Wendy Knepper


As its title conveys, this book aims at acquainting Anglophone readers with the multifaceted work of one of the most remarkable intellectuals of the Francophone Caribbean region. Wendy Knepper adopts a roughly chronological order to sketch Patrick Chamoiseau’s development as a writer and political thinker. The introductory chapter traces his youth and the main phases of his writing and outlines the reputation of both the artist and the activist. Knepper then examines Chamoiseau’s early work (Chapter 2), his first novels *Chronique des sept misères* and *Solibo Magnifique* (Chapter 3), and his *Créolité* period, including the epic novel *Texaco* (Chapter 4). His subsequent experimental phase is studied through his screenplays, columns, and folk tales, as well as the key texts *Écrire en pays dominé* and *L’esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (Chapter 6). Finally, his most recent works—including both political manifestos and works of fiction (*Un dimanche au cachot* and *Les neuf consciences du Malfini*)—are subsumed under the heading “activism and tales of initiation” (Chapter 8).

In the fifth and seventh chapters, the chronological order is exchanged for a generic one, to examine Chamoiseau’s autoethnographic fictional narratives of childhood (Chapter 5) and analyze his visual narratives, including screenplays, books of photography, and children’s books (Chapter 7).

Knepper offers a skillfully researched overview of Chamoiseau’s writings with keen insight into the literary and political context of the postcolonial Caribbean. She sets herself the task of exploring “the ways in which the author’s use of masks and phases of writing serve to interrogate contemporary postcolonial horizons” (p. 4), but the announced focus on masquerade does not occupy center stage. Rather than examining one specific motif or poetic procedure, she offers an overview of the themes and literary techniques that run as leitmotifs across Chamoiseau’s production, such as place and locality, memory and nostalgia, or the interplay of the written and the oral. The disadvantage of this approach is that the close readings sometimes lack depth and are seldom innovative; they are more all-encompassing than penetrating: *qui trop embrasse, mal étreint*. Nevertheless, Knepper also surprises readers with some original close readings: the study of *Solibo Magnifique* within the history of the crime novel (Chapter 3) is especially profound. The book is well-written, though sometimes a bit jumbled, and the whole would have been more coherent if each chapter had been rounded off with a short conclusion.

Although the quality and depth of the analyses is unequal, this book stands out for its constant attempt to situate Chamoiseau’s writings within both his
personal poetics and the sociopolitical and literary context, and for the attention paid to the reception of his works. It is remarkable for its focus on Chamoiseau's minor or neglected writings, which are indeed “brought into dialogue with the author's best-known fictions in order to investigate his poetics in a holistic fashion,” as promised in the introduction (p. 5). This is an important contribution to the existing scholarship, as Chamoiseau's early works and his literary production outside the realm of the novel (screenplays, comic books, political writings, etc.) seldom receive the attention they deserve. It is somewhat strange to study Chamoiseau's lesser-known writings in what claims to be an introduction, but the originality of this approach and the archival research needed to accomplish this project deserve praise.

Knepper's all-encompassing approach allows her to retrace the evolution of certain themes or narrative strategies. One example is the analysis of Chamoiseau's early play Mannman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse; often dismissed by critics because of its naïveté, it is considered by Knepper as a “groundbreaking work” (p. 47). She demonstrates the way the play indeed foreshadows Chamoiseau's later works: it introduces the author as a meta-fictional character, announces the importance of a revolutionary stance in a creolizing world, situates itself at the interface of the spoken and the written word, and sings the praises of the marvelous, anticipating in this way the Warrior of the Imaginary. Moreover, Knepper realigns Chamoiseau’s writings in sagacious ways: reading Chronique des sept misères and Solibo Magnifique in dialogue allows her to highlight the writer’s quest for a new form of narration, while considering his autoethnographic fictional narratives of childhood, Antan d’enfance, Chemin-d’école and À bout d’enfance, as a trilogy permits her to focus concurrently on their coherence and on their “shifts in style that reflect Chamoiseau's own changing poetics” (p. 150).

The book opens with a chronology and concludes with a select bibliography. The list of works about Chamoiseau is rather selective, but the list of works by Chamoiseau is a practical tool for scholars interested in investigating his lesser-known writings. Globally, Patrick Chamoiseau: A Critical Introduction does what it promises to do, offering an insightful overview of Chamoiseau's literary poetics. It is recommended to scholars interested in Francophone Caribbean literature, especially those unfamiliar with Chamoiseau's work, and those familiar with his novels but curious to learn more about the connections between them, or about Chamoiseau's lesser-known works.

Liesbeth De Bleeker
Department of Translation, Interpreting and Communication,
Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
liesbeth.debleeker@ugent.be