A Response to Repondeurs

Patric Chamoiseau’s School Days is one of the most difficult books that I have had to read in college thus far. This is not because it was uninteresting, but because of the incredible ability of Chamoiseau to convey experiences of confusion, humiliation, and suffering. His method is especially powerful; the story is told from the perspective of a child, whose naivety is crucial to the message, as innocence corrupted is far more striking than the familiar struggling of “grown-ups”. The book could be interpreted similarly to Annie John, as a metaphor for the relationship between a “mother” country (France) and her Caribbean constituent of Martinique, with the “little boy” representing the indigenous population and the Teacher/Monsieur le Director representing the inescapable grip of the French. As the boy’s education is heavily (entirely) influenced by this foreign body, the development of his identity becomes decreasingly affected by his Creole origin and culture. This metaphor represents the slow but steady stymying of the natives’ way of life by the French occupation, and the many negative effects that result from such a conflicted upbringing. As memories are weaved into a delicately detailed narrative, the oppressive elements of his upbringing begin to amass, revealing the just how steep his uphill battle for education would eventually become.

The recollection begins with Chamoiseau's mischievous adolescence, focusing primarily on the powerful influences of the French colonization upon the early formulation of his identity. This greatest of these influences is his schooling, which he initially longs for with great jealousy, but eventually turns into a task of survival (the book is divided into sections indicating these phases.) Language plays a massive role in this tale, as the Teacher forces the children to learn, speak, and consume Parisian culture while punishing them heavily for any and all usage of native Creole. Though the children initially regard French as a venomous necessity, the constant abuse by the teacher causes Creole to eventually becomes the lowly, dejected tongue, only resurfacing when intensely excited (during fights), or in the safety of the home. The little boy’s drawings reveal the infectious nature of this phenomenon; his ‘personal’ expression consists entirely of creatures, structures, and stories that have no root in the Caribbean. The education itself is punctuated by cries from “repondeurs” (“back-talkers”) as they bemoan, celebrate, and apologize to their Teacher, usually in a way that underscores a miscommunication or lack of understanding between the two parties. Adult commentary and other musings pepper the tale, allowing the audience to briefly gleam how these events still resonate within Chamoiseau's life. Though the Teacher would do his best to stamp out anything Creole, and neglect those who were not “favorable” (more French-like), he would ultimately nurture Chamoiseau's affinity for reading and storytelling, while Big Bellybutton (initially) set the example to retain Creole strength, resilience, and patience.

In spite of the many onerous tasks that the little boy faces, he still escapes his education with a powerful tool: a deep-seated respect for, and fascination with, the powerful realm of literature. This “gift” of knowledge is one that is achieved through a combination of luck, intelligence, and patience; though Big Bellybutton is initially embodies and instills the Creole spirit of defiance, his mathematical abilities are never nurtured, and he is (assumingly) never able to expand upon this innate talent. In this sense Chamoiseau is the lucky survivor of an all out war against the Creole way of life, only escaping due to his natural inclination toward the written word.

1. The Teacher himself is black. Is he of Creole origin, from another country, or raised in a Eurupean nation?

2. What would each of these indicate about the effects of foreign powers upon the formulation of *his* identity?