and her mind, and was hospitalized, her boy “disparut de la circulation” (77) and embraced “cette façon de marronnage de notre vie” (78), a life in which food procurement was of foremost concern: “Il mangeait des corrossols, des mangots, parfois même du manger-coulis, et buvait l’eau des cacades où il

to suffering, violence, and the state of bodies in death, all products of the authorities but couched in appropriately diverse (Creolized) cooking terms. Suspects’ battered heads are referred to as “crabe[s] farci[s]” (92), while Doudou’s injured skull is “comme une tomate farcie” (96). Diab-Anba-Feuilles describes his violent intentions in food terms: “[M]an sé grajé’w kon an bi manyòk . . .” (94). Crime victims can be “hachée[s] petit-petit” for Bouaffesse (85). In death, Solibo’s legs have “poils enroulés (à dire des graines de poivre)” (36), his face is “en déshérence comme des ignames plantées à la pleine lune” (71), and his body is “come une graisse de soupe froide” (86) and “glacé comme un sorbet vanille” (128). Congo’s death is also vividly described by Bouaffesse: “. . . flap ! et donne-descendre comme un mangot en bonne saison...” (210). In this way, as in many other stylistic and formulaic choices, Chamoiseau’s text itself is a manifesto of *Créolité* at its best.

²⁴ Sidonise’s reaction to the accusation of poison is revelatory: “Poison ? Quel poison ? Dans le touffé-requin !... *Mon dieu-seigneur !...* L’hypothèse la renvoya dans une prostration dont elle ne sortit plus” (194; emphasis in original).

²⁵ Solibo’s mother has her own very maternal connection to local foodways, as the narrator tells us parenthetically: “Man Florise aussi était noire comme hier soir avant la lune (je l’ai aperçue, une fois seulement, près de la caserne Rochambeau où elle vendait du lait aux soldats, tandis que Solibo, marmaille encore, lavait les chevaux de l’état-major)...” (180).

empoignait les z'habitants, écrevisses vite dorées à la flame." All of which, Chamoiseau tells us, "lui permett[ait] de devenir ce qu'il était" (77-78), thereby linking food explicitly to identity. Returning at last to town, however, the young Solibo heads for the most logical haven, the market, where he receives not only physical food to sustain him, but also an introduction to the intangible food that will become his Word:

... 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 (les vieilles s'en rendirent compte et amplifièrent la dose) cela germa, se déploya, avec plus de splendeur qu'un flamboyant de mai. (78)

As life-giving as the market food of which Solibo partakes are the stories that ensure his survival, stories he "distillait" and then shared with those who came, "l'entendant un samedi au marché" (79). Not that the tangible food is insignificant. During his interrogation by the police, Ti-Cal, the anti-colonialist militant enumerates Solibo's favorite dishes: "Et son goût du manger? Les dongrès, les trempages, les méchouis flambés au tafia, les féroces²⁶ à toutes heures, toute une agitation où, il faut bien l'avouer, il propageait un peu de sa parole de nègre conscient" (189-90). Food consumption, and its concomitant commentary, is performance. Echoing Brillat-Savarin's oft-cited food platitude, Solibo *was* very much what he ate. Consumer of stories but also of explicitly Martinican delicacies and even French-inspired *marinades*, he himself embodied *Créolité* at its best, embracing the complexity of creolization without risking what Mary Gallagher has termed, "an impoverished self-identity" (32).²⁷ Because of the food and the stories he consumes, Ti-Cal explains, Solibo "était mieux inscrit que nous tous dans la vie d'ici" (190). He is the exemplum, the epitome of what it means to be *Creole*, as distinct from any legal designation of the island dwellers as "French citizens." He is not 'merely' Martinican (a term in itself difficult to qualify), but a true hybrid informed by all aspects of the island's culinary history.

How, then, is the community to honor, and even continue, Solibo's legacy after his death? Not surprisingly, perhaps, by telling stories, by recounting episodes from the life of the storyteller himself, stories that feature Solibo's predilection for Martinican cuisine, his quasi-liturgical preparation of that cuisine for the community and sharing of it with the community. Such sharing begins most often with a drink. In his half-invented narrative, the suspect Richard Cœurillon mingles fact—"Solibo n'avait pas d'ennemis" (195)—with a paradigmatic anecdote of how the storyteller would have confronted an enemy had he had one, to wit, in the same way that he might have responded to any interlocutor: "... Solibo surgissait joyeux comme un Guadeloupéen à leur fête de cuisinières. Il coiffait de sa main le bourreau, et lui disait : Viens boire un sirop avec Solibo, mon nègre... Le reste de la journée voyait leur allégresse autour du rhum, plus en amitié que si leur sang traversait le même cœur..." (197). Richard Cœurillon's hypothetical flourish eloquently celebrates "le grand

²⁶ "[A] spicy avocado and codfish dish or dip" (*Solibo Magnificent*, trans. Réjouis & Vinokurov, 188).

²⁷ Gallagher notes that, to the contrary, "the positive connotation of creolization—even the creolization of life and death ...—ensures that the presence of the country in the town is desired and celebrated in the writing of *créolité*" (190).

Solibo, nègre de race" (195) with particular attention to the storyteller's generous desire for fellowship around the *tafia* bottle, even with non-extant foes.

More poignant is the story of Man Gnam, a local matriarch whose pig Solibo once calmed for slaughter for the Christmas feast by means of his inimitable Word (80-81). When her children move away, Solibo occasionally keeps the old woman company, yet she wastes away, barely eating, "étouffée d'amertume" (156). The agricultural worker la Fièvre memorializes Solibo by recounting the wake Solibo arranges for his old friend, a means of honoring a tradition intimately associated with his own calling as a storyteller: "... Man Gnam était du monde de la parole et des veillées ..." (156). Solibo thus ensures a place for community centered on a ritualistic sharing of food and fellowship: he enlists the aid of the merchant Man Goul and Man Élo, "reine du manger-macadam" (156), pays for all the food and drink himself, and serves all of the mourners, offering "les bols de soupe claire," rum or *ti-punch*, and tin cups of coffee (157). As noted above, like rum, coffee is a phenomenon whose history is shared, a substance embraced across island and European cultures. The emotion evoked by the event stirs all in attendance: "Les yeux pleuraient de contentement. Rhum et soupe s'engouffraient dans des gorges sans fond" (158). And the crowning event: Solibo adds his own word to the festivities, celebrating Man Gnam's life and death "de belle manière" (158). Solibo himself will receive no such care. His corpse will be autopsied and consigned to a pauper's grave without the benefit of "bonnes herbes" to scent it, nor the "un dit de veillée" (25). Instead, the police will brutally violate Solibo's body, removing even the remnants of "son dernier touffé-requin" (26). Ironically, this stew is, as Nick Coates ably points out, a fundamental image of the product of creolization: "Thus Chamoiseau's virtuoso description of the 'sharkstew' (*touffé de requin*) in *Solibo Magnifique*, with its heady combination of 'yellow hot pepper' (*piment jaune*), 'French onion' (*oignon-france*) and 'garden spices' (*bouquet-pays*), clearly functions as an appeal to the syncretic vitality of Creole culture" (260).²⁸ The shark stew is also the consummate example of communion via a shared meal in *Solibo Magnifique*.

Situated more or less at the center of the novel, the story of the shark stew, recounted by Sidonise to her fellow accused as they wait uncomfortably in the police van (and criticized implicitly by Ménil, as we have seen above), is the quintessential account of the near-sacramental nature of commensality—the act of eating together—for this Creole community. For Solibo, the cooking and sharing of a meal becomes a form of communion in both the secular Martinican and Christian missionary senses of the word with *tafia* (both straight rum and in punch) serving in place of a chalice of wine, and a whole neighborhood of participants ready to respond and partake. Sidonise's story begins on a quasi-confessional note, as she encounters Solibo near the boat where she is buying her shark and says, "Solibo, écarte-toi pour que j'aïlle préparer mon touffé..." (123). This is an indirect avowal of her desire for him (detailed at length for her listeners at the beginning of her tale) and for the marriage that never was to be: "Hi, hi, c'était manière de lui dire : *Solibo, viens goûter le touffé de Sidonise...*" (123-24; emphasis in original). Arriving on her heels, Solibo immediately takes over as principal celebrant, butchering the fish, preparing the

²⁸ Likewise, in *The Tropics Bite Back*, Loichot notes the way in which "the very assemblage of foodstuffs with eclectic origins" creates a kind of "grammar of creolization, which connects fragments while preserving their particularity" (61-62).

marinade, observing every necessary ritual step in the process: “C’est lui qui a coupé la tête du requin, qui l’a vidé, qui l’a échaudé pour décoller la peau. Avec des gestes d’abbé à l’office, il avait disposé les morceaux de poisson dans la bassine de marinade” (124). Sidonise herself willingly serves as Solibo’s acolyte, handing him the vinegar, the cloves, and the lemon on cue, attentive to each step in the ritual without being able to penetrate its mysteries: “Mais après les oignons et l’eau tiède, quand un parfum de bénédiction fit chanter le poisson, je compris que Solibo m’avait encore couillonné : sa marinade est restée secrète !” (124). As she watches the master, Sidonise “avai[t] mis une figure de communion” (126), though her heart sings with the anticipated joy of communal sharing. Loichot has indicated that, “Shared and sustainable food not only satisfies bodily needs, but it also serves as the vessel of a shared cultural production and consciousness . . .” (*Tropics* 60). Solibo’s apostolic audience—“douze gueules coulantes remplissaient ma cuisine” (125)—is rapt in the ritual unfolding before them. Master of the Word, Solibo is also, in Sidonise’s parlance, “fort dans le manger” (124)—her shark stew narrative lovingly details every moment of an unforgettable Last Supper. As stated in *Creole Folktales*, even from this “most pessimistic tale” of police bungling, bullying, and overt persecution “emerges . . . a movement toward construction” (Loichot, *Tropics* 58).

If, borrowing from both French missionary and Martinican traditions, the shark stew has the power to unite the community around a shared table, Solibo’s Word, to the master storyteller Solibo’s mind at least, has slowly been losing its unifying power. Rather, like a disease, the decline of the authority of the storyteller, and the transition of his culture from oral to written, literally consumes the man; “[elle] le rongeait” (223). Chamoiseau suggests that, “un flot de verbe devait lui tortuer le ventre” (224). When Solibo is cut down by “une égorgette de la parole,” he is in the midst of inviting his listeners’ response with the rather unconventional exclamation, “Patat’ sa !” (25). It is perhaps telling that Solibo’s final word references the tuber that has traveled over time and space, from the Americas to Europe, only to return to Martinique in the form of French fries (173, 204), its cultural meaning evolving all the while. Might not this reference to the versatile and perpetually reinvented potato be suggestive of the on-going transformation of Creole society, hybridized as it travels through time? The authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* embrace the “complexité” of such transformation as constitutive of *Créolité* at its best, “le principe même de notre identité” (28). Solibo’s life ends as he breathes this one last gastronomical invitation, to which his audience, attentive yet to tradition and culinarily inclined, responds, “Patat’ si !” (25).

With shades of Brillat-Savarin, Solibo Magnifique “explorait à fond ce que nous sommes” (190) by means of a palate savoring all comestibles eminently and properly Creole combined with a pronounced “goût du mot” (26). Likewise, Chamoiseau offers a flavorful investigation into the relationship between *oralité* and oral consumption, ultimately demonstrating that a culture that knows how to appreciate the liturgico-ritual preparation and ingestion of a communal repast is also a community that will, appropriately, mourn deeply the loss of a significant and related cultural form, the tale of the storyteller. The Word may well be lost at the end of *Solibo Magnifique*, except insofar as

it remains viable, albeit in altered form, in the written Text of Chamoiseau himself.²⁹ Nonetheless, the communal plate (or communion paten) is not lost, as the Law is ultimately forced to concede its ignorance and insufficiency in the face of the power of the community to come together and share, over a meal or a bottle of *tafia*, the intimacy that humanizes, the bonds that offer a sense of belonging, ever-refreshing, restoring life.³⁰ Even the Chief Inspector and Sergeant Bouaffesse are ultimately touched by the underlying essence of such life-giving justice.³¹ As the investigation comes to a close, the narrator notes,

Nous leur redîmes l'histoire du cochon de Man Gnam, la manière dont Solibo la sauva d'un enterrement sans voix, le cirque de la bête-longue qui envoûtait Man Goul, cette terreur qui muait en amis les rares ennemis du Magnifique. Ils réapprirent l'essence du mot Solibo, ce qu'y apportait le second terme, et Sidonise leur ouvrit son cœur sur ce mystère qu'ils dirent être de l'amour. (220)³²

We are told that Solibo Magnifique's life "soutenait des dizaines de vies" (171)—an embodiment of love that is life-giving. Chamoiseau's novel is a testimony to that nourishment, and a celebration of nourishment itself as a constituent component of *what we are*—and, most decidedly, what we are not.

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²⁹ As Greg Wright points out, "Chamoiseau depicts the plurality of Creole culture, which, while evolved from diverse past cultural and linguistic threads, represents itself as a vibrant part of the present" (82). Ultimately, "uniting the oral speech act with death does not limit Creole culture's power to renew tradition through reshaped forms" (92-93).

³⁰ It is not yet "l'Être harmonieux du monde dans la diversité" (53) of which the authors of the *Éloge de la Créolité* dreamed, of course, but it does suggest a move in that direction.

³¹ In a 1999 interview with Michaël Plumecocq, Chamoiseau himself identifies with the characters Pilon and Bouaffesse because of their ambivalence or *betweenness* (Pilon is said to be "entre deux chaises" or "between two chairs"), their desire to assimilate values that come from without (135). Interestingly, Chamoiseau couches his embrace of such ambivalence in what might be taken to be cooking terms: "... il ne s'agit plus d'opposer les deux langues mais de se dire : tout cela est à nous, faisons ce que nous pouvons avec. . . . Nous devons avoir l'appétit, traiter nos deux langues de telle manière que nous ayons l'appétit de toutes les langues du monde . . ." (134). His reference is, of course, to "langue" ("tongue") in the sense of language, but one could read a kind of culinary strategy at work here in the suggestion of spontaneous combinations of disparate elements.

³² As translators Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov indicate in their list of "Glosses on Names and Nicknames," *solibo* means "fall, somersault, pirouette" (186) in Creole, and the storyteller commences his performance "en achevant une pirouette" (33). "Solibo Magnifique" thus translates as "magnificent fall," an oxymoron that seems to capture in many ways the problematic tensions of creolization.

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