



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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Black Shack Alley:
Joseph Zobel,
Development, and
Writing

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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Historically, novels have tended to enshrine
the perspective of the privileged

A book like *Black Shack Alley* may
challenge our assumptions about literary
authorship and authority, and about who or
what should be represented and how.

Here, the colonized learn to
“write back” to Empire.

At the same time, Zobel's text registers ambivalence about the privileging of literacy and literary representation, to cast doubt on whether writing can ever be a vehicle for liberation.

This novel about education and development questions how much really changes over time, and whether those changes that do take place are as positive as they are painted.



THE PROBLEM WITH DEVELOPMENT

Black Shack Alley was written at a time of global transformation, and it takes the possibility of change as its theme.

Zobel writes at the outset of a postwar wave of decolonization that saw the rise of what was often called the “Third World.”

The French Caribbean was different. France's remaining possessions in the region, the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, decolonized not by becoming independent nations but when in 1946 they became overseas departments of France.



Fort de France, Martinique

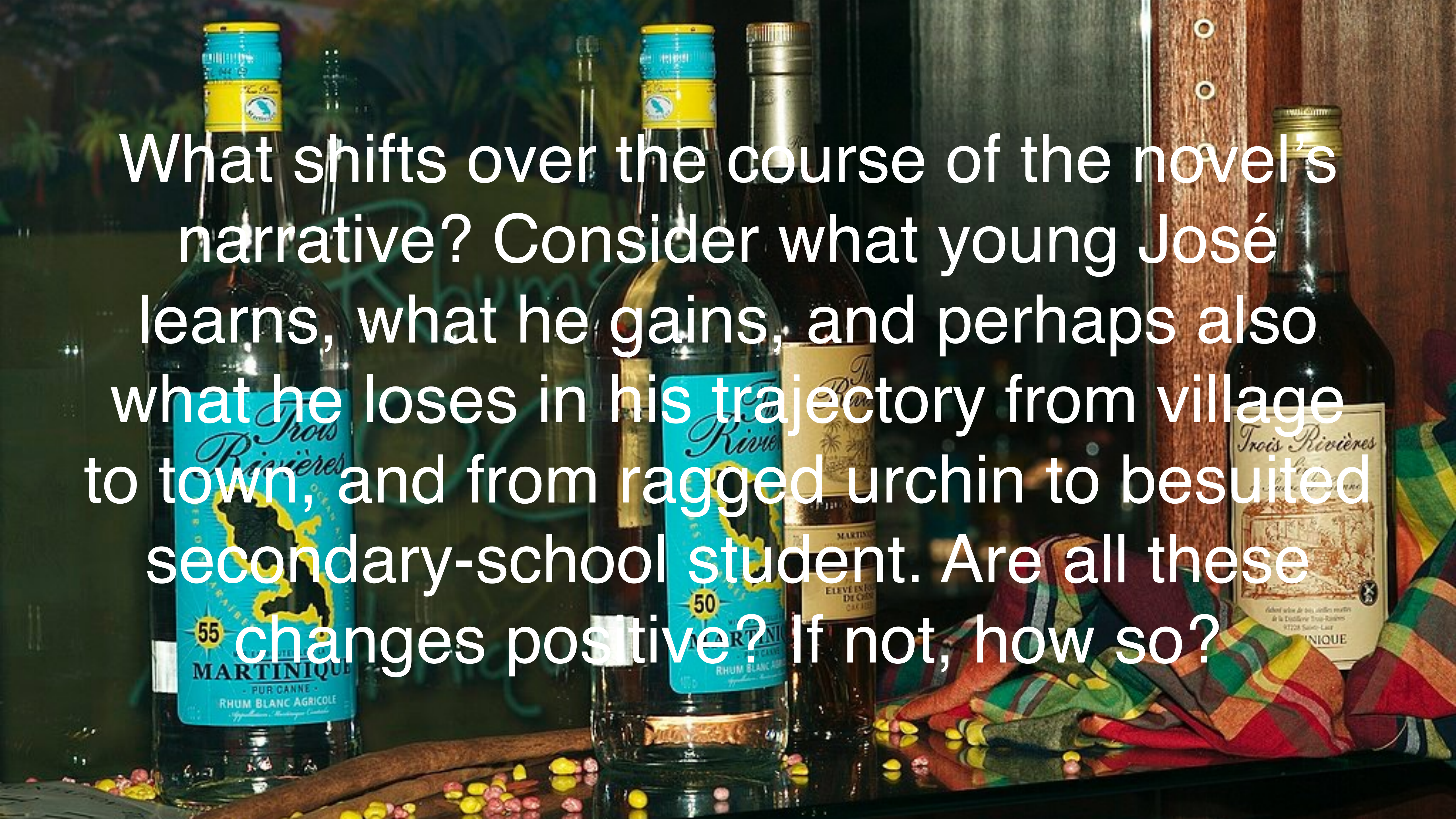
Legally, these territories were—and remain—as much part of France as the Loire or the Somme. Today, they are part of the European Union. This was decolonization by integration rather than by independence.

Black Shack Alley can be read as in part an allegory of this process that combines growing autonomy with increasing integration: personal development—the trajectory of the individual character—is to mirror and presage economic or cultural development on a broader scale, all within the fold of the “mother country.”

Zobel is aware of how little educational achievement really changes! In fact, in some ways it merely cements a hierarchy between centre and periphery, while the success of a few token Black individuals leaves the fate of the majority unaltered.

Those token successes may find themselves simply in a new set of “cases-Nègres” (“boxes for Blacks”), pigeonholes for a supposedly fortunate few who are told to be thankful that they have a place within the postcolonial edifice, at the cost of betraying their roots.

What shifts over the course of the novel's narrative? Consider what young José learns, what he gains, and perhaps also what he loses in his trajectory from village to town, and from ragged urchin to besuited secondary-school student. Are all these changes positive? If not, how so?



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Zobel's novel tracks its protagonist from youth to maturity, from dependence to responsibility, from student to teacher, from the countryside to the city, and from an overwhelmingly Black, creole-speaking environment to rubbing shoulders with the light-skinned and white middle class in the Francophone fee-paying *lycée*.

Early on José is warned that such great transformations can hide more fundamental continuities.

“I, too, danced with joy and went running all over Martinique [. . .]. But when the intoxication of my freedom was spent, I was forced to remark that nothing had changed for me nor for my comrades in chains. [. . .] I remained like all the blacks in this damned country: the *békés* [whites] kept all the land, all the land in the country, and we continued working for them.” (37)

The narrator reserves his admiration for the stevedores at the port (“Herculean black men,” “veritable bronze statues [. . .] snorting like purebreds” [174, 175]), rather than for the members of the class of intellectuals and civil servants that he himself is fated to join.



THE PLEASURES, POSSIBILITIES, AND DANGERS OF WRITING

The greatest transformation undergone by young José Hassam may well be his journey from orality to literacy.

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But this is also the source of his greatest ambivalence.

The world of Black Shack Alley is full of music, dance, folktales, and oral story-telling.

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Hardly anyone here is literate.

There is a rich wealth of knowledge and information shared by word of mouth, either within the community or passed down from one generation to another.

José is not who he once was. Over the course of the narrative, he has now entered literate society; he is one of the “learned” ones.

Reading is a means of escape, of thinking otherwise. It is thanks to his literacy that José is able, unlike his friends, to elude “the destiny of one born in Black Shack Alley” (181), fulfilling the ambition that his mother and grandmother have set for him, reacting against their own experience of underdevelopment.

“She would question me about what was being taught to me in class and would ask to read her a little story, a fable or a song. [. . .] while in the glow of our kerosene lamp, I was struggling valiantly with one of those bits of paper, I thought for a minute that I detected in M’man Tine’s eyes a look of deepest tenderness, enhanced by the most touching admiration” (107).

The lives of people like his grandmother do not feature in the novels José is reading, which conjure up a world of “people with blond hair, blue eyes, pink cheeks [. . .].

Towns, with their motor cars, their big hotels, their theatres, their salons, their crowds, the ocean liners [. . .] the fields, farms where novels were set, none of that I had ever seen” (164).

It is as though the Black labour undertaken by his grandmother, which so shapes her body and the narrator's early experience, existed wholly outside language altogether, or at least outside the French language.

“I didn’t know, in French, the name of the job she held. No, it certainly did not exist in French. [. . .] For me, impossible to find the name of the work my grandmother did” (164-165).

Yet without that work—or that undertaken by all the other Black labourers—the fabric of Martinican society would collapse. And so long as it fails to name that work, any representation of postcolonial society is false and incomplete.

“The passages the teacher accused me of having ‘copied from some books’ were precisely those that were the most personal to me and which had come most directly, without any reminiscence.” (191)

The point in writing is to achieve a similarly visceral impact, “to write books that would make people bite their thumbs till they bleed” (203). The reader’s bleeding thumbs might give them an intimation of the power (and the pain) that shaped M’man Tine’s cracked extremities.

Black Shack Alley is an account of its own genesis. The narrator resolves that he will have to tell a story, even at the risk that it is ultimately integrated within the literary canon.

Despite knowing that his tale will go unheard by “those who are blind and those who block their ears,” he must still “shout it” out (221). His novel may find no readers, may fail to persuade those determined not to hear, but the cry in itself has value of its own.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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