ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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Black Shack Alley: Joseph Zobel, Development, and Writing

However much we may agree with Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin that the novel is in principle an inclusive literary genre, polyphonic and diverse, and however much for some time it was regarded with some suspicion by elites, the fact remains that, historically, novels have tended to enshrine the perspective of the privileged: white, male, European, middle or even upper class, and so on. As such, a book like Joseph Zobel's *Black Shack Alley* (*La Rue Cases-Nègres*, 1950), by a Black descendant of slaves in the French Caribbean, 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, however, 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. Yet by the time he is in a position to articulate this thought, the narrator is already at a point of no return; for better or worse, he has left the slums behind. This novel about education and development (on many levels, from the personal to the global) questions how much really changes over time, and whether those changes that do take place are as positive as they are painted.

1. 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 began perhaps with the independence (and partition) of what had been British India in 1947 and continued through the 1950s and 1960s across Asia and Africa and elsewhere as the British, French, and other European Empires were mostly dismantled and newly independent nations emerged, violently or otherwise: from Indonesia (1949) to Cambodia (1953), Ghana (1957), the Congo (1960), Algeria (1962), Singapore (1963), Aden (1967), Equatorial Guinea (1968), and so on. Something similar took place in the Anglophone Caribbean, with the independence of Jamaica (1962), Barbados and Guyana (1966), and later the Bahamas (1973), Saint Lucia (1979), and other colonies. This period also saw the rise of what was often called the "Third World" or the "non-aligned movement," which looked to keep its distance from both the US-dominated West and the Soviet sphere in the East, and which sought to define its own voice for instance in the Bandung Conference, held in Indonesia in 1955.

The French Caribbean was different. France's one-time most profitable colony, Haiti, had long been independent, following a revolutionary upheaval that began in 1791. Its remaining possessions in the region, the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique as well as Guyane (French Guiana) on the South American mainland, decolonized not by becoming independent nations but when in 1946 (along with Réunion in the Indian Ocean) they became overseas departments of France. From this moment, legally, these territories were—and remain—as much part of France as (say) the Loire or the Somme; cities such as Fort-de-France (in Martinique) or Cayenne (in Guyane) are constitutionally as French as Toulouse or Paris. Today, they are part of the European Union and their currency is the Euro. In short, this was decolonization by integration rather than by independence.

Image 1: Fort de France, Martinique

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." The novel's protagonist, José Hassam, leaves the slum that gives the book its title, and can dream of supporting his mother (a domestic servant) and grandmother (a weeder in the cane fields), thanks to his

achievements in the French-run education system. The novel's sequel (*La Fête à Paris,* 1953) will describe how the same character then moves to metropolitan France, a path followed also by Zobel himself as well as other postcolonial intellectuals such as fellow Martinicans Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. But Zobel is aware of how little this 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. And those token successes may find themselves simply in a new set of "*cases-Nègres*" (literally, "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 then shifts over the course of the novel's narrative? Pause the video, and 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? While you do that, I'll have a rum on ice, but I'll be right back.

It is possible that rum (a distilled liquor made either directly from sugar cane or, more often, from the molasses that is a by-product of sugar production) was first made in Martinique as early as the sixteenth century. There were certainly distilleries on the island by the late seventeenth century, when rum was made by and for slaves. In 1713, the French authorities banned its manufacture, but production continued—rum has always been associated with illegality, piracy, and smuggling. *Black Shack Alley* shows rum's ubiquity in the postcolony, and its many uses: as medicine and payment, as well as libation; it is a social lubricant in everyday situations and at times of crisis or celebration. When José first tries the drink, he feels "as if [. . .] we were going to live a free, exalted life" (40), but this is an illusory or equivocal freedom. For rum is part of what sustains Black people's ongoing exploitation, even if it also provides temporary relief against it.

Zobel's novel is a *Bildungsroman* that tracks its protagonist from youth to maturity, from dependence to responsibility, from student to teacher (of his friends Carmen and JoJo), 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*. But early on José is warned by his mentor and friend, old

Mr Médouze, that such great transformations can hide more fundamental continuities. Médouze remembers the abolition of slavery (which took place, in the French colonies, in 1848). He tells young José that he "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). Similarly, Zobel questions the benefits of other forms of "development," individual or social, as José loses interest at school and is scornful of the antics of the petit bourgeois people parading around the central park of Fort-de-France, where he takes "malicious pleasure at the spectacle of people who could not live simply" (208). 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.

2. The Pleasures, Possibilities, and Dangers of Writing

The greatest transformation undergone by young José Hassam over the course of *Black Shack Alley* may well be his journey from orality to literacy. But this is also the source of his greatest ambivalence. The world of Black Shack Alley (the place, rather than the book) is full of music, dance, folktales, and oral story-telling. Hardly anyone here is literate: if José's guardian, his grandmother M'man Tine, is to send a message to his mother, M'man Délia, who lives in town, she has to "go down to the village to ask a 'learned' person to write a letter" (28). But on the other hand 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, not least by old Médouze, with his riddles and his tales of the past. It is Médouze who tells José about Africa, "evok[ing] another country even further away, even deeper than France, which was that of his father: Guinea" (36). And even when the old man dies, at his funeral "the song continued" and "many a tale was told that night" (67); a "master storyteller" presides over the wake, "carried away by his feelings into the magical domain to which he lifted up his enraptured audience" (68). So when, at the novel's end, M'man Tine also passes away, José's thoughts turn to the mourning and celebration that must be taking place back home: "Assionis would be relating stories and would play his drum with a soul full of compassion and with frenzied

inspiration" (219). Though he cannot be there, as her grandson he resolves that he, too, should tell a story in her honour.

But 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 who would have helped M'man Tine write. Indeed, he has been carried away by his reading, finding in books that "the world began to broaden around me, beyond any tangible limits" (162). Reading is a means of escape, of thinking otherwise, of "obliterating myself from all that surrounded me" (162). 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) even as, at the same time, he is in this way fulfilling the ambition that his mother and grandmother have set for him, reacting against their own experience of underdevelopment (personal and other). They have no romantic illusions about plantation life, and M'man Tine is quietly thrilled about her grandson's new skills: "On certain evenings 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." She gives him scraps of printed matter to read out to her and "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). For those who have sacrificed most to enable José's education, his transformation is the realization of their desire.

José is uneasy when he realizes that the lives of people like his grandmother do not feature in the novels he 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). What José does know is places such as Black Shack Alley, the village and the plantation, as well as "men, women and children, all more or less black. Now, certainly that was not the stuff novels were made of, since I had never read any of that color" (164). Indeed, *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*. Asked in class his grandmother's "profession," he finds he "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" (165). Yet without that work—or that undertaken by all the other

Black labourers, from stevedores to chauffeurs, washerwomen to maids—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.

Yet when José does seek to put something of his experience into writing, his submission is turned down by his schoolmaster, who alleges plagiarism: "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). It is as though his written formulations were still too literary, did not sufficiently break with the conventions of the novel, so that they are unable to register either the splendour of the Black body in its prime, the vital force that still maintains the very social order that represses it, or the embodied suffering that results from that repression, most visible here in the narrator's image of his grandmother's "black hands, swollen, hardened, cracked at every joint and every crack encrusted with a sort of indelible mud" (220). As one of José's friends puts it, the point in writing is surely 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.

At the novel's end, then, *Black Shack Alley* is an account of its own genesis. In the wake of his memory of the "fierce cuts inflicted by the cane leaves" on his grandmother's flesh, the narrator resolves that he will have to tell a story, even at the risk that it is ultimately integrated within the literary canon. And on thinking back José realizes that, for all that his education has marked him out as exceptional, different from the kids with whom he once played between the shacks of the plantation, his story is "quite similar to theirs"; his personal "development" has not transformed him entirely. 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.

works cited

Zobel, Joseph. *Black Shack Alley.* Trans. Keith Warner. London: Penguin, 2020.

Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Martinique_-_Fort-de-France.jpg

Song: "Martinik Leve" (Mizik Bo Kail)