

<CT>Créolité and the Regime of Visibility: Reading *Les neuf consciences du Malfini* by Patrick Chamoiseau</CT>

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Language has always been a central issue for critics of *Éloge de la créolité*.¹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant clearly emphasize creole as a means to claim national, and in extension literary, identity in opposition to France's colonial politics of assimilation. To take one of the most famous and most generalizing examples of the critical attention to language, in *La république mondiale des lettres* Pascale Casanova refers extensively to *Éloge* and argues that orality can be interpreted as a desperate attempt by francophone postcolonial authors to claim what she calls the Herder-effect, meaning the valorization of national cultures and languages over French universalistic pretensions.² Using local languages, such as Creole, and playing with orality, francophone authors could delineate a literary space of their own. Nevertheless, says Casanova, they are tragically trapped within France's literary hegemony.³

Looking at *Éloge* twenty-plus years later, it is perhaps time to move beyond the obvious question of language. In fact, visibility seems just as important as a primary tool for self-representation. There is a clear predilection for the semantic field of visibility in *Éloge*; the pages are filled with verbs such as *voir*, *regarder*, *apercevoir*, and *percevoir*, in various forms, along with nouns such as *vue*, *regard*, *yeux*, and, most notably, *vision intérieure*. It would not be an exaggeration to say that questions of seeing and being seen, of what is visible and what is not, govern this manifesto. Yet, like many of the creolists' favorite tropes,

¹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); *Éloge de la créolité / In Praise of Creoleness*, trans. M. B. Taleb-Khyar, bilingual ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). Hereafter cited in the text; all citations and English translations are from the bilingual edition.

² Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999; repr., Paris: Seuil, 2008). The Herder-effect is discussed on 12–125; the question of orality is treated on 414–22.

³ *Ibid.*, 186–87.

visibility is complicated and often contradictory. It serves, on the one hand, to capture various techniques and strategies of observation and representation of Caribbean society. On the other hand, visibility seems to be aligned with a projection forward, as a visionary movement toward a situation yet to come. In some contexts the gaze has negative implications, while it is described as positive and even necessary in others, all depending on *who* observes, along with *when*, *what*, and *how* something is viewed.

In this essay, I will analyze the development of the role of visibility in Chamoiseau's writing by taking *Éloge* as a starting point in order to interrogate what shapes and functions visibility takes in his 2009 novel, *Les neuf consciences du Malfini*.⁴ First, I will unpack the different meanings and functions of visibility. Having outlined what I call, in the wake of Jacques Rancière, the creolist regime of visibility, I will in the second part of this essay do a close reading of *Les neuf consciences du Malfini* and explore how Chamoiseau develops the visual through a somewhat different lens in using the narrative perspective of a bird circling over his native Martinique. I will read this "mode of narrating the non-human world" not as a radical break within Chamoiseau's writing, as Richard Watts argues, but rather as an exploration of the optic narrative mode articulated in *Éloge*.⁵ The aim is to see whether visibility also operates a so called Herder-effect, and if so, in what way? If Chamoiseau, by virtue of being a francophone author, would be trapped within France's literary hegemony and thus, according to Casanova's analysis, be cut off from any possibility of local action, then why does he continue to *look* at Martinique?

<A>Watching Inward, Outward, and Onward

⁴ Patrick Chamoiseau, *Les neuf consciences du Malfini* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁵ Richard Watts, "Poisoned Animal, Polluted Form: Chamoiseau's Birds at the Limits of Allegory," *Pacific Coast Philology* 46, no. 2 (2011): 181.

The importance of visibility first needs to be understood as a reaction to what creolists describe as a fundamental objectification of Caribbeans and Caribbean society. Martinicans have always been described from the outside by others, they claim, and are thus “fundamentally stricken with exteriority” (76). The perspective of French “preacher-travellers,” showing nothing but “blue sky and coconut trees [that] blossomed a heavenly writing [*une écriture paradisiaque*]” has prevailed in literature on Martinique and in the Caribbean since the mid-seventeenth century onward (77 [15]). While certain objects and phenomena of creole society have yet to be brought to light, there are, according to the manifesto, other aspects that have indeed been depicted and even overrepresented and distorted through the other’s gaze. The visual is a powerful instrument of oppression that “strikes” its object, exercising an insidious form of violence. It is an exoticizing gaze, reducing reality to preconceived stereotypes, which have overshadowed images of the Caribbean and, more important, the relationship between Caribbeans and the outside world. Following Édouard Glissant’s assessment of Martinican society in *Caribbean Discourse*, the creolists argue that this exterior gaze of (French) outsiders describing the islands has been internalized by Caribbean authors to the point that they too describe their reality in exotic terms.⁶ This tendency is visible in the writings of earlier generations of authors who “planted their eyes on themselves and [the Caribbean] environment, but with . . . the eyes of the Other” (77). Alienation, rather than being described as a psychological process, is indirectly captured as an effect of perspectives. “We had to bring an exterior look to our reality, which was refused more or less consciously,” they write (87). In describing the region from the outside, colonial discourses have throughout four centuries of colonization molded Caribbean subjectivity as dependent on the exterior, that is, on the colonial metropolis, in order to exist; they cannot independently articulate subjectivity. This idea of internalizing an exterior gaze is

⁶ See Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989).

one of the most important arguments for delineating a new creolist aesthetics, which would break the spell of external dependence so that the other's gaze would no longer be necessary for Caribbeans themselves to assert.

In order to do away with this internalized exterior self-representation, *Éloge* advocates that writers and artists set out to rediscover Martinican and Caribbean reality. It is thus not the optic mode per se that is questioned; the issue is rather *what* is in focus and valued. Parts of creole society that have been overlooked and denigrated need to be brought to light, such as its “ways of laughing, singing, walking, living death, judging life, considering bad luck, loving and expressing love” (87). Here more than elsewhere in the manifesto the authors express a faith in the power of literature to change society, a faith inherent in the modern (European) notion of literature. Rancière has argued extensively that when nineteenth-century novelists began describing society in all possible detail, they redefined the entire notion of literature into politics. From then on literature was seen as an expression of society; it interferes with the political in that it makes mute objects speak and sheds light on hidden corners of reality so that these parts may appear and become subjects in the political arena.⁷ The optic mode uses and speaks to the senses, meaning that the aesthetic becomes the basis for politics in that it decides who sees, who is seen, and, then, who speaks. The creolists rely on a similar aesthetic: there are parts of creole society that have yet to become subjects of literature, so they have yet to become visible, to be able to articulate their own identity and partake in the shaping of their own reality. To them the visual thus seems to determine the Caribbean situation and the means for expressing and remapping this situation. So if Rancière evokes an aesthetic regime in terms of a distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*), this regime is, in the context of the creolists' reading of the Caribbean, a regime of visibility in which the partition of the sensible almost exclusively passes through an optic mode of

⁷ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 32–34.

representation and would ultimately lead to overcoming alienation—if only other sides of society were made visible.

As a response to the outsider's exterior point of view, the authors propose an "interior vision," meaning that it is time to observe reality from an internal perspective. This expression—*une vision intérieure*—figures among the most used phrases in *Éloge*; it has its own chapter and surfaces throughout the text in several different contexts, as if the entire idea of *créolité* could be boiled down to finding an interior vision. The interior vision is an "instrument" in a particular process (*démarche*) to reaching self-knowledge (23); it is in itself described as being at once the "foundation of [one's] being" and "the major aesthetic vector of [one's] knowledge of [oneself] and the world" (87). The change of perspectives implies a strategy to radically alter the parameters of how to look at and value reality. Instead of writing for the other, a new generation of creolist authors would be writing for themselves and for other Caribbeans. The creolists assert that it is not simply a matter of discovering new subjects for literature and making them visible but that a cathartic procedure is necessary:

<EXT>We had yet to wash our eyes, to turn over the vision we had of our reality in order to grasp its truth: a new look capable of taking away our nature from the secondary or peripheral edge so as to place it again in the center of ourselves, somewhat like the child's look, questioning in front of everything, having yet no postulates of its own, and putting into question even the most obvious facts. This is the kind of free look which, having no outside spectators, can do without self-explanations or comments. It emerges from the projection of our being and considers each part of our reality as an event in order to break the way it is traditionally viewed, in this case the exterior vision submitted to the enchantment of alienation. (86)</EXT>

<FL>What is described here is less a realist aesthetic program in line with the modern novel than a phantasm of pure observation and experience through the candid eye. This gaze is oriented toward the surrounding reality, but it emanates from within, which implies that not just anybody can unveil hidden Caribbean realities. Interior and exterior are linked, so only those who have profoundly experienced the deep mechanisms of alienation can envision that which is not yet exposed to the naked eye. But whereas the creolists localize the interior vision as coming from the profound depths of “being,” they do not link it to the unconscious. The psychoanalytic discourse present in Aimé Césaire’s and René Ménénil’s *Tropiques*, in Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, and in Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* is here replaced by a geographical understanding of identity. Exploring with the interior vision is “measuring [one’s] internal geography in order to perceive it and understand it better” (102), and the authors compare their methodology to “the process of archeological excavations”: “When the field was covered we had to progress with light strokes of the brush so as not to alter or lose any part of ourselves hidden behind French ways” (84).⁸ In *Éloge* everything that has to do with “authenticity,” “truth,” and “being” is conceptualized spatially. *Créolité* is first and foremost a locality: it is inside, hidden; it can be found under layers of alienation, in “our depths.” It is always localized *within*, hidden in “our interior being.” Revealing it always entails a movement inward in order to bring to light and liberate that which has been incarcerated, and the interior vision is often equated with plunging in to reach the true self that lies enclosed.

The spatial understanding of identity is linked to the optic mode, implying a gaze that maps reality and may even see beyond what is apparent to the naked eye. The idea of seeing, of practicing the interior vision, is directly translated into a spatial vocabulary and

⁸ This is an indirect reference to Glissant, who often uses the same metaphor of archeological digging. See *L’intention poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 238, and *Caribbean Discourse*. Chamoiseau quotes Glissant on metaphorical digging in the epigraph to the last section of his novel *Texaco* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). I have analyzed this gesture in Glissant’s writings in *The Poetics of Ethnography in Martinican Narratives: Exploring the Self and the Environment* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013); see chap. 4.

movement: “It is a question of descending into ourselves, but without the Other, without the alienating logic of his prism” (90). The interior vision is at once a perspective that delineates reality, thus constructing it geographically, and, at the same time, an instrument for penetrating this geography and extracting true being. The double attention to the apparent and the hidden could be problematized through Jean Starobinski’s idea of the power of the absent, meaning that the hidden has an impact on our minds because of the very fact that it is not there, before our eyes.⁹ Starobinski speaks more specifically about beauty, but the way that *Éloge* localizes authenticity as embedded within culture and geography exercises a similar power of attraction. This would also explain how the interior vision is oriented outward (making things visible) while emanating from within. Starobinski suggests that the absent, because it is not there to describe, appeals to the imagination. So the image of the absent always emanates from within as an intimate impulse, just as the creolists described the interior vision.

In this way the creolists add a crucial component to the strategy for reaching self-knowledge by making things visible in arguing that it does not solely operate in the realm of referentiality. What they articulate is a *vision*, a projection of ideas and desires. French dictionaries define *vision* as both the physiological act of seeing, the optical ability to perceive, and a representation “in the mind,” linked to intuition, clairvoyance, and revelations as much as to the real. To visualize entails both seeing what is there and seeing what could have been there, what can be there, or what we imagine is there. Starobinski suggests that this projective dimension is present also in the French word for “to see/watch,” namely, *regard/regarder*. To watch, Starobinski reminds us, is to take under surveillance. An “impatient energy,” he writes, “inhabits the act of watching,” since one always wants to see

⁹ Jean Starobinski, *L’œil vivant: Corneille, Racine, La Bruyère, Rousseau, Stendhal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 10.

more and look for what might escape the watching eye.¹⁰ In wanting to see below the surface of an apparent reality, the impatient viewer doubts that which is directly visible. The manifesto rarely uses the term *visionary*, but the authors do speak about the interior vision as being a revolutionary procedure (86) in order to “visualize [one’s] depths” (85) and “virtualities” (100), and to plunge into one’s “singularity, to explore it in a *projective way*” (89; italics mine). Moreover, there is an unpredictable and mysterious element implied in the idea of hidden authenticity, which is associated with the visionary aspect of vision.

This is important for understanding how *créolité* operates in the attempt to remap the regime of visibility. If the other observes in order to control and oppress the interior, vision would not only go beyond what is apparent to the naked eye but also imagine that which is not yet there but may appear if only we learn to watch the world from another point of view. The interior vision is thus not restricted to external reality. It entails a projection toward the future. Such a visionary orientation is, of course, typical for the very form in which Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant write, namely, the manifesto. But there is also something inherently visionary in the optic mode emphasized in the text. In his theorization on the ultimate optic mode—namely, description—Michel Beaujour reminds us that description never has to do with the referent or with reality: “They are *fantasies*,” he says, “as the multifaceted mirror of Desire, description bears only an oblique and tangential relationship to real things, bodies and spaces.”¹¹ Description paints an object by addressing the imaginative capacity of the reader and is thus always close to the visionary. This conclusion helps to clarify the power of the visual and why the creolists insist on articulating their supposedly new aesthetics within the same regime of visibility that had, according to their analysis, been deployed in order to control and subjugate Caribbeans and their culture. *Éloge* seems to draw from the notion of vision and its inherently contradictory directions,

¹⁰ “L’*énergie* impatiente qui habite le regard”; Starobinsky, *L’œil vivant*, 11.

¹¹ Michel Beaujour, “Some Paradoxes of Description,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 61 (1981): 61.

thereby calling both for an inventory of the real (making things visible) and for a new world to come. The regime of visibility is closely connected to the real while carrying an almost mythic coefficient as it projects what is not there. It is precisely this double, paradoxical capacity of the visual that will appear in full force twenty years after the publication of *Éloge* in a novel by Chamoiseau, told from the perspective of a bird.

<A>A Bird's-Eye View

The creolists' novels are to a large extent governed by the optic mode that is outlined in the manifesto; they are filled with descriptions of different kinds, offering new perspectives on reality. In the case of Chamoiseau, he often makes the reader see by using lists that tend to have a paratactic structure, presumably to avoid giving way to the illusion of grasping a coherent whole and instead presenting parts of the whole, like the shantytown in *Texaco*. Or else he tends to single out an object or a phenomenon within the narrative flow, like the poetic description of how to construct a wheelbarrow in *Chronique des sept misères*. This art of making things visible dominated his novels up to the turn of the millennium, when a more visionary optic mode took over. Dominique Chancé rightly argues that in novels such as *Biblique des derniers gestes* and *Un dimanche au cachot*, Chamoiseau had shifted into an entirely new literary mode by means of baroque, fantastic writing.¹² The same is true for *Les neuf consciences du Malfini*; taking the perspective of a bird inherently implies an imaginative dimension. Chamoiseau has used animals in his writings before.¹³ The difference is that *Les neuf consciences du Malfini* is told entirely from the bird's point of view, and the novel can be seen as a part of a larger contemporary literary phenomenon that reinscribes

¹² Dominique Chancé, *Patrick Chamoiseau, écrivain postcolonial et baroque* (Paris: Champion, 2010), 214.

¹³ For an analysis of animals in Chamoiseau, see Watts, "Poisoned Animal, Polluted Form"; and Lucile Desblache, *Plume des bêtes : Les animaux dans le roman* (Paris: Broché 2011), 179–214. Surprisingly, Desblache pays only a little attention to *Les neuf consciences du Malfini*.

animals into the literary tradition.¹⁴ The narrative does not borrow from the fable or the tale; rather, it lets animality infuse the narrative and seeks to explore the animal's own sense and constitution of difference, not its difference in regard to humans. Human voice is reduced to a footnote at the end. The novel is narrated in the first-person singular through the perspective of the Malfini, a chicken-hawk, who becomes obsessed with two hummingbirds. Usually these smaller birds would be prey for the Malfini, but he enters into his ninth "consciousness" and starts *observing* them, which leads him to name them: Colibri and Foufou.¹⁵ In the periphery of this ornithological trio, the "nocifs," or humans, operate, changing the landscape and partly destroying the birds' habitat. As Watts has shown, there is clearly an ecopoetic dimension to this project that aligns with a postmodern way of using animals in literature in a reversed sense: if fables have portrayed animals as humans to promote human civic morals, today animals themselves teach lessons to humans.

The fact that Chamoiseau chooses a bird is partly a matter of identification: playing with his name, he often calls himself *Oiseau de Cham* (bird of Cham). It would be tempting to see the bird narrator in *Les neuf consciences* as yet another avatar of the writer.¹⁶ However, what I would like to suggest here is that the narrative perspective of a bird could be considered a prolongation of the regime of visibility present in *Éloge*. The visual is pushed to the extreme in this novel so that it becomes *descriptive*, in Philippe Hamon's sense of the term. To Hamon the descriptive can be distinguished from description in that its optic mode operates throughout the entire narrative and cannot, unlike description, be neatly framed and distinguished from narrative action.¹⁷ This is how *Les neuf consciences* is constructed: plot seems secondary; the core of the novel is localized to the Malfini's gaze and his readings of

¹⁴ See Desblache, *Plume des bêtes*, 81–84.

¹⁵ *Colibri* is the name in French and Creole for hummingbird. *Foufou* is the Creole designation of the smallest hummingbird in Martinique; it is aggressive and territorial and has been observed attacking larger birds, even hawks.

¹⁶ Chancé, *Patrick Chamoiseau*, 252–53. For an analysis of the author position in Chamoiseau's writing, see Dominique Chancé, *L'auteur en souffrance* (Paris: PUF, 2000).

¹⁷ Philippe Hamon, *Du descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1993), 165. See also the introduction.

the birds and the forest of Rabuchon in the heart of Martinique. The descriptive gaze and not the narrative voice holds this novel together.

The novel even borrows its structure from a concrete image of an observer circling far above. As always in Chamoiseau's novels, a writer-figure appears, this time in the margins of the story. This character, named "Chamoiseau," tells of how he observes another man, a scientist, a "botanist, ornithologist or entomologist," and asks to have a peek at his notebook, which is filled with "unreadable writing" and sketches from the Rabuchon. The character Chamoiseau writes: "Among the countless drawings, always the hachures of a shadow with large wings that kept itself over, floating under, often in the background, and that seemed to be a rare variety of a large bird of prey."¹⁸ The visual is clearly the impetus for the novel, and in letting the bird tell the story, narrative point of view and voice merge. Taking the bird's-eye view as a point of departure, the novel appears as an attempt to write the stream of consciousness of the Malfini, as the title indicates, and becomes, as suggested by Watts, an allegory of the process of finding one's own identity in relation to others and of sharing the land.¹⁹ So even when given the possibility of exploring the ultimate narrative omniscience, in the context of Chamoiseau's novel the bird's-eye view is, in fact, an interior vision as outlined in the manifesto.

All along the narrative, the bird-narrator zooms in and focuses on particular features of Colibri and Foufou, which he then at once describes and tries to capture before moving on to the next feature. This way, descriptions drive the narration forward and follow a certain pattern, going from observation of a detail to interpretation and then raising the gaze to widen the perspective. As the objects of the narrator's obsession move, so does the story. The close attention to details shows Foufou, in particular, as a most singular hummingbird,

¹⁸ "Et, parmi ces innombrables dessins, toujours les hachures d'une ombre à grandes ailes, se tenant au-dessus, dérivant en dessous, souvent en arrière-plan, et qui semblait relever d'une variété très rare de grand rapace"; Chamoiseau, *Les neuf consciences*, 257.

¹⁹ Watts, "Poisoned Animal, Polluted Form." Desblache also reads the novel as an "allegorical discourse" ("discours allégorique"); *Plume des bêtes*, 210.

constantly in search of new things, which forces the observer to imagine when description falls short. In this way the descriptions, by virtue of attention to details, prepare for an imaginative rather than realistic narrative. This little bird is beyond anyone's reach, and consequently it can take us anywhere, which is precisely what it does. The Malfini follows Foufou across the world to meet hummingbirds of all kinds, recalling the imaginary travels in Chamoiseau's 2002 novel *Biblique des derniers gestes*. The description of the unrealistic escapade amply illustrates how the discovery of the outside world is tied up with observation, and that observation builds on imagination. The Malfini is flabbergasted because "these little things" are omnipresent, and he continues by describing what he sees: "I saw [hummingbirds] on earth covered with ashen snow. I saw them in the mouths of forbidding volcanoes. I saw them in deserts around old cactuses, near lakes burned by salt. I saw them carved in bronze, and hirsute, suckling orchids under sticky shadows."²⁰ This is an apocalyptic vision of hummingbirds adapting to extreme conditions caused by ecological catastrophe. Most important for understanding the optic mode that structures these passages is that the imaginary voyages appear as given within the narrative as a consequence of the narration being entirely built on the descriptive gaze of the narrator. The story is set up so as to tell how the bird-narrator maps places and observes behaviors. The text shows how the Malfini notices something, which leads to long passages with anaphoric sentences listing different qualities of the object described, so typical for Chamoiseau's style. Thus the descriptive passages seem to deal with the very process of observation more than with the object itself.

Hamon argues that the kind of topographic gaze that Chamoiseau's bird narrator deploys allows for the text's ideological operations: "We find in the descriptive a tendency to be mixed up with a general aesthetics of discontinuity, of synecdochical dispersion, of

²⁰ "Ces petites choses"; "J'en vis dans des terres couvertes de neiges cendreuses. J'en vis dans la gueule de volcans infréquentables. J'en vis dans des déserts autour de vieux cactus, auprès de lacs brûlés de sel. J'en vis, ciselés dans du bronze, et hirsutes, et qui tétaient des orchidées sous des ombres gluantes"; Chamoiseau, *Les neuf consciences*, 118.

cadastrification of the real and the lexical, of ‘discretion,’ of enclosure and fragmentation, . . . an aesthetics that may as well lead to a final blurring of spaces as to a strict and ‘logical’ separation or ‘marking’ of the same spaces.”²¹ The optic mode links to the real but decomposes it, only to reconstruct it into an imaginary space where a new identity can be forged. But, Hamon reminds us, it does so by disturbing the narrative flow and the very image of reality it is set up to construct. In the case of Chamoiseau, this ultimate disturbance affects language to the point at which it ceases to refer to a recognizable reality. The descriptive deconstructs the French prose while making it suggestive, pointing toward another reality. Language operates a form of magic no longer concerned with narrative or mimetic resemblance.

The reader has to go through pages of descriptive and hallucinatory lists before the aim of the bird-narrator’s observations is spelled out. He tries to understand what the hummingbirds are all about, and after following them on their imaginary trip he reaches a conclusion: “It was no longer for me blocks of indistinguishable species but a powdering of individuals. . . . That’s how I learned difference. I also learned, by extension, that difference was the liveliest, largest, surest, and stablest material of all existing things.”²² In the space of two pages we move from a phantasmagoric visual omniscient perspective to a “reading” that results in a philosophical lesson about being and multiplicity. Two things are worth noticing here. First, that the gaze is doubled: the reader watches through the eyes of the Malfini who watches Foufou’s way of observing the world. Second, true observation, linked to the magic

²¹ “Nous retrouvons donc la propension du descriptif à se confondre avec une esthétique générale du discontinu, de l’émiettement synechdochique, de la mise en cadastre du réel et des lexiques, du ‘discret’, du cloisonnement et du fragmentaire, . . . esthétique qui peut aller aussi bien du côté du brouillage final des espaces que du côté de la séparation étanche et ‘logique’, du ‘marquage’ de ces mêmes espaces sémantiques”; Hamon, *Du descriptif*, 184.

²² “Ce n’étaient plus pour moi des blocs d’espèces indivisibles, mais un poudroïement d’individus. . . . J’apprenais ainsi la différence. J’apprenais aussi, par extension, que la différence constituait la matière la plus vive, la plus vaste, la plus sûre et la plus stable de toutes choses existantes”; Chamoiseau, *Les neuf consciences*, 119.

of descriptive language, is presented as a revelation, a moment of insight. Through distant observations of another observer, the narrator slowly discovers difference.

As the bird tries to *understand* observation, the novel takes another orientation toward interiority. When the Malfini first notices the hummingbirds, he explains, “I adjusted my gaze to try to understand.”²³ Observation entails interpreting—one might say that Chamoiseau’s bird is here doing philosophy: he gives definitions of the true nature of things rather than describing as a poet. Chamoiseau keeps insisting that Foufou’s “essence” escapes the bird-narrator, that observing is not about comprehension but about following movements, or to use his words: “*What marvel, only marvel, there is in contemplation!* . . . It wasn’t about understanding, knowing simply, but about approaching a plenitude that existed and incited one to live the unthinkable of life.”²⁴ It is true, as we have seen, that Chamoiseauian interpretation is imaginative. The idea of “approaching,” for example, entails precisely the use of the imagination rather than rational deduction. So his interpretation has no claims of telling the truth. Nevertheless, the novel’s descriptive mode is infallibly linked to interpretation and even to a certain kind of epistemology. The Malfini *reads* the movement of other birds; he deciphers the landscape, as in the passage when he watches Foufou dive into the ocean: “I was shocked by what I saw. *Hinnk, what was the use!?* To put oneself in danger, completely gratuitously, filled me with indignation. But following the game, I came to envy him. He didn’t fish. He kept his eyes open. *He . . . he watched under water!* He saw another world or tried to see it. . . . I began to study the fisher-birds carefully.”²⁵ Again, the importance of seeing underneath and exploring another world is what attracts the Malfini and emerges as the

²³ “J’ajustais mon regard pour tenter de comprendre”; *ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ “*Que de merveilles, que de merveilles dans la contemplation!* . . . Il ne s’agissait pas de seulement comprendre, de seulement connaître, mais d’aborder la plénitude qui faisait l’existence et l’incitait à vivre l’impensable de la vie”; *ibid.*, 197 (italics in original).

²⁵ “Moi, j’étais consterné par ce que je voyais. *Hinnk, quelle en était l’utilité!?* Se mettre en danger, de manière toute gratuite, me remplissait d’indignation. Mais, au fil de ce manège, j’en advins à l’envier. Il ne pêchait pas. Il conservait les yeux ouverts. *Il . . . il regardait sous l’eau!* Il voyait un autre monde ou tentait de le voir. . . . Je me mis à étudier les oiseaux-pêcheurs avec attention”; *ibid.*, 124–25.

very motivation for observing. The contradictory orientations inherent within the notion of vision are here combined as the bird-narrator describes an external reality, but because the description is entangled with speculative interpretation, of trying to get under the skin of the difference observed, the process of observing overshadows the object described.

Seeing Foufou change his manner at sea makes the Malfini observe the seabirds differently, and ultimately he starts to change his own behavior. By examining other birds, the chicken-hawk establishes a relationship to these birds and the environment on a respectful basis of mutual understanding, which makes him objectify himself and understand his own identity. In a sense, this is the novel's conclusion: "The master [Foufou] had left me facing myself. With myself as only limit and horizon."²⁶ Exterior observation is presented as it appears in the eyes of the beholder, which ultimately leads back to the self rather than to the outside world. In other words, Chamoiseau uses the regime of visibility to establish a relational conception of identity. But it is important to note that the way relationality operates here departs from Glissant's concept of relation as a form of contact, linguistic or phenomenological, that operates beyond and in spite of comprehension. In Chamoiseau's novel relational identity starts with observation, which leads to interpretation, which ultimately allows the observer to transcend his current identity. The magical descriptive language, forged through the optic mode, makes room for another space beyond present reality where a new identity can emerge. However imaginary it might be, relation is in this context an intellectual and transcendental process that stems from the optic mode.

<A>Reaching the Global through the Regional?

Les neuf consciences du Malfini uses vision to enhance a geographical being in the world, thus echoing the creolists' spatial conception of identity. But if the ambition in *Éloge* was to

²⁶ "Le Maître m'avait laissé en face de moi-même. Avec moi-même comme seule limite et comme seul horizon"; *ibid.*, 254.

show creole existence, Chamoiseau's later novels, as Chancé accurately observes, "rework symbols, make us think about gestures no longer in order to see them but to contemplate them, that is, in order to meditate and transcend."²⁷ This visionary orientation alters the role of language from being a fundamental instrument for articulating cultural identity to expressing something beyond what is apparent to the naked eye. And perhaps it is here that Chamoiseau's optic mode takes the Herder-effect in another direction than what is suggested by Casanova. Contemplating Martinican reality, even if it is through the imaginary bird's-eye view, links the narrative to the local not only in aesthetic terms but also as a political statement, urging the reader to pay attention to a precarious nature. At the same time, this contemplation moves beyond and transcends the narrow focus on a tiny island in the Caribbean. The politics that is put forward in this novel is not national or regional, as in the case of *Éloge*. Here, identity politics has turned toward ecopoetics: a *global* concern that is experienced *locally* and expressed poetically. In *Les neuf consciences du Malfini*, this turn occurs through the regime of visibility put in place in *Éloge*, but in the novel the optic mode explores an identity intimately tied to the outside, thus functioning locally and globally simultaneously. The magical power of language that is released in the descriptive ultimately becomes the locus for articulating a new identity that emanates from a fantastic creature, shaped simultaneously from observation and imagination.

In other words, this "visual Herder-effect" shows that promoting oneself in Paris may very well be combined with a strong regional focus that is not automatically a springboard for *national* identity. In fact, Chamoiseau's pointed attention to the habitat of three Martinican birds may be *imaginary* and thus far from any pragmatic politics, but it is in no way limiting. Almost like an ancient explorer, the Malfini leaves his usual habitat, observes the world around him and discovers alterity, which then leads him to assess himself.

²⁷ "Retravaille les symboles, donne à penser les gestes, non plus pour voir mais pour contempler, c'est-à-dire méditer et transcender"; Chancé, *Patrick Chamoiseau*, 226.

In this way the creolist aesthetic strategy to make things visible and the imaginative visualization embedded in the optic mode coincide as an expression of desire, a desire to seize a mystical pattern of global, almost mythical, cosmic interrelations between animals, landscapes, and seascapes, one that could include humans if we could only envision the world through a bird's-eye view.