The Making Of A Distinguished Reader: Francophone Stories Of Literary Initiation

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The Making Of A Distinguished Reader: Francophone Stories Of Literary Initiation

Abstract
Drawing on an interdisciplinary blend of sociology, didactics and literary scholarship, this dissertation discusses representations of early engagement with literature as they are conveyed in the semi-fictional and autobiographical writings of Patrick Chamoiseau (Une enfance créole, Écrire en pays dominé) as well as in other contemporary autobiographies de lecteur. It builds on the concept of literary initiation, a social construct that I define in terms of symbolical power. I first follow the evolution in visions and practices of French language arts instruction since the early 20th century, which largely amounts to tracing the formation and persisting power of a specifically French imaginary – and / or ideology – of l'entrée dans la littérature. I proceed to offer a survey of theoretical and empirical perspectives on reader trajectory narratives that reveals the extent to which social structures and social agents often perpetuate a problematic legacy of representations about 'literary' reading development. In postcolonial contexts particularly, I argue, autobiographies de lecteur expose the complicated bearing of dominant (i.e. metropolitan) representations of literary initiation on recollections of the process. An important part of the dissertation rests on the notion, hardly considered in French education research or literary studies, that variation in cultural frames of reference may affect the imagination relative to literary initiation and its discursive rendering. Over two chapters, I address the complex ways in which Chamoiseau's coming-of-age story is one of both resistance and yielding to the Hexagon-centered imaginaire littéraire. Throughout the dissertation as a whole, I show that the widespread internalization of an elitist vision of advanced literacy is a matter of concern to which we – literature scholars who are also teachers – should grant more attention. The works of Gilles Béhotéguy, Bertrand Daunay, Brigitte Louichon, and Bruno Védrines, among others, are essential to this demonstration. Ultimately, I contend that contemporary Francophone narratives of literary initiation do not teach us about developmental and educational processes past or future as much as about the importance of comprehending and embracing “the imagination as a social practice” (Arjun Appadurai).

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those before you / are a part of your fabric” (rupi kaur)

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me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color.” (W. S. Merwin)

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Forever and ever, vous éclairez le chemin.

To you, my Love of fourteen years: “it’s the end of the world as we know it”; “c’est un
nouveau matin”.

Aspiró el aire frío que se abría como un sol de papel en los pulmones.
Saber del mar su luz, su pasadizo.
Atrás dejar la sal. Volver a casa.

—Ana Gorria
ABSTRACT

THE MAKING OF A DISTINGUISHED READER:
FRANCOPHONE STORIES OF LITERARY INITIATION

Fiona Moreno
Gerald J. Prince

Drawing on an interdisciplinary blend of sociology, didactics and literary scholarship, this dissertation discusses representations of early engagement with literature as they are conveyed in the semi-fictional and autobiographical writings of Patrick Chamoiseau (Une enfance créole, Ecrire en pays dominé) as well as in other contemporary autobiographies de lecteur. It builds on the concept of literary initiation, a social construct that I define in terms of symbolical power. I first follow the evolution in visions and practices of French language arts instruction since the early 20th century, which largely amounts to tracing the formation and persisting power of a specifically French imaginary – and / or ideology – of l’entrée dans la littérature. I proceed to offer a survey of theoretical and empirical perspectives on reader trajectory narratives that reveals the extent to which social structures and social agents often perpetuate a problematic legacy of representations about ‘literary’ reading development. In postcolonial contexts particularly, I argue, autobiographies de lecteur expose the complicated bearing of dominant (i.e. metropolitan) representations of literary initiation on recollections of the process. An important part of the dissertation rests on the notion, hardly considered in French education research or literary studies, that variation in cultural frames of reference may affect the imagination relative to literary initiation and its discursive rendering. Over two chapters, I address the complex ways in which Chamoiseau’s coming-of-age story is one of both resistance and yielding to the Hexagon-centered imaginaire littéraire. Throughout the dissertation as a whole, I show that the widespread internalization of an elitist vision of advanced literacy is a matter of concern to which we –
literature scholars who are also teachers – should grant more attention. The works of Gilles Béhotéguy, Bertrand Daunay, Brigitte Louichon, and Bruno Védrines, among others, are essential to this demonstration. Ultimately, I contend that contemporary Francophone narratives of literary initiation do not teach us about developmental and educational processes past or future as much as about the importance of comprehending and embracing “the imagination as a social practice” (Arjun Appadurai).
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INTRODUCTION

Venez, venez autour de moi, la traversée est difficile, qui s’amorce dans le sommeil des livres…

Patrick Chamoiseau

At the beginning of the literary journey that interests us all, lovers of writers’ autobiographies, she stands undecided, clumsy yet confident: the child reader. She is a figure in emergence. She does not know what awaits her nor how the story will unfold – but we do. We trust her to eventually achieve a certain kind – the socially legitimate kind – of textual expertise. We picture the obstacles. We expect some entity to support her in that process: a public library… the home of a privileged friend… an adult stranger… school, maybe? The latter feels counterintuitive, an outsider passeur de littérature more likely. We are well aware that l’Ecole is involved with all things literary but somehow confusedly, we doubt that it will prove the most propitious context for our character’s literary flourishing.

The process seems indeed to have at least partly unfolded out of the classroom for young Philippe, who did not yet know either, at the time of his painful secondary school experience, that he was bound to become an authority in literature studies. So goes the story told by the major theorist of autobiographical narration Philippe Lejeune to an audience of French teacher trainees:

De 10 à 13 ans, j’ai pratiqué l’alexandrin comme un jeu, mimant Hugo, Heredia, Lamartine, si bien que je savais déjà faire des vers quand la vie m’a donné quelque chose à dire. En 1952, mes poèmes sont devenus autobiographiques, mais dans la ouate du ‘je lyrique’ et le carcan des douze pieds, j’ai vite étouffé, si bien que la prose autobiographique la plus directe a pris le relais. … Longtemps je me suis bercé de l’idée qu’adolescent j’avais eu deux cultures: celle du lycée, vieillotte, artificielle, et celle de la maison, moderne (la bibliothèque de mes parents) et intime (mon journal). J’étais un ingrat. C’est le lycée qui m’a initié à la poésie et poussé à écrire. J’ai recopié mes poèmes sur un cahier, en marquant que j’étais membre de l’A.L.C., Association Littéraire (j’ai oublié le sens du C: Classique, sans doute?) que j’avais formée en quatrième avec deux camarades épris comme moi de belles-lettres. (Lejeune 2005, 143)

Lejeune’s literary expertise should immediately show up to the ‘educated reader’ – educated, in this case, within a specific model enabling (or constraining) her to have grown attuned to certain
formal qualities historically attached to literary textuality as well as familiar with a patrimonial body of texts. The ideal reader that the teacher trainee addressee of Lejeune supposedly embody is bound to notice references and stylistic features she was trained to recognize as literary wor(l)d-play. Part of the first sentence – of which the quintessentially French alexandrine is the focus – reads itself as a near-perfect doublet of alexandrine verses. The first half of the second sentence, in turn, playfully rides a rhyming wave (“autobiographiques” / “lyrique”, “pieds” / “étouffé”) just as it discusses classical poetry features and the teenage urge to break free from them. Hence would “autobiographical prose” become the apprentice thinker's preferred writing mode, one inescapably attached to the Proustian figure that, in Lejeune's discourse, is soon convoked by means of an implicit variation on the Recherche's opening sentence, as well as a possible reference to Baudelaire's Vie antérieure (“Longtemps je me suis bercé de l'idée…”). Lejeune here conveys more than his utterance literally denotes to listeners / readers considered able to perceive the playful, subtle, deliberated parodic tone. The success of the all-but-naive recollection relies on its specific context as well as on the assumption of the possibility of connivance, itself grounded in a relatively expert shared knowledge. Any reader ‘educated’ in a French public secondary school would be expected to have been exposed to this knowledge, although only a distinguished few might catch the sub-discourse.

Lejeune implicitly performs a mastery of literary knowledge mostly acquired in the classroom just as he explicitly valorizes the variety of formal and informal influences constitutive of a developing reader’s experience. Meanings conveyed on one discursive level appear to nuance those presented on the other one and hint at a more complex experience of literary reading development than the one accessible at first sight. In Lejeune’s account, the confrontation with, the ingestion, and the digestion of classical masterworks (deemed such by the French curriculum) appear necessary premises to the student’s humble expression; innutrition is the condition to finding a voice. Furthermore, this voice is in no way idiosyncratic but is imbued with ‘great’ stylistic references which, although deemed constraining, are soon claimed critical to reading and writing development; in letter and in spirit, to literary initiation (“c’est le lycée qui m’a
initié”). Having reasserted the clear division between “deux cultures” and assigned negative value to formal literature education, Lejeune moves on to invert the stigma and claim the supremacy of school’s influence on his literary coming-of-age. Even an informal education such as Lejeune’s – highly stimulating, “moderne” and “intime”, exceptionally supportive of the youngster’s intellectual and social development - does not dethrone formal literature education, no matter how little engaging. As far as literary initiation is concerned, there seems to be no validity to the “important tenet of progressive educational theory” according to which “pupil well-being and effective learning go hand in hand” (Heller Sahlgren V).

In fact, Lejeune’s autobiographical account tells a number of different stories just as it initially seems to recount just one, revealing multiple tensions along the way. Among the issues raised are the complex relationship between the need for a certain type of references and the desire to escape them altogether; the allegedly critical impact of one’s social and cultural background, as well as of early teenagehood, on one’s literary initiation; and the undervalued centrality of the connection between reading and writing development. Lejeune also indirectly suggests that different text genres (in this case, poetry and “prose autobiographique”) play different roles at different developmental stages. Most importantly perhaps, he expresses the seemingly imperturbable perpetuation of a complete adhesion to a very old-fashioned (“vieillotte”? ) conception of literary textuality (“belles-lettres”). In the end, Lejeune shows that representations about / of formal literature education do not necessarily overlap with representations about / of literary reading development. Yet at the same time, he indirectly acknowledges that, at the very least, school plays a determining role in literary initiation and, at worst, is central as a conveyor of ideology.

My project addresses the different facets of this conflicted coming-of-age narrative thread – which is, in part, “la trame permanente d’un discours d’exclusion”1 – as it is woven in contemporary autobiographical and autofictional works, more precisely in what Hardwick defines as “the post-1990s récit d’enfance” (56). Drawing on an interdisciplinary blend of sociology, didactics and literary scholarship, I also trace the formation, discussion, and persisting power of a
specifically French imaginary of “l’entrée dans la littérature”. The idea of a literary initiation can hardly be circumvented in the process of comprehending the stakes of literary reading education in historically French-speaking areas of the globe. ‘Literary initiation’ only exists within quotation marks, or, in other words, through and thanks to the representations held about it and discursively (re)produced. In this dissertation, literary initiation is to be understood as an essentially representational, imaginary content, as well as a two-dimensional construct, which perspective I will now explain.

I am interested in literary reading precisely to the extent that it is a volatile construct. The exact nature of the competences that this concept entails remains the object of debate. What scholarly and institutional instances overall agree upon is that literary reading competence is the outcome of a long and complex process of knowledge acquisition and capacity maturation. Something about literature, and/or something ‘literary’, unquestionably will have been learned upon exiting this process. But the actual outcomes of an education aiming at fostering the ability to ‘literarily’ engage with texts, or to engage with ‘literary’ texts, considered within a broader social context, may not entirely coincide with those envisioned as part of the representational construction that is ‘literary initiation’.

In line with the view of the majority of their English-writing counterparts, didacticians Bemporad and Jeanneret (2016) consider that in practice, the “initiation aux pratiques littératiées” includes both formal and informal learning, reading development also drawing on spaces other than the classroom, forms of knowledge different from those favored by curricula, and interactions complementing or conflicting with teacher-student exchanges. I do conceive of literary initiation in both educational and developmental terms, distinguishing between the two and presuming that there is no necessary overlap – a dual approach that I will address again. I came to embrace the term ‘initiation’ notably because the notion is not educationally marked and can be understood to encompass both formal education and the knowledge development that is partly independent from it. But ‘initiation’ was irreplaceable here for a particular reason: as social construct and imaginary product, it carries connotations of ritual oppression, thus of symbolical – if not empirical
power. I recognize this dimension of the notion as essential; there lies, to me, its uttermost interest. To fully understand this point, it helps to address the third term of the equation.

_Representation_ is a considerably nebulous concept that has been and remains un objet de recherche dans plusieurs sciences humaines, notamment la sociologie, la psychologie, l’anthropologie, la linguistique et les sciences de l’éducation … Le fait que ce concept ait par ailleurs été l’objet d’étude de multiples disciplines est probablement en partie responsable de la grande polysémie qui l’entoure aujourd’hui. (Miquelon 43)

Two of its meanings are relevant to this dissertation: (1) representation as a graphic description of an object or event, and (2) representation as a typically unacknowledged worldview which textual accounts (i.e. written representations) allow us to apprehend. While humanities scholars intuitively understand representations to be more or less mimetic depictions of objects, the ‘representations’ at stake in sociology and psychology are about a given object. The notion, in this case, refers to organized sets of cognitions held by subjects or groups and connected to larger cultural systems (Jodelet 52). They are thought to directly affect individual expectations regarding the object about which representations operate and affect therefore their approach to it. They also undergo constant transformation as the representation holder negotiates with multi-layered environmental input related to the object. In cognitive and social sciences, the concept of representation is semantically connected to the less commonly used notion of ‘frame’. Although they may be distinguished according to disciplinary legacies or degrees of ‘scientificity’, both appellations cover the level of shared, “culture-based, conventionalized” knowledge about specific objects that translates into assigned patterns (Grishakova). At the cognitive level, representation systems or frames are considered to encompass a variety of more narrowly defined structures, such as schemas, prototypes (i.e. general categories), stereotypes, scripts (stereotyped sequences), and exempla (specific instances). They constantly affect perception and are affected by it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the context of this dissertation: updating – defined as integration of stereotype-inconsistent information – will typically imply _resistance_. Sociological research offers a somewhat complementary perspective. The French concept of representation remains heavily marked by its Durkheimian origins and is considered essentially in the light of its socially constructed (rather than cognition-bound) quality (Miquelon
45). Beyond the Hexagon,\(^3\) social sciences predominantly consider representations to be ‘the stuff ideology is made of,’ ideology being minimally definable as “a configuration of beliefs that shape in a substantial way how the people holding those beliefs operate in the social world”, that is, a system “largely conveyed through representations – that lead us to see the world in certain ways”:  

It is socially significant in that it is not just a single person’s private system but must at least be shared by enough people for it to be acknowledged (even if only by rejection) in the social structure. (Misson and Morgan 44-5)  

In Francophone education research, the sets of conceptions with which students enter the school system are seen as a potential issue – albeit one to tackle according to the premise that those sets are primarily idiosyncratic. Individual representations about teaching and learning contents are understood to be in large part established prior to instruction (“l'apprenant a déjà des représentations au sujet d'une discipline avant même d'en commencer l'apprentissage”):  

les représentations qu’a un élève d'un contenu scolaire influencent directement la valeur qu'il attribue à cette activité et la façon dont il l'abordera conséquemment. (Miquelon 46, after Abric)  

These representations, acquired out-of-school and often pre-schooling, are divided into the ones deemed “fonctionnelles” and those that turn out to be “obstacles” depending on whether the “système d’anticipations et d’attentes” that they produce appears to support or fragilize the intended learning outcomes (ibid.). Preconstructed student representations about learning objects such as language or literature (representations that are, again, mainly discussed as idiosyncratic) are commonly approached via a deficit model: their supplementation, reorganization or correction by means of deliberate teacher action are assumed to be a primary desired outcome (Fisher; Reuter et al.). The socially constructed nature of both student and teacher representations often remains unaddressed within didactique du français. We – scholars and practitioners – do not question enough the extent to which a literary reading education is imbued with culturally pervasive assumptions about its nature. In any literate society, but in Francophone countries especially due to the particular status conferred to littérature within their boundaries (c.f. Chapter
1), shared representations relative to reading development can be expected to play a role in the fashioning of early and advanced engagement with ‘literary’ material.

Social sciences and the humanities agree on one essential point: representations about are typically conceived and investigated as conveyed by representations of – typically the discourses that make them at least partly accessible; in the words of Raphaël Baroni and Chiara Bemporad, “la partie observable des représentations [est] celle qui fait l’objet d’une mise en discours” (121). 'Literary initiation', as I understand it, exists primarily through and thanks to the existing body of verbally expressed representations about it. The reader trajectory narratives prompted as part of qualitative studies or deliberately produced with artistic intention have a lot to teach us in that regard. I have suggested that a particularly valuable point of entry into representations of literary initiation is the acknowledgment that they rely on experience involving two “domains of life” or “of activity”, which are both interwoven and fundamentally distinct:

Literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making as well as formal education and training. (Barton et al. 14, emphasis mine)

Textualized scenes of literary initiation can refer to one or both of these two symbolical areas: informal education (which mostly occurs out of school and may involve deliberate -self- teaching) and formal education (delivered within an institutional school context; student initiative is limited).

Related to this division is another important one, of metonymical nature: the curricular progression that plays out in formal education is only one factor – though certainly a crucial one, as I will explain in Chapter 1 – contributing to the development of an ability to engage with texts in a literary fashion, or to engage with texts considered to be literary. The depiction of a particular reader trajectory will involve a developmental, encompassing learning experience as well as a school-based continuous one, the latter operating as part of the former; or, again in other words, a narrative of ‘literary initiation’ will engage with the two dimensions of progression (designed to be the backbone of formal education) and development (resulting from formal and informal learning).
On a superficial level, “autobiographies de lecteur” are formidable sources of information relative to real-world budding “investissement dans l’appropriation langagière” (Bemporad 2016, 14). They allow researchers to discern and / or hypothesize the social and subjective parameters affecting the learning trajectory of an individual newly exposed to written communication in a given language and specific cultural context. They also point to the metatextual phenomena at play in student reports of their trajectoire d’appropriation (Jeanneret 35). But autobiographical accounts focused on the socially charged process of ‘literary initiation’ teach us something else as well, concerning the power of a very French imaginaire littéraire. This is what the present dissertation is about.

My first chapter addresses the resistant conceptual instability of literariness as seen through the lenses of late 20th-century didactics of French as a first language. Social structures (such as educational institutions) and social agents (such as teachers or – former – students) convey and often perpetuate representations about what it means to engage with literary-reputed textuality at various ages. I follow the evolution in visions and practices of literature instruction from the early 20th century on and discuss approaches to literature education and literary reading development that are quite ironically little considered in literary studies. Perhaps most importantly, I introduce the notions of “imaginaire pédagogique” and “idéologie littéraire” whose exposition is meant to highlight the relevance of a study dedicated to representations of literary initiation.

I have said that the concepts of literariness, initiation and social representation are all crucial to the comprehension of my object of study. Autobiographical accounts reflect a social conception of (literary and other) reading development to the extent that this conception is held by most individuals in a particular time period, location and social milieu – even though memories of one’s coming-of-age are also shaped by idiosyncratic perception. I dedicate Chapter 2 to reviewing approaches to representations of emergent ‘literary’ reading as they have been elaborated by social scientists. I explain the usefulness of the operational construct “autobiographie de lecteur” to empirical studies of emergent reading practices, noting that it originates in the interest of education scholars for literary-reputed reading trajectory narratives. I
also point out the limitations of this construct, which include the origins just mentioned as well as the underlying assumption that objective narration of one’s reading experience is possible at all.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the literary-reputed récit d’enfance contemporain. I peer into scholarly demonstrations of its being first and foremost a narrative of reading development. Then, I inquire into the existence, or absence, in the field of literary studies, of systematic analyses unearthing the foundational features of reader trajectory narratives. The chapter opens with an overview of literary scholars’ efforts to identify traits specific to the contemporary récit d’enfance. I emphasize one common feature pointed out by most scholars: the centrality, in the storyworld, of an emergent capacity and willingness to engage with literary textuality. Carrying out a detour through textual representations of adult reading activity, I observe that the adult reader is discussed either as an implied instance or as a character and that the former is overwhelmingly preferred in literary studies while the latter is the object of much attention in didactics. I point out that disparate attempts were made to delineate recurring themes in reading scenes spotted across primarily fictional works, even though it eventually appears, according to Gerald Prince (2017), that the category of ‘character-reader’ has in fact “seldom been explored systematically”. I subsequently demonstrate that such is even more the case for the figure of the child reader, with the notable exception of children’s literature scholarship, within which this figure arouses much interest for obvious educational purposes while also generating a few denunciations of its stereotypical nature. Gilles Béhotéguy’s claim that many reading scenes rest on “a cultural mythology … determining its aesthetics and establishing its values” is a particularly powerful one, which converges with perspectives from didacticians (Bruno Védrines, Bertrand Daunay) and historians of literature (M. Martin Guiney, Leon Sachs) discussed in Chapter 1.

Having outlined theoretical and methodological trends in research on contemporary reader trajectory narratives as conducted in two distinct scholarly traditions, I move to introduce one of the most accomplished attempts to identify the recurrent patterns in these narratives, a study by Brigitte Louichon (2009) whose design is partly inspired by qualitative practices and whose overall intent consists in using a literary-reputed narrative corpus to didactic ends. My
fourth chapter is entirely dedicated to detailing and commenting this in-depth examination of contemporary “souvenirs de lecture”.

Louichon’s contribution to the study of narratives of literary reading development is in many ways remarkable. In my conclusion to Part I which is also a transition to Part II, I point to a few areas that deserve further inquiry. I insist on the evolution of the discipline français over the decades in which most contemporary reader trajectory narratives are set, explaining that there might be discrepancies between curricular progression (what is taught) and effective literary reading development (what gets learned). I note the diversity of the Francophone world and the possibility of area-specific tensions between divergent models of engagement with textuality beyond institutional settings. This transitional conclusion communicates my intentions moving forward.

The first part of my dissertation, of which I just offered an overview, largely promotes non-French (Swiss and Quebecois) scholarship in an effort to amplify supposedly ‘peripheric’ Francophone voices. For the same reason and others explained in the conclusion to Part 1 as well as in Chapter 5, I center the autobiographical writing of a prominent Antillean author in Part 2. The celebrated writings of Patrick Chamoiseau pertain to an imaginary body of texts that continues to be considered congruent and relevant precisely as one body:

les littératures francophones des Antilles, du Maghreb et d’Afrique subsaharienne, [qui] portent la marque évidente d’une interaction des langues et des cultures, dans une confrontation parfois violente. (Combe 9)

Many texts from the Francophone ‘Global South’ warrant consideration in relation with the topic of this dissertation; some of them will be discussed in my general conclusion. Chamoiseau’s autobiographical work is an ideal candidate for benchmark close-reading because in the manner of many other post- and neocolonial non-metropolitan accounts of French-speaking childhoods, it displays “inevitably complex … processes and layers of autoethnographic formation”: Une enfance créole is “profoundly engaged in a dialogue with France, but … is equally concerned with the local” (Knepper 131).
Chapter 5 is conceived as a prologue to the study of Chamoiseau in general and to the content – as opposed to the form – of his narrative work in particular. I explain, drawing on Chamoiseau scholarship as well as on the recent histories of non-metropolitan Francophone autobiographies, why it is both defensible and unfair to consider non-metropolitan reader trajectory narratives to be the expression of a group identity, and why it is problematic to decide that they cannot be studied together with metropolitan ones. I cover research on the formal dimension of Chamoiseau’s work and contend that the *monde raconté* should be further investigated – which is what I do in the two following chapters.

Chapters 6 and 7 probe into the representations of and about literary initiation that traverse and uphold *Une enfance créole* and *Ecrire en pays dominé*. I work at connecting the content of Chamoiseau’s writing with Louichon’s findings in particular as well as with some of the rich theoretical and empirical takes on representations of literary initiation exposed in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, and summarized at the end of Part I. While Louichon does not find representations of formal literature education nor of engagement with diverse text genres to deserve much attention (based on her overwhelmingly French corpus), I contend that Chamoiseau’s narrative calls for attention to these two themes. Besides, the close study of Chamoiseau’s partly fictional storyworld suggests that despite being consciously “constructed in response to (in dialogue with / resistance to) metropolitan representations”, Francophone ‘autoethnographic’ narratives may contribute to the unquestioned perpetuation of literary imagination, thus demonstrating the difficulty to “clear a space for self-articulation” (Knepper 130).

Childhood narratives represent a fertile reservoir of shared representations about language arts formal and informal education all over the world but literary reading development plays a particularly important role in Francophone récits d’enfance most certainly due to France’s unique focus on the littérature construct throughout its history and societal evolution. Can the features of literary imagination then be shown to recur rather unscathed across various Francophone spaces? Dominique Combe indirectly suggests so:

> Ce sont ces représentations communes du monde (on n’ose dire, comme Senghor, des ‘valeurs’) qui donnent une fonction heuristique au qualificatif ‘francophone’ (22)
An important part of my general conclusion is dedicated to interrogating an extended corpus of contemporary autobiographical texts (in most cases claimed as such, sometimes framed as fiction) from a range of Francophone areas including Algeria, Quebec and Guadeloupe. This inserted study is conceived as a preview of possible further investigation and therefore a means to bring my own study to a meaningful close.

A few pages in my second chapter cover education research experiments that set the frame for subjects to reflexively engage with their personal reader trajectory narrative. It is not always evident that such metatextual takes on one’s own story of ‘literary initiation’ can truly foster individual growth. What authorized discourses on reading often show, observes Bertrand Daunay, is that the readers who are discursively centered

*[sont des idées de lecteurs, et que celles-ci risquent de n’être que le dessin en creux de l’image qu’[e les énonciateurs] se font du lecteur qu’ils croient être – que la sociologie identifie au lecteur légitime. (Daunay 2014, 183)]*

Conversely, “l’image qu’ils se font du lecteur qu’ils croient être” is likely to compromise non-expert readers’ apprehension of their own trajectory as well, post-writing analytical gaze or not.

Furthermore, one can doubt that expecting the biased recollections of formerly emergent readers to inform official education frameworks is an entirely relevant approach. Moving forward, I propose to consider these narrative datasets in a different light. I believe that stories of literary initiation are a bountiful source of information regarding not only representations of reading as they are formulated by individuals educated in French-speaking areas, but also as expressions of cultural resonance and dissonance within and across various Francophone geographical spaces and communities, beyond Hexagonal France. It is likely that by and large, Chamoiseau’s *autobiographie de lecteur* recounts “an act of unlearning and re-imagining” through which a non-metropolitan emergent reader manages to resist the dominant conception of *l’entrée en littérature* and eventually flourish (Ntelioglou 58); an act realized by both a character and a narrator, who together claim the right to “create intellectual and lived bridges” between a society’s view of literary literacy and an Antillean-based reading experience (Pinar 9). It is also possible that the
ideologically charged space of the French language and literature classroom (Védrines) ends up prevailing, in either or both positive and negative ways. This – the extent to which the situated coexistence of cultural and linguistic influences framing one’s childhood might affect one’s memories of her *initiation littéraire* – is information that could greatly enhance our approaches to contemporary reader trajectory narratives pertaining to the Francophone literary field as well as further our understanding of the social construction and impact of "la chose littéraire", among other issues central to our discipline.⁶

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¹ Daunay 2004, 239.

² See for instance Louichon, 2011.

³ *L’Hexagone*, as a phrase, comes with a history much worth keeping in mind in the context of this dissertation. In the wake of decolonization, explain Lydie Moudileno and Etienne Achille, "[l]a figure de l’hexagone … devient une allégorie projetant le patrimoine culturel et historique français qui retrouve ainsi son berceau d’origine." “Le mythe de l’hexagonalité” implies a fundamental (geographical as well as cultural) difference with, if not the exclusion of, the *territoires d’outremer*, "les Antilles disparaissant de l’imaginaire collectif" (89). Even more than the Center, the Hexagon is the country.

⁴ Groupe de recherche sur les biographies langagières (GReBL), Ecole de français langue étrangère, University of Lausanne. [https://www.unil.ch/fle/files/live/sites/fle/files/shared/GReBL/GReBL_2017_TM.pdf](https://www.unil.ch/fle/files/live/sites/fle/files/shared/GReBL/GReBL_2017_TM.pdf)


⁶ Védrines 72, after Macherey.
PART ONE

Representations of Literary Initiation – Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities
CHAPTER ONE

Unfolding the fabrique scolaire du littéraire: History and Sociology of French Language and Literature Instruction

Culture may be broadly defined as a set of values and beliefs shared by a given population, itself delineated according to markers such as geographical or linguistic boundaries. The Francophonie might be considered one such relatively homogeneous cultural space if we are to see it as a virtual “entrelacement à l’équilibre fragile de pratiques, de croyances, de rituels qui pose les normes d’une idéologie littéraire” (Védrines 46). As literature scholars and educators, we have much to learn from the child reader-as-character and depictions of early engagement with textuality — as long as we care to approach them in a culturally sensitive manner. This is one of the central assumptions in which this dissertation is grounded and that it seeks to demonstrate. The present chapter will contribute to this overall effort by providing an overview of French and Francophone approaches to literature education as well as a discussion of representations held about literature, literariness, and literary reading development in French-speaking spaces.

Francophone formal education dans le texte: a prelude

According to literary scholar and historian Leon Sachs, reading development plays no small part in the French “pedagogical imagination”, a concept that Sachs forged and explored throughout a study of the “Republican legacy in twenty-first-century French literature and film”:

The school, from the elementary grades to the university seminar, is the place where we acquire and hone the skills of reading in the most concerted manner. It could be said, then, that every adult reader, whatever the age, remains in some sense within the imaginary walls of the school. The reader is always a student. (Sachs 190)
This is the first premise of Sachs’ two-fold argument for close examination of Republican reading education as embodied in “scenes of formal classroom instruction” (19). Sachs moves on to claim that

> [It] is precisely the obviousness of this point … that prevents us from perceiving and thus thinking about it in a deliberate and self-conscious manner.

Sachs’ discursive context of interest is the one usually privileged by literary scholars: he has set out to explore a corpus of “works of arts” (visual and written texts, all pertaining to narrative fiction) because such corpus would present the great advantage to “demonstrate with particular force the relationship between pedagogical doctrine and artistic form” (12). After Shklovsky, Sachs argues that

> [t]he power of the work of art … resides in its ability to defamiliarize this banal and thus overlooked relationship [between developed reading practices and taught reading practices] and thereby reawaken our perception of it. (190)

The aim is to “bring together, within a single frame, these two distinct discourses – one about modern (literary and filmic) art and the other about modern pedagogy” (15).

Sachs is not the only one to have recently attempted to cross that bridge. Pedagogical imagination is the focus of Swiss researcher Christiane Chessex-Viguet as well in *L’école est un roman.* Like Sachs, she sets out to explore representations across a corpus of 19th and 20th century French, Swiss, German and British fictional narratives. Chessex-Viguet’s interest is broader than Sachs’; it lies in “romanesque” depictions (“porté[e]s par un récit et des dialogues”, occasionally only by homodiegetic narrators) of interactions between an adult and children "dans cette Institution nommée Ecole" rather than depictions of literature education in particular (Préface). Still, it is notable that she observes consistency in content throughout the works under scrutiny, which would suggest that representations about / of formal education do not evolve much:¹

Malgré la multitude de mots et de langages pour dire la relation pédagogique, c'est l'unanimité de ces voix romanesques qui donne à la littérature ses lettres de crédibilité … Quant à ceux qui objecteraient que les auteurs, artistes toujours angoissés, dénaturent la 'vérité' pédagogique par l'outrance de leurs propos et de leur mise en scène, nous les renverrons à l'enquête française … dont le contenu – des interviews d'enseignants – fait voir que la fiction, même dans ses paroxysmes, n'est que conforme à la réalité. (138-9)
Narratives of (literary) education should be expected to prominently feature two figures with which the reader is likely to identify: teacher and student. Sachs specifically investigates the former, whom he sees, in French works of fiction, as the bearer of a “contradictory message”:

at one moment a progressive view that is suspicious of elite (and elitist) literary studies and, at a later moment, a traditionalist view that defends these same studies in the name of Republican universalism. (19)

“The teacher, in other words”, Sachs adds, “expresses opposing viewpoints in the longstanding debates about literary education” (19). It is my contention that a very similar argument could be made about the autobiographical account of Philippe Lejeune discussed in my introduction; that it could indeed be made about most Francophone discourses centering literature education. Sachs does make such a point about French institutional discourse specifically, emphasizing that “the bond between language and literary studies and raison d’état is unusually pronounced in the case of France”, and that this bond notably materializes in critical reading activities that, although painstaking (as acknowledged by Philippe Lejeune), highly matter (as also acknowledged by Lejeune) to the extent that they enact a “certain idea of Republican ideology”:

[O]ther nations and other traditions have certainly emphasized critical reading, but France has placed the concept at the center of an intense public debate about educational policy and woven it into the very fabric of government itself. (Sachs 13)

“Ideology”: Sachs makes repeated use of the term, which he associates with the French Republican tradition. Another author keen on assimilating the French official take on literature instruction to an ideology is M. Martin Guiney. To fully grasp the raison d’être of such stark affirmations, one must be acquainted with the recent history of French formal literature education and have a sense of contemporary debates relative to this education’s object(s). Before turning to Guiney’s and others’ conceptualizations of a specifically French “literary ideology”, let us therefore examine the different objects that might be discussed by way of littérature within French instructional and more widely social spaces.
National cultures of literature education

What exactly is it that we teach and / or learn in the literature classroom? This is a question relevant to education systems worldwide:

[de manière presque universelle, la 'littérature' est à la fois objet et outil d'éducation et d'enseignement, puisqu'elle est dans le même temps intimement liée aux 'valeurs', à la langue et à son apprentissage et à la maîtrise des discours. (Fraisse)]

Yet, as the above stance makes clear, this “objet d'enseignement universellement partagé … est par ailleurs probablement le moins facile à définir de manière stable et indiscutable”. According to Emmanuel Fraisse, who directed a special volume dedicated to literature education as practiced in eight countries on four continents², three major convergences between otherwise diverse national approaches to literature education ought to be identified. Literature instruction is a pillar of all the public education systems studied. Furthermore, literature in educational settings is typically supposed to bring into question the “relation entre l’universel et le particulier”, “se connaître soi-même et connaître l’autre”. A third notable convergence is that in most systems, literature does not become an official object of study, and self-sufficient discipline, until secondary school. One could and should add, to this global picture, the shared primacy of a generic continuity: fictional narratives might be treated in a manner other than literary, yet literary reading is almost always associated with the category of fictional narrative, both in research (all cultures considered) and in pedagogical practices (all education levels considered). Finally, one should be aware of the glaring absence, in most national systems, of a recommended or prescribed literature teaching method (see Schneuwly and Sales Cordeiro).

A particularly important finding in the context of this dissertation is that educational approaches to literature appear tightly connected to national “values” and “identity”. To M. Martin Guiney, the ties between reverence to the nation and to national literature respectively are valid and problematic beyond the French example:

There is no doubt that for the English-speaking world, for example, Shakespeare plays a role in the educative process that is analogous to [the situation in France]. Schoolchildren learn that it is more important (and much easier) simply to worship Shakespeare's plays than to understand them …
That gap - between what an individual understands and appreciates, and what he or she is told to appreciate whether or not he or she is able - is where the realms of the sacred and the political merge. (Preface XII)

However, Guiney would most likely consider that the six aforementioned characteristics of educational approaches to literature (centrality, axiological perspective, ambivalence toward the Other, primacy of the novel, rupture in curricular progression, absence of a shared, explicitly laid out teaching method) are nowhere truer and more marked than in France. European education systems in general have traditionally conferred high value to this object and been keen on interweaving literature with national identity, favoring literature both as an object of study and as a notion, no matter how loosely defined. But France, notes Fraisse, has historically "fait de la littérature et de la langue un fondement de l'idée qu'elle se fait d'elle-même". As it is important to "prendre en compte la valeur attribuée aux pratiques littératiées" in each society (Bemporad and Jeanneret 40), one must understand that the value attributed to the French language by French institutional and social spaces is inseparable from a uniquely strong accent on its inherent 'literariness':

Dans l'espace littéraire mondial ... chaque langue a une position spécifique, plus ou moins dominée ou dominante, désignée comme sa 'littérarité'. (Dugonjic and Richard de Latour 195)

If France is not the only nation to have "used the institution of public education, or even the teaching of literature, in order to perpetuate itself", it is likely, suggests Guiney, that "the modern French nation has developed its own special way of doing so" (Preface XII). Literature is both the object (what is perpetuated) and agent (what does perpetuate) of this uniquely French, and probably Francophone, process (Sachs, among others). It might not be possible to define literature or – more to the point – littérature once and for all. But it should be possible to determine what littérature means in educational contexts.
Qu’est-ce que la littérature... enseignée?

Guiney points out with reason that “what qualifies certain texts as ‘literature’ is the subject of unending debate” in literary studies in general and French humanities in particular. His follow-up point can be considered even more pertinent:

Literature nevertheless exists, even in the absence of an adequate definition of the term. One proof of its existence is the continued prosperity of institutions that depend on it, such as the publishing industry, the field of literary criticism, and the teaching of literature at all levels of education. (Guiney 1)

This is the first conception of literature – “au sens moderne du terme” – offered by Sandrine Aeby Daghé as part of an overview of existing perspectives in the field of didactique de la littérature:

literature is a field in the Bourdieusian sense (Aeby Daghé 4), to be viewed comme un champ social qui … articule étroitement trois institutions: le champ des pratiques littéraires elles-mêmes … celui des études littéraires et celui de l’école. Cette articulation est la condition de l’installation de l’étude de la littérature en classe, installation qui est inversement l’une des conditions essentielles de l’instauration du champ. (Védrines and Gabathuler 46)

Although entirely relevant per se and recognized as such by Francophone education scholars such as Aeby, this definition can be perceived as relatively inoperative by instructional designers more or less directly engaged with classroom matters. Literature is a social entity but it is an educational object as well; it “exists” (Guiney) in these two ways that do not coincide – until higher education, where the two understandings might start to overlap, both of them being turned into objets d’enseignement. A conception of literature as an institutional good does appear necessary to its deconstruction in a variety of advanced learning contexts (i.e., literary studies). Yet, many curriculum designers and practitioners would point out that this conception can hardly be the reference in foundational education settings. If literature is to remain a school subject, it must also remain a solid enough construct to be grasped and safely explored by pupils whose worldview is itself still in construction. In order to be taught, literature needs to be defined in a way that allows it to become an enseignable (Schneuwly and Dolz, among others). Were we willing to envision
and move toward a world where the recognition of a *socially-constructed* condition of literature gets enacted in the primary and secondary curriculum, much reconfiguration would be in order. Questioning the social, possibly ideological underpinnings of this thing called ‘literature’ within the space of the literature classroom would demand the creation of an entirely new set of teaching and learning tools that would ultimately apply (for the sake of a coherent take on what might be deemed the ‘literature’ fallacy) to a considerably different object of study: textuality.

To a certain extent, this approach was pushed by French social studies in the 1970s. It did permeate French education studies, as we will soon see. In the case of actual classroom interactions, however, ‘literature’ appears a highly resistant notion, one upon which elementary and secondary school actors never ceased to explicitly rely. The definition of literature that continued to prevail through recommended innovations can be summed up as “littérature comme ensemble organisé de textes”, according to Aeby Daghé (4). Supposedly, such body of texts would be ‘organized’ by an external, collective entity – hence both dependent on and feeding social institutions. Yet Aeby Daghé notes that “[l]es partisans de l’approche de la littérature comme ensemble organisé de textes” are first and foremost attached to the idea of specifically literary features (“les spécificités du littéraire”), which implies an understanding of literature as self-constituted and intrinsically distinct from other potentially teachable objects. In the French secondary classroom and to a lesser extent in the primary, literature indeed is consistently approached not only as an existing world of recognizable textual practices but as a body of texts that share an aesthetical function; that is, literature as inherently literature rather than as an institutional and institutionally-validated byproduct.³ Referring to literature in or in relation to the classroom typically means performing the action that Alexandre Gefen considers inevitable in the (French) social space more widely:

> parler de la littérature, c’est opérer une essentialisation, voire, si l’on attribue à celle-ci des actions, une réification, une anthropomorphisation. (17)

No educational discourses about literature are immune, even those precisely holding dear the sociology-friendly notion that literature is “un dispositif social et symbolique puissant” (Gefen 17)
best defined as “une configuration historique de pratiques discursives” (Kuentz). In French-speaking Switzerland, the latter articulation has become consensual and seems indeed an appreciable middle way integrating social preoccupations into literature teaching, as demonstrated by Bemporad’s highly valuable two-part proposition:

Le terme littérature renvoie à l’ensemble constitué par l’objet littéraire et par tous les discours sur ce texte, ainsi que tous les éléments, les pratiques, les activités qui se font autour de cet objet. Le texte littéraire est l’objet, le document source (de sa production contingente jusqu’à sa réception multiple) qui peut être reconnu comme littéraire par une société à un moment donné, en raison d’un ensemble de propriétés et des effets qu’il suscite chez des lecteurs. Il s’agit notamment d’une construction historico-sociale, qui s’effectue dans les commentaires sur les œuvres, ou encore dans l’évaluation socio-discursive’ (2012, 31)

Bemporad writes from the perspective of didactics of French as a second language, hence of linguistics and social sciences more than literary studies, which, I argue, makes it possible for her to rely on a greater and more pragmatic variety of discourses on literary textuality. Nevertheless, even her clear-cut attempt at explicating her premises conveys assumptions about literature that go unexamined. Throughout the study building on the above definitions, she does not question notions such as lecture littéraire or littérature, either during the student interviews she recounts nor within the discussion of her results or methodology. No a priori analysis or reflexive comment is dedicated to these crucial concepts. Having opened with an explicit acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of the texte littéraire, Bemporad’s article closes on an equally interesting invitation to expand the literature domain, but the questionnaires that the study relies upon make use of the notion of lecture littéraire as if this one term did not require clarification or interrogation.

Writing as experts in the didactics of French as a first language, Swiss researchers Yann Vuillet and Chloé Gabathuler express an opinion largely disregarded within their own field when they push for recognition of the fact that “la littérature” must be apprehended “en tant que concept ... pour le moins contestable” (Vuillet and Gabathuler). Together with Vuillet and Gabathuler’s argument, the two-fold definition of literature proposed by Aeby Daghé and the ambivalent positioning of Bemporad ought to be read against the backdrop of a century of evolution in
French – and more largely Francophone – approaches to literature education, which included major ruptures as well as intriguing continuity.

*Le(s) bon(s) usage(s), past and present*

The model of literature instruction implemented in the overwhelming majority of French and Francophone classrooms until the 19th century did not, in fact, make use of the notion of *littérature.* The French maître taught *Belles-lettres,* or a “corpus d’auteurs latins, modifiés, adaptés [et d’auteurs français, essentiellement des dramaturges, des historiens et des prédicateurs du 17e siècle” (Gabathuler and Védrines 44). The late 19th century sees a progressive introduction of the concept “sous la forme d’une voie double”: literature will be the hallmark of the golden, academic version of secondary school, as opposed to the vocational route. Within the French model and French-speaking classrooms, “le passage des ‘Belles-lettres’ à la littérature se fait lentement, graduellement” (48), and one could argue that the *Belles-lettres* instructional ideal still very much dominates the approach in place by the mid-20th century:

> La perfection qui s’admire … est conformité de la forme et du fond à une doctrine. … Les élèves liront peu de textes, mais ils les liront souvent. L’’exigence de perfection’ est inséparable du processus de scolarisation des morceaux choisis par lequel le texte original est transformé pour servir les besoins d’édification morale. (ibid. 46)

A training in veneration: this is, in a nutshell, the traditional or ‘classical’ model of French literature education targeted by a sub-current of the social and educational revolution taking place in 1960s France, to which scholars will later refer as the *crise de l’enseignement de la littérature.* It is from this crisis that the notions of a *discipline français* and a matching *didactique* will emerge, “largement construite[s] contre l’enseignement des lettres” (Vibert 1).

The movement started with calls for social justice initiated in the street and prolonged in French universities, which led to an upheaval in approaches to culture in general and literature education in particular. A great amount of the criticism targeting the then-prevailing version of this education is of a socio-political nature and denounces “la hiérarchie des valeurs (classiques,
propriétés à la culture bourgeoise élitiste...) liées à un corpus imposé” (Aeby Daghé 2). What is a stake here is the very question of the corpus and the overlapping issue of the (perhaps literally) sacro-sanct littérature patrimoniale, a highly distrusted object in the context of mai 68 (Vibert 1):

La littérature devient un patrimoine suspect, la composante inutile d’une culture fallacieuse parce qu’héritage bourgeois et le lieu de manifestation de la ‘distinction’ (ibid., after Bourdieu and Passeron)

The time has come, it is claimed, for a ”mise en cause du mythe d’une grande littérature universelle classique, inventée par l’école, porteuse d’inégalités” notably by means of corpus expansion: a modern language arts curriculum should engage with a variety of texts, including those pertaining to a supposedly low-brow category (Gabathuler and Védrines 52). It is interesting to note that this recommended “élargissement du corpus, soit en intégrant des textes considérés comme de la paralittérature, soit en prenant en compte des textes contemporains, non encore ‘classiciés’” would continue to enact the existing hierarchy of teachable genres: “les narrations, les textes fictifs constitu[e]nt toujours l’essentiel des textes analysés” (65).

A second set of critiques espouse the rediscovered cause of ‘scientificity’ within humanities scholarship:

elles remettent en question la définition de la littérarité à la lumière des sciences du langage (la linguistique et les disciplines qui s’appuient sur elle pour analyser les textes) et des sciences humaines (la sociologie, la philosophie) (Aeby Daghé 2)

The enthusiastic adoption of ‘scientific’ approaches to textuality across academic fields as diverse as discourse analysis, psychoanalysis, sociology and, last but not least, literary studies, will fast translate into the development of teaching tools expected to transform the secondary school reading experience. Structuralism in general and narratology in particular, along with pragmatics, end up having a huge impact on the first generation of didacticiens who welcome these fields as a source on which to draw “une légitimité pour critiquer l’ordre ancien et des outils théoriques pour repenser l’enseignement de la littérature” (Vibert 2). A third ensemble of criticisms will give the decisive impulse for the theorization of a new model of language arts education. These are specifically pedagogical and concern “le caractère rigide et transmissif d’un enseignement qui ne
tient pas compte des conditions d’appropriation des connaissances par les élèves” (Aeby Daghé 2).

The newly established awareness of the role played by formal education in the reproduction of social inequality would soon enable education shapers to consider the importance of curricular continuity between primary and secondary models of literature instruction and new modes of writing practice (“le texte littéraire étant source et non plus objet de l’écriture”, Gabathuler and Védrines 52). A whole refoundation of the French language arts curriculum is underway.

**What (to teach) now?**

This refoundation comes at a symbolically high price. Indeed, the democratization of secondary schooling, the advent of structuralist perspectives and the opening to new pedagogical options “rend[ent] caduque l’évidence de la littérature comme objet de culture à enseigner”:

> Dès lors qu’on ne considère plus la littérature comme un donné … et qu’on refuse d’envisager la discipline français selon un principe de ‘ségrégation’ des niveaux scolaires, on minimise l’importance de la littérature au sein de ladite discipline. (ibid.)

The theoretical and social effervescence of the 1960s has major effects on the way literature education is conceptualized. From then on, literature cannot legitimately claim as large a space in the French language arts curriculum. But could it claim a place at all? The impossibility to define “ce qu’est la littérature autrement que de manière autotélique” has become the established scholarly consensus in France by the 1970s, and this poses a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in educational contexts:

> Comment en effet délimiter les contours d’un objet enseignable lorsqu’il est impossible de s’appuyer sur des fondements théoriques pour le définir? (ibid. 53)

The *discipline français* arises from this recognition, as well as from the ashes of *l’enseignement des lettres* more generally, in the late 1970s. Across school levels, the primary *enseignable* has been determined to be *français langue maternelle*, enacting
une conception de l’enseignement du français et non plus de la littérature, où l’approche des textes est pensée dans la continuité entre primaire et secondaire. (Aeby Daghé 3)

Within educational settings, the “question littéraire” (ibid.) is henceforth to be apprehended as one component of a more general reflection on, and introduction to, linguistic and discursive subjects,

et la question de la littérature ramenée aux questions de lecture, voire d’écriture, sans constituer un champ autonome dans les recherches didactiques. (Vibert 1)

These changes indeed happen first and foremost at the scholarly level, within the newly constituted field of didactique du français that is to theorize and accompany the development of the eponymous discipline. The dominant trend within the field at the time goes against the delineation of a “catégorie de textes dits littéraires susceptibles d’une approche spécifique” among the mass of printed, teachable discourses (ibid. 2):

[l’]émergence de la didactique du français comme champ de recherche participe ainsi à une certaine ‘déconstruction du littéraire’ (Gabathuler and Védrines 52, after Halté)

This radical move is made possible by the abundance, in the late 1970s and 1980s, of research endeavors dedicated to textual and discursive typologies that Vibert sees as responsible for the relegation of other “dimensions” (“notamment axiologiques ou esthétiques”) to the background of innovations such as the development of a grammaire textuelle. Within didactique du français, the educational material and institutional prescriptions drawing from this research, notions such as text and discourse become widely preferred to those of œuvre and style. At the classroom level, narratological models become the new staple. Littérature not only ceases to preside over language arts education, it seems to lose all conceptual legitimacy.

The discipline français prospers as such throughout the 1980s so much as to become a formalist caricature. This, at least, is the judgemental warning issued by a group of didacticiens and literature scholars who, by the 1990s, have grown concerned about what they consider a “dérive techniciste” of French language education. These researchers have remained fond of a number of features of traditional literature education whose value, they proclaim, has never been as high as in times of crisis of the humanities and reading practices. The very notion of littérature
should be rehabilitated without delay, in a collective impetus to "[r]éaffirmer la spécificité de la littérature et son importance dans l’enseignement" (Vibert 4) and to “repenser les finalités propres à cet enseignement” (Gabathuler and Védrines 53). At the core of this “reaction des littéraires”, as it has been called, is a case for maintaining literature’s status as an enseignable. The argument relies on the premise that littérature exists, not in the socially constructed way Guinéy had in mind when he made that very statement, but as an autonomous entity. The issue at stake for the soon-to-become didacticiens de la littérature is now the following, writes Aeby Daghé:

la littérature doit-elle être considérée comme une (sous-) discipline du français comme les autres ou est-elle une discipline à part? (3)

Having agreed on the necessity to teach literature as distinct from other forms of textuality, these researchers will move on to establish a didactique dedicated to what they consider a self-sufficient discipline in the hopes to re-imagine literature instruction on the solid grounds of its history. History is a key word in their advocacy work: the “techniques de l’histoire littéraire” are considered as essential to a well-rounded language arts education as the “transmission” of a specific, ‘literary’ body of works. The pole of the “dimension patrimoniale des oeuvres” is the first one of two deemed central by the self-proclaimed didacticiens de la littérature (Gabathuler and Védrines 53). The second pillar of didactique de la littérature gets erected on the awareness of the disconnect between French reading education and the actual “modalités d’appropriation des oeuvres par les élèves” that has been growing strong since the 1970s (ibid.). It is not possible anymore to ignore the epistemological shift affecting literary studies in that regard: from the primacy granted to the text, sums up Vibert, the field has moved to a – theoretical – focus on reader reception (3). This change in perspective remains to fully happen at the level of educational practices, it is then argued, the “dérive techniciste” of formalist approaches still arguably affecting the classroom at the time. Didactique de la littérature takes hold of this issue:

[Il]a didactique de la littérature va ainsi se construire en insistant sur l’activité de lecture et les cheminements interprétatifs. (ibid.)
The literature education of the incoming twenty-first century will be promoted as one that makes every effort to accommodate reader subjectivity and its share of “jugements de valeur pluriels” (Gabathuler and Védrines 65) – at least in part because such orientation will allow for another goal to be reached: “défendre l’enseignement des lettres” (Vibert 9)… as in Belles-lettres.5

*Lecture littéraire*

This apparently revised agenda calls for a new terminology. Along with and as a corollary to the vocable sujet lecteur surfaces another key one: lecture littéraire. The official birth setting of the phrase is thought to be a 1984 colloquium held in Reims by Michel Picard, a renowned champion of psychoanalytical approaches to literary textuality. In the following years, the concept gets refined and theorized by Picard himself through scholarly production (Vincent Jouve’s *La lecture littéraire*) and follow-up conferences such as the meeting organized in 1995 by the Centre de recherche en didactique des langues et littératures romanes in Louvain-La-Neuve. Rooted in reader reception studies (Jauss, Iser, Eco, Rosenblatt…) and initially proposed by literary studies, it will be picked up in no time by literature education theorists who will turn it into a pedagogical construct, market it as an essential product and make it the kernel on which the then-emerging *didactique de la littérature* is bound to develop.

There are several reasons why the construct fast became a highly successful one. *Didactique de la littérature* needed an effectual concept that would make it possible to “intégrer le travail sur la lecture à une approche renouvelée de la littérature en articulant les approches didactiques aux recherches littéraires” (Aeby Daghé 5-6). *Lecture littéraire* was perceived as having the potential to become such a magic formula. Its power lied in its potential for empirical impact:

*la lecture littéraire a présenté l’avantage non négligeable, en se décentrant du texte et de son indéfinissable littérarité, de ‘définir un enseignable’ à partir duquel il devient alors possible d’identifier, de théoriser et de didactiser l’enseignement de la littérature.* (Gabathuler and Védrines 55, after Daunay)
But the lexical shift was also, to some extent, the mark of a re-branding strategy. The notion matched the dominant didactic and institutional orientations of the time; it would appear more fashionable and / or politically correct than *littérature* and allow literature education research to prosper anew:

> elle a joué ce rôle de ‘catalyseur’ qui a permis l’émergence d’une approche didactique específica à la littérature. (ibid.)

The construct presents the advantages of explicitly focusing on reader activity while maintaining a concern for the literariness of the process – whatever the latter is. Here is the double bind indeed: *lecture littéraire* provides the illusion of a clarified object of study, yet the problematic nature of *littérature* remains. The posterity of the notion attests to the resistance of this definitional challenge. Even though the operational value of *lecture littéraire* is now considered established across French education and literary studies, the notion remains “susceptible d’acceptations différentes suivant le champ dans lequel elle s’inscrit (littéraire ou didactique)”. More startling is the fact of its definitional instability within *didactique de la littérature* itself:

> si l’expression de ‘lecture littéraire’ est entrée dans les écrits des chercheurs en didactique, sa définition est loin de faire consensus. (ibid. 53)

Polysemy and polyphony are understandably cherished values within the humanities, particularly literary studies. Maintenance of a large margin for definition of (what supposedly would be) a competence being taught to still developing learners may be considered a more precarious, less legitimate judgement call. But there is more. Working at the crossroads of the two above mentioned fields, Brigitte Louichon conducted a wide review of didactic research specifically, only to conclude that

> même lorsque la notion est référencée, sa signification n’est pas toujours claire. A fortiori lorsque le syntagme apparaît en cours de propos, comme une évidence partagée. (2011, 205)

Here it is: “une évidence partagée”. Explicit unfolding of the qualifier in *lecture littéraire* is a step often omitted on the implicit grounds of its being unnecessary. Precisely because of this strong
tendency in the field, a minority of didacticiens have suggested that the unpacking of the
"enseignable" lecture littéraire in fact remains to be done and definitely must be conducted.

Divide and conquer

Lecture littéraire is always used in the context of a tension that some would consider a
dilemma (Gabathuler and Védrines 54) and others a pendulum ("va-et-vient dialectique", Vibert)
between two supposedly distinct reading modes: lecture subjective, investie, participative, which
can be more crudely labelled ordinaire or naïve, as opposed to sophisticated lecture distanciée,
letrée, experte (see for instance Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur). One might consider that the
tension is very much addressed by scholars in didactique de la littérature within which each mode
has its tenants. The movement calling for a rehabilitation of ‘subjective’ reading practices at
school builds on a rejection of the supposed excesses of formalism. It focuses on psychoaffective
engagement with the text which is understood to entail identification with characters and what is
commonly called immersion. The second movement stems from a reaction to these demands:
“plusieurs chercheurs ont voulu prévenir des dérives subjectivistes” (Gabathuler and Védrines
54). Some of its foundational arguments might sound conservative, if not reactionary (e.g. the
emphasis on reading pleasure could be evidence of a spreading hedonist tendency detrimental to
society). Other criticisms appear just as socially progressive in spirit as the very discourses that
they oppose. Yves Reuter and Karl Canvat notably wonder whether a focus on emotion, in that
case aesthetic pleasure, may contribute to reproduce social differentiation through a valorization
of taste (for a certain kind of textuality), re-establishing “des hiérarchies contestées par ailleurs (la
suprématie de la littérature)”. These authors, “partisans de la lecture distanciée”, champion

le dépassement des pratiques référentielles et anecdotiques de la lecture, le contrôle des émotions
subjectives au profit d’un ‘accès à la symbolisation’, de la découverte des manifestations de
‘valeurs archétypales’ et de ‘la mobilisation d’activités cognitives et culturelles variées’ (Gabathuler
and Védrines 54, after Dufays et al.)
Consensus seekers present both reading modes as corresponding to “deux usages complémentaires … qu’il importe de bien distinguer pour reconnaître à chacun sa pleine place” (Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur 17). The “enseignable” lecture littéraire would be bipartite, the body of texts and teaching methods à choisir et à enseigner en fonction non pas d’une finalité, mais d’un équilibre, d’une tension dialectique entre deux grandes finalités complémentaires, l’une – apprendre à lire – qui touche à l’épanouissement personnel, à la construction de l’identité, l’autre – apprendre la littérature – qui concerne davantage l’intégration socioculturelle, la construction d’une culture commune, à quoi s’ajoute l’éveil à l’esprit critique, la capacité de problématiser le monde, les êtres et les choses. (18, emphasis mine)

Whenever the first goal (learning to read) is the one pursued, the preferred activity should be “la lecture qu’on qualifie habituellement d’”ordinaire’ ou de ‘cursive’, celle qui mobilise la ‘participation’ émotionnelle du lecteur à l’univers référentiel du texte”, whereas “la lecture qu’on qualifie de ‘savante’ … plus tournée vers la ‘distanciation’” would best match the second “enjeu”: learning literature. The proposition here is quite counterproductive in that it reasserts the relevance and endurance of littérature as an object that could be taught and learned instead of its now widely adopted substitute “enseignable” for which Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur themselves are trying to make a case, lecture littéraire. The notion and connotations of littérature do appear to make regular comebacks in educational spaces. These dynamics may be traced back to various plausible causes that the present chapter will at least partly cover.

But let us linger for a minute on the binomial, some might say Machiavellian, approaches to reading that were just laid out. The debate between promoters of one of two distinct visions of engaged reading currently structures much of French language arts education research as well as arguably much of the future of literature education. Perhaps more compelling than the often confusing surface is the subtext. Scholarly claims or denials of the supremacy of one reading mode over the other as well as arguments about the need for an education accommodating both all rest upon the questionable assumption that this distinction does exist. The idea of a dividing line separating two types of reading experience might be newly attractive. Yet, the need for foundational oppositions is a historical feature of the humanities in the opinion of ‘dissident’
The Bourdieusian contention that “[l]es prises de position sur l'art et la littérature … s'organisent par couples d'oppositions” is particularly relevant to the case at stake. Typically “héritées d'un passé de polémique, et conçues comme des antinomies indépassables, des alternatives absolues, en termes de tout ou rien”, oppositions such as the one between literary reading practices and non-literary ones would structure thinking, “mais aussi l'emprisonnent dans une série de faux dilemmes”, if we are to follow Bourdieu and Daunay:

si l'intérêt heuristique de tels découpages est indéniable, leur réification devient problématique, en ce qu'elle conduit à des conclusions autorisant une normalisation de la lecture, indissociable d'une dévalorisation de certains rapports aux textes. (Daunay 1999, 36).

French educational discourses nowadays tend to convey the idea of a dynamic, fruitful tension between two forms of textual experience that would be more or less equally part of teaching and learning. It is tempting to think of the polemics relative to the binary structure of reading practices as signaling a modern, thoughtful, inclusive conception of literature education. The situation can also be viewed from a radically different angle. By essentializing this structure, many discourses participate in the reproduction of a long-operating hierarchy:

[[les caractéristiques fondant la réputation littéraire et leur transposition scolaire s'inscrivent dans une lignée qui distingue soigneusement la lecture littéraire des pratiques ordinaires, simples. (Védrines and Gabathuler 79)

L'école s'est attachée à endiguer toute tentative d'implication affective des élèves pour les amener à la lecture distanciée de l'expert et du lettré. Il s'agit là d'une tendance de longue durée… (Vibert 10)

Even the argument for a rehabilitation of 'ordinary' reading practices in school does enact a hierarchy fossilized together with the dichotomy. The contemporary subtext at work in didactique de la littérature in fact makes very little room for complementary approaches to the text and their horizontal, even-handed conceptualization:

La notion de 'lecture littéraire', qui donne de nouveaux motifs à des interdits qui ne l'avaient pas attendue, connaît une réelle fortune aujourd'hui. C'est sans doute que cette notion n'est pas étrangère aux anciennes catégorisations. (Daunay 1999, 37)
Lecture littéraire tends to be marketed as a complex blend of two allegedly discrete reading modalities rather than a delineable subgroup of reading experience, but at the classroom level it remains understood, more often than not, as

un certain type de rapport au texte littéraire, fondé sur ce que l'on pourrait appeler le principe d'exigence dans la lecture des textes, posé comme source de plaisir esthétique. Ce principe d'exigence détermine la mise en œuvre, sur les textes littéraires, d'une stratégie de lecture qui soit perçue comme dépassant le cadre de la strict compréhension ou de l'appropriation; se dessine ainsi une hiérarchie des formes de lectures (ibid. 2)

What exactly is the substance of each of these supposedly clearly distinguishable reading styles? To an outsider, the grounds on which the opposition relies might appear somewhat shifting. Designation is indeed unstable, as shown by a sample of epithets: ‘participatory’, ‘ordinary’, ‘involved’, ‘naive’, ‘first-level’ reading practices should be considered antithetical to ‘interpretative’, ‘expert’, ‘aesthetical’, ‘distanced’ modes of engagement with the text. Apparent incoherences are plenty; they include the contradiction intrinsic to the depreciation of both disinvested and invested reading, or the process by which rejection of one dimension of ‘low-order’ reading experience (e.g. resort to real-world references) turns out to be, in fact, the dismissal of another (e.g. unacknowledgement of ‘high-order’ stylistic features). But there are stable traits to this opposition – or, in Daunay’s words, “des conceptions qui façonnent les normes actuelles de ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler la lecture littéraire”.

One is the assumption that the emergent literary reader is by definition / by default vulnerable because deprived of certain competences – the very ones that happen to be valorized by institutional evaluation of ‘literary’ initiation (“la simplicité ne l'est que par son rapport inégal à un français autre qui de ce fait est perçu, reconnu, légitimé comme littéraire”, Gabathuler and Védrines 67). Reader vulnerability is negatively charged and opposed to positively connoted knowledge and control, for the time of this initiation at the very least. The scission at the core of Francophone approaches to lecture littéraire involves a wholly imperfect competence to be equated with vulnerability and to be contrasted with another that is accomplished, not to say ideal, and, in any case, synonymous with mastery. The dichotomy takes many lexical shapes. It underlines the distinction between abilities to ‘infer’ and ‘judge’, to ‘paraphrase’ and ‘comment’, to
'comprehend' and 'interpret', to extract sens and to create signification, among many others. But the premise of a basal reader vulnerability is pivotal to it.

In French educational spaces as well as arguably across the Francophonie, the primary vulnerability to fend off (rather than harness) has long been the one predisposing to so-called illusion référentielle:

Ne pas sombrer dans une lecture immédiate, insensible à la forme langagière et textuelle, subissant l’illusion référentielle apparaît ainsi comme un facteur de distinction au même titre que pouvait l’être le latin dans le secondaire du XIXe siècle … Les considérations stylistiques et formelles valorisées par l’enseignement, ainsi que l’autotélisme comme exemple révélateur d’une distinction permettant l’entrée dans le cercle des littéraires par la disciplination, sont le fruit d’une abstraction considérable, systématique qui demande d’abandonner la référentialité aux usages fautifs. L’élève qui reste collé au contenu empirique ne peut jamais ‘décoller’. (Védrines and Gabathuler 79-80)

Here is, then, according to Swiss didacticiens Gabathuler and Védernes, another stable trait of approaches to lecture littéraire: “le refus de la référentialité”. To this day, a concrete educational gesture that enacts this posture while also enabling its upholding is the overwhelming partiality to fictional narratives (as opposed to non-fictional ones) in the classroom, just as in Barthes the bipartition between “une écriture intransitive à vocation esthétique” and “une écriture transitive, fonctionnelle, utilitaire” would overlap with the view that

la fiction apparaît évidemment ici comme le vecteur privilégié de l’écrivain, les genres dits factuels relevant quant à eux du domaine de l’écrivant. (ibid. 78)

The two-part structure of the construct lecture littéraire was meant to manifest an inclusive move – toward an heterogeneous conception of the literary reading experience and increased attention to the reading process in general. It should be clearer by now that it does in fact conceal a tangible imbalance. Reading does not matter as much as its being ‘literary’ ("[o]n voit bien ressurgir ici la notion de littérarité, projetée de son champ initial d’application – le texte – sur l’acte de lecture", Daunay 1999, 32). In ‘literariness’ lies the source of the didactic conundrum. As enseignables, both littérature and lecture littéraire rely on a shared belief in the existence and value of literariness.
Védrines and Gabathuler discern four moments in the constitution of "ce qui est réputé littéraire" within the scope of modern and contemporary French history. After the autotelic movement later termed Romantic, one marking event is the emergence of a *langue littéraire* imbu with an imaginary of its own ("quelle que soit son orientation, classique ou expérimentale"), which turn Védrines and Gabathuler identify as lexical and syntactic: "le style devient dès lors signe de reconnaissance d'une littérarité" (75). The 1930s Formalist moment also has a considerable impact on conceptions of literariness, literature nowadays remaining in part defined by "sa capacité à susciter l'étrangeté", or its potential for defamiliarization. Védrines and Gabathuler consider that the rise of structuralism, the *Nouveau Roman* and scientific approaches to textuality altogether make for the last major moment. Literariness can be seen as the unsettled sum of these historical layers.

This should not be considered an exclusively Hexagonal concern. French literary studies and *didactique de la littérature* do not have the monopoly on literariness-centered discussions. The notion tends to resist precise delimitation from a variety of national perspectives, as exemplified by narrative psychologists Bortolussi and Dixon's conclusion that "[l]iterariness is not one thing but rather a collection of factors". This multitude-containing "thing" is as difficult to locate once and for all as it is to define. It could be a text-immanent component, as recently reasserted by empirical studies of engagement with "discourse deviation" or "schema refreshment": texts syllogically "foregrounding" specific features would be granted "aesthetical" preference (see, for instance, the work of empirical 'literary processing' researchers Miall and Kuiken, Oatley, Van Peer). It could be a quality assigned to the text, naturalized by (social, educational) institutions and reproduced by (constructed) reader expectations: "we attribute literary value to bewilderment and perplexity" (Mikkonen). It could be a 'way of reading' (Macé), in which case "[a] text will be processed in a 'literary way'" when certain conditions are met
(Hoffstaedter). It could be the result of the reading experience, a quality to be perceived as “conditionnelle, dépendante de la réception du texte” (Thévenaz-Christen), knowing that reception itself may be taught in terms of affective, cognitive, embodied (dis)engagement, among other possibilities. Then, just as it is the result of historical sedimentation, it could be best defined as a collection of “critères à la fois intrinsèques et extrinsèques” to the text (Bemporad 2012). In any case, literariness is acknowledged as a potential problem across Europe – its historical birthplace – and to a lesser extent in non-European scholarship as well.

Only in France, however, does the notion of literariness remain a relentlessly tackled, painfully polemical and notoriously elusive nexus – as well as a seemingly untouchable one. Early Formalist attempts at defining it were meant to “demystify the sacred nature traditionally ascribed to literary texts as distinct from other modes of discourse”. Yet, one could argue, as Guiney does, that these attempts “actually contributed even further to literature’s institutional autonomy, and hence to its magical aura” (10). One could consider that efforts to legitimize and operationalize the notion of lecture littéraire similarly fail to limit the radiance of the “magical aura” that is literariness because they rely on a simple shift in focus, from the “ruines d’une littérarité indéfinissable selon des critères propres aux textes” to a report of the “décision de littérarité” on the act of reading (Daunay 1999, 37).

Within French discourses relative to literature education, literariness tends to be treated as an object of shared representations that does not call for any sort of questioning. At the very same time, argues Guiney, “more than most academic subjects, the field of literary studies struggles with the question of what, exactly, is being taught” (4). Daunay notes that the definition of literariness indeed plays a critical role in discourses “ayant pour enjeu la littérature” across Francophone institutions even though, according to Gérard Genette,

la littérarité, à l’évidence plurielle, demande une théorie pluraliste, mais qui, ainsi entendue, doit prendre acte de l’impossibilité de dégager un invariant atemporel et consensuel tel que le concept de littérarité cherche à l’exprimer. (Daunay 1999, 36)

Negative, exclusive definitions of literature represent the quintessential acknowledgement of, and discomfort with, this impossibility:
La littérature n’est ni seulement une langue, ni seulement une universalité exprimée à travers des textes incontournables … C’est encore moins quelque chose dont la perception ressortirait à une hérédité (Demougin 2010, 30)

This catch-22 arguably reflects what Védrines and Gabathuler refer to as la pierre angulaire de l’approche classique: l’instauration du texte comme littéraire par des discours et activités littéraires sur le texte en tant qu’objet, réputé littéraire par le fait même de pouvoir être objet de tels discours. (65)

Although central to discursive constructions of literature education, literary reading competences are hardly ever taught outright. Studying secondary school practices in 1990s France, Fournier and Veck found that the tools supposedly supporting literary initiation did not appear to be “the object of explicit instruction”:

C’est comme s’ils étaient censés être connus des élèves dès le début du Lycée. … On se trouve plutôt devant ‘des pratiques visant à l’imprégnation et à l’imitation de l’activité magistrale’ … Dans bien des cas, l’appropriation du texte par les élèves se limite à cette première étape, laissant le monopole de l’interprétation au maître. (Gabathuler and Védrines 59)

If this description sounds reminiscent of what many of us would view as the past of literature education, it is because that past is still very much present, particularly in secondary school (the ‘classical approach’ to literariness notably rests upon a rupture in curricular progression). Literariness cannot be an enseignable – in good part because it cannot and / or should not be defined – but French and arguably Francophone literature education is still all about literariness, which allows Guiney to make the following point:

From a structural standpoint … the questions of literary value and sacredness are similar. The difference is one of essence: the mysterious, elusive, and above all specific nature of the quality that defines a text as sacred or literary, but not in the effect that such qualities have, or the functions they serve, in the institutions to which they give rise. … literature, regardless of how distinct it may be from Scripture in its essence, nevertheless functions in a manner similar to Scripture. (2)

The French pedagogical imagination and representations about literariness therefore seem to share an essential feature: hyper-valorization – if not sacralization – of a ritualized “éveil” to literariness.
Merging imaginations

French and Francophone representations of literary initiation are likely to draw on two sets of representations – about education, on one hand; about literature, on the other hand. Françoise Demougin hints at the tight connection between those more or less abstract spaces when she postulates that “[l]a littérature appartient à notre imaginaire collectif: s’il ne se référerait pas à cet imaginaire, l’enseignement de la littérature perdrait en fait toute son intention éducative.” (29). A didacticienne de la littérature interested in the notion of a collective imagination pertaining to literature education, Demougin also relays an opinion widely shared among her peers when she proposes that “[l]a ‘faillite’ si souvent évoquée de l’Ecole participe d’une nouvelle donne, celle peut-être de la désacralisation de la littérature” (ibid., emphasis mine).

Bruno Védrines – whose dissertation is titled L’assujettissement littéraire – and M. Martin Guiney – author of Teaching the Cult of Literature – would vehemently oppose such a view. Védrines, a member of the Geneva-based Groupe de recherche pour l’analyse du français enseigné (GRAFE), strongly advocates for a socially situated approach to representations of literature, literariness, and literary education. His is a distinctly sociological, Marxism-tinted view largely inspired by experience: Védrines teaches French language and literature in a vocational high school. We saw that the crux of French struggles to de/reconstruct literature education was and remains the question of what literariness ought to entail. According to Védrines, “la chose littéraire” should always be considered “dans un champ de luttes idéologiques”, a fortiori in the classroom (72). It would be a less worthy scholarly enterprise to look for the accurate definition of the nebulous “chose littéraire” than to acknowledge that the dominant literary ideology (“idéologie littéraire”) is not an autonomous set of representations. It is, however, a performative one: “dans tous les cas elle agit”. This part of Védrines’ proposition echoes a very recent statement of French scholar Alexandre Gefen that stands out as audacious given Gefen’s primary affiliation to literary studies:
This is where Védrines’ and Guiney’s approaches subtly differ. Although both aim at deconstructing the modes of expression and functioning of an ideology whose dissemination is largely enabled by school, Guiney sees this ideology as a product of governmental will that is enforced on pupils by the School instead of, or by means of, literature (the latter being mainly the privileged vehicle), while Védrines conceives literariness as ideological in nature, more or less deliberately empowered by a number of social entities far exceeding any one single institution, and, therefore, as a considerably complex phenomenon. To lexically capture the primary way in which the latter kind of ideology would manifest itself, Védrines and Vuillet like to speak of a “réputation littéraire” applicable to texts or practices, made of the components produced and recognized by the literary field as deserving such “reputation” (“autotélisme, langage extraordinaire, formalisme, désintérêt pour la référence” being likely candidates – Védrines and Gabathuler 79). Yet, ultimately, Gabathuler, Védrines and Vuillet seek to explore the how rather than the what:

Comment la réputation littéraire, que nous entendons comme le produit toujours renouvelable d’évaluations sociales s’attache-t-elle aux objets qu’elle qualifie? Quelles reconnaissances s’y jouent? A travers quelles activités langagières? (137)

Earlier in this chapter, mention was made of Leon Sachs’ naming and discussion of a specifically French “pedagogical imagination”. Sachs considers that this imaginary not only has ideological roots but still operates as an ideology. A handful of – non-French – social historians (i.e. the American M. Martin Guiney) and breakaway didacticiens de la littérature (i.e. the Swiss Bruno Védrines) posit just the same about literature in and beyond educational contexts. It should be taken as more than a coincidence. As suggested above, chances are that French social imaginations respectively dedicated to public education and to literature are very intimately linked. The correlation between representations relating to both is again suggested by Demougin’s observation that
As one might expect based on awareness of French societal and educational changes at the times, Barthes’ famous “semi-boutade” was uttered in the aftermath of 1968. Emmanuel Fraisse points out:

avec les meilleurs esprits de son temps, Barthes mettait en cause l’idéologie de l’histoire littéraire dont le Lagarde et Michard semblait le symptôme et l’agent le plus visible. Mais, d’un tout autre point de vue … c’est justement le travail de normalisation institutionnelle et de définition par la liste (le canon) que l’École impose très généralement, voire suggère à travers ses outils et ses exercices, qui permet à tous les acteurs d’avoir une idée de ce qu’est ‘la littérature’. (40)

The “fabrique scolaire de la littérature”

The institution of education is not the only one involved in what could be regarded as the ideological constitution of the réputation littéraire. I mentioned earlier that scholars adopting a Bourdieusian perspective are likely to identify three “institutions fondatrices du champ de la littérature” equally responsible for its legitimation process: literary production, literary studies, and “l’École”. The primary feature shared by those institutions, argue Védrines and Gabathuler, is the firm resolve to ensure the recognition of their particular stance as the paradigmatic one. Even though the stances themselves slightly differ, the process at stake in all three cases is a “constitution du littéraire par le processus de légitimation fondé sur les discours” as well as, in educational contexts, “[sur les] activités à propos et sur le texte”:

La légitimité acquise pour des raisons historiques par chacune d’entre elles tend alors à naturaliser ce qui est appelé ‘littérature’. (Védrines and Gabathuler 70)

School, however, plays a uniquely important role in the reproduction of a ‘literary ideology’ or of a système axiologisé, in Reuter’s terms. Whereas approaches to literariness can appear relatively versatile or fluctuating in the two other institutions (literature publishing, literary studies) that hold novelty and mutability dear, the School stands for the steadiness and perpetuation of literary values and as the guarantor “dans laquelle se maintient, se proroge et se contrôle une définition du ‘littéraire’ et de la ‘littérarité’” (Védrines 37). Hence the possibility to envision, argue Védrines
and Gabathuler (71), "une histoire des effets littéraires en relation avec des pratiques scolaires elles-mêmes".

To Guiney, there is no doubt that the French School has been a locus of indoctrination for much of its modern – if not contemporary – history. Although literature doesn't become an actual discipline until secondary school, Guiney reckons that “primary education … has in fact been teaching ‘something else’ in addition to and even instead of literacy”, or “the rudiments of reading and writing”:

[The paradox of teaching a subject by teaching something else in its place is especially characteristic of … literary pedagogy. (3)

As didacticiens de la littérature, Védrines, Gabathuler, Vuilliet, Daunay approach the role of school in the reproduction of a ‘literary ideology’ with expertise in formal education matters, which leads them to stress the following: it is not enough to analyze the – literary and didactic – “savoirs savants” on which French literature curricula are typically based to understand what effectively goes on at school. Comprehension of the extent to which “l’école est une fabrique de légitimité littéraire”, “un lieu où sont produits les ‘effets littéraires’”, is inseparable from awareness of the specificities of educational settings and the complex ways in which “le fonctionnement de l’appareil scolaire” (Balibar and Macherey) fosters the “construction idéologique des savoirs” (Védrines and Gabathuler 71). Teaching practices and classroom interactions matter as much, if not more, than official prescriptions and curricula; all of the latter contribute to shaping students’ and ultimately social representations of literature, literariness, and literary initiation:

La construction scolaire du savoir sur la littérature et la posture envers elle, le corpus sur lequel se bâtit ce savoir, les tâches, les exercices mis en œuvre pour le lire ‘comme il faut’ … relèvent d’enjeux sociaux et idéologiques majeurs. (Védrines and Gabathuler 70)

L’Ecole, la littérature et le sacré

As pointed out earlier, Guiney’s approach (rooted in history and literary studies) and Védrines’ take (merging sociology and didactics) on the idea of a literary ideology slightly diverge
in their appreciation of it. Yet, they share a particular concern for what both identify as an unyielding analogy between the literary and the sacred. The idea that “la valeur littéraire n’est pas une propriété de l’objet, mais une sacralisation sociale” is made the center of Guiney’s analysis and admitted as a premise by Védrines. Guiney considers that literature education and religion sacralize their object(s) using exactly the same methods, such as the “separation of canonical texts from the mass of discourse”, which would be “one of the functions both of religious and literary institutions” (2). Following Védrines and this time on the topic of the réputé littéraire, Vuillet and Gabathuler do not hesitate to go for a daring analogy that Guiney would have likely embraced:

Pour qu’il y ait ‘Saint Suaire’ dans la religion catholique aussi bien que ‘lecture littéraire’ en didactique, des partis-pris doivent être assumés: des croyants doivent vouloir voir une ‘incarnation divine’ à travers un drap mortuaire …; des didacticiens doivent accepter de voir quelque chose de ‘littéraire’ à travers des signes de lecture collectés en classe (Vuillet and Gabathuler)

Another expression of this case in point, still in the religious vein, would be the solemn axiological approach to literary reading practices or “évaluation fondamentale” that Vuillet and Gabathuler see attached to the notion of literariness and judge to be the main obstacle to the deconstruction of the latter in and by didactics:

les vocables de lecture littéraire, d’écriture littéraire ou d’études littéraires ne fonctionnent, pour des communautés données, qu’à la condition d’attacher le produit d’une évaluation (la réputation littéraire) aux ‘objets’ précités.

Didactique de la littérature might not have the legitimacy of the “Eglise” or a “lieu de culte” but it still positions itself as such to the extent that it heavily draws from literary studies’ “impressionnisme intéressé”, from which “il est crucial que la didactique se départisse consciencieusement et systématiquement”:

C’est à cette condition que la didactique pourra approcher aussi bien les dimensions historico-matérielles que les processus de (dé-)valorisation sociale qui fondent la réputation littéraire. (Ibid.)

Literature education and the scholarship relative to it would both be complacent regarding the sanctification of literariness. Guiney sees a diachronic continuity in this process as it takes place within the school, a position that close observation of contemporary Francophone educational
practices presumably validates. According to scholars such as Daunay, Védrines or Schneuwly, the reality of literature education did not change much in France and other French-speaking areas over the last century. Established representations of literariness and its teaching / learning perpetuated by non-official discourses in and out the classroom, they suggest, tendentially remain unshaken by institutional or scholarly attempts to transform them, which themselves would in fact often continue to convey traditional representations. The persistence of tradition against the very backdrop of progressive initiatives is another aspect that could support Guiney’s religious analogy.

**Connivence and assujettissement**

Like Guiney, Védrines and the GRAFE research group insist on the discursive nature of the process that is the constitution du littéraire. The reproduction of a certain vision and sacralization of the littéraire depends on the reproduction of certain discourses. But given the hazy, hardly definable character of the “chose littéraire”, the maintenance of shared representations of literariness and literary initiation – despite apparent innovations in teaching practices and learning materials – would rest upon another crucial mechanism: connivance. Much of the discursive construction of literariness happens implicitly; tacit discursivity is the sphere and the form in which connivance operates. In school contexts, connivance is to be understood as taking place between a teacher, the implied author of a textbook / curriculum / activity, or the editor of an allegedly ‘literary’ work, on the one hand, and an ‘educated’ emergent reader, on the other hand:

Pour qu[e l'idéologie littéraire] opère, il faut qu'elle ait à la fois la transparence de l'évidence et qu'elle soit le foyer à partir duquel le 'je' assujetti devient possible, comprend le texte, le trouve beau, entre dans la cérémonie de l'explication de texte et pense sans avoir même à le verbaliser: 'Oui, à l'évidence, c'est de la littérature'. (Védrines 65)

Precarious, dysfunctioning or non-existent connivance should not be, and yet often is, conflated with failure to learn. Quebec-based didacticienne de la littérature Marion Sauvaire is one of a
number of Francophone education scholars to claim that it is neither possible nor desirable to legitimate only “la lecture canonique de textes patrimoniaux” – the corpus issue being an important one, if not the only one – “en postulant une connivence culturelle” (Sauvaire 45, emphasis mine). To Gabathuler, Védrines and Vuillet, connivance survives scholarly resolutions to fight it as far as literariness is concerned, in large part because avoiding its full recognition ensures the sustainability of ‘literary’ communities, including academic ones. “La chose littéraire” cannot be explicated if distinction by means of literary expertise is to be maintained. The attribution of value and the phenomenon of connivance would be the two hinges enabling littérarité to continue to operate across various social spaces even though the concept is riddled with indeterminacy. Connivance allows the process of evaluation (of works, of reading practices) to keep happening, hence the need for a reflection on the potential for connivance to become “un concept sociodiscursif opérationnalisable” within didactics of literature, according to Gabathuler et al. (138). Connivance is less of an issue in primary school than in the secondary level\textsuperscript{10} where familiarity with ‘literature’ more or less abruptly stops being a means to an end (literacy) to become a finality. Once basic reading skills are considered acquired, reading tools cease to be systematically made clear even though (the expected) reading itself turns into a completely novel practice: what is now expected of students is that they develop – with little to no explicit support – an ability to approach textuality in an ‘expert’, ‘interpretative’, ‘literary’ manner.

Tacitness probably is an essential feature of the secondary-level literature education machinery in many countries. It is also identified as an issue beyond France, as suggested by the recent work of Swiss narratologist Raphaël Baroni\textsuperscript{11}, or the following observations by American and Dutch literature education scholars:

\begin{quote}
[I]he gap between learning reading strategies and practicing literary interpretation forces students to make a prodigious cognitive leap from reading to interpretation if they are to gain access to college (Eckert)

[I]o guarantee the occurrence of positive reading experiences, students may need guidance and support of their reading experiences for a much longer period than is currently offered (Mol & Bus)

what we’re looking for is a set of comprehensible, pragmatic, and coherent principles about literature, readers, and the act of reading, principles on which readers can rely as they build literary interpretations. (Rabinowitz & Bancroft)
\end{quote}
In France and at least neighbouring French-speaking Switzerland, one such explicit set of tools does exist, made of concepts adopted from 1980s narratology and more or less adequately adapted to a learning environment. Implicit representations of littérarité however persist and the tools that one would suppose necessary to identify and discuss this precise smokescreen are not part of the available toolkit. Védrines or Guiney would likely argue that they do not and cannot exist, as literariness must remain impossible to directly address for its associated and / or constitutive ideology to prosper:

l’idéologie littéraire, qui fait partie de la littérature même, s’acharne à dénier cette base objective, à représenter la littérature ... comme quelque chose d’extérieur (et de supérieur) au procès de scolarisation, qui serait tout juste bon à diffuser, à commenter la littérature dans un effort besogneux, et sans espoir de jamais pouvoir la circonscrire. (Balibar and Macherey 30)

At the same time, recognition of a given text’s ‘literariness’ and ability to approach it in a ‘literary’ fashion are competences required from students who are not equally equiped to succeed in this process. I noted that the problem permeates literature education internationally. However, this situation appears to have especially devastating repercussions as in France where “l’enseignement de la littérature entraîne nécessairement avec lui une reproduction de la distinction”, if we are to follow Bourdieu’s landmark analysis, as Védrines does (37). To Védrines,

entre l'idéologie littéraire telle que propagée dans la société, et l'enseignement de la littérature tel que dispensé en contexte institutionnel, c'est en fait l'assujettissement qui assurera le lien. (25)

“Assujettissement,” in Védrines’ use of the notion, must be understood as both (active) subjugation and (passive) subjection. Vulnerable students would be the primary victims of a symbolical violence still unfolding in the contemporary literature classroom. It is possible to find other instances of Francophone scholars recently using the term in reference to that same space. An interesting example is a qualitative study of high school students’ appreciation of “la lecture littéraire en classe de français” conducted by Quebecois then-Master-student Alexie Miquelon. “Une lecture scolaire assujettie” is one of several categories – “profiles” – into which students’ representations get classified. Miquelon notably observes that students’ answers express “une représentation générale de la littérature dans la classe de français comme une littérature soumise
à des contraintes” as well as a “résignation envers les lectures faites en classe”. Part of her findings indirectly support Védrines’ approach to the literature classroom through the lenses of “assujettissement”:

Pour deux profils d’élèves sur quatre dans notre échantillon, les profils La lecture littéraire en classe de français: une lecture scolaire assujettie … et La lecture littéraire en classe de français : un mal nécessaire … cette représentation de la littérature est appairée à une représentation de la lecture littéraire à l’école comme étant une lecture qui doit censurer l’investissement subjectif du lecteur. (Miquelon 141-2)

These two subgroups of Miquelon’s student subjects appear to have internalized one essential aspect of “l’idéologie littéraire qui fait partie de la littérature même”: the reader as subject (the very sujet lecteur that didactique de la littérature relies upon since the 1980s) has no place in the actual literature classroom, where “quelque chose d’extérieur (et de supérieur) au procès de scolarisation” happens, something that leaves students and teacher “tout juste bon[s] à diffuser, à commenter la littérature dans un effort besogneux” (Balibar and Macherey). Without subscribing to such a view, Vuillet and Gabathuler note that

les enseignants, à leur manière, se trouvent tout autant didactiquement assujettis que leurs élèves. Ils ne sont pas moins contraints d’endosser un rôle prédéfini, puisqu’il leur revient prioritairement de déclencher des processus de médiation formative dont la pierre de touche est formée par les savoirs réputés vrais ou les normes réputées justes qu’ils n’ont pas nécessairement retenus d’eux-mêmes.

In this last sentence, Vuillet and Gabathuler purposely echo the notion of réputation littéraire, underlining the unconscious reproduction of representations passed along. Védrines, Vuillet, and Gabathuler see literary assujettissement as a social rather than uniquely educational phenomenon – but as didacticiens, it is about students, current and future, that they worry the most. They are joined in their concern by a scholar whose work I have mentioned earlier in this chapter and whose French nationality is a rare enough find on this side of the discussion to be emphasized. Bertrand Daunay started writing about the need for a truly – rather than pretend – student-centered perspective in didactique de la littérature over 20 years ago. Weaving Védrines’ and Daunay’s respective arguments, Vuillet and Gabathuler observe that

cet assujettissement didactique peut conduire à instituer littérairement des ‘imbéciles’ (Daunay, 2014). Or on ne saurait souligner assez que le seul tort de ces élèves est d’êprouver plus de peine
que d'autres à reconnaître et à intérieuriser certaines normes dont la légitimité, pour imposée qu'elle soit, n'en demeure pas moins essentiellement contestable.

Although they resort to different terminologies, Védrines and Daunay both see student vulnerability as a topic deserving primary attention from discussants of literature education's futures. Their concern might sound familiar to American education researchers used to long-established scholarly concern for the need to harness students' and literacies’ diversity. It is quite a groundbreaking and definitely minority position in didactique de la littérature and many French literature education classrooms where different reading practices – providing that such partition can be considered valid – are still routinely assigned different values. There is nothing inherently wrong with scholarly and classroom discourses grounded in this assumption, says Daunay:

qu'il y ait différentes formes de lecture est une proposition recevable; le problème … réside d'une part dans l'établissement subreptice d'une hiérarchie (qui ne se repose plus sur un postulat théorique mais sur un jugement de valeur), d'autre part dans la projection de cette hiérarchie des lectures sur les lecteurs eux-mêmes et enfin dans l'identification de ces lecteurs à des catégories sociales tangibles, qui permet de découvrir une hiérarchie des personnes. (Daunay 2014, 183)

Students unable or unwilling to conform to unvoiced expectations of literary reading development would be quickly labelled as ‘bad’ readers, “le bon lecteur étant l'autre visage du bon élève, alors même que l'on sait à quel point la capacité de lecture est liée au degré d'acculturation” (Védrines and Gabathuler 81). Here again, Védrines and Gabathuler see an ideology at work:

construire une ‘figure fantasmée’ du non-lecteur ‘sans aucun souci de la vérification empirique des catégorisations ainsi esquissées’ revient à promouvoir dans l'institution une légitimité de la lecture avec ses effets de qualification, de certification et de disqualification. (80, after Daunay).

If only one – unclearly defined – perspective on textuality is considered the ultimate learning achievement, young readers reluctant or ‘failing' to unlock this achievement are delegitimized not only as readers / learners but, in Daunay’s view, as individuals:

Le problème réside en effet dans l'étroitesse du jugement qui, observant une pratique de lecture, rejette dans la 'non-lecture' toute autre pratique. C'est plus qu'un problème, quand on voit là pure négation de l'autre et de l'altérité … Poser en effet que la lecture littéraire est 'si importante pour l'être humain' [Picard] … ce n'est pas seulement renvoyer dans le pathologique toute pratique (majoritaire) autre que celle de l'élite, c'est quasiment dénier à son pratiquant son statut d'être humain (Daunay 1999, 48)
“L'idéologie littéraire” could be approached as an autonomous set of social representations or as an actively, deliberately designed institutional creation; as Védrines would say, “dans tous les cas elle agit” (72).

**Ideology on the (school)ground: a mitigated impact?**

It would admittedly be difficult to teach both literature and the very fact that literature is first and foremost “ce qui s’enseigne” (Barthes), i.e. a socio-discursive construction and sub-discursive set of conventions, to secondary and a fortiori primary school students. It would also be seriously inaccurate, unfair, and even dangerous to consider that French literature classrooms are nothing but ideology incubators. There is no single answer to the question asked at the beginning of this chapter (qu’est-ce que la littérature… enseignée?). The jury is still out on what exactly is taught in the literature classroom, for a number of reasons that bring nuance to the literary ideology argument.

First and perhaps obvious is the fact that education, at any point in time or location, does not happen in a vacuum. Formal education as we know it should be considered “en lien avec la création des Etats-nations”; conceived as a rupture with then-dominant modes of knowledge transmission, say Schneuwly and Dolz, it is originally and still meant to provide “un accès généralisé à la construction d’un rapport au monde médiatisé notamment par la culture de l’écrit” (20). Current education models and the implementation of the latter build on previous realizations and representations of education in a given national and / or local space. The same goes for literacy practices: “like all cultural phenomena, they have their roots in the past.” (Barton et al. 13). This premise has become a staple of the mainstream discourse on literacy internationally. In France just as much as in other countries, there is relative public consensus nowadays on the necessity to approach modalities of engagement with textual material “as fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part”, and a complex blend of historically situated components (ibid.). Some aspects of the recent evolution in reading practices are still far
from making their way to the average French classroom for a variety of reasons, including practical and / or – indeed – ideological ones. Even so, French literature education cannot be deemed an “état de fait intemporel”; it is the product of a history durant laquelle ce qui est réputé ‘littéraire’, mode de lecture et corpus de texte, se transforme et se précise inlassablement. (Védruine and Gabathuler 69)

Members of the GRAFE see this process as a “double mouvement de perpétuation de la tradition et d’incorporation de la nouveauté” that also constitutes an ultimate test of relevance for the innovative and traditional objects confronted to each other and to the reality of the classroom. Any school discipline (or subject) would evolve according to this logic of progressive transformation and simultaneous maintenance of certain objects and methods. Resistance to change has been strong on the literature education front; yet there too, perpetuation of particular “socio-historical practices” is only partially accomplished, as the sedimentation process entails (limited) incorporation of the new (Schneuwly and Dolz). Sedimentation is a very Vygotskian concept, note Schneuwly and Dolz, and one perfectly fitting here as it is used by Vygotsky in relation to human development. Translated to school environments, sedimentation can be defined as a general process by which new teaching traditions come to append themselves to formerly established ones in a more or less harmonious fashion. At its core, it is a classroom-based process. The level of teaching practices is where innovation and tradition engage in a choreography that shows them to be co-dependent to a certain extent:

les nouveautés dans l'enseignement sont généralement ancrées dans les pratiques plus anciennes et, à contrario, les pratiques anciennes ont tendance à revenir quand les nouvelles montrent leurs limites. (Schneuwly and Dolz 59)

The configurations of this dance – not only the nature of the layers but their arrangement – are increasingly recognized as an object of particular value to French education research. It does indeed seem a privileged pathway to understanding the alchemy that schooling would be – and in our case of interest, what the classroom does to / with representations of literariness and literary initiation.
The second reason that should make us reluctant to believe in the monolithic uniformity of a ‘literary ideology’ and the steadfastness of its dissemination lies precisely in classroom dynamics. As a world with structural and interactional logics of its own, yet permeable to a variety of cultural influences, each classroom environment is a unique laboratory within which knowledge gets reinvented anew:

La classe est un écocomplexe, dont l'environnement modifie considérablement les éléments extrinsèques qui entrent dans ses dispositifs au point de les rendre autres (Védrines 69)

Védrines is far from alone in believing in the “puissance créatrice de l’école” (Védrines and Gabathuler 69). What could this creative power translate into on the literature classroom ground? Scholars outside the Francophone world might rejoice in seeing the classroom generate “its own forms of inquiry into social life, as teachers and students join in the ‘social exchange of meanings’ around the texts that provide the focus for study”:

[b]y engaging in this exchange of meanings, in the ‘interactive event’ of the ‘text’ … we focus – to borrow again from Bakhtin – on the ‘truth’ of the situation as it presents itself ‘to me as the one who is actively experiencing it’. (Doecke and Van de Ven 4).

This is a very non-French proposition, indeed, in several ways: the stress on interactions; the equivalent degree of agency recognized to all actors; the primacy of collaborative meaning-making over solitary mining of the text; the equal value a priori recognized to all meanings; the valorization of readers’ affective subjectivity. In a different vein, Gabathuler and Védrines suggest that even the explication de texte – a quintessentially traditional activity that largely silences the idiosyncratic voice of the student, “interprête objectif et neutre”, and tends to “sacraliser le texte” – could become, in the classroom, a means to a transformative end conceived as emancipation (64).

This is a transformation more likely to sound familiar to French readers, notably, if not only, because it relies on the premise not of equality, but of a deep-seated hierarchy supposedly to be overcome. Gabathuler and Védrines indeed want us to see further: French literature education actors would partake in a logic of dominants-dominés; this system would be
reproduced by discourses more or less explicitly conveying detrimental representations. Hence the claim that

la seule porte de sortie de l'idéologie pourra venir de l'enrichissement et de la transformation des discours dans la discussion des textes. (ibid.)

To Védrines, one element that makes it possible to envision such a transition is the fact that the *forme scolaire*, coming with “sa propre cohérence, ses propres lois, ses contraintes, ses objectifs” (Védrines 69), ultimately has the power to (re)define the undefinable: “c'est précisément ici que la légitimation scolaire se distingue de la légitimation des experts” (Védrines and Gabathuler 64). It took time and an invalidated hypothesis (according to which the *idéologie littéraire* would be directly reflected in classroom interactions) for Védrines himself to acknowledge how easy and risky it is to underestimate “l’autonomie, la logique, l’histoire, la disciplination spécifique à la forme école” (Védrines 27). The latter, Védrines came to believe, certainly fosters reproduction but also – maybe at the same time – potentially inflects the composition and impact of an ideology that “par sa revendication d’autonomie semble se situer dans un lieu hautement intellectualisé indemne” (ibid.).

**The littéraire, from scholarship to the forme scolaire**

Védrines’ distinction between two forms of knowledge (school-made / experts-made) draws from the last construct that allows us to nuance the idea of an almighty ‘literary ideology’: *transposition didactique*. Teaching is likely to have a relatively transformative effect on contents because it never consists in a blind implementation of curricular prescriptions or transmission of established knowledge. All three spaces (teaching, education policy, scholarship) weigh in education and learning outcomes, but according to pioneer Swiss didacticien Yves Chevallard there can be no “identité possible, voire souhaitable, entre objet de savoir et objet d’enseignement.” (Schneuwly and Dolz 19). The theorizing of the process by which expert knowledge becomes taught knowledge, termed *transposition didactique* by Chevallard, takes
the three aforementioned dimensions into account to explicate the complex functioning of the educational apparatus. The first part of the process – *transposition didactique externe* – happens at the level of policy-making and curriculum design. It consists in a modelization of desired learning outcomes based on the components deemed relevant by scholarly “savoirs de référence”. At this level, elements get selected and adapted into *enseignables* – which explains, for instance, the fact that

la décision de la valeur littéraire des œuvres qui figurent dans les programmes scolaires – qu’elles soient prescrites ou conseillées au sein d’une liste – échappe aux enseignants, ces derniers n’intervenant dans les choix des œuvres étudiées que dans un second temps. (Rouxel 2010, 117)

*Transposition didactique interne*, by contrast, designates the stage of classroom-based reinterpretation of official prescriptions, an interpretative work consisting in “une construction et une négociation … dictée par les capacités des élèves, évidemment en tension avec les discours de la prescription”. It is in this “tension” between more or less concordant representations that the power of transformation / actualization of the classroom space and its actors as well as the specific constraints weighing on them would be revealed (Thévenaz-Christen & GRAFElect 43).

All the actors involved in this two-part process come to literature education with preestablished representations, teachers included. The following reminder features the sedimentation metaphor this time applied not to the discipline but to its human representative, a move consistent with Vygotsky’s original use of the notion:

[s]i la construction de l’identité du lecteur se réalise dans la complexité, complexité il y a également dans la construction de l’identité du futur enseignant, une identité faite des strates de ce qu’a déposé l’enseignement reçu, en termes de corpus mais aussi de pratiques, du lecteur qui s’est construit sur ce substrat scolaire et dans ses rencontres privées avec la littérature, des effets de la formation … et des prescriptions des programmes. (Ulma 230)

The student (as empirical or archetypal figure) of course is not excluded from the theoretical models sustaining *didactique du français / de la littérature*, and *didactique* more generally. It is the student’s reaction to the teacher’s *dispositifs*, modes of communication, means of presentation that is however observed and / or projected in priority, this reaction being considered “l’indice de leur propre action d’apprentissage” (Schneuwly and Dolz 28). It is worth remembering, however,
that students just as teachers must deal with representations more or less explicitly conveyed by social instances as well as by the discipline français whose content, throughout the last century, has become an aggregate

de disparitions (par exemple, disparition des humanités … au profit … d’un nouvel objet, la littérature française), de reconfigurations (l’articulation lecture-écriture dès les premiers degrés d’enseignement), de refontes liées à la discipline français dans les années septante (avec le recentrage sur un objet, la compréhension de textes, et l’abandon de l’histoire littéraire) et de créations… (Thévenaz-Christen and GRAFElect 44)

The transposition didactique interne (from education policy to classroom implementation, enseignable to enseigné and eventually to objet d’apprentissage) is a fascinating subprocess. Still, little has been written by Francophone scholars about this part of the trajectory of a given school subject ("[p]eu d’études ont pour objet principal l’objet enseigné et sa construction", Schneuwly and Dolz 27). It is only recently – tellingly, perhaps – that “on voit … se dessiner un mouvement qui … commence à s’intéresser à ce qui s’enseigne effectivement en classe” in French-speaking areas, and France in particular, which is why it remains difficult to “déceler des tendances communes fortes” (ibid.). One can only imagine how many alterations an objet de savoir such as littérature would undergo until / as it becomes an objet enseigné.

Because literature education practices and contents undergo sedimentation; because classroom dynamics get the last say as to what exactly gets taught; and because at least two stages are involved in the constitution of littérature as an enseigné, it is difficult to conceive of ‘literary ideology’ as a stable, homogenous entity. It is more likely to resemble a set of discrete elements standing out, in and out the classroom, as convergent and recurrent in representations about / of literary initiation. These elements can be either consolidated or moderated at all three levels involved in the transposition didactique (literary scholarship, education policy, primary and secondary school teaching). Their successful reproduction also depends on the extent to which they pervade the other social spaces that the students evolve in. There are numerous parameters involved de facto in the reproduction of a French ‘literary ideology’.

One factor is left unaddressed by the authors discussed since the beginning of this chapter – for it does not constitute a topic of interest either in didactique de la littérature or in
French sociology and education studies more generally. I am talking about national-cultural variation in emergent literary reading education, a variation that can be hypothesized based on the existing diversity of geographical locations, hence cultural spaces, in which French is taught as a first language.

**Francophone variations**

So far, I have referred to a variety of converging attempts to conceptualize an idiosyncratically “French” approach to literature education. It is on a global rather than local scale, however, that this approach should be considered. French is a national language in some 30 states that inherited it from their Hexagonal neighbour, former administrator or colonizer. Together with an even larger constellation of unofficially French-speaking areas, these states form a physical and cultural landscape spread across continents and known as the Francophonie. They are symbolically represented by an institution (the IOF) whose view is that “of course France retains a strong association with the worldwide promotion of French, because of its policies and practices in the cultural and educational domains” (Véronique). As suggested by this discourse, center-peripheries dynamics hold strong. In most of the countries where French is a primary language of schooling, French educational and literary cultures (e.g. “le canon littéraire patrimonial tel qu’il s’est constitué dans ses relations avec le champ national français”, Védrines and Gabathuler 69) remain the referent par excellence, which might not come as a surprise. “Existe-t-il dans et par la langue française”, wonders Combe, “une certaine communauté ‘d’esprit’ (comme dirait Senghor…), ou plutôt de pensée?” (22). Education researchers do indeed often evoke a *modèle francophone* – rather than French – of language and literature education that is uniquely sheltered from international influences and consistent in its underpinnings across the numerous curricula based on it across French-speaking areas other than Hexagonal France.

As seen throughout this chapter, established traits of the ‘Francophone’ approach to first language and literature education notably include the centrality of a French-born notion, *lecture*
littéraire, whose ill-defined character causes potentially damaging confusion. According to many didacticiens, such as the Swiss Bernard Schneuwly, another recurrent feature is the struggle to accommodate a number of enduring resistances at the level of instructional practices. In any given Francophone context, studies of curriculum implementation or teacher training would likely reveal, among other tendencies, highly conflicted postures toward ‘modernized’ teaching methods and a particularly radical rupture between primary and high school. At the three levels of scholarship, policy and instruction, the Francophone space as a whole appears impressively enclosed and resistant to international knowledge exchange (f.i. “[l’]enseignement de la littérature dans le système scolaire est une problématique qui semble plus souvent débattue dans des pays de la zone francophone (Belgique, Canada, France, Suisse)”, Plumelle 133). French and non-French (“Francophone”) literary texts are invariably disassociated:

"il va de soi … que ‘la littérature’, c’est la littérature française, plus que la littérature en français … L’enculturation dans la culture propre ne pourrait donc être réalisée qu’au moyen de l’appropriation d’une littérature nationale, identifiée purement et simplement comme ‘la littérature’. On peut voir là les restes, dans les programmes, d’une idéologie accordant aux lettres françaises un destin spécifique. … Ce même principe de démarcation opère encore aujourd’hui, dans la répartition entre lettres ‘françaises’ et ‘francophones’ (Mazauric 37-38)

This principle continues indeed to operate beyond the metropolitan center: French canonical works tendentially dominate curricula even in non-metropolitan areas.13 Most characteristics of the French model of literature education apply by definition to French overseas departments but to other French-speaking countries as well.

The French concept of literariness importantly entails a certain relation to language that has imbued most curricula in the Francophone world. Together with “autotélisme”, “formalisme” and “désintérêt pour la référence”, the consistent resort to a langage extraordinaire – i.e. separate from / superior to les mots de la tribu – is an essential element “pour définir ce qui est réputé littéraire”, observe Védrines and Gabathuler (79). The French representation of literariness and obsession with distinguished uses of language are connected, and the latter certainly remains a primary vector of social reproduction, as uncovered long ago by Pierre Bourdieu, across the Francophone space. However, the modalities of the initial adaptation of French language and
literature curricula and their subsequent transformations have also been country-specific. Even if there exists a model of emergent literary reading education that is specific to the Francophone space and unified in that sense, this model is likely to be managed differently in different locations. One should expect, across the Francophone space, to find that initially French curricular and pedagogical propositions are the object of cultural modulations / bricolages. Differences could be noticeable at the level of transposition didactique externe, in different ways. To this day, French scholarship remains the unrivalled reference as far as Francophone policy relative to language and literature education is concerned. But the French 'expertise' does not necessarily make its way into non-French national or regional curricula at the same pace or in the same form. Approaches in Quebec have long been influenced by Canadian and American scholarship and pedagogical methods. Conversely, it is possible, even likely, that certain aspects of the modèle that are considered dated in Hexagonal France persist in other areas. I was just now discussing the central function of outstanding language proficiency in social elevation. Mastery of the French language is a foundation stone of cultural domination – and mastery must be irreproachable before it can become inimitable (extra-ordinary). Nonetheless, the pedagogical means to this end have evolved in accordance and relation with specific regional and national conditions. Alexis observes that in contemporary Haiti’s primary schools, like in French ones a few decades ago,

[le texte se dit: il convient de le connaître, de le verbaliser avec expressivité … [L’évaluation de cet aspect de la connaissance linguistique continue à jouer un rôle non négligeable dans les clivages sociaux. Connaître les classiques par cœur, prononcer ‘correctement’ les syllabes et les mots, marquer les liaisons en français sont des indices des établissements scolaires fréquentés, de la culture littéraire d’un individu ou de ses origines familiales. (74)]

Aeby Daghé et al. observe that in Sub-Saharan countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger or Senegal, literary-reputed textuality in primary education remains vastly presented as a support for literal comprehension, moral edification or memorization practice (rather than framed by “a communicative perspective consistent with more recent pedagogical objectives”) just as in the classical model that structured French public education before its r/evolution:
dans les Instructions officielles fin XIXe-début XXe, la fonction du texte littéraire était d’enseigner les valeurs dominantes de la société (donner des leçons de morale ou de civilisation, constituer une identité culturelle) et de présenter le modèle d’une belle langue à imiter (se forger un style). La transmission de ces contenus se faisait surtout par imprégnation. Cette cohérence s’est altérée progressivement dans la deuxième moitié du XXe siècle. (Vibert 1)

In a number of formerly French countries or current French overseas departments, this model did prevail for much longer, resisting the more or less radical changes to language and literature education that took place in 1970-80s France. Important efforts to reform primary and secondary-level reading curricula are underway in the above-mentioned African states. Yet, representations of literary initiation imbued by the historically legitimate Francophone ‘model’ of education could endure in many ‘Southern’ Francophone classrooms as suggested, for instance, by the fact that in Togo, Benin or Burkina Faso, “[q]uand on interroge les maîtres sur leurs lectures personnelles, le manuel revient souvent, plutôt que ‘du roman’, expression qui désigne de façon un peu péjorative la littérature de fiction” (Noyau 4).

It is at the level of transposition didactique interne that beliefs about literary reading development might most clearly clash or enter in negotiation with French ones at a given time, reflecting cultural histories that overlap and compose different traditions. From her international perspective, anthropologist of education Elsie Rockwell not only found out that beside reflecting effective normativity, school realities would entail diverse historical constructions notably present in discourses and practices (“[c]es éléments constituent des ‘cultures scolaires’ vraiment complexes qu’il faut déchiffrer pour mieux comprendre les processus éducatifs actuels”, 2006, 31). She also argued that this complexity "n’est guère comprise par les catégories de la didactique" that fail to pay enough attention to studies of written and material culture, student resistance, non-verbal interactions and expressions of affect, among other elements. It is interesting that these are the very elements that seem to constitute the blind spot of dominant approaches in didactique de la littérature. They are also some of the essential dimensions of classroom dynamics to consider if we are to fruitfully explore cultural variation in representations about a shared model of literature education.
In non-French classrooms implementing an overwhelmingly French-inspired program, trans/national cultural hybridity may manifest itself as a tension between multiple normativities (Sauvaire, among others) possibly finding resolution in a fusion of sources and annihilation of imaginary frontiers, or in "dislocation"; possibly blending or hardening within “third spaces”, a notion famously theorized by Homi K. Bhabha:

‘C’est dans l’émergence des interstices – dans le chevauchement et le déplacement des domaines de différences – que se négocient les expériences intersubjectives et collectives d’appartenance à la nation, d’intérêt commun ou de valeur culturelle.’ (Bhabha, in Husung and Jeannin 78)

la spécificité d’une culture ou d’un individu vient des combinaisons infinies qui peuvent être produites, des agencements de termes hétérogènes, dissemblables, différents, bref, de la reformulation de plusieurs héritages (Laplantine 52)

In other words, the literary ideology still powerfully at work in French classrooms (according to Védrines, Guiney) might translate into more complex systems in different Francophone settings, variously contributing to locally specific imaginaries relative to literary initiation.

**Teachers and emergent readers as culturally diverse subjects**

In school, “the plurality of global French experiences” (Morphis 28) is embodied in teacher and student actors who come to French literature instruction with non-French identities. Cultural identity continues to prove a notion difficult to embrace against the backdrop of communitarianism-wary French society:

la recherche en didactique de l'écrit s'est encore assez peu intéressée aux questions identitaires en lien avec les pratiques littératiées et les apprentissages (Bemporad and Moore 30)

[a]ujourd’hui, le ‘sujet lecteur’ n’est pas réellement construit, nous semble-t-il, comme un sujet socioculturel, même si cette notion est intéressante pour déplacer la question de l’interprétation, du texte ou de l’auteur vers le lecteur. (Daunay, Delcambre and Reuter 29)

The absence of studies dedicated to different Francophone appropriations of an originally French model of literature education, particularly at the classroom level, can be explained by this more general and very French reluctance to acknowledge cultural particularisms. A culturally sensitive approach to the teaching of French as a first language seems overdue at a time when a growing
number of students are educated in the same language according to local variations on the same imported, French-grounded model, in geographically distinct settings. Ideally, this approach would take into account “la dimension fondamentalement dynamique de l’identité culturelle des individus, et partant, refuser l’imposition d’un modèle culturel unique et essentialisé” (Husung and Jeannin 76). Should such a model remain the dominant referent, we would need a framework allowing to push further the idea that instead of speaking of “une idéologie de la littérature”, it might be useful to “considérer le champ comme un rapport de forces en équilibre instable entre des dominants et des dominés” (Védrines 69). The suggestion does indeed take a different amplitude when applied to a once colonized world.

In officially French-speaking classrooms whose actors know several languages, could teaching produce “un heurt avec le répertoire narratif et discursif propre à la langue maternelle et composante de l’univers symbolique”, for instance, just as in classrooms where French is taught as a second language (Husung and Jeannin, after Chiss, 79)? Daunay, Delcambre and Reuter note that “de rares et anciennes études ont mis en évidence comment des lecteurs culturellement différents produisaient des lectures différenciées d’un même texte” (29). Readings might differ in part because of a divergence between projected expectations. In all probability, (inter)actions on and with the text will vary depending on what a teaching or learning subject believes to be the norm in literary development – her representations of literary initiation. Discourse communities (“groups of people held together by their characteristic ways of talking, acting, valuing, interpreting and using written language”, Barton et al. 11) bound by both non-French informal language practices and an inherently French formal education framework could negotiate this framework in different ways – alternatively undermining or fostering the reproduction of a French ‘literary ideology’. Francophone enactments of a historically French imaginary (“national patterns of interpretation”, Leenhardt and Jozsa; "national reading cultures", Griswold) appear very worthy of more thorough investigation.

Neither Védrines14 nor Daunay, writing about French-speaking Switzerland and France respectively, resort to the specific notion of vulnerability while discussing the imposition of a
literary ideology even though they do resort to related semantic fields. It seems like a particularly useful concept to return to as we consider the issue of a Francophone model of literature education versus diversity of the Francophone space. Earlier in this chapter, I contended that the emergent readers’ default mode can be considered to be vulnerability – to social and institutional evaluation of their ‘literary initiation’, from an external observer perspective; to illusion référentielle, from a social and institutional perspective. We saw that in France, “sombrer dans la lecture immediate” gets perceived as the main peril to which a vulnerable reader will be exposed (Védrines and Gabathuler) and that reader vulnerability tends to be negatively charged because it is associated with the defective pole of the binomial space within which approaches to textuality are sorted. In teaching and learning situations involving emergent readers unequally endowed in dominant cultural capital, reader vulnerability can be perceived / experienced as a particularly pronounced weakness. Such might be the case with proportionally underserved student groups in European and American French-speaking areas. Learners schooled in less privileged French-speaking countries (including some formerly French territories in North and West Africa) or overseas French departments could make up for the most vulnerable populations. However, in these contexts especially, vulnerability can also be approached as a potential worth harnessing, a reservoir for counter-narratives as well as alternative forms of knowledge, and ultimately a threat to legitimized representations:

in the Caribbean imaginary, a diminutive status does not equate with subservience, but is the very position from which resistance is forged. (Hardwick 5)

The vulnerable reader standing her ground holds the power to symbolically outcompete another reader instance – the ‘educated’ reader – arguably colonized by an imposed imagination and turned colonizer of textuality.

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1 Chessex-Viguet chooses to label the late-20th-century texts in her corpus “témoignages”, opposing them to 19th – early 20th century “récits pédagogiques” that were meant to be used as actual educational supports. She considers the former a particularly stellar basis for the creation of educational models applicable in the empirical (school) world. Approaching this body of texts in such a way, she neglects the fact that
autobiographical writing often features fictional elements, a disregard that tends to immediately operate whenever texts relating school experience are concerned. More problematic, though, than the author’s semi-fictional intention is the cognitive bias that likely leads the reminiscing writer to – non-intentionally – validate and reproduce possibly fallacious representations of what literary initiation is or should be.

2 Enseignement et litterature dans le monde, Revue internationale d’éducation de Sèvres, no. 61, December 2012.

3 See Gabathuler, Aebi Daghé, Daunay, among others.

4 The notion is not new, but its current meaning is recent: “L’existence ou plutôt la reconnaissance d’un corps de textes caractérisés par leur fonction esthétique, autrement dit la littérature dans notre conception actuelle, ne remonte pas au-delà du XVIIe siècle” (Daunay); “A l’Âge classique, ‘littérature’ signifiait ‘connaissances’, ‘doctrine’…” (Fraisse).

5 The “valeur” at stake in the various value judgements that are presumably now welcome remains the “valeur-littérature” (Gabathuler and Védrines 64, after Vuillet).

6 See for instance Daunay’s table in “La ‘lecture littéraire’: les risques d’une mystification”, p. 35.

7 Ronveaux and Scheuwyly 27.

8 See Védrines 66.

9 See Lafarge, 1983.

10 This point was suggested in the introduction, where the notion of connivance was evoked in relation with Philippe Lejeune’s address to teacher trainees.

11 See Baroni, 2017.


13 Many Francophone countries started early on to integrate non-French ‘literary’ works into their national corpus but they may not necessarily have, at the time, pushed for ‘decolonized’ approaches to these texts.

14 Védrines actually does refer to vulnerability in relation with his topic of interest only once, commenting on a quote from Judith Butler: “Le terme ‘vulnérabilité’ est particulièrement évocateur, car il connote une forme de faiblesses et une réaction de l’individu qui réagit pour ne pas être blessé, affecté.” (32).
CHAPTER TWO

Disciplinary Approaches to Narrative Representations of Literary Initiation, I: Social Sciences

Among discursive genres, self-narrative in particular has long been recognized by social scientists as a privileged tool to refine and expand knowledge about a variety of topics. Within the field of *didactique du français langue étrangère*, the wealth and quality of data accessible by means of this resource is particularly appreciated; researchers have been prone to build qualitative design frameworks that largely rely on it. The *Groupe de recherche sur les biographies langagières*¹ at the University of Lausanne is a particularly exemplary entity in that regard: not only do its members use a semi-directed narrative model allowing to better grasp “les circonstances, les motivations et la chronologie” of individual second-language appropriation, they have also established the legitimacy of reader autobiography as a primary source of knowledge (Baroni and Bemporad 118). Indeed, oral and written reader autobiographical writing represents a unique methodological asset to subfields of French sociology and education research dedicated to enhancing the comprehension of reading practices in specific or general populations.

Bernard Lahire is widely considered a pioneer both in this area of study and in resorting to that type of source. Bourdieu’s influence looms large in Lahire’s work where the notion of *domination culturelle* makes frequent appearances. The Bourdieusian concept of *distinction* finds an echo in Lahire’s *dissonance culturelle*, which applies to the limits constraining cultural code-switching in a strictly hierarchized public and imaginary space inaccurately presented as democratic or *égalitaire*:

Parler métaphoriquement de dissonance, c’est souligner le fait que, dans l’état actuel des choses, l’ordre inégal des différents registres de légitimité culturelle n’a pas volé en éclats et que les variations d’un registre à l’autre sont rarement vécues par les acteurs comme des déplacements horizontaux à l’intérieur d’un espace de registres culturels strictement équivalents. (Lahire 673)
Lahire’s study of cultural practices and preferences (2004) still knows no equivalent in France, being unique in its focus on both intra-individual and inter-class variations, in its detail and in its breadth\(^2\). The extraordinarily vast overview achieved allowed Lahire to formulate claims, still deemed valid in his field and beyond, about the socially perpetuated persistence of dissonance culturelle as well as the catalyst role of French public schooling in this ideological reproduction:

> Tous ceux qui ont fréquenté suffisamment l’école pour intérioriser le sens des hiérarchies culturelles peuvent à un degré ou à un autre, à un moment ou à un autre, dans tel ou tel domaine de la pratique, juger les autres ou se juger eux-mêmes à l’aune des normes légitimes ou, du moins, de ce qu’ils en ont perçu. (694)

Lahire goes as far as to define the French école as a “lieu d’inculcation” (“où l’on a historiquement formé le plus systématiquement un ascétisme élévateur”, 690), a very powerful qualification congruent with Sachs’, Guiney’s and Védrines’ findings. Moreover, Lahire’s data show that the normes légitimes at stake, as far as reading is concerned (and reading is very much concerned in the reproduction of distinction and dissonance culturelle), is almost entirely a matter of registres de langage, one of which would be utilitarian, practical, mindlessly used, and the other symbolical, distanced, thoughtfully handled. Once again, the stark distinction and opposition between two types of engagement with textuality – instinctive and material (literal) versus distinguished and intellectual (literary) – appear to rule representations:

> apprendre à maîtriser symboliquement le langage, c’est se mettre objectivement en position de maîtriser ceux qui n’en ont qu’une maîtrise pratique (la maîtrise pratique étant perçue par les dominants culturels comme une non-maîtrise). (691)

The consumers of culture surveyed, interviewed and observed by Lahire and his peers are exceptionally diverse in age and socio-economic status. Later studies in sociologie de la lecture and education have been more narrowly focused (understandably so in the latter case) on teachers’ and students’ experiences.
“(Auto)biographie de lecteur” in theory and practice

In line with its focus on the sujet lecteur, the quite novel discipline known as didactique de la littérature (see Chapter 1) has shown great interest since its inception in exploring student and teacher narratives of engagement with first-language textuality. In fact, the early 21st-century concept of biographie langagière (“un récit plus ou moins long, plus ou moins complet, où une personne se raconte autour d’une thématique particulièrem, celle de son rapport aux langues, où elle fait état d’un vécu particulier, d’un moment mémorable”, Perregaux 83) paraphrases, in form and substance, the (auto)biographie de lecteur as defined and used by didacticienne de la littérature Annie Rouxel:

une mise en discours des expériences de lecture de textes ainsi que de la manière dont on se confronte au texte littéraire et à la littérature [qui] ouvre la réflexion sur la part que peut prendre la littérature dans la formation d’un individu, sur la multiplicité des modes d’appropriation des textes, sur la place de la subjectivité chez le sujet qui construit du sens (2004, 137)

To be sure, the (auto)biographie de lecteur is invaluable as a finished product to the social scientist looking for insights. Teacher-focused studies for instance have – unsurprisingly – shown that “les représentations des enseignants de la littérature influencent fortement leur pratique de sélection des corpus scolaires et leurs pratiques d’enseignement” (Miquelon 10). Rouxel’s groundbreaking 1996 and 1999 studies involving middle- to high-school students revealed, according to their author, that the essentialist conception of literariness theorized by Genette3 (1991, in Miquelon) dominates student conceptions, at least in the participant groups.

In Rouxel’s and Bemporad’s view, the autobiographie de lecteur is a pedagogical resource in addition to a data source, a process just as much as an end result. Having students and teachers compose a narrative of the self-as-reader will propel them to take a stand vis-à-vis the social function of literature and their own reading practices (ibid.):

Malgré les difficultés (comment assumer un statut de non-lecteur? dire son manque d’intérêt et son ennui? la contrainte des lectures scolaires?), la pratique est riche d’enseignements pour les sujets lecteurs en formation (Vibert 11)
Since the early 2000s, “la scolarisation du genre” has been enacted in various French, Swiss, Quebecois secondary- and higher-education contexts. Teachers’ metanarratives have been the object of much attention; important studies include those conducted by De Beaudrap, Duquesne and Houssais (2004), Emery-Bruneau (2010) or Falardeau et al. (2009) for the Quebec area. When implemented in professional development contexts involving education practitioners, the exercise tends to get more openly analytical than when practiced by student populations as it is then meant to explicitly engage current or future teachers “dans une démarche réflexive” (Vibert). In contrast, experimentations involving young students would be designed so as to empower literary reading development by developing meta-cognitive awareness as well as trust in one’s own reading abilities and agency (de Croix and Dufays). The framing of the activity can be detailed or general enough to either direct subjects’ attention to particular issues or enable them to explore any “souvenirs” or “problèmes ayant trait à la lecture ou à l’écriture ainsi qu’à leur apprentissage” (Daunay and Reuter 188).

It should be noted that student and teacher populations are not equitably represented yet in the collected narrative output. In fact, compared to that of teachers, students’ expression of their rapport à la littérature remains to be seriously taken into consideration:

La recherche sur les représentations des élèves, tout spécialement en didactique de la lecture, a été et est encore beaucoup moins prolifique que celle sur les représentations des enseignants et des futurs enseignants. (Miquelon 58)

An emblematic example of the “scolarisation” of reader trajectory narrative involving young students is Séverine de Croix and Jean-Louis Dufays’ 2004 experiment with socio-economically distinct groups of Belgian teenagers (generally privileged, heterogenous or disadvantaged student populations) in three high schools dispensing either academic, generalist or professional oriented courses of study. Drawing on the hypothesis of a direct correlation between an emergent reader’s meta-cognitive awareness, or “représentation claire” of her own reading activity, and her reading performance, de Croix and Dufays set about exploring a hundred students’ “profils de lecture”, factoring into their design and analysis the diverse social and educational settings in which these youths’ development unfolds. Students were tasked with participating in two activities
respectively opening and closing the experimental didactic sequence: an “autoportrait de lecteur / lectrice” conceived as a factual description of recent reading activity, and a much more elaborated and reflexive “autobiographie de lecteur / lectrice” as a final production (154-5). The best possible accuracy was demanded, both in the self-portrait (expected to be a truthful rendering of recent readings that would provide access to students’ “représentations initiales … en matière de lecture”) and the autobiography (meant to consist in a chronologically correct narrative of reading development). In between the two tasks, students were invited to get acquainted with, debate and mimic the writing of six “scènes de lecture” excerpted from young adult literature:

Par ce choix, il s’agissait de confronter les élèves à quelques représentations de l’acte de lire, de les familiariser avec une activité peut-être étrangère à leur milieu familial et socioculturel et d’éveiller leur conscience par rapport à leurs propres pratiques de lecture. … [C]es scènes représentent une forme de médiation culturelle indispensable pour les publics d’élèves qui ne sont pas en contact régulier avec le livre. … En cela, elles proposent une initiation, une familiarisation avec l’univers du livre (156)

“[L]e pouvoir indéniable de la fiction” would multiply these benefits:

L’apprentissage explicite de la lecture qu’elles permettent n’est pas porté par le discours de l’enseignant et nous faisons le pari qu’il n’en sera que plus efficace. (ibid.)

Engagement with a variety of text genres (“l’identité littéraire est toujours sélection d’un corpus, reconfiguré singulièrement et configurant l’identité”, Louichon 135) and attitude towards reading end up identified by the authors as the most critical factors shaping students’ reader profiles; the resulting “typologie des profils” ranges from “peu diversifié – peu passionné” to the positive opposite (de Croix and Dufays 160-1). It eventually appears that de Croix and Dufays simultaneously pursued two objectives: to assess students’ actual reading practices; to bring out emergent readers’ representations about their identity as such and reading in general:

ces textes en disent assez long, non pas sur les lectures elles-mêmes, mais sur la manière dont les élèves se posent en tant que sujets face à la lecture. (164)

Narratives produced as part of educational experiments in reading-focused autobiographical writing differ in purpose from those prompted by sociological studies in that they are bound to be the object of feedback, to enhance self-comprehension and to foster progress – that is, to support
learning outcomes. The narrative deliverable is valued to the extent that it can be used as a pedagogical prop allowing developing subjects to achieve a “prise de distance par rapport aux questions de l’écriture et de la lecture, par le retour réflexif sur une expérience personnelle” (de Croix and Dufays 206).

School reading, a reliably negative story

A recurring finding in teacher-centered research is the tension – one might say the paradox – between a strong drive not to reproduce the kind of literature education one was exposed to and an equally strong belief in the relevance of “un clivage très clair entre la littérature qui est bonne à lire à l’école et la littérature qui est bonne à lire dans la sphère privée” (Miquelon 51, after Ulma and Winkler) – a distinction that several studies found to be very pronounced also in students’ discourses (Demougin and Massol; Rouxel, 1999). Interestingly, this result is mirrored by Rouxel’s student-focused studies, among others:

La lecture privée semble … permettre un corpus plus éclaté et nombreux, tandis que les titres jugés propres à la lecture scolaire sont relativement stables et beaucoup moins nombreux (Miquelon 59)

According to the research summarized by Miquelon, literary reading activity at school seems indeed to be generally perceived as a necessarily tedious experience, by both students and teachers. But Hubert, among others, warns that “[la relation entre institution scolaire et activité de lecture est complexe: elle varie selon les individus” (219). Internationally, research shows that emergent readers’ representations of classroom-based literary reading can be affected by a number of individual and environmental factors, “même s’ils appartiennent à la sphère privée,” which include

le genre, le milieu socioéconomique d’origine, l’aisance économique de la famille, le fait d’avoir des parents lecteurs, le fait d’avoir des livres à lire et à manipuler à la maison (et dans sa chambre) ainsi que le fait de s’être fait lire des histoires durant l’enfance (Miquelon 67)
As demonstrated by Philippe Lejeune’s address to teacher trainees (discussed in the introduction), representations of literature education can consequently entail positive components for different individuals and groups. In 2004, Fourtanier conducted a study involving seven groups of teenage students in three different institutions, part of which was deemed a “test de representations”. In all of these seven classes, students were given the following prompts:

Écrivez les mots qui vous viennent à l'esprit lorsque vous entendez: ‘cours de français’. Soulignez les trois plus importants … Écrivez les mots qui vous viennent à l'esprit lorsque vous entendez: ‘littérature’. (Fourtanier 2004, 10)

Students’ answers suggest nuanced representations, as emphasized by Miquelon:

pour eux, le cours de français rime beaucoup avec dictée, grammaire et conjugaison, et bien peu avec lecture. Leurs représentations de la littérature sont ‘plus complexes’ … Au-delà des prises de position positives ou négatives émergent l’imagination, l’ouverture d’esprit, la culture, la réflexion, la passion, la tristesse, ‘l’envie de se mettre dans la peau des personnages’ (60)

Views of the *cours de français* as transmissive (rather than student-centered), generally boring, and excessively oriented toward language mastery dominate. The *littérature* component, however, appears to trigger a broader and more complex range of conceptions.

**Confronting representations?**

In most of the cases described above, discursive representations are conceived as a means for educators and emergent readers to access and address previously unacknowledged cognitive representations about (their own) engagement with textuality:

L’expérience permet l’amorce d’un décentrement, la mise en évidence de postures de lectures différentes chez un même lecteur et la prise de conscience de discordances éventuelles entre ses goûts et ses pratiques réels de lecteur et ce qu’on suppose devoir afficher ou enseigner. (Vibert)

Student / teacher *biographies de lecteur* are considered particularly precious in that they can shed light on some of the expectations and duties projected by direct education system stakeholders (“ce qu’on suppose devoir afficher ou enseigner”). As Vibert notes, they are also meant to reveal the discrepancies between these and the reality of one’s reading experience.
This take nevertheless assumes that representations, which so powerfully embody the “caractère socioculturel de l'activité du sujet lecteur” (as noted by the – non incidentally – Quebec-based scholars Falardeau et al., 122), can surface as objects delineable enough to be identified as such and deconstructed by the subjects expressing them. It also assumes that one is able to narrate one’s literary initiation in all objectivity; that the recalling of reading events, the verbal memory of the literary “expérience personnelle” centered in the activity, is only minimally if at all constrained by cultural representations. It assumes that the “expérience personnelle … contribu[e] à la construction des représentations de l'écriture et de la lecture et du rapport à ces dernières” rather than the other way around (Daunay and Reuter 206). Perhaps most importantly, it builds on the premise – central to didactique de la littérature – that readers are first and foremost subjects whose views on literary reading in general and idiosyncratic reading practices are deeply personal matters, which can obscure the socially perpetuated nature of many of these representations.

What these studies certainly suggest, collectively, is that whether they are held upon entering school or developed as learning unfolds (“les représentations se construisent et se restructurent tout au long du processus d’apprentissage”, Miquelon 69), representations about literary initiation might transversally impact all types of resources (meta/cognitive; psychoaffective; epistemic; axiological; material; sociocultural...) known to modulate engagement with complex texts and with one’s learning trajectory. Herein lies one of the arguments for the close, systematic analysis of their mise en discours.

**Typologies of engagement with literary textuality: two examples**

A number of qualitative studies attempted to capture and classify recurring aspects of student representations about literary reading in general and at school specifically. We saw that de Croix and Dufays explored students’ “profils de lecteur” based on a hundred subjects’ autoportraits and autobiographies de lecteur / lectrice, concluding that teenage readers'
(representations of their own) engagement with textuality could be considered to range from ‘seldom diversified / passionate’ to the positive opposite. Miquelon also conducted one such study. Having chosen ‘the description of Quebecois teenage student representations of literature and literary reading in the French classroom’ as the primary purpose of her investigation, and having proceeded to careful sampling (“choisissant … les élèves sollicités de manière à ce que notre échantillon possède les même caractéristiques que notre population”, 69), Miquelon opted to characterize different profils de représentations in the student population under examination based on over 800 students’ answers to a three-part questionnaire (“données sociodémographiques”, “représentations de la littérature à l’école”, “représentations de la lecture littéraire à l’école”). Miquelon’s subjects were eventually considered to fit one of four representational profiles, including “La lecture littéraire en classe de français: une lecture d’épanouissement culturel et personnel”, “une lecture de plaisir personnelle et subjective”, “un mal nécessaire”. The profile shouldered by the majority of students is labeled “La lecture littéraire en classe de français: une lecture scolaire assujettie”, in a powerful reminder dans les termes of Védrines’ Assujettissement littéraire. Miquelon resorts to the words ‘resignation’ (to teachers’ text choices, to institutional focus on engagement with language rather than text content) and ‘rejection’ (of the idea of enhanced self-understanding by means of literary reading at school) to characterize the positioning of students fitting in this category. Personal involvement is not considered a component of literary reading classroom practice. Here again, it seems that literary reading, at least as defined at and by school, is negatively connoted for most emergent literary readers (“un assujettissement aux contraintes scolaires”, 120), for a number of reasons detailed by Miquelon which include the denial of emergent readers’ affective engagement with the world in general and textworlds in particular.

Rouxel explored a corpus of secondary- and higher-education students’ autobiographies de lecteur from the perspective of a “jeu de cartes identitaire” which she conceived as both overlapping with and departing from Michel Picard’s famous figures du lecteur. Her pioneering work on emergent readers’ identités littéraires as accessible through their autobiographies de
lecteur notably resulted in her identifying four “motifs récurrents” characteristic of the genre: the evocation of emotions triggered by reading; that of the role of a particular text in identity construction; that of the decisive impact of identification with characters or recognition of one’s own experience in narrated events; and that of diversity in literary taste (Rouxel 2004). Contrary to Miquelon, Rouxel seems to discuss literary reading as a non-spatially marked practice; she does not seek to approach literary reading in its specifically classroom-based expression. Yet, her identités littéraires are implicitly defined in direct relation with school experience. They are also radically positive, as could be expected from a sample composed of high-schoolers pursuing a literary track (option littéraire) and humanities students. While Miquelon found that only a minority of her 800 subjects enjoyed literary reading as an institutional proposition, Rouxel presupposes that her subjects have literary tastes (as demonstrated by the set of “motifs récurrents” listed above) and that these tastes are closely tied to school practices. In contrast with Miquelon’s findings again, Rouxel considers that exposure to literature in the classroom not only fosters diverse and fluctuating “goûts littéraires” but awakens an appetite for self-exploration as well:

Rien d’étonnant pour des lecteurs en formation, qui découvrent la littérature et se découvrent à son miroir. (Rouxel 2004, 145)

Rouxel’s “figures” or “identités de lecteur” are more impressionistic than Miquelon’s, and to a certain extent more congruent with literary imagination (Sachs): “le fugueur … envisage la littérature comme une évasion de soi et de la réalité dans un temps aboli”; “le spectateur … privilégie les échos du texte en soi” (and appears particularly representative of high school literary track students about to graduate, according to Rouxel); “le bohème … musarde en lisant” and typically corresponds to a college-level posture of “lecteur dilettante, amateur”; “le critique … s’attache aux enjeux de l’écriture, effectue des rapprochements avec d’autres textes”, and is the only one described as “un lecteur expert” (ibid. 146-7).
The backlash of the *refoulé littéraire*

Here is one interesting fact: Rouxel’s framework was inspired – just as Lahire’s approach is marked – by the established existence of *autobiographie de lecteur* as a literary genre:

> ce genre ouvre la réflexion sur la part que peut prendre la littérature dans la formation d’un individu, sur la multiplicité des modes d’appropriation des textes, sur la place de la subjectivité chez le sujet qui construit du sens. Rien d’étonnant que l’école s’en saisisse! (ibid. 137)

While Rouxel works at theorizing pedagogical uses of literary-reputed reader trajectory narratives, contending that the latter could foster reflexive practices in the literature classroom, Lahire chooses to rely on reader autobiographies that made it to the literary canon so as to further illustrate points already supported by an incredible wealth of qualitative, narrative data. Sartre’s culturally legitimate *Les Mots* is thus said to “donne[r] à lire … d’une part, la relative diversité des influences culturelles auxquelles il a été soumis durant son enfance et, d’autre part, la hiérarchisation de ces influences”:

> c’est en vivant cette ‘double vie’ que le petit Jean-Paul fait l’apprentissage de la distinction culturelle: en prenant conscience de l’indignité d’une partie de ses propres pratiques. Autant qu’un écart de soi (membre de la bourgeoisie du savoir) à autrui (le peuple), la distinction culturelle s’éprouve sur le mode de l’égarement, de la faute, du péché, de la défaillance ou de la chute personnels. Sartre intériorise toute une structure de perception culturelle (digne/indigne; sérieux/pas sérieux; légitime/illégitime; officiel/clandestin; dicible/indicible; honneur/infamie; sacré/profane; vérité/égarement, etc.) qui s’applique à lui-même autant qu’elle s’applique à la différence entre lui et les autres individus concrètement fréquentés ou entre sa classe sociale d’appartenance et les autres classes sociales… (Lahire 682-3)

Rouxel’s focus is on the *scolarisation* of what she calls a “démarche d’expert”, or the pedagogical use of this “genre qui place l’identité de lecteur au coeur de la démarche autobiographique”, is also the concern of most of the qualitative research on *biographies de lecteur* detailed so far. A strong argument can surely be made for the investigation of such prompted reader narratives to uncover the functioning and components of representations about literary reading development and education. From a meta-research perspective, it may also serve to uncover researchers’ schema reproduction. Indeed, from immersive reading to detached “sensib[ilité] aux effets du texte et attenti[on] à sa forme”, from naïve engagement (a short paragraph) to knowledgeable
distanciation (two pages), Rouxel's classification is a model replicating the hierarchy that Daunay and other didacticiens du français have tried so hard to dismantle in the past twenty years.

\[1\] In a biographie langagière, the language-learning subject “considère son appropriation comme un tout, une expérience qui a affecté sa personnalité, son identité, et dont les circonstances peuvent être racontées’ d’une manière rétrospective (Jeanneret 2010) … De ce point de vue, il y a biographie lorsque, à un moment donné, l’apprenant.e analyse l’ensemble de sa trajectoire, ou du moins une partie qu’il /elle juge significative de celle-ci.” (Baroni and Bemporad 118).

\[2\] The analysis conducted by Lahire and his team covers seven hundred pages, many of which include excerpts from an impressive volume of materials diverse in nature (“données statistiques, entretiens … observation directe des comportements, documents écrits et audiovisuels divers, etc.”). The researchers adopt an innovative method (relying on attention to both the individual and social levels) that eventually “met en lumière un fait fundamental, à savoir que la frontière entre la légitimité culturelle (la ‘haute culture’) et l’illégitimité culturelle (la ‘sous-culture’, le ‘simple divertissement’) ne sépare pas seulement les classes, mais partage les différentes pratiques et préférences culturelles des mêmes individus, dans toutes les classes de la société.” (13).

\[3\] In Fiction et diction (1991), Genette nuances the exclusion of a fictional dimension from the definition of literariness (which until then largely relied on the notion of a poetic function of language) and distinguishes between two “régimes” of literariness. The “régime constitutif” allows to objectively define a body of works according to generic conventions while the “régime conditionnel” relies on the reader’s appreciation. Together, these régimes presumably account for “les diverses façons qu’a le langage d’échapper et de survivre à sa fonction pratique et de produire des textes susceptibles d’être reçus et appréciés comme des objets esthétiques.” (31).

\[4\] Bertrand Daunay’s and Yves Reuter’s reflection on the “Usages et intérêts de souvenirs de lecture-écriture en formation” (2009) is particularly emblematic of this scholarly trend.
CHAPTER THREE
Disciplinary Approaches to Narrative Representations of Literary Initiation, II:

Literary Studies

It is possible that childhood-focused récits de soi all tendentially resort to the same metaphors, fables, myths and assemblages of traces, to try and tell the non-communicable; it is likely that they all rely on a unique cultural model of human development to (re)construct a friable yet viable personal (hi)story, as contemporary French literature scholar Bruno Blanckeman suggests. On the other hand, one might resist the idea that a shared conception of childhood narration so largely conditions this particular literary tradition:

l'idée que le récit d'enfance puisse avoir des modèles, être objet d'imitations, donner lieu à des formules codifiées et à des séries, semble paradoxale: la relation du début de la vie n'est-elle pas considérée comme l'occasion d'affirmer la singularité de la personne et de mettre au jour ce qu'il y a de plus intime dans une existence? (Chevalier and Dornier)

The contemporary récit d'enfance: preliminary observations

Blanckeman provides an exploratory attempt at an answer, starting with a tripartite proposition of a definition:

Par 'modèles', j'entendrai un état de détermination composite participant, dans le récit, de son inscription culturelle, de sa préfiguration heuristique et de son instanciation rhétorique.

Considering six contemporary récits de soi deliberately picked for their idiosyncrasies, including works by Annie Ernaux, Georges Perec and Pascal Quignard, Blanckeman builds on the acknowledgement that some specific "mécanismes moteurs, scripturaux ou psychomentaux" mark all six narratives in order to inquire into the structure and meaning of these discursive representations which are seen as a representative sample:

Comment à travers eux une civilisation donnée, la nôtre, se représente-t-elle l'enfance? Quel imaginaire de l'enfance réfléchissent-ils et articulent-ils tout à la fois? Peut-on en dégager des modèles culturels?
To this “first set of questions”, Blanckeman adds an important dimension:

De quelles catégories de savoirs ces modèles sont-ils eux-mêmes tributaires, et comment les récits contribuent-ils à les remanier?

Gone are the times of idyllic visions of childhood, according to Blanckeman. Today’s ‘narrated child’ is a sentient being of its own (“un enfant qui n’est lui-même plus soluble en adulte”) penetrated by intense and limited “impressions,” engaged in fast-disappeared “mental constructions”, anchored in an eternal yet evasive present. To render childhood experience, the contemporary ‘narrating adult’ would tendentially favor fugitive, deferred, fragmentary modes of expression.

And yet, there is a legacy to square with: models of narrative structures, and models of childhood. In past as well as contemporary works, these models presumably exist and persist in a way or another:

Tout récit est … amené à trahir son enfant, aux deux sens du verbe, le révéler et le falsifier, à partir d’un fonds d’impressions élémentaires qui constituent son bagage, à recréer une présence vide qui en comble la figure vide.

In Blanckeman’s approach, such partial falsifications are to be understood as rewritings of psychoanalytical ‘neotypes’ that would act upon and throughout the narratives comme des arrière-plans figuratifs, des conducteurs logiques, des supports symboliques et des indicateurs linguistiques.

Blanckeman’s argument builds on the explicit assumption that psychoanalysis deeply disrupted representations of childhood, enough so that psychoanalytical types have integrated and to a certain extent shaped childhood imaginaries. In recent autobiographical narratives, text structure would re-play either a fracture or a symbiosis, both defining traits of the "updated myth" of childhood. Memories of early experience would be narratively, symbolically, linguistically rendered in one of two modes: erasure or saturation. Yet parody and distancing vis-à-vis the psychoanalytical dogma (often by means of stereotypical text genres, such as the fable, used as fragmentation-proof strongholds) would be frequent too.
Does the récit d'enfance have recurring features?

Blanckeman's initial definition of “modèle du récit d'enfance” (“un état de détermination composite participant, dans le récit, de son inscription culturelle, de sa préfiguration heuristique et de son instanciation rhétorique”), together with his questioning the contents and reinvention of past representations of childhood within contemporary ones, might be more interesting as interrogative postures than the rather elusive framework of interpretation he also provides. But Blanckeman does have a key point: it should be possible to detect recurrent features, to notice predictable meanings and trajectories, in content as well as structure, in Francophone childhood narratives; and it should be possible to assert, as Louise Hardwick does, the existence of “aesthetics, narrative dynamics and thematic concerns” proper to the “semi-autobiographical genre known in French as the récit d'enfance” (8).

Denise Escarpit’s consensual definition of the récit d'enfance includes non-autobiographical approaches to childhood, and is grounded in a strict fiction / nonfiction divide:

C'est un texte écrit … dans lequel un écrivain adulte, par divers procédés littéraires, de narration ou d'écriture, raconte l'histoire d'un enfant – lui-même ou un autre –, ou une tranche de la vie d'un enfant: il s'agit d'un récit biographique réel – qui peut alors être une autobiographie – ou fictif. (24)

In truth, it would be challenging to neatly distinguish between “real” and “fictional” (auto)biographical narratives, self-reflective textual work being always fictional to a certain extent, as pointed out by many (including Walsh, commenting on Escarpit's definition: childhood narrative "is one in which the real mixes with the imaginary", 6). It seems highly pertinent that "slippage between genres" stands as "an inherent feature of the récit d'enfance", a fact that arguably applies to the larger autobiographical field. Thus, the first volume of Patrick Chamoiseau's childhood narrative trilogy is originally "marked as a récit, a 'genre that can more easily embrace the interweaving of fact and fiction'" (Hardwick, after Patrick Crowley, 65). And so is L'Exil selon Julia, a “roman” by Gisèle Pineau that will be mentioned in my conclusion, presented by the interviewed author as “a vision of her own childhood”.¹ As noted a few times
already, the point to remember is not the author's semi-fictional intention as much as the cognitive bias that likely results in the validation and reproduction of potentially fallacious representations of what literary initiation is or ought to be.

In contrast to Escarpit's, Hardwick provides a restrictive definition of the *récit d'enfance*, which ought to “explicitly engage with the autobiographical tradition” and “adopt a position of relative transparency, rather than mediating or ventriloquizing memories through a fictional protagonist” (9). Most importantly, it must “confine itself to recounting the author's childhood memories from earliest infancy through to adolescence”:

The reader follows the progress of the child narrator along a path of increased knowledge, witnessing their growing maturity, and the *récit d'enfance* is therefore also a *Bildungsroman* which charts the formation of an individual. (ibid.)

The contours of predefined generic figures are suggested by Hardwick. The approach of comparative literature scholar Richard N. Coe relies on the same presumption of existence of such shared figures, which would extend to most childhood narrative traditions:

> [G]iven a sufficient number of Childhood-texts, there do begin to emerge certain features common to any given culture, and at the same time elusive to it – or nearly so. Recurrent preoccupations and obsessions can be identified, which seem to operate at a subconscious rather than at a conscious level, and frequently, it would appear, without the individual writer being necessarily aware of the significance of what he is writing, since the significance only crystallizes in the light of its parallels in other Childhoods generated by the same culture, or in that of its absence elsewhere. (Coe 2)

The validity of cross-national comparative attempts is questioned by Hardwick, however, on lexical and ultimately generic grounds:

> In the English-speaking world, one immediate obstacle to approaching the genre is linguistic, because of the lack of an equivalent established translation for the term *récit d'enfance*. (8)

It is worth emphasizing the implicit claim, in Hardwick’s above assertion, of a French(-language) origin to the genre itself. The very notion of *récit d'enfance* would be a French creation, which is evidence of the importance of the genre to the Francophone literary tradition – if need be: after all, modern autobiography as a genre is traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hardwick, whose research focuses on Caribbean autobiography, points out that contemporary instances of the genre build on an established “(metropolitan) French literary canon” that includes
well-known works by Sartre, Sarraute, or the aforementioned Perec – all of which, one might claim, build on a Proust-inspired canon developed over the 20th century. Beyond linguistic limitations imposed on theorizing gestures, it is fair to hypothesize that Francophone childhood narratives display specific traits.

For Blanckeman and Hardwick, those works would be marked by a reflexive, often ironic narratorial posture. What would distinguish 'literary' self-narratives from the ones prompted as part of qualitative studies would be a considerably heightened meta-awareness – analysis-oriented – and its creative use – to artistic ends. Hardwick’s observation below is made in reference to Chamoiseau’s work, but it may be viewed as valid for most ‘literary’ autobiographical works:

the adult author is aware that, in attempting to revive bygone episodes, he elaborates and invents; yet this knowledge of the objective impossibility of his project engenders its innovative aesthetic success. (68)

More than any other variation on self-narration, childhood narrative in general and “the post-1990 récit d’enfance” in particular is a genre that champions fragmentary composition. Michel Braud’s description of the “récit des jours” accurately renders the spirit of “détours and fragmented recollections” (Hardwick), “fissures for the raw material of memory to infuse” (McCusker) that characterizes these narratives (and in the two latter citations, Chamoiseau’s autobiographical work):

C’est une suite de microséquences narratives ou descriptives non liées – dont le principal et parfois le seul lien est le personnage du diariste. … Le récit des jours est la forme par laquelle le sujet s’approprie le temps ordinaire, non épique, façonne le temps à sa mesure par le discours, devient son propre temps. (in Galichon 74)

The closer to early sentience and identity nebulosity, the farther from eloquent pretense: no discursive coherence should be expected.

The telling of one's formation must be considered a construction, rather than transcription, no matter its form or context of production. Reader autobiographies generated as part of social science studies and literary-reputed childhood narratives are similarly constrained by the premise of mnesic reconstruction. As they are retrieved, memory traces get combined and
additionally altered by verbal expression. The near-impossibility of accurate childhood restitution – notably because of the partly language-devoid experientiality from which it draws – makes childhood narrative a prime candidate for re-creation.

But it is in the literary field specifically that the announced failure of any strictly autobiographical undertaking becomes fertile ground for metatextual postures, implied authors acknowledging and engaging with the said failure. This condition stands for a foundational trait of the genre, according to Hardwick and Blanckeman: the post-modern era of French and Francophone literature production is characterized by a particularly high degree of performed awareness regarding the illusion of transparency.

Where the aforementioned scholars see distancing, others discern renewed intimacy, which is revelatory of the auctorial ambivalence often at stake in contemporary autobiographies. Another supposed pattern has been emphasized, indeed: as regards narration, and form more generally, Francophone contemporary récits d'enfance tendentially pursue a renewed truthfulness of the autobiographical contract, a return to the basics of the pact. We are presumably made to attend particularly pronounced, effortful attempts to adhere to original emotions or actions and to renounce distancing. Philippe Lejeune’s reading of Nathalie Sarraute’s Enfance makes precisely that point:

En passant des tropismes aux souvenirs d’enfance, elle a découvert l’indulgence. Elle a appris à laisser parler, même si c’est avec pudeur et prudence, la tendresse et la sensualité. … Toute la fin d’Enfance … organise un contrepoint entre la tension des rapports familiaux, et la détente et les accomplissements qu’offre l’univers scolaire. Malgré les taquineries adressées à l’exercice de la rédaction, la fonction positive de l’école est reconnue. Et puis, existe-t-il d’autres livres de Nathalie Sarraute où l’on trouve ‘l’odeur des bois mouillés’, ‘la terre couverte de mousse’ ? et où le jeu et le fairesemblant soient si favorablement traités ? … Ce n’est pas seulement une question de sujet traité, mais de ton. (Lejeune 1998, 261)

After Lejeune, Isabelle Galichon defines the general category of récit de soi as characterized by a “dispositif d’écriture extime” (64). The contemporary récit d’enfance is seen as returning to a more intimate approach to retrospective writing – one that might be dismissed by criticism, as noted by Denis Essar regarding the reception of Dany Laferrière’s “simpler, more bucolic and nostalgic” childhood narratives. Francophone récits d'enfance “do indeed”, remarks Hardwick, “hold a
different literary status to their authors’ other works”, which, in the case of postcolonial writing, might be turned into a form of exoticism by deliberate marketing strategies (11).

The contemporary récit d’enfance gears toward more simplicity, then – and yet more complexity, as it expresses a double impossibility to tell: one’s own life experience cannot be faithfully conveyed; one’s early life experience is bound to remain both the most intimate and the most foreign one, which represents a considerable challenge to narration (often materialized in the process of fragmentation) as well as a formidable opportunity for creative reconstruction.

**The reader at the center: récits d’enfance as narratives of reading development**

In terms of content, récits d’enfance widely share a feature of uttermost interest here. Most of them depict, and often focus on, the emergence of an ability and motivation to engage with texts in general and texts identified as literary in particular. In the words of Brigitte Louichon (whose groundbreaking work will be discussed in Chapter 4):

*Rares sont les autobiographes qui ne sacrifient pas à ces pages dévolues aux lectures d’enfance, puis aux textes fondateurs et aux lectures importantes. Depuis plus de deux siècles donc, les écrivains qui se racontent, racontent aussi leurs lectures, évoquent leurs souvenirs de lecture parce que, comme Rousseau sans doute, ceux-ci ont fortement à voir avec ‘la conscience de soi-même’.* (Louichon 2009, 13)

This dissertation builds on the premise that one central feature of the Francophone “semi-autobiographical account of childhood experiences” is its dedication to representing literary initiation. Francophone childhood narratives are, to an important extent, first and foremost narratives of the *devenir écrivain*, that is, narratives of emergent familiarity with / appropriation of ‘literariness’.

One may expect that if “[e]ach author had different reasons for wishing to foreground the importance of reading in his or her intellectual or emotional development”, they would nevertheless tend to use “established tropes or motifs to write about this experience.” (Stephen Colclough, in Lamb 223). If the reading child is an “autobiographical trope” of modern and contemporary Francophone narrative production, one should also expect its defining features to
have been studied systematically. Have they? I will now inquire into that question by successively exploring existing approaches to the textualized figure of the adult reader and of her child counterpart.

**Representations of adult literary reading in literary texts**

Although both the reader-as-character and “textually inscribed reader” have long been recurring entities in the French narrative tradition, the 20th century has seen incomparably rich convergences of critical perspectives on the figure of the reader – the *archi-lecteur* always being conceived as an adult one. Historians and sociologists interested in effective practices notably developed context-inclusive models typically aimed at countering the dominant text-centered stances. One may indeed wonder ‘whether [literary theory’s] sustained attention to the reader was matched with a deepened knowledge of actual reading experiences’ (Piéguay-Gros); whether it acknowledged the fact that ‘reading always is a practice, embodied in gestures, in spaces and places, in habits’ (Chartier). Such knowledge happened to surface, by literary means:

> La littérature contemporaine, selon des modalités problématiques qui restent à éclaircir, prend acte d’une impossibilité de théoriser le lecteur réel et se propose, par le recours à la fiction, d’en tracer les contours. (Lapeyre 169)

As critical takes on reception were thriving on and around the French theoretical scene, a particular *objet de language* had been drawing on and returning to the notion of literary reading, with enough insistence to be deemed a genre. The 20th century sees the rise of the *roman de la lecture*, the ‘partially fictional ... product of an exploration blending newly developing knowledge and necessarily gray areas’, whose ambition is simultaneously aesthetic and theoretical (Trouvé). The passion for the reader culminates as ‘this real reader makes a massive entrance in some of the most important works of this early [21st] century’ (Lapeyre 169). The adult reader and reading practices depicted in the *romans de la lecture*, as well as in fully or hardly fictional narratives from this century and prior ones, are by then consistently drawing attention across disciplines diversely engaged with comprehending them.
Positioning herself within traditional literary studies, Christine Montalbetti has offered numerous narratology-based insights into the functions of “reading sequences” as they unfold in fictional narratives - and as they might be of relevance to secondary school students. Her survey of French novels of interest is published in a collection meant to enable ‘active reading’ and understanding of a particular ‘literary issue’, in this case the ‘images of the reader’ featured in novels. Montalbetti’s approach is illustrative of strong tendencies in this area of research. As is typically the case in studies of the reader in the text, Montalbetti’s examination builds on a binary opposite: reflections of the (implied, addressed, ideal, empirical) reader are to be studied separately from representations of characters as readers, the two sets of ‘sequences’ being understood as ‘complementary fields’. The latter representations are themselves analyzed from a dualist perspective, as scenes of reading would supposedly be either ‘anecdotal and arbitrary’ – purely entertaining – or the telltale expression of a meta-discourse – purely revealing as to the nature of ‘romanesque’ reading.

Such is the polarization structuring many approaches to textual figuration of reading: empirical and implied (extradiegetic) instances are opposed to the (homodiegetic) reader as character – a scission described by literary reading education expert Jean-Louis Dufays and his colleagues in the following, tripartite terms:

Les scènes de lecture foisonnent dans la littérature. Soit l’auteur y évoque ses propres souvenirs de lecture (cf. Sartre), soit il place ses protagonistes en situation de lecture (cf. Emma Bovary), soit encore le narrateur s’adresse au lecteur réel en train de lire (cf. Calvino). (Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur 177)

Across literary studies, the reconstruction of an implied reader is tendentially given primacy on, and conducted separately from, the study of the already constructed representation that is the reader as character. French education researchers seizing on the topic of literary reading representation most often adopt the same faultline (“simple motif dans les oeuvres considérées ou narrataire inscrit dans la trame fictionnelle”, Lapeyre 169) but prove more inclined to attend to the other figure of the equation. Confrontation with reading scenes and more largely images of the reader as character seem indeed made to be used in classroom activities that will ‘enable
[students’] familiarization with an activity maybe foreign to their family and sociocultural milieu’ and indirectly foster engagement with their own practices, as Séverine de Croix and Jean-Louis Dufays importantly observe (c.f. Chapter 2). The *mise en abyme* of engagement with ‘literary’ textuality may, more generally, be considered to offer

un terrain idéal pour conjoindre les acquis de disciplines dont le dialogue a été aussi fécond quand il a été mené avec volontarisme, que frileux lorsque chacun s’est replié sur son pré carré: narratologie, sémiotique, histoire littéraire, sociocritique, histoire du livre et de l’édition, sociologie de la littérature. (Glinoer and Paquette)

Outside literary studies, reading scenes are almost always meant to provide insights susceptible to help ‘overcome conceptual aporias’:

Ce que la théorie littéraire ne peut dire au sujet du lecteur, la fiction par le miroir qu'elle tend au lecteur le suggérera et permettra ainsi à cette singulière expérience de se dire – en détour, dans l'angle oblique du reflet. (Lapeyre 178)

Studies in material book culture have attended to representations of readers in *récits de soi* for the same reasons. Roger Chartier famously directed an interdisciplinary collection of studies dedicated to “elucidating the models and effects” of reading practices, “these ancient figures of reading” graspable through reconstruction of an implied reader as well as through deconstruction of readers’ depictions. The emergent (or developing) reader is a recurrent figure throughout the collection, although it is never conceptualized per se beyond the evocation of a few canonical references, such as in Jean Hébrard’s captivating study of a farmer-turned-professor’s account of his self-conducted reading education:

Jean-Jacques [Rousseau] n'a pas à revendiquer une place dans le monde culturel de l'écrit, il y a 'toujours' été. C'est là l'expression d'une connivence qui exclut la conscience d'une éducation autodidacte. On pourrait en rapprocher d'autres modalités comme l'émerveillement devant la facilité de l'apprentissage de Sartre dans *Les Mots* ou la négligence avec laquelle Gide rappelle cet épisode dans *Si le grain ne meurt*. (37)

Looking for ‘types’ of represented readers and reading processes

In “Narrataires et lecteurs dans quelques récits contemporains”, Chantal Lapeyre evokes the possibility to draw “typologies du lecteur”, even identifying a few such “types”: the reader who doesn’t know (how) to read; the obsessed reader, “éternellement prisonnier du texte”; the
converted reader... (173-4). Lapeyre’s conclusion, however, reasserts the difficulty of further systematization:

Ces récits contemporains jouent le jeu d’une fictionnalisation du lecteur, apte à en tracer les contours, les errances, les lignes de fuite, ne redoutant pas même d'aller au bout du paradoxe qui consiste à dire l'indicible du lecteur en tant que tel. (173, emphasis mine)

One interesting recent attempt to systematize the study of reader characters over an extended Francophone corpus focuses on the portrayal – the “staging” – of the reading process, more than on the reading subject:

Les personnages lecteurs ne constituent qu'un élément, lié à la représentation, d'un processus qui s'inscrit dans le texte selon différents modes. (Hotte 33)

Lucie Hotte sought to bridge the relative gap between the two aforementioned figures of the inscribed, ideal reader that texts might project, on one hand, and the more tangible reader as character on the other hand. Hotte heavily draws on reader reception studies and her project is theory-focused; the corpus of Québécois novels on which her demonstration relies is assigned a purely “illustrative” function. Romans de la lecture, lecture du roman only partly deals with traditional representation, or “explicit inscription”, of the reading process in fictional narratives; it is largely devoted to shedding light on the modalities of “implicit inscription” of a projected reader and to enhancing comprehension of “instituted conventions of reading” as opposed actual reading processes. The latter intention makes for the most attractive dimension of Hotte's enterprise. The typological ambition is another commendable element of her approach: Hotte undertakes the classification of reading scenes as they would instantiate distinct “functions” and “conventions” of reading. Her objective, however, is restricted to offering a parcours de lecture (35) that would demonstrate the pertinence of her theory-rooted presuppositions, which limits the generalizable potential of her results.

A nodal assumption of Hotte's is that “readers and types of reading present in the novel influence extratextual reading” (36). Hotte's consideration goes to the immediate experience of the empirical reader progressing through each particular novel discussed in her study, but her observation is valid beyond isolated text-reader interactions. It is undeniable that textual and
visual representations of reading available in a given society contribute to the reproduction of stereotypical images of engagement with book culture (as shown by many examples and scholarly analyses throughout this dissertation), and therefore can be expected to affect, to various degrees, individual reading experience. Maybe even more importantly, textual reading scenes can be considered conveyors of existing cultural representations. In that sense, there is intrinsic legitimacy to the close study of literary narratives elaborating on more or less fictional early reading experiences, which might be considered a retrogressive move relative to ‘theoretical and scientific progress’ on the topic (Piégay-Gros). The constant expansion of educational, sociological, scientific concern for engagement with book culture in general and fictional narratives in particular, paralleled with a contemporary complexification of the prominent ‘literary’ figure of the reader in action, provides ample validation of the interest in textually inscribed reading experience.3

Has this experience been granted the attention it deserves within literary studies? To Glinoer and Paquette, among others, it has. Not only can we now consider that “le procédé de la mise en abyme de la littérature dans le texte littéraire a été bien balisé”, notably by Lucien Dällenbach4, we should also stand assured that “les représentations littéraires du livre et de la lecture” (Glinoer and Paquette 2) have been the object of a number of thematic studies. For sure, concedes Gerald Prince, “one can find essays on [characters who read]” and “come upon studies of readers in the eighteenth-century French novel, or in contemporary children's literature, or in particular authors or texts”. And yet:

in general, the category of ‘character-reader’ has seldom been explored systematically.

Prince here alludes to the likely great interest of a grammar of the “‘character-reader’” and regrettable lack thereof. Systematic studies that would isolate, define, analyze different features of this “category” of reader would indeed teach us much – rather than about the behavior of real readers, about our representations of what this behavior is, was, or should be.
To a large extent, the child reader as character is even more deserving of such attention.

In the aforementioned collective work, Chartier and his contributors ask a critical question that is central to the present dissertation:

De quels poids respectifs pèsent dans les apprentissages du lire les structures perceptives et cognitives de l'homme et les conditionnements, historiquement et socialement variables, qui régissent les acquisitions? (10)

And yet, representations of developing readers have been even less “explored systematically” than depictions of adult ones. That is, if only literary studies – or adult literature studies – are considered: thorough analyses of images of child readership have been conducted within the specific field of children's literature studies internationally, including across the French-speaking world, since the beginning of the century.

Representations of child reading development in youth literature

In 2002, Catherine Tauveron identifies the “aventure littéraire” as a dominant meta-narrative trend in youth literature, that would consist in the staging of

le livre dans le livre : comme objet de quête ou objet en train d'être lu, grille de lecture du monde et grille de lecture de soi, lieu de vie du personnage ou personnage à part entière. (9)

Two years later, Quebecois researcher Noëlle Sorin makes a case for the recognition of what she deems a new genre within children's literature: l'aventure de lecture, whose features are partly reminiscent of the 'adult' roman de la lecture (“un récit d'aventure littéraire où la lecture est prise comme objet, participant de manière importante à l'intrigue en présentant la fin d'une histoire comme quête … le salut par le livre … ou le voyage à travers le temps et l'espace”).5 Adventurous is a qualifier that suits youth literature research quite well: at the crossroads of literary studies and education, studies attending to child readers mis en abyme often distinguish themselves by an open-minded willingness to “bring together the representations of readers and of reading experiences and the historical readers of those books, combining a consideration of the textuality and the materiality of reading” (Lamb 9).
In a praiseworthy effort to connect diegetic and extra-diegetic information, Montréal-based Monique Noël-Gaudreault and Flore Gervais studied both representations of child readers in novels aimed at 9 to 12-year-olds and reading practices of real child readers as attested by a questionnaire survey, proceeding to compare the two sets of data. They used a simple, possibly flawed yet bold design that was rewarded with very interesting findings:

Il en ressort que, si les personnages ressemblent assez aux enfants réels, ils s’en distinguent également par certains aspects. Ainsi, l’enquête montre que c’est à la maison que les enfants lisent le moins alors que c’est là que lisent les personnages lecteurs. Tandis que 47% des enfants sont des lecteurs occasionnels, avec une prédilection pour les bandes dessinées et les revues, c’est le personnage lecteur passionné qui est le plus souvent représenté et celui-ci ne lit que des romans. Les raisons de ne pas lire ne sont pas évoquées dans les récits, de même qu’est absente la bande dessinée. En outre, y figurent très peu de personnages adultes lecteurs. [Il] y aurait intérêt à donner une vision plus nuancée des différents types de lecteurs réels.

French literature scholar Gilles Béhotéguy reasserts Noël-Gaudreault and Gervais’ point in a particularly powerful study of the mythification of the child reader in teen fiction. His comparative reading of over forty “romans où la lecture est un actant de la diégèse” published in France between 1980 and 2005 proves captivating in its conclusions:

Si les auteurs manifestent une ardeur de prosélytes dans la célébration des vertus de la lecture, force est de constater que, dans l’ensemble, ils ne montrent guère d’originalité dans leur démarche. Ils ne revisitent pas les grands mythes qui fondent la culture du livre, mais ils en réaffirment au contraire la permanence et s’érigent en gardiens du temple, en conservateurs du patrimoine culturel légitimé. L’objet-livre est saisi comme un symbole ou est détourné en fétique investi par les fantasmes d’écrivains bibliophiles. Tout aussi stéréotypée, la scène de lecture rompt avec la réalité de sa pratique et tend à l’allégorie. Ces mythologies de la lecture courent le risque, finalement, de faire du livre un pur objet de fiction, une curiosité étrange et incompréhensible pour le jeune lecteur égaré dans un roman-musée.

Béhotéguy demonstrates that early reading scenes featured in contemporary youth literature are highly stereotyped ones geared towards allegory as well as underpinned by ideology. Indeed, his convincing central claim is that any minimally developed reading scene can be shown to rest upon “une doxa qui en determine l’esthétique et en établit la valeur”. Their own works would reveal authors of youth literature to be “héritiers d’une conception très française de la culture, rentiers d’un capital sans tache … gardiens du temple … en bons élèves qui ont fait leurs humanités sans faute”. Intradiiegetic reading scenes in French youth literature would systematically reassert a strongly conservative tendency toward “le patrimoine culturel légitimé".
How much of this heavy charge against youth literature could apply just as well to semi-autobiographical narratives of childhood pertaining to contemporary ‘adult’ literature? In her closing contribution to the 2001 Colloque de Cerisy devoted to the récit d’enfance, Francine Dugast Portes fairly remarks that

[n]on est parfois plus proche du stéréotype que de l’archétype; mais les travaux les plus récents soulignent aussi la nécessité d’une doxa, l’impossibilité de la table rase, l’indissociabilité du modèle et de sa destruction. (304)

Representations of child reading development in literary-reputed récits d’enfance

To an important extent, something else than themselves is of interest to writers of retrieved childhood reading scenes: the development of a desire and ability to engage with textuality – and / or the education supposedly enabling it. In autobiographical narratives of childhood, as the remembrance of reading past allows social and self-analysis to unfold, the figure of the reading child is conferred both experimental value and mythical status. The mythologizing process is definitely deep at work and at stake in the récits d’enfance, Coe points out, basing his conclusion on the close reading of an extensive cross-national corpus:

through the study of the myths of the Childhood, we can discover a path which leads from the merely contingent to the genuinely significant (3)

Distanced writing as well as deconstructed and deconstructive narration simply do not go far enough in the questioning of such myths and the endangering of their predominance in social and discursive representations – as enacted by the author and held by the reader of the récit d’enfance.

When they include sequences focusing on reading experience, however, contemporary childhood narratives often happen to realize new modes of intimate writing, the (book) support or (reading) process literally becoming the subject and revealing the Subject, which change of tone and approach might enable more authentic proximity with the experience itself. In the words of Nathalie Piéguay-Gros, here congruent with a feature of childhood narrative – “genre extime” – evoked earlier in this chapter,
The supposed intimacy and relative reliability of represented reading scenes in contemporary narratives centering them would dramatically contrast, as a feature, with the characteristics and ultimate function of such scenes in the past. Under the French Third Republic, these narratives were produced and used to explicitly didactic ends (see Guiney, among others). In fact, reading development has long been central both to the narrated world and to the actual posterity of childhood narratives: many *récits d'enfance* of the past eventually made it to the public domain and back to actual childhood, having proposed

> le modèle potentiel des enfances à venir — d'où le changement de statut des œuvres: nombre de *récits d'enfance* passent dans la littérature destinée à la jeunesse (le phénomène est ancien) (Dugast Portes 305).

Some recently published *récits d'enfance* still make their way to the official French language and literature curriculum and / or to the classroom. Hence, the figure of the reading child, despite the possible evolution in its representation, is at least partly made of “toutes les enfances travaillées par le mythe” that compose its ancestry and of the pedagogical aims that helped and inflected its reproduction. It also likely reflects and makes for an important part of current cultural assumptions on the supposedly intrinsic features of a child’s reading experience. French *didacticiens de la littérature* such as Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur have themselves been noting this crucial aspect:

> Les scènes de lecture constituent à certains égards l'avèe de toute une série de pratiques que l'école a l'habitude de renier au profit d'une lecture 'modèle' attentive à vérifier la compétence du lecteur au lieu de nourrir son enthousiasme potentiel. (178)

**Literary-reputed representations of literary initiation**

I have previously explained that I see literary initiation as an imaginary process whose features we project onto actual advanced reading development (i.e. a representational entity composed of socially bolstered cognitions) and which defines, in turn, much of one’s effective literary experience. It is a complex construct, deeply embedded in French culture as well as
probably at work across the Francophone world, a strong possibility that will be examined in the second part of this dissertation. As is the case for most representations, the essential mode and means of reproduction of the imaginaire littéraire in general is discourse. Literary-reputed self-narratives are a particularly interesting discursive form to discuss in this context, as also emphasized earlier, these works being marked by the highest degree of meta-awareness and creative (i.e. innovative) intention. Not because of an elusive 'literary quality', but because they are book-length works (following readers' progression from awakening to coming-of-age); because they are penned by established 'experts' in literary reading and writing; and because meta-reflexiveness, discourse and inventiveness are a priori a primary concern of their authors, literary-reputed representations of literary initiation provide a particularly complex and detailed picture of an equally complex process not only of development, but of restitution.

As privileged cultural objects across the Francophonie, literary reader autobiographies are also privileged conveyors of literary imagination, most notably of its dimension relative to initiation – in Noëlle Sorin's terms, aventure de lecture; in Béhotéguy's, aventure littéraire. They can either validate or powerfully contrast with the results of social science research on – necessarily constrained and partial – biographies de lecteur in that regard.

Rouxel, whose work was detailed in the last chapter, erects her very vertical set of identity “modélisations” on a reference to a few reader autobiographies themselves deemed literary, i.e. reader narratives written by great writers ("grand[s] écrivain[s]", 137-8) such as Pierre Dumayet's Autobiographie d'un lecteur. This is a significant move, and one that should not surprise us, in that it holds as a reference the literary-reputed version of the genre, practiced by established writers. But how does an ‘expert’ subject actually remember/ render her literary reading skills acquisition? Fourtanier observes that many literary reader autobiographies are little supportive of the relatively rigid hierarchy underlining the acquisitional pathway above suggested by Rouxel, which would corroborate the idea that the mythification of literary initiation is in decline within the contemporary corpus of récits d'enfance:

la circulation des éléments de l'imaginaire dans la formation du lecteur et la constitution de la bibliothèque intérieure ne s'effectue pas à sens unique, du jeu enfantin vers le corpus scolaire, du
non légitime vers le classique, mais s’élabora par des acceptations et des refus, par des déplacements et des entêtements, par des superpositions, par métissage et hybridation culturelles, dont il est parfois difficile de cerner la cohérence interne, d’où l’aspect catalogue fourre-tout de ces descriptions de ‘bibliothèques intérieures’. Dans la construction de l’imaginaire importent donc, outre les livres lus, les films ou les images regardés, les histoires écrites, les personnes présentes lors de ces activités, les lieux environnants, les événements concomitants (Fourtanier 2010, 169).

On the other hand, numerous existing qualitative studies provide reports of a situation that sharply contrast with analyses of literary-reputed texts. Having questioned close to 60 teacher trainees, Marie-Claude Hubert, for instance, deduces that there almost always is, in teachers’ reader development, such a thing as a livre fondateur,

un livre qui a compté dans la vie du lecteur ou de la lectrice, c’est-à-dire un livre qui a contribué à construire l’identité de la personne ou qui se rattacha à un événement fort de son existence (Hubert 212)

Hubert goes on to affirm that

[de]ns la construction des parcours de lecture, un tel livre est très souvent à l’origine du goût et du plaisir de lire (ibid.)

But Fourtanier’s exploration of a corpus of literary reader autobiographies reveals that writers who unpack their personal library (“déballent leur bibliothèque”) show this library to be in a typically heterogeneous jumble, in any case “davantage une bibliothèque d’expériences de lecture qu’une bibliothèque de livres” (2010, 172); so much for the livre fondateur as a supposedly unique and cherished artefact.

Of these two representations of literary initiation (as enabled by and building on one catalyst book; as spread over shambolic ‘arrangements’ of multimodal texts varying in genre and significance to the author), one seems to align better than the other with pedagogical imagination: the idea of an initial revealing encounter with ‘superior’ textuality, which typically was made possible by school. It is clear-cut, easily comprehended and visualized. It also feels fantasized.

Brigitte Louichon notes that

[l]e lecteur d’aujourd’hui n’est pas un homme-bibliothèque qui porterait en lui des livres bien rangés. Cette représentation mythique semble pourtant poursuivre le lecteur moderne (2009, 136)
Louichon here alludes to the fact that cultural representations evolve over time and societal changes. The ordered *bibliothèque intérieure* might have been a valid construct in past eras but not one congruent anymore with contemporary experience.

**Introducing Louichon**

French literary studies and didactics have attended to the figure of the child reader and/or scenes of reading involving a child character; systematic studies of their features, however, are scarce. There is one particularly notable exception to this overall underinvestment: the impressively comprehensive study of depictions of emergent reading in Francophone childhood narratives conducted by *didacticienne de la littérature* Brigitte Louichon. Louichon’s work is particularly interesting in that it sits astride two methodologically and epistemologically distinct scholarly cultures: the humanities – literary studies – and social sciences – in this case, didactics.

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3 A case in point is the embodied dimension of any – real or represented – reading activity. Bodily involvement remains the parent pauvre of most theoretical approaches to reading, while appearing to be a consistently dominant aspect in narrative representations of early reading development, which exemplarily illustrate Barthes’ contention that “all bodily emotions take part in the reading process, entangled, wrapped: fascination, vacancy, pain, ecstasy” [“dans la lecture, tous les émois du corps sont là, mélangés, roulés : la fascination, la vacance, la douleur, la volupté”]. On the topic, Jean Marie Goulemot, renowned historian of cultural practices, astutely emphasizes the subtle yet marked impact of cultural imagery on our imaginaries, remarking that “[o]n nous impose (qui est ce on?) des attitudes lisantes: lectures rêveuses (Baudelaire, Hugo), lectures profondes (la tête entre les mains), lectures absentes (Jean Lorrain, le visage fardé, mollement allongé sur son sofa)... Nous nous plions, quoi qu’on en ait, à des modèles, à une typologie des actes de lecture que véhiculent toutes les formes de l'iconographie publique et l'institution scolaire.” (Goulemot, in Chartier, 122).


6 Lurelu, op. cit.
Dumayet’s work is not part of the French canon but still literary-reputed and therefore legitimate. As an actor of the *champ littéraire*, Dumayet qualifies – according to Rouxel – as a *grand écrivain*. 

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CHAPTER FOUR

Social Sciences meet Literary Studies: La littérature après coup

Louichon’s landmark survey of 74 “témoignages de lecteur” – the overwhelming majority of which could in fact be considered literary-reputed autobiographical narratives rather than testimonies – focuses on the rendition of what she calls “souvenirs de lecture”, or littérature après coup. The latter phrase became the title of a book (2009) based on her dissertation. In both works, Louichon’s goal is explicitly didactic: her target audience consists of future and current teachers of literature; she aims at contributing to a reflection on literature teaching by comprehensively outlining various theories of literary reading before proposing avenues to explore in the classroom specifically. At the same time, she seeks to address “tous ceux qui aiment lire”, explicitly extending her intended audience to non-experts and setting on offering introspective pathways allowing those readers to explore their respective literary coming-of-age.

Louichon’s main operational construct, the souvenir de lecture, encompasses all three following manifestations, laid out as such by Gerald Prince (2017):

— textual stretches which scenically present a character in the act of reading (“Tout autant qu’un récit, comme dans le cas de Proust, le souvenir de lecture est très régulièrement une scène de lecture”, Louichon 2009, 95);

— mentions that a character reads a lot or little and does it with more or less engagement and competence;

— reference to the texts that characters read (or that one can find in their library).

In other words, the souvenirs de lecture include characteristics of the delimited, always unique action of reading; of progressively established individual reading practice; and of textual supports, that Louichon terms “objets-livres” and connects to “material libraries”, just like Prince. She decides on exploring reading scenes (first manifestation) as largely defined by environmental “circumstances” while tackling the second expression of the souvenir de lecture identified by
Prince – which typically allows to analyze individual reading practices at specific developmental stages – within an inquiry into identité littéraire.¹

The literary premise

It is telling that Louichon immediately conflates reading and literary reading. While her object, the souvenir de lecture, is to be analyzed through cross-examination of a posteriori representations of reading, definable as the interaction of a text and a reader in a given biographical, temporal and spatial context, the latter should in turn enable one to perceive the stakes of literature in the long term (2009, 73-5, literal translation and emphasis mine). The conflation quite strikingly plays out in the way Louichon’s book title (La littérature après coup) gets renamed in the text, without further ado, "lecture après coup" (100). Even after stating the specificity of literary textuality within textuality (an honorable attempt to address the issue of the undefinable specificity of literariness), Louichon will consistently use literary reading and reading, souvenir littéraire and souvenir de lecture interchangeably. Literariness is generally treated as a self-evident quality and reading as worth addressing only if defined as literary. This is a preconception underlying many contributions to didactique de la littérature: 'literary' reading – however loosely the latter adjective is conceptualized – is the one (practice, approach, competence, "interaction"…) that matters.

This assumed superiority of the littéraire over supposedly referential, literal textuality – and its remembrance – marks Louichon’s study in other ways. The grammatically ambiguous phrase souvenir de lecture littéraire is to be understood also as souvenir de lecture restitué dans un texte dit littéraire. This is the only kind that Louichon is interested in, based on the premise that the specific form of discourse she’s working at defining is most interestingly developed in literary-reputed autobiographies:

[[les énoncés littéraires se singularisent de tous les autres (enquêtes ou récits biographiques sollicités) du point de vue de la situation d’énonciation et du point de vue de l’énoncé. (84)]]
Reading-centered testimonial narratives produced on demand, whether as part of scientific studies or of a celebratory collection, would provide poor grounds for the investigation envisioned by Louichon. The latter types of reminiscence about reading experience are judged monotonous for the very reasons that make them a somewhat useful unpolished source of inspiration. Referring to these categories of texts, Louichon indeed evokes

un sentiment de lassitude, sentiment réjouissant puisque si les auteurs disent souvent la même chose, cela permet de penser que l'on peut proposer une sorte de formule abstraite du souvenir de lecture. Mais dans le même temps, la lassitude est aussi le signe des limites du genre. (83-4)

In other words, on-demand, non-literary mini-biographies de lecteur would feature insufficient and unremarkable figures. Louichon’s hope is that the principle of a “formule abstraite” will prove transposable to the analysis of a sophisticated ‘literary’ corpus – still not really engaging with the ins and outs of her uses of literariness.

The conflation of reading and literary reading, souvenir de lecture and souvenir littéraire, which quickly leads to omission of the latter qualifier, says a lot about internalized schemas: there is only one form of reading recognized and valued enough to deserve book-length analysis as well as implicitness throughout – le littéraire va de soi. All the while claiming the specificity of literary reading, and assuming that the one reading worthy of depiction is literary, Louichon never goes so far as to define literariness or to show how exactly literary reading is distinct from other forms of engagement with textuality. In line with this assumption of literariness’ self-evidence, Louichon cannot avoid some pitfalls of the literary imagination. Every now and again, she lyrically gears the argument toward suggestions of text agency (“le texte parle”) and an axiologically-charged approach to a complexity supposed to be inherently literary (in a circular manner, complexity is literariness, literariness is complexity, where none of the two notions is explicated). There is a fair warning and important reminder to recognize here: even the well-intentioned and highly qualified analyst of representations relative to literary reading development is likely to fall, at some point, into the trap that is literary imagination, or the set of shared representations at the core of her own study.
The recurrent traits identified by Louichon

Louichon examines the works composing her corpus in a three-fold approach, moving from a loosely, eclectically defined “contexte” of the reading experience (“le livre”, “les lieux et les jours”, “la deuxième histoire” or “histoire de la rencontre”, “la bibliothèque et la vie”) to “oeuvre”, or the text – as different from the book – with which the remembered subject engages. She divides the second part into three sections titled “la fable”, “le texte”, “la voix”, that appear to respectively discuss the fabula (narrated sequence of events), sjuzhet (discourse, or composition), and narration, making it crystal-clear that the texts whose reading is remembered and rendered in her corpus are almost exclusively fictional narratives. The third and last part of *La littérature après coup* quite seamlessly responds to the “voix” section, as it is dedicated to the reading “sujet”.

Louichon’s primary finding regarding context is that it matters. It might seem obvious, but the great extent to which reading environment “colore le souvenir” (108), although a well-known and proven neuroscientific fact, is given a “place flagrante” in Louichon’s corpus that does not necessarily reflect its recognition in real life. It must be noted, however, that Louichon understands context in a particularly broad way. In this first part, she discusses factors typically understood as contextual, such as time and place, which are essential pieces of memory formation and retrieval (“c’est la mémoire qui fonctionne comme ça”, 99). She tackles the importance of the who and how as parameters of the encounter with the book (“histoire de la rencontre avec le livre”, 102). The presence, identity and behavioral traits of the “pourvoyeur de livres” (which is an almost inescapable figure) are absolutely central, according to Louichon:

La lecture – et partant le sens du texte – est affectée par ce qui l’a déclenchée, la parole de l’autre. (Ibid.)
La question intéressante est celle de savoir quel rapport entretiennent, non pas le médiateur et le lecteur, mais le médiateur et le livre lu. … En général … le livre prend la couleur de celui qui l’a transmis. (101-2)

In her analysis of context, she also considers aspects as diverse and seemingly extraneous to it as the pictures present in the book at stake (which may be remembered as constituting a truly separate text or supplementing the actual one, and often appear to carry as much weight as
textuality); or material features (“le souvenir du livre physique”, 92, as encountered in early childhood shows deep attachment to the book own, invested emotionally and physically – “un exemplaire ne vaut pas un autre”, 105).

If context matters, the text matters more, being “à l’origine du souvenir” (106). Louichon’s discussion of the “œuvre” is split into “fable”, “texte” and “voix” sections reminiscent of the classic triad of French narratology: histoire, récit, narration. Her understanding of each, however, slightly differs from Genettian definitions: she addresses aspects of narrative structure, or discourse, as part of the section dedicated to the “fable”; in the “texte” section, she mainly tackles stylistic issues; and she makes the most of the polysemous nature of “voix” in this context.

The “fable” section of her reflection opens on the assertion that “le résidu de la fable est toujours une reconfiguration” (123), which would be considered valid by cognitive psychologists. Every mnesic trace retrieved, beside bearing the mark of its encoding context, makes for a memory that is reconstructed in slightly different ways every time. Louichon’s most powerful speculation concerning the “fable” is, in fact, a matter of narrative discourse rather than story content. But it is an intriguing one for sure. Based on her corpus, she hypothesizes that the specific form of a given souvenir de lecture is “fortement induit[e] par l’appartenance générique” of the text at its core:

le cadre prototypique du genre … fournit au souvenir lui-même les structures de sa mise en mémoire et de son énonciation. (108)

At the times of encoding and retrieval, memories of emergent reading experience would adopt the generic characteristics of the “œuvre” on which experience and memory both hinge upon. Text genre would frame and shape the memory’s texture: “on peut penser que le texte lui-même produit des types de souvenirs” (109). Louichon is interested in “le narratif” first and foremost as this is the dominant genre in the souvenirs de lecture she examined – one that would induce “des souvenirs qui relèvent du narratif” (109). Not only would the description of the narrative work prompt and eventually “obligatoirement” rely on “des énoncés narratifs” (111), the whole
recounted memory would be filtered through “un tamis qui épouse la forme de la structure narrative” (109).

Having remarked that narrative structure and narrative reading have distinctive properties compared to other text types and engagement with them, Louichon insists on one aspect: the “régime de progression” (112), which she approaches in Raphaël Baroni’s terms.2 Louichon claims to adopt such a view only to note that

\[\text{il apparaît que l'intrigue fictionnelle, qui rend la lecture possible, passionnelle, mémorable, sitôt dénouée, se délité, au profit d'autre chose, qui se noue autrement, à un autre niveau, dont il reste trace et qui n'est pas l'intrigue … comme si l'énigme résolue et l'harmonie rétablie ne réglaient aucunement la tension existentielle (113)}\]

Up to that point, the “fable” section followed a very pragmatic, even scientific approach to the topic of memory of reading experience. Here, Louichon takes a turn that Sachs, Guiney and Védrines would probably deem ideological. The mention of an “autre chose, qui se noue autrement, à un autre niveau”, that seems to be by nature unlocatable and undefinable (“comme si…”) other than by exclusion (“n’est pas l’intrigue”) and the resort to a slightly esoteric vision of textuality (the “tension existentielle”) are moves that have been seen before in didactique de la littérature and have been pointed at by the above-mentioned authors. Underlying Louichon’s bifurcation is a resurgence of the littéraire. The rigorous analysis and evidence-based hypotheses give way to romantic, impressionistic assertions of both the intrinsic preciousness and necessary elusiveness of literary reading and its remembrance. Narrative progression becomes a secondary concern and topic; narrative, in fact, is pushed into the background entirely; what matters in fine (to Louichon, and to her authors of interest) is some tiny, invaluable dimension of the remembered book and reading experience: a “résidu”. What allows this fractal sliver of text or experience to take precedence over the force of the narrative “tamis” is its literary essence. Literariness overrides narrative quality. “[T]el une pierre précieuse au milieu d’un champ de poussière” (again a metaphorical approach both circumventing its object and mimicking one of its supposed qualities), the fragmentary image of literary experience “demeure et, par sa seule présence, affirme que la lecture a eu lieu” (114, emphasis mine). Having built an elaborate
argument about the narrative shape of the *souvenirs de lecture*, Louichon abruptly abandons this promising avenue, even refuting the argument entirely. Generic characteristics of the remembered “oeuvre” – “l'appartenance à un genre (le roman) ou même à un type textuel (le narratif)” – are not considered anymore to guarantee “des régularités dans les souvenirs”: “Ceux-ci ne sont pas homologiques des textes lus.” (ibid.).

The “texte”, then: would there be consistencies in its representation across reader autobiographies? Louichon first shows that the “souvenir du texte” often takes the form of a fragment of the text itself (“bribes textuelles”) that is remembered by heart and included fully in the autobiography. The issue of text genre makes a comeback here, as the “permanence de l’énoncé” (123) appears to very much depend on it:

> Seule la poésie pouvait donner lieu à une autobiographie de lecteur dans laquelle les textes sont présents (115)

Poems in general (because of their limited length) and regular verses in particular (because of marked musicality) lend themselves to reading aloud and ultimately superior encoding. The very act of poetry memorization, though, is – today still – part of regular teaching practices in many Francophone areas. The incidence of formal education on the precedence of the *souvenir du texte poétique* is probably not emphasized enough by Louichon (see Chapter 6 as well as the upcoming conclusion). Other genres can be remembered à la lettre as well, although in a much more scattered manner:

> La mémorisation semble alors véritablement opérer comme un tamis qui ne laisse passer que certains mots, expressions ou phrases qui sont bien des restes du texte lu. (116)

The remembrance of the “fragment textuel” is typically associated with some sort of introspective insight, notes Louichon, borrowing the latter notion from anthropologist of reading practices (and analyst of her own reading trajectory) Michèle Petit. Inserted fragments therefore can be seen to carry a “dimension performative”: as they spin a discourse emanating from another self than the reader’s, yet so close (“ce que nous entendons, c’est nous”, 122), the “mots de l’autre” come to generate a fruitful tension between identity and alterity (117-8).
To Louichon, the “voice” is therefore first and foremost the text’s own. What this implies exactly is once more defined only by exclusion, as neither the “langue” nor the “sens” but, rather, as taking place beyond (“par delà”) these dimensions. The souvenir of the “voice” is one of a particular experience, “ce jour où un texte parle, où … le lecteur entend la voix du texte”:

Oublieuse des mots, la remémoration de la lecture fait ressurgir cette voix inchangée et surtout cette expérience, d’un texte qui parle (123)

This poetic image again pulling toward the literary imagination is counterbalanced by a reference to the actual voice of the adult reading out loud to the child protagonist, which configuration appears to be a regular component of representations of literary initiation. Several authors in Louichon’s corpus represent such a “voice” as having a major influence on literary reading development. Interestingly, while Louichon minimizes the importance of the school setting in representations of literary coming-of-age, the determining voice is the (primary or secondary school) teacher’s one, as Pierre Michon puts it: “J’ai appris la littérature par la bouche des instituteurs” (122). From this finding, Louichon proceeds to hypothesize that the fundamental interest of literature conveyed by the adult voice, the one aspect whose encounter is thereby enabled, is not exactly other than both the “sens” and “langue”; it is, in fact, absolutely disconnected from the former and very much related to the latter:

il semble que ce que l’enfant ‘apprend par la bouche de ses instituteurs’ … soit une expérience de l’incompréhension. (ibid.)

The move has been circular again. From the “voix du texte” to the effective voice of the adult figure, from the teacher’s mouth to an inscribed “voix qui parle une langue – partiellement – inconnue” (123) (where both voice and language are undefined and unidentified), we return to the literary imagination; there would in fine be such a thing as

la langue étrangère de la littérature, qui parle haut parce qu’on ne la comprend pas, qui parle fort parce qu’elle est de ce monde et qui reste en mémoire comme la voix du texte. (ibid.)

Instead of serving her reflection, the polysemy of “voix” ends up beclouding Louichon’s suggestions. The fact that the section fails to address a crucial premise (what exactly is “la voix
du texte“?) sows some doubt on the pertinence of an inquiry into the notion. In any case, it makes something clear: the temptation is always high, while discussing ‘literary’ textuality, to return to metaphor and personification, to weave abstract significations, and ultimately to build a discourse that is abstract and unhelpful at best – even for a scholar as exceptional as Louichon, who is overall extremely practical, methodical, and intentionally innovative in her approach to representations of literary initiation.

After examining representations of the "oeuvre", in a (somehow questionable) repartition into aspects of the “fable”, “texte” and “voix” respectively, Louichon turns to the “sujet”, which she (in line with the dominant view in didactique de la littérature) quite clearly considers the most important dimension of the souvenir to shed light on: “Le souvenir de lecture est un discours de soi sur soi lisant.” (125). Louichon’s references in this section essentially belong to traditional reader reception research (Jauss) and are largely French-centered (Picard, Jouve), with the exception of one contemporary narratologist from French-speaking Switzerland, whose work draws on discourse analysis more often than on psychoanalytical theories: Raphaël Baroni. From Baroni and Jauss, Louichon borrows insights into the affective character of reader response to “la question posée par le texte” (125), which would explain why the resolution at the end of the initiation is always the reader herself. Having forgotten the text’s answer to its own question, forgotten what precisely her excitement and curiosity were all about, the reader would only remember being left facing herself by way of the text:

Les souvenirs de lecture sont majoritairement cela, des souvenirs de la découverte de soi, via des livres, un livre ‘qui porte en lui un secret qui parle au mien’, le secret de mon secret. (129)

The souvenir would more or less confusedly always star an emergent reader protagonist struggling with an intimate and / or existential issue to which the book is retrospectively read as a key. In the memory at least (if not in the remembered reality of the event), there is this “mystère à découvrir, dont les contours sont flous,” that the book shall deliver. Following Jouve and Picard, Louichon can claim the ultimate inversion: “la lecture … lit le sujet” (134); its memory shows the mystery to be specific to each reader’s individual quest, beyond the book yet thanks to it.
Louichon closes the section with a decidedly psychoanalytical turn:

Les choses les plus secrètement désirées concernent, durant l'enfance et l'adolescence, la génération, la procréation, la sexualité. (126)

One finding highlighted by Louichon concerns the long-standing homology between superior reading enjoyment and sexual pleasure, an analogy that autobiographers appear fond of: "Le plaisir charnel et le plaisir du livre se rejoignent dans le souvenir." (128). This is one additional pattern to keep in mind.

From Louichon’s grammar of the *souvenir de lecture* back to other studies of reader trajectory narratives

*La littérature après coup* is perhaps the cleverest examination of patterns in contemporary Francophone representations of literary initiation to have been published, and a model in many ways for anyone undertaking a comparable investigation. Louichon convincingly forges an operational construct (the *souvenir de lecture*) allowing one to simultaneously and separately explore various crucial facets of these representations, including environmental aspects affecting both the past experience and the memory of it, characteristics of the remembered book as artefact and as text, and images of the reading subject. She thoughtfully delineates her autobiographical corpus, deciding to favor uncritical representations of specific reading experiences over incisive reflections on one’s overall reading development (thus excluding works such as *Les Mots*, deemed overly analytical); and to prefer literary works on the (debatable) grounds of their superior complexity, hence interest. She explicitly aims, based on the large corpus thereby constituted, to bring out a “formule abstraite” accounting for the tropes structuring *souvenirs de lecture*. From the very beginning, she commits to systematization, dividing her study into three parts (context, work – or “oeuvre” –, subject) and a number of sub-categories (within the “oeuvre” section: fable, text, voice).
The classification of her findings, although quite arbitrary and confusing at times, enables patterns to emerge. The recurrent traits detected by Louichon include the following:

- the immediate context of reading experience always “colore le souvenir”;
- the “pourvoyeur de livres” is a founding figure and feature of literary initiation;
- materiality and graphic design matter as much as, if not more than, textuality;
- what is left of the fictional narrative at the center of the remembered reading experience is a romanticized, tiny “résidu” of the experience itself or of the text, rather than a narrative structure;
- poems are frequently quoted in their entirety;
- the encounter with the text is usually represented as an encounter with another mind and language (“les mots de l’autre”, “expérience de l’incompréhension”);
- rather than prized per se, the book is ultimately a medium to self-knowledge development and growth;
- literary and sexual initiations often go hand in hand;
- formal literature education has little to no impact on literary coming-of-age.

The studies discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 did not include systematic, in-depth examination of the features shared by most autobiographies de lecteur. But several of their authors did notice recurring figures and themes – which happen to coincide with those pinpointed by Louichon. A relatively exhaustive list of these topoi includes the central role, throughout literary initiation, of adult passeurs de littérature, materiality, and orality (Louichon, Fourtanier), of patrimonial textuality (Béhotéguy, Fourtanier), of one single decisive text (Béhotéguy, Hubert) and the re-reading process (Louichon). It also includes the strongly felt existence of two distinct spaces of literary reading development (Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur; Lahire; Miquelon, after Rouxel; Fourtanier); the conception of literary reading as catalyst of self-discovery (Rouxel, Louichon); the prime impact of emotions (Rouxel, Fourtanier) and context at the level of memory selection; and the proximity of, and intimate connection between, literary and sexual initiations.
It is remarkable that no mention can be found, in this list, of the institutional entity *Ecole* or of text genres. I believe that many of the themes identified by Louichon et al. should in fact be considered part of a larger tapestry that they contribute to weave: the complex rendition of the impact of institutionally legitimized approaches to book culture on a youngster’s opening to the textual world. I also believe that this opening is best approached from a genre-centered perspective that would differentiate between the respective impact of each type of textuality. The school experience and existence of different text genres are underlying themes in all studies of reader autobiographies – as well as, obviously, in the autobiographies themselves; and yet, they are almost never addressed as ones deserving of specific attention.

**Blind spots: formal education and generic partition**

Formal literature instruction is not granted much consideration across all three parts of Louichon’s study (“contexte”, “oeuvre”, “sujet”). Louichon argues that it is hardly ever represented in her corpus, at least as a component of literary initiation. Its influence is typically depicted as neutral enough to not deserve or require attention. When the “médiation scolaire” appears to impact the course of literary reading development, it is in a rather unflattering manner, if not worse:

> L’école n’est pas ennuyeuse et elle donne à lire, mais elle semble incapable de permettre le souvenir d’une rencontre, et, à ce titre peut-être, elle altère les œuvres. (103)

Louichon’s claim here is corroborated by the results of qualitative studies, including Miquelon’s:

> [L]es représentations endossées par une majorité d’élèves au sujet des corpus littéraires scolaires traduisent une certaine résignation envers les lectures faites dans le cadre du cours de français, qui, semble-t-il, pour les élèves, sont vouées à ne pas être intéressantes, parce que choisies par quelqu’un d’autre en dépit de leurs gouts et intérêts. Cette représentation … traduit une représentation générale de la littérature dans la classe de français comme une littérature soumise à des contraintes et étrangère aux intérêts des élèves, au goût de lire et au regard sur soi. (Miquelon 141)

Louichon’s analysis tendentially echoes and supports Tauveron’s vision of the school as responsible for its own absence from reminiscences of literary exploration. Despite ostensible
progress in practices, formal literature instruction still too often seems to impose passive reading practices on students and to prevent "l'initiation au plaisir de lire" (ibid., emphasis mine). The greatly limited importance attached to school’s influence in autobiographical narratives of literary initiation seems to reflect a real-life situation.

Could individual teachers have been more memorable? Louichon insists on the centrality of the “présence de l’autre” in memories of reading experience, or more specifically of “l’autre lisant”, the adult reader and “pourvoyeur de livres” (101). Teacher figures, however, are scarcely mentioned in La littérature après coup, supposedly because they are scarce within the corpus itself; eventually, their empirical voice doesn’t matter as much as “la voix du texte” anyway. Louichon does touch on cases where “l’école s’incarne en une figure, celle d’un professeur unique” (103), only to eventually deny the impact of schooling in representations of literary revelation. The portrayal of decisive teacher influence would dismiss the affiliation of the adult passeur to the institution:

le professeur médiateur n’est en réalité pas différent du médiateur familial ou amical, le proche qu’il devient parfois. (ibid.)

Louichon eventually returns to her assessment of school as a (hazy) setting and (negligible) influence in literary initiation with a somewhat enigmatic assertion. The virtually complete absence of "souvenirs de lecture scolaire" across her corpus – at least in her (over)view – should not be taken as evidence of literature education’s uselessness in effective literary reading development. The classroom may have

un rôle en négatif, en contrepoin. Elle est l’arrière-plan sur lequel brille le souvenir … le rôle de l’école serait de donner au jeune lecteur les moyens de vivre ailleurs et autrement des évènements de lecture (162)

Ultimately, concludes Louichon, contradicting a major part of her related argument but supporting her didactic case to come, one must “faire l’hypothèse que l’école est parfois un lieu créateur de souvenirs de lecture ou qu’elle peut le devenir” (ibid.).

Regarding generic variability, Louichon astutely observes that the “œuvres” at the core of reading experiences in her corpus are overwhelmingly fictional narratives, without further
following and developing this fascinating lead. She resorts to a lexicon and categories elaborated by narrative scholars and addresses intrinsically narratological issues (what remains of the original “fable” in its mnesic reconstruction? What is specific to memories of narrative texts?). She does not, however, investigate the many possible reasons why fictional narratives are overrepresented in *souvenirs de lecture*. She is not much concerned either with other text genres, including multimodal ones, also often featured in reader trajectory narratives. As will be explained and illustrated in Chapter 8, generic diversity is in fact a crucial factor to take into consideration when examining depictions of literary reading development.

1 Louichon is very precise overall in the parameters she sets for her construct’s outline. Temporal distance between “la lecture effectuée” and “le discours sur la lecture” must be important to ensure “la dimension explicitement résiduelle du discours sur la lecture”: “[c]e qui reste ne se confond pas avec ce que l'on choisit de retenir” (77). This restriction leads her to exclude book reviews as well as most diaries from her corpus. The French linguistic notion of “modalités d’énonciation” makes for another criterion serving the definition of her master concept together with the inclusion / exclusion of certain works. “Sujet lecteur” and “sujet énonciateur du souvenir” must be one and the same, namely instances united by an autobiographical pact. Even though it occasionally seems to pertain to metatextual discourse, the *souvenir de lecture* is to be distinguished from the commentary, in which an author “ne dit pas ce qu'il se rappelle du texte ou de l'oeuvre, il dit quelque chose d'autre de l'oeuvre, quelle que soit, par ailleurs, la dimension subjective ou évaluative de ce qu'il dit” (79). Louichon understands the *souvenir de lecture* as non-reflexive to the extent that reflexive is equated with critical—“même s'il peut intégrer une composante critique” (ibid.). Furthermore, the presence of the reader-as-character in the narrated *souvenir* is considered essential: an emerged image would be *souvenir* “en ce qu'elle est trace identifiée (le texte est clairement référé) d'une lecture effective (le sujet est présent dans l'énoncé)” (81). The *souvenir de lecture* is also primarily a "souvenir d'une lecture, c'est-à-dire d'une oeuvre ou d'un texte", as opposed to "le souvenir de la lecture et de ses enjeux" (80, emphasis mine), a category in which Sartre's *Les Mots* would be considered to fit: "les souvenirs de lectures singulières y sont beaucoup plus rares que les discours sur la lecture" (80).

2 See Baroni, 2007.

3 I mentioned earlier that Louichon’s work was explicitly conceived as a contribution to teacher training: “*La littérature après coup*, dans une perspective de formation, vise … moins à être une théorie du souvenir de lecture qu’une sorte de corpus organisé, voire d’anthologie susceptible de servir à la mise en confrontation, et donc à la transposition dans le cadre de la formation”. Louichon considers that resorting to “témoignages de lettrés” efficiently serves the specific learning objective that she tasks teacher training with within the framework of this study: to help trainees develop an ability to deconstruct “les discours axiologiques à visée normative”, evaluating those in light of “la réalité des pratiques de lecture” – which are, quite ironically, represented in Louichon’s own study not only by narrative reconstructions of reality, but by literary-reputed texts that she deems superior in content and discourse, their authors being lettrés: “Plus le lecteur est grand (en quantité et qualité), mieux il peut aider à disqualifier tous les discours de disqualification et de distinction”. Thus, the study is designed partly on the grounds of the ideological perspective that the same study should allow one to deconstruct. Nonetheless, Louichon does wonder, to her credit, whether “le grand lecteur peut être un modèle (dans le sens scientifique) pour penser l’apprenti lecteur”… or not.
TRANSITIONAL CONCLUSION

The previous chapter focused on the descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive) dimension of Louichon’s study: her attempt to pinpoint patterns in a corpus of literary-reputed reader trajectory narratives. Whether the content of the latter could and should be directly relevant to future educational design is a debatable point. Louichon herself acknowledges that there unfortunately are limitations to the use of literary-reputed souvenirs de lecture as a knowledge foundation allowing to formulate practical teaching recommendations: “[I]les souvenirs énoncés, racontés sont au service du projet autobiographique” (2009, 88), and to that extent, the narrator is always potentially unreliable. But the author’s agenda includes its share of unconscious biases. Therefore, Louichon’s study is most certainly precious to understand the replication of patterns in representations of literary initiation, and to that extent, eventually benefit the comprehension of emergent and advanced engagement with textual content, particularly fictional narratives, in and out of school. Louichon has built solid ground for further examination of literary reading experience narratives.

Like Louichon’s souvenir de lecture, my proposed concept, “representations of literary initiation”, tacks on both notions of a schema-based cognitive reconstruction (representations about) and of textual mediation (representations of). However, the notion of “literary initiation” makes explicit the centrality of literariness (eluded in the preferred appellation souvenir de lecture) as well as the ideological nature of the represented development (the substance and shape of any “initiation” process being first and foremost products of social imagination).

In the second part of this dissertation, I would like to explore the avenue opened by Louichon, referring to her findings, yet adopting a doubly different perspective: my focus will be on Francophone areas typically neglected by researchers working on biographies de lecteur, and on two themes I mentioned earlier – formal literature education, generic diversity – which are much more central to reader trajectory narratives than acknowledged in Louichon.
1. Prioritize overlooked Francophone areas (as contexts of authorship and narrative content)

Just as I have been centering non-French (Swiss and Quebecois) scholarship throughout the first part of this dissertation in an effort to amplify supposedly ‘peripheric’ Francophone voices, I will attempt to address these open questions by centering non-Metropolitan authorship in the second part of this dissertation. The complex set of representations developed throughout a culturally situated literature education can be expected to impact as well as reflect an emergent reader's experience. It is also likely to condition the manner in which her literary initiation is remembered and possibly translates into a hypothetical autobiography. The reason I am choosing to examine the autobiographical writing of a French Caribbean author – beside the blatant underrepresentation of reader trajectory narratives penned by African and Caribbean across the studies evoked in Part 1 – is our knowledge of the existence of a specifically French imaginaire littéraire, yet our ignorance of the extent to which the latter would replicate across various Francophone spaces.

The récit d’enfance of Patrick Chamoiseau, particularly the second and third volumes of his autobiographical trilogy, will serve as a case study. Chemin-d’école and A bout d’enfance stand out, according to Knepper, for their ‘literary’ quality: they would deserve nomination to the pantheon of modern and contemporary childhood narrative masterpieces along with works by Marcel Proust, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nathalie Sarraute; or Joseph Zobel, Raphaël Confiant, Maryse Condé… in that – once again revealing – order (132). Together with the more engaged Ecrire en pays dominé, written between the two volumes abovementioned, Une enfance créole is a captivating multi-part story of culturally tangled reading development. Chapter 5 will elaborate on the non-metropolitan récit d’enfance and Chamoiseau’s positioning within this recent tradition.
2. Prioritize formal reading education and text genres (as themes worthy of investigation)

As we will soon see, Chamoiseau’s autobiographical work demonstrates the need for recognition of those two dimensions as critical to any discussion not only of *Une enfance créole* and its strictly autobiographical complement *Ecrire en pays dominé*, but also of many, if not all, Francophone reader trajectory narratives.

In Part 2, I discuss these two themes consecutively, often referring to the features listed in Chapter 4 (*passeurs de littérature*, etc.) and re-organizing them to a certain extent. I hope to show that in Chamoiseau at the very least, the role of formal instruction, on the one hand, and the role of generic specificities, on the other hand, are some of the primary issues at stake.

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1 How to limit the impact of the author’s agenda and idiosyncrasies on the identification of “traits récurrents” within her corpus? Louichon believes she can solve this by ‘objectively isolating’ souvenirs – using the aforementioned criteria – in a great variety of works spanning “epochs, genres and people”, and by collecting and comparing them. This might be considered a circular argument (avoiding bias by affirming bias can be avoided); still, Louichon’s results prove it quite pertinent.
PART TWO

Representations of Literary Initiation in a Non-Metropolitan récit d’enfance:

_Au pays d’émerveille_ with Patrick Chamoiseau
CHAPTER FIVE

Presumption of Dissonance.
On Interpreting a Non-Metropolitan enfance

Over the three volumes of his semi-fictional mémoires (Antan d’enfance, 1993; Chemin-d’école, 1994; A bout d’enfance, 2004) and one explicitly autobiographical essay (Ecrire en pays dominé, 1997), Patrick Chamoiseau develops the story of a reader’s coming-of-age in 1960 Martinique. This focus on literary initiation makes up the core of most contemporary récits d’enfance, as underscored in Chapter 3. However, the privileged scholarly take on Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing is one of elaboration on what distinguishes the ‘Francophone’, Antillean Chamoiseau from authors who identify / are identified differently and most notably as ‘French’.

‘Francophone’ vs. French récits d’enfance

The supposedly “unclear, annexed literary status” of the non-metropolitan, postcolonial récit d’enfance might be more pronounced than in the case of its French equivalent, but the status of the latter is quite blurry itself:

multiple attempts to classify the texts' genre … result in a number of overlapping designations in English and French criticism: childhood narratives, childhood memoirs, autobiographies, autobiographical novels, autofictions, souvenirs d’enfance or récits d’enfance, an anxiety of genre which hinders comparative scholarship. (Hardwick 7)

Here lies one of the reasons why childhood narratives in general are rarely considered "in relation to other texts on childhood", suggests Hardwick (7). Yet, the issue is particularly acute as regards ‘Francophone’ récits d’enfance, a fact that is best explained, beyond the "anxiety of genre" evoked above, by the orientations traditionally favored in postcolonial studies and the historical conception of the field of littérature francophone. Mireille Rosello could not be more accurate when she points that “theoretically, Hexagonal literature is a branch of Francophone studies”
...and the fact that this claim would even just for a moment strike us as counterintuitive is an expression of the core issue.

The qualifier ‘Francophone’ is an inherently problematic one, as it often upholds, points out Hardwick, “a distinct barrier between metropolitan France and all other areas where French is spoken” (4). Furthermore, “la Francophonie renvoie dans l’opinion commune au ‘tiers-monde’”:

La Francophonie est… couramment assimilée à l’héritage colonial de la France. Quand ce n’est pas au mépris, les francophones ont donc droit à la condescendance ou à la commisération (Combe 29)

The concept’s elaboration was meant to found a global, inclusive vision that would spread across institutions and infuse representations. But the metropolitan center continues to dominate the ‘Francophone’ periphery in many ways, according to Sankara, who also notes that this domination “to the West advantage and with little interplay” seems to be the case also in the literary field, where Francophone autobiographies are for the most part exhibited, promoted, and sold for their cultural otherness (value). (Sankara 16)

Lydie Moudileno and Etienne Achille also point out the paradoxical dynamics of a field that indeed promotes the integration of “le[s] grand[s] écrivain[s] noir[s]” into the French histoire littéraire while continuously enacting “une racialisation qui les maintient dans une différence francophone” (112).

Whenever Francophone récits d’enfance (here opposed to those produced in the Metropole) get compared to texts produced elsewhere than in former French colonies, the analysis conducted does not address convergences as much as specificities supposedly traceable back to these narratives’ peripheral position vis-à-vis the French world of reference. In fact, it is presumed that comparing non-metropolitan Francophone childhood narratives with texts pertaining to the same genre, but penned by Hexagon-born and-raised authors, automatically results in distorted outcomes – abusive and invalid conclusions – because geographically and historically distinct social imaginaries are involved (Hardwick). The implication here is not that several such imaginaries are at stake but that the gap separates the French from the ‘Francophone’ one, the latter turned into a somewhat congruent ensemble of representations by means of its opposition to another, strictly Hexagonal one. The postcolonial récit d’enfance can
never be discussed on the same terms as childhood narratives of the non-colonized world – a conclusion that Louichon’s analysis, overwhelmingly exclusive of non-metropolitan texts, seems to enact.

‘Francophone’ representations of child development and the literary initiation process are almost always examined in a perspective best described as ethnographic\(^2\), which more or less explicitly assumes the text to be devoid of fictional elements and testify to a collective experience. In effect, non-French authors writing in French have historically been acutely aware that they are writing for the Métropole and they are therefore keen on “combin[ing] their individual coming-of-age stories with ethnographic information” (Austen 225). Thus did French expectations come to largely determine the structural and stylistic shape as well as the contours of the implied audience of Francophone autobiographical writing, just as they did in the case of fully fictional narratives:

> Les lecteurs français des premiers romans maghrébins, africains ou antillais ont … tout à attendre de la description des lieux, des décors et des coutumes traditionnelles. D’où le tour didactique et descriptif d’œuvres qui ont toujours une portée référentielle. (Combe 140)

As African postcolonial literature in particular developed into a field, the struggle to emancipate their writing from a narrow, exoticizing Western view therefore became a particularly urgent cause among West African authors who, despite having “long been quick to turn to anthropology” notably for the reasons detailed above, took issue with seeing their creative autobiographical production reduced “to communicably ‘authentic’ accounts of cultures whose merits are seen as more ethnographic than properly literary” (Izzo 3). The matter at stake is very much one of referentiality and the right of the Francophone author to access a ‘literary’ level of textual engagement once again valued over ‘literal’ writing and reading. This is the very issue underlying Chamoiseau’s aspiration to achieve ‘literary’ form using a language deemed literal.

> Une enfance créole does give voice to a community to a certain extent, that is, on Chamoiseau’s
mischievously political terms. Rather than resulting from scholarly discussion and applied a posteriori, the ethnographic approach is assumed to be strategically claimed by Chamoiseau’s narrator himself, who consciously weaves “the authorized discourses of autobiography and ethnography”. The narrative therefore seemingly contests the French injunction (truly a double-bind: be ‘authentic’ / be ‘literary’) through playful deconstruction of both expectations.

Having been largely conditioned to write “in a form so identified with the European literary tradition”, authors from the postcolonial Francophone world are constrained to make “some cultural compromise with the dominant ‘other’” (Austen 226). Some compromise – which leaves room for cultural variation to be an important factor of influence on the content of textual representations of literary initiation produced in non-metropolitan French-speaking areas. It is also a potential source of internal paradoxes, since beliefs about reading acquisition reflect cultural histories that overlap while also pertaining to different traditions (Rockwell 2006, 37). The phenomenon of cultural dissonance (Lahire) that might result from this configuration and become manifest in non-metropolitan autofictional storyworlds is centered in a study of Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing conducted by Marie-José Fourtanie who eventually appears ambivalent herself regarding the effects of the French literary imagination on the developing reader protagonist of Une enfance créole, without further delving into that ambivalence.4

Une enfance créole exemplifies the subtlety with which local approaches to Hexagonal ‘literary’ culture impact the form and content of non-metropolitan narratives, allowing, to some degree, to distinguish between formerly oppressed populations. While African autobiographies could generally be considered “‘traditional’” in style (e.g. gravity of tone, linearity and unity of subject), postcolonial literature studies show Francophone Caribbean authors such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant to be keen on depicting the complexity of self and community trajectories by means of polyphonic and typically humorous narratives (Sankara 6-7). Besides, having been “[m]ore exposed to Western education than the average African”, Francophone Caribbean writers
That "crisis" of the Creole culture is typically supposed to originate in linguistic violence.

Whenever Francophone Caribbean childhood narratives are explored in literary criticism (which is rarely, according to Hardwick, 7), their being singled out relies to a large extent on the assumption that the narrated experience centers the language question just as much as narration itself enacts it. Chamoiseau scholars are particularly concerned with a relation to language that is considered idiosyncratic yet emblematic of a community's worldview distinguishing the sujet créole and coloring its (narrated) story in the same manner that it affects its (narrative) recounting.

Let us start by surveying divergences and convergences between Une enfance créole and the French contemporary autobiographical archi-texte in terms of form, before moving to the under-investigated level of content.

**Form. The styling and structuring of the Creole reader trajectory**

Chamoiseau's project fits one dominant trend in contemporary French reading trajectory narratives, and récits d'enfance more generally, as covered in Chapter 3: fragmentary narration. We have seen that current autobiographical poetics in the metropolitan space typically multiply obstacles to linear progression as a way to express mnesic precariousness. In Chamoiseau too, digression, bifurcation, internal contradiction become strategies repeatedly disruptive of narrative harmony. As observed by Hardwick, the charting of childhood in Chamoiseau's trilogy is purposefully disorderly, digressive and contradictory; paragraphs may develop logically, be loosely thematically connected, or undertake a complete and unsignalled departure from the previous subject under discussion. (64)

Formal experimentation relying on such techniques has come to be expected from contemporary autobiographical production. Indeed, the "stratified composition" of Chamoiseau's texts, adds
Hardwick, “reveals postmodern influences, notably in interventions that challenge and contradict the narrative” (67). Une enfance créole much conforms to the French contemporary project in that it tendentially favors metaphorical and symbolical “aperçus” over a traditional plot, strongly suggesting, according to Crosta, that these “aperçus” would best serve the expression of both memory faultlines and “la subjectivité de l’enfant dans son giron familial et social”. Like other autobiographical works produced in the French contemporary space, Chamoiseau’s writing appears to build on the awareness of a fundamental obstacle to the “recuperation of an essential self”, which might only be overcome through

the discovery of a poetics through which the self might be negotiated and imaginatively reconstructed (Knepper 152).

A critical preliminary step in this discovery process is the recognition and dramatization of the narrator’s radical dissociation from his storyworld-level representation. Chamoiseau’s creative reconstruction questions the terms of the autobiographical pact, defined by Lejeune as “the pact between the ‘je’ (I) and the ‘moi’ (me) or the promise of sincerity”:

Chamoiseau's multivocal poetics of self-negotiation reflect the impossibility of fulfilling the autobiographical pact … (Knepper 139)

Postmodern writing is also known to question the possibility of ‘sincere’ re/construction more than ever before. Une enfance créole stems from the need to acknowledge and creatively perform the foundational issue of the “split subject” (132). Chamoiseau allegedly chooses to

esquiver … ce choix inévitable entre l’ego et sa matérialisation en maintenant une distance critique vis-à-vis de son enfance et de son œuvre. (Crosta)

This decision to inscribe a division – of labor – between first-person adult narrator and third-person child protagonist (le négrillon), thus acknowledging the impossibility to overcome this split⁶, is again characteristic of contemporary approaches to the récit d’enfance.⁷ Echoing other narrators, Chamoiseau’s “worries that he does not know himself and that he is only known by a fragile memory that exists outside him”, which memory has already, in full autonomy, selected the specific episodes of a bountiful childhood experience that are bound to be retrieved (Walsh 60,
emphasis mine). Narration itself undergoes division, according to Walsh, in a powerful rendering of mnesic complexity:

A narrator in the third person recounts the perspective of the négrillon when relating events of the past, and a narrator in the first person intervenes throughout to comment on the project of remembering childhood. (63)

Contestation of linearity, of sincerity, of unicity of the self and the story are all defining features of contemporary French autobiographical writing. Now, the postcolonial nature of the site of enunciation and/or narrative setting arguably adds a layer of complexity to the fragmentary quality of identity and narration. In Chamoiseau’s case, observes Walsh, memories of the colonial past haunt both the character and narrator, although differently, the latter having gained critical skills that the former does not yet possess (54):

Cette double perspective est un révélateur au sein des antécédents littéraires en littératures africaines et caribéennes. (Crosta)

The neocolonial discourse of childhood, whose “gaps and lapses” are consistently exhibited throughout the narrative, are presumably a central target in Chamoiseau’s project:

Memory remains entangled in the ‘post/colonial’ condition, a neologism that Chris Bongie coined to describe the liminality of the contemporary position which is neither colonial nor postcolonial but somewhere betwixt and between. Consequently, the pact with memory entails a constant detouring of self in order to negotiate the liminal space and work toward a postcolonial horizon of transculturation. This ambiguity haunts the ‘we’ or ‘nous’ of the text in which the term is used to refer both to the Martinican community and the pact that joins memory and Chamoiseau. (Knepper 140)

To that extent, Une enfance créole complexifies the French perspective on autobiographical reconstruction with which it otherwise aligns. Most studies of Chamoiseau closely attend to this dimension, approaching it as a confirmation of the author’s attempt to regenerate a collective rather than individual voice and experience – a Martinican identity, more generally (or specifically) Creole, above all defined as a historically oppressed one. The collective quality of this perspective would discursively translate into sustained insertion of a linguistic imaginary that ultimately itself translates into a ‘creolized’ narrative style:

Des caractéristiques – réelles ou imaginaires – sont … attribuées à la langue créole et se retrouvent un peu mystérieusement dans la narration. Parmi ces qualités essentielles du créole:
dissimulation du message, 'narration tournoyante ... brisée en de longues digressions', 'bruitages de ruptures et d'onomatopées', 'dialogue incessant avec son auditoire'. (Auzas 116)

Narrative discrepancies in Chamoiseau “arise through lapses of memory”, just like in writing from the Hexagon, while being also enacted “through creolization”, a specifically Caribbean feature which provides another cultural context for the articulation of self and the discourse of childhood. (Knepper 131)

To Knepper,

[m]uch of the bittersweet comedy of the narrative derives from this double-voiced view of the narrative, which is attentive to the effects on the child, but expresses the adult's Creolist perspective regarding the poetic and political possibilities of language. (143)

At the level of discourse, which is the dimension most often discussed in Chamoiseau studies, Une enfance créole aligns with general tendencies in contemporary French autobiographical writing. However, if we are to follow the aforementioned scholarly perspectives, the trilogy stands out through one feature: the focus on language as a source of power and its logical consequence, a uniquely creative engagement in translanguaging exploration. The proliferation of “hybrid language forms, which frequently embrace Creole terms or calques” is so characteristic of Chamoiseau’s writing that it distinguishes it even from non-metropolitan autobiographical production, notes Hardwick:

Chamoiseau's linguistic innovation sets him apart from other contemporary authors from the Francophone Caribbean, or indeed the Francophone world more generally. (65-6)

The distance from metropolitan writing is even wider, Chamoiseau’s creative manipulation of language being likely to “constantly surprise and wrong-foot readers accustomed to metropolitan French” (ibid.). Chamoiseau arguably builds a discursive universe forcing the reader linguistically or culturally unequipped out of her comfort zone. Language discrepancy becomes a source of profound defamiliarization and therefore a strategy that potentially reverses the stigma: it alienates the non-Caribbean, most likely metropolitan French reader who represents the colonizer in this instance. But linguistic recreation in Chamoiseau is ultimately driven by a search for inclusive communication, expressive of both cultural conflicts (“French and Creole never map
together into a harmonious whole", Knepper 144) and the possibility of reconciliation. Language mutates in a way disruptive of native reading as well:

Just as French-only speakers may be puzzled by insertions of what truly are foreign words and concepts, for the Creole speaker, the transcription of an oral language produces a kind of distancing effect. (Hardwick 66)

Chamoiseau himself points out that

he forges a polymorphic, idiosyncratic language which privileges neither the Creolophone nor the Francophone reader… (ibid.)

Developing a model relying on “constant tensions of undigested meaning” (Knepper 144), Chamoiseau claims that hope resides in Creolized discourse and reclaims the right to alter a mostly French linguistic model of contemporary autobiographical writing.

Chamoiseau thus subverts and seeks to redefine traditional definitions of literary language. There is a considerable twist, however, to this resistant posture arguably adopted at the level of implied authorship: the empirical author remains a tenant of canonical representations of literariness sustaining the notion of an axiologically superior cultural and textual dimension (the true langue étrangère) at odds with the referential, literal expression typical of transcribed oral speech. Together with other French Caribbean authors of the same generation (such as Raphaël Confiant, co-writer of the Eloge de la créolité manifesto and himself the author of a powerful récit d'enfance), Chamoiseau is indeed known to be a fierce advocate of poetics, or 'literary knowledge', in lieu of politics; to "situe[r] son combat non sur le terrain politique, mais sur le terrain littéraire" (Crosta). His endeavor "se veut littéraire et non le calque ou l'imitation simple de la vie" (ibid., emphasis mine). It is about redefining literariness rather than contesting its reign or existence as a construct – which would demand to explore radically novel perspectives on his own production and textuality overall (e.g. why would we ever endow a given text with higher ‘value’?). Such implied acceptance, at the metatextual level, of this established imaginary is all the more interesting given that the elusive notion of 'literariness' (notably discussed in Chapter 1) should be considered a very Hexagonal heritage. It is also one largely validated by scholarship as far as Une enfance créole is concerned: in Knepper's view, literariness increasingly appears as
the true Grail pursued at the level of narration. The formal dimension of the latter ultimately ‘belies’ the fabula:

While the first two works of childhood, Antan and Chemin, can be associated with the Creolist project of recuperating interior vision through memory and forays into the repressed articulations of the Creole self, the latter work is characterized by a literariness that belies any sense of glimpsing the ‘authentic self’ in a nascent state… (Knepper 145)

Just like his commentators’ perspective, Chamoiseau’s meta-discursive positioning is far from hermetic to the French literary imagination, which considerably attenuates the power of the attempt to resist it that we see enacted in his work.

At the levels of form (adhesion to postmodern literary-reputed postures) and of Chamoiseau’s (explicitly ‘literary’) formal intention, ambivalence toward what Védrines would call literary ideology is quite clearly discernable. To what extent does content reveal ambivalence too? It is tempting to favor a discourse-oriented perspective when approaching Chamoiseau’s representation of emergent ‘literary’ expertise — and indeed, existents, events, themes of the négrillon’s story are typically used as secondary evidence in form-centered analyses of his work. They are actually worthy of a proper study, especially as we seek to question the author’s comprehension of literary initiation.

Content. Reading the wor(l)d of the oppressor

A number of scholars, including Walsh, consider that Chamoiseau’s attempt to reinvent literariness at the level of form is rooted in his own development as a user of language-s, reflected in the diegetic substance formatting by the narrator of Une enfance créole:

Chamoiseau strives to recreate the existential dilemma inherent in the négrillon’s newfound hybridity by rendering his récits d’enfance, like his novels, “textes métisses”, where the oral, the written, Creole, and French, all converge. (46)

The unique features of narration (level of form) would mirror those of the developmental experience of the author-turned-character (level of content). Walsh is adamant on the subject:
[a] thorough grasp of Chamoiseau's vision of créolité must take into account the recreation of the *négrillon*, who understands that his hybridity is a product of historical contact, going back well before his birth. (47)

Postcolonial works centering literary initiation, or a nascent-to-evolving 'literary' appreciation of textuality, are bound to narrate particularly complex trajectories since their emergent reader protagonists appear to be "subject to a double alienation":

they are in a subordinate position both locally (as the descendant of colonized subjects) and universally (as a minor "acted upon by adults and limited in their own agency"). (Hardwick 12)

Should we then expect Chamoiseau’s diegetic world to focus on the initiatory experience of a colonized, culturally torn subject specifically approached as such? This is the scholarly perspective most often adopted. Like linguistic defamiliarization, the content-level characteristics of literary initiation in *Une enfance créole* would materialize awareness of the degree to which issues of language and power are intricated, of the need to redefine literary imagination as a culturally inclusive space. The attention granted to such questions in Louichon’s almost exclusively Hexagonal body of texts and her discussion of it is proportionally nonexistent. Linguistic violence seems to be a specifically non-metropolitan concern setting Chamoiseau’s work apart from reader autobiographies recounting childhoods lived in Hexagonal France.

And yet, based on the empirical author’s desire to reinvent literariness without dismantling the construct, based on his ostensibly literary ambition, the *négrillon*’s literary coming-of-age, constructed as the source of the latter ambition, should at least in part overlap with the canonical model of literary reading development as elaborated by the Parisian cultural Center. We saw that Chamoiseau already conforms with the contemporary French autobiographical project in more ways than one at the discursive and metadiscursive levels, including his overall allegiance to particular formal features (e.g. structural fragmentation) and explicit recognition of literariness as a legitimate construct within his conceptualization of Creolist discourse. It is more than likely that the tension between the internalization of the French literary imagination, on one hand, and the urgency to depart or diverge from it, on the other hand, will be discernable throughout the *négrillon*’s adventures.
As brought up in the conclusion to Part 1, it is my contention that the impact of literary imagination (or ideology?) on the substance of these adventures will emerge in the study of two of their most neglected dimensions, namely formal education and generic diversity. Before turning to the protagonist’s engagement with various text genres, I will now move to explore the négrillon’s school experience. I will successively refer to each of the features of French reader trajectory narratives identified notably by Louichon. My goal is to contrast the scholarly consensus on the insignificance of school (as a space of influence on literary initiation) with Chamoiseau’s depiction of the négrillon’s journey. I hope to show that formal education is in fact central in this journey as it is represented and a theme essential to comprehend the equivocal nature of the story of literary initiation that constitutes Une enfance créole.

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1 “Parmi les grandes aires géographiques de diffusion de la langue française, en simplifiant et en schématisant à l’extrême, on peut distinguer le ‘Nord’, le monde occidental, où la langue française s’est développée librement (mêmes si elle s’agit de colonies de peuplement, comme au Canada), du ‘Sud’ colonial et postcolonial, où la langue a été imposée par l’impérialisme européen … Un abîme sépare la francophonie en Algérie, province arabe de l’Empire ottoman lorsqu’elle est conquise par l’armée française en 1830, et en Suisse romande, où l’on parle français depuis que le français existe, et qui n’a jamais été sous domination française. Les différences de situation sont même si profondes que certains critiques s’interrogent sur la pertinence de l’idée de ‘francophonie’ … pour rapprocher des littératures et des cultures que parfois tout sépare.” (Combe 8-9)

2 The “Francophone” narrative of reading development allegedly has a distinct history, particularly in former colonial territories built on the subjection of local and / or enslaved populations. The autobiographical genre has branched in culturally marked variations even though the latter remain strongly rooted in and structured by French literary norms in many historically French territories: “African and Caribbean Francophone autobiographies are the hybrid result of the encounter between two respective ‘subaltern’ entities and France, the latter being both the common denominator and the dominant factor” (Sankara 7). The “serious” and solemn tone characteristic of the African autobiographical tradition, which arguably reproduces and consistently magnifies French autobiographical norms, for a long time distinguished it from expressions of the genre found outside the Sub-Saharan area. In Francophone Africa, literary imagination and the autobiographical genre happen to be closely tied not only within the literary field but in constrained empirical writing practice imposed to advanced students throughout relatively recent history. Under colonial ruling, autobiographical writing was a very real rite de passage marking out both processes of internalization of French cultural domination (to assimilate and imitate in order to better serve) and of literary formation (following the colonizer’s rules): “French colonial authorities inculcated and demanded the need for Francophone autobiography … prior to the formal literary practice of the genre, there was a tradition of written self-narratives in Francophone Africa in the form of journals, travelogues, and other self-writing during the colonial era” (ibid. 6-7). These self-narratives, however, were not supposed to make use of French canonical ‘literary’ models. Autobiographical writers received the explicit or implicit instruction to provide ethnographic accounts devoid of ‘literary-reputed’ features as much as possible. Francophone African authors’ consistent reliance on such features might therefore be seen either as compliance with the colonizer’s cultural worldview (favoring a specific ‘literary’ imagination: “students were often obliged to use
literary models", Warner 2) or as ambivalent, somewhat forced resistance to it (by engaging with French 'literary' models "while having to appear not to be writing literature", ibid), if not as both compliance and resistance.

3 This description of autoethnographic life-writing, proposed by Mary Louise Pratt, is discussed by Knepper on page 139.

4 Marie-José Fourtanier is one of the French scholars involved in the theorization of the notion of sujet lecteur, the formation of the latter, and imaginary development in school context. It is from this perspective that she became interested in Chamoiseau's "récits autobiographiques" which she explicitly conceives as an illustration or ground for elaboration of theoretical claims with a practical, pedagogical aim. To Fourtanier, Chamoiseau's texts are well-suited to develop a reflection on cultural dissonance of use in the classroom. Her position stands out within the collection of 'literary' analyses that includes her last article on the topic (2017), her explicit goal being to expand school-applicable knowledge: "Je chercherai encore une fois, dans et avec le récit de ses apprentissages, ce que peut nous apporter le parcours de Patrick Chamoiseau pour nous aider à enseigner en contexte de dissonance culturelle: quelle manière d'être, de structurer son imaginaire et de modéliser sa sensibilité, quelle façon de grandir entre des postulations culturelles contradictoires?". The text will be to a certain extent taken at face value, as a transcription of actual experience, whose study is deemed to profit others' experiences, to have "heuristic value": "En fait, un grand écrivain prolifique et couvert de prix va me permettre de modéliser ma réflexion sur l'enseignement actuel dans la mesure où les élèves ici et maintenant, mais aussi les jeunes enseignants, sont tiraillés, au point d'en être 'chiquetailleurs-défoncés', comme le 'négrillon', entre des univers culturels dissociés, non seulement socialement, entre la culture familiale des enfants d'ouvriers et/ou d'immigrés versus la culture patrimoniale et nationale dominante, mais aussi de manière générale et moins socialement marquée, entre les pratiques culturelles des jeunes liées aux médias et au numérique versus les références culturelles des oeuvres qui leur sont données à lire en classe" (96). Fourtanier's reference to the notion of cultural dissonance is an interesting move, but her argument can also be considered a risky one. See my discussion of her approach to Une enfance créole in the general conclusion.

5 This fact happens to be an incontournable of the cours de lettres modernes, as exemplified in this course chapter from the University of Lausanne: "l'invention formelle qui caractérise l'ère post-autobiographique de la littérature contemporaine admet la vanité de tout projet de narration de soi: le caractère illusoire de la reconstitution des événements selon un ordre arbitraire … l'impossible exhaustivité de la relation de soi qui confronte le sujet aux défaillances de sa mémoire, à l'incohérence et à l'insignifiance de son vécu."

6 "The man and the child remain separate selves, unable to be reconciled into a single unified entity that is both 'je' and 'moi.'" (Knepper 139).

7 "Ce jeu de la modalité narrative accuse l'écart temporel qui sépare le narrateur-adulte du personnage-enfant, et a pour effet d'insister sur la situation de dépendance qui caractérise leur mise en relation dans les conventions du récit d'enfance." (Crosta).

8 "The nostalgic return to childhood is … thwarted by the impossibility of recuperating the earlier 'I' of the boy that once existed." (Knepper 132).
CHAPTER SIX

“The Reader is Always a Student”:

Contrasting Reflections of an Antillean Education

We know that school is not the only space fostering emergent engagement with textuality. In the introduction, I evoked the two-dimensional nature of the construct ‘literary initiation’: advanced reading development and representations held about literary initiation are nourished by experiences in and beyond the classroom. The way current and former students approach the idea of literary reading competence is in part indebted to the unstable space of informal learning. Ideally (from an institutional and social point of view), the development of a capacity to ‘literarily’ engage with fictional narratives – which are to become the privileged support of the ‘literary’ education students will receive – would have started outside of school, fostered by family and the social environment at large.

In reality though, students' first encounter and most consistent interaction with literature as an explicit object of interest and study typically takes place at school. Following a number of sociologists and education scholars, I pointed in Chapter 1 that representations of literariness and literary initiation are directly and indirectly fashioned by three areas of production and reproduction of discourses about literature. The first two, scholarship and education policy, directly feed and affect pedagogical practice. In most ‘real life’ cases, formal education presumably forms the backbone of the imagination relative to literary development. This very space (the forme scolaire or forme école, termed such by the Swiss didacticiens) is overall steeped in a relatively conservative, prejudicial vision of literariness and literary initiation, according to Bruno Védrines and M. Martin Guiney, which vision theoretically suggests rather unfortunate outcomes of French language arts education in a number of cases. The big picture thus supports the case for a detailed reading of narrative descriptions of school experience:
L’école, comme l’une des institutions fondateuses du champ de la littérature, fonctionnant en même temps selon sa propre logique, produit et reproduit les discours sur ce qui est littéraire (Védrines and Gabathuler 79)

School matters considerably both in the development of an ability to read in a ‘literary’ fashion and in the construction of representations about the latter. Representations of literary initiation rely on individual and group experiences in the literature classroom and affect these experiences in return.

But we also know that schooling is a highly complex process that unfolds according to both a designed progression and a number of unforeseen obstacles, leaving possible outcomes open to some degree, notably because the short and long-term effect of variable teacher-student interactions is for the most part unknown. We can suppose and should keep in mind that even in a highly constraining school environment, a “négoce actif de sens et de significations” takes place in the literature classroom:

l’école, l’enseignant et les élèves transforment des textes qui les transforment en même temps. (Vuillet 2014, 23)

It is still true that social discourses about literacy, literariness and literary initiation encountered outside the institution matter. Like most other autobiographical works, Une enfance créole features the two settings of literary imagination development evoked earlier, these two partially overlapping, intertwined or starkly contrasting spaces that contribute to the perceived growth of the protagonist as a ‘literary’ reader. If the forme scolaire functions in relative rupture with its surrounding environment, as asserted notably by Schneuwy and Dolz, it is important too to account for the extent to which the dynamics structuring this outer space modulate the transmission of literary imagination primarily ensured by formal education.
Evacuating formal instruction: récits d'enfance as loci of rejection

If we are to consider that the imagination pertaining to literary reading experiences, upon which they rely in turn, takes shape within the frame of formal education for most students, then the (literary) reading classroom should logically make for a primary setting of autobiographical narratives of literary initiation. According to Louichon, this assumption surprisingly turns out not to be true for many of these texts:

[...] la médiation scolaire est peu présente dans les souvenirs de lecture des grands lecteurs. L'école apparaît comme totalement incapable de remplir cette tâche, si ce n'est [...] a contrario. [...] L'école reproche fréquemment adressé à l'école de ne pas prendre en compte la dimension subjective du lecteur se matérialise dans les rares énoncés qui lui sont consacrés par le fait que le discours relève plutôt du commentaire que du récit, du général que du singulier. Comme si la mémoire épisodique ne pouvait faire ressurgir les objets, les heures et les lieux, comme si le vécu scolaire ne pouvait se redire sous la forme épisodique, comme s'il ne restait rien, du moins, rien de dicible de toutes ces lectures. (2009, 103)

Louichon’s account of what sounds like unanimous rejection and minimal narrative incidence is unforeseen given that Francophone systems are uniquely prone to construct literature education as a "lieu esthético-socio-culturel important à l'école" (Reuter) and beyond:

[...] the School, both primary and secondary, continues to loom large in the ongoing debate over what constitutes the ends and the means of institutionalized practices of reading, in France more than anywhere else. (Guiney 22)

The consensual position in research on autobiographies de lecteurs is that formal literature education has little to no impact on effective literary coming-of-age – based, at least, on the representations conveyed by such autobiographies. The rencontre (with literariness and / or oneself; we know that according to Louichon and Rouxel, “la question de l'identité est au coeur de la lecture”, Louichon 2009, 140) would not be fostered nor even enabled by schooling:

La médiation scolaire est peu présente dans les souvenirs de lecture des grands lecteurs. L'école apparaît comme totalement incapable de remplir cette tâche, si ce n'est [...] a contrario (ibid., 103)

Whenever reader trajectory narratives show language arts instruction to affect 'literary' reading development, the influence is taken to be detrimental. L'Ecole is typically represented as oppressive ("les contenus et les apprentissages sont imposés de l'extérieur et sous la contrainte,
que celle-ci au demeurant soit brutale ou affable”, Fourtanier 2017, 102) and unable, or unwilling, to “prendre en compte la dimension subjective du lecteur” (Louichon 2009, 103). School is almost never embedded in the narrative; rather, it would be invoked through auctorial incursion and commentary form – rare utterances whose substance would pertain to metatextual more than narrative discourse, “du général que du singulier” (ibid.) – one more evidence, it is suggested, of its irrelevance to the emergent reader character’s literary initiation.

It must be conceded: researchers do acknowledge – without engaging much with the idea – that this view might be reductive and call for nuances. Louichon notably accepts that some Francophone autobiographies (here opposed to metropolitan French) depict institutional efforts to integrate elements of specific cultural contexts. Such is the case, for instance, for Michel Tremblay’s child reader protagonist3 who first encounters Quebecois literature at school, yet will experience the actual initiation to non-metropolitan literature much later and outside of the classroom, through adult exploration of Gabrielle Roy’s work, considered way more foundational by Tremblay’s adult narrator than the

représentation contraire de la littérature francophone transmise par l’école, se réduisant à quelques extraits catholiques et édifiants ou quelques poèmes, systématiquement dévalorisés par rapport à la littérature française (Louichon 2009, 103)

Formal literature education, notes Louichon along with several of the previously mentioned researchers, might not always be depicted as oppressive. Some classroom scenes could hypothetically feature moments of empowerment. Louichon sometimes comes close to invalidating her own argument: despite remaining as constraining a structure as institutional religion (an analogy explicitly referred to by Vuillet, Gabathuler and Guiney, cited in Chapter 1) whereas actual literary initiation tends to be represented as a freely spiritual process, “l’école n’est pas ennuyeuse et elle donne à lire” (ibid.). Moreover, literature instruction in autobiographies de lecteur presumably endows underprivileged children with access to “une fenêtre sur le monde”, literary reading enabling liberation à la Freire.4

And yet, as much as the institution tries (“de permettre le souvenir d’une rencontre”, ibid), it does not effectively contribute to the miracle of literary initiation. French didacticiens de la
Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur point that the passionate reading practices performed and therefore promoted by characters in literary-reputed texts – which practices presumably pave the way toward literary accomplishment – are the opposite of those typically encouraged in the literature classroom:

Les scènes de lecture constituent à certains égards l’aveu de toute une série de pratiques que l’école a l’habitude de renier au profit d’une lecture ‘modèle’ attentive à vérifier la compétence du lecteur au lieu de nourrir son enthousiasme potentiel. (178)

Semi-experimental studies of depictions of reading experience show a similar view of the role of school: generally negative, yet somewhat equivocal, as the phrase “à certains égards” suggests. Looking at the behavior of both empirical child readers and reader characters in contemporary novels aimed at 9 to 12 years-old, Noël-Gaudreault and Gervais notice that while characters do indeed overwhelmingly engage with textuality at home, a simple questionnaire survey submitted to selected children reveals that the majority of reading events actually take place at school (c.f. Chapter 2). In Louichon’s words, “l’école donne à lire”. But what and how does it allow one to read? Miquelon, whose study is also discussed in Chapter 2, claims that the profile shouldered by the majority of contemporary Quebecois students corresponds to “La lecture littéraire en classe de français: une lecture scolaire assujettie”, which is a powerful, literal reminder of Védrines’ Assujettissement littéraire.

All the analyses above gear toward the conclusion that as a representational object, literary initiation unfolds outside or in spite of formal literature education. Yet, I also pointed out that in this overall scholarly trend, there is some room for nuance and / or ambivalence. Fourtanier notably suggests that it might tendentially be different for underprivileged emergent reader characters, a category in which she includes Chamoiseau’s child alter ego.

French literary reading education and development in postcolonial Francophonie

The transformations of literature education described in Chapter 1 took place as such in France. International research in didactique du français suggests that Belgium, Quebec or
Switzerland have gone through similar reforms following approximately the same timeline. Much less is known about the modern and contemporary history of literature education in former or current (overseas) French territories considered to pertain to the ‘Global South’, such as Morocco, Senegal, Guadeloupe. Literature education practices across the Francophone world undoubtedly share much more than some ancient curricular bedrock; they remain profoundly connected in ways that are largely still to explore. They can also be assumed to have in part undergone distinct evolutions:

Les francophonies coloniales (ou postcoloniales) résultent d’une exportation ou d’une ‘dispersion’ du français vers les Antilles, l’Afrique, le Proche-Orient, l’océan Indien, le Pacifique, et se distinguent des francophonies ‘ataviques’ (Glissant) … les histoires des deux mondes se croisent, se rejoignent et s’entrelacent, mais elles produisent des situations très différentes (Combe 8-9)

Institutional and classroom-level changes certainly follow locally-bound logics differing in each French-speaking state and even départment français symbolically pertaining to that “‘Sud’ colonial et postcolonial”. However, few attempts have been made, in French research and scholarship from privileged, Northern French-speaking areas, to account for the effect of national and regional specificities on advanced reading education and development across the entire Francophone world or more specifically in the “Monde francophone postcolonial du ‘Sud’” (Combe).

We do know – and it might explain, in part, the scarcity of global studies – that the issue of cultural diversity has “long tended to be blotted out by the Republican indifference to difference”, notes Elsie Rockwell. Still today, deviation from the legitimized regime of language typically remains converted into a secondary and insignificance feature, which can be ignored for scientific and political purposes … This tendency corresponds to Bourdieu’s maxim of ‘indifference to difference’ that is reiterated by educators in France (Rockwell 2012, 385)

The mere existence of a multiplicity of cultural points of entry into textuality continues to be vastly ignored in French areas – and arguably by many postcolonial Francophone administrations – as well as in the academic production of educational knowledge, following Rockwell. Quebeccois takes on the topic are comparatively progressive, having absorbed (the presumably positive
aspects of) American educational practices to an important degree. At the end of the 20th century, the ‘socio-cultural function’ of literature education is considered essential and centered in both curricular development and teaching practices (Dufays, Gemenne and Ledur 39). But this problematic dimension of the Francophone imagination of literature education still affects Belgian or Swiss – i.e. France’s neighbors’ – institutional and scholarly approaches. Discussing literature teaching practices in the 1950-60s, Dufays et al. for instance note that the “public scolaire” remains quite homogeneous then:

Une large majorité des élèves est encore susceptible de se sentir en connivence spontanée avec la culture dispensée par l’école dont ils sont souvent imprégnés au sein même de leur famille. (23)

What is interesting here is the occultation of a whole section of the Francophone student population. Are the mid-century homes of most Guadeloupean or Algerian students permeated with literary-reputed culture in the same way that those located in the “lieux de la naissance et du développement de la langue française en Europe” might be (Combe)? The generic “élèves” does not extend to the youth schooled in ‘Southern’ (post)colonial territories.

From a comparative perspective, literature education in former or ‘peripheral’ French territories is constrained by double-binds specific to the French legacy. Emergent French-speaking readers’ approaches to ‘literary’ textuality differing from the dominant metropolitan model still do not receive the warm welcome that culturally divergent conceptions of storytelling and literature typically do in many English-speaking environments. French research, and French language arts education policy in a number of French departments or independent countries, traditionally overlook the fact that students educated in culturally different Francophone areas might implement specific strategies and encounter specific obstacles as they negotiate the representations of literary initiation proposed respectively by the historically Franco-centric education system and postcolonial society in which they are raised, which may or may not be congruent. And yet, to paraphrase Alvarado, these students’ experience offers epistemological vantage points that further understanding of what it means for a Francophone emergent literary reader to be exposed to specific models of literary education. The difficulty to integrate cultural
variation, including in perceptions of reading activity, textuality and literature, into the designed
and implemented curriculum continues to seemingly be a Francophone specificity (“[t]he notion of
culture, so central in the American tradition of anthropology of education, is regarded with
suspicion”), one that binds French-speaking countries “in spite of deep sociopolitical, institutional,
and historical differences”:

what is perhaps most striking is paradoxically the extent of similarities. (Raveaud and Draelants,
145)

French language arts education largely remains shaped by the French imperialist imagination. If it
is the case indeed, we should expect representations of school in postcolonial autobiographies de
lecteur to express this adhesion to the French literary imagination and conception of literary
initiation as well as to question it by all means, centering formal education much more than it is
usually suggested.

Most contemporary autobiographical works recount child and adolescent experiences
taking place between the 1950s and 1980s. These texts published at the turn of the century,
particularly since the early 2000s, tell stories of development unfolding against a very specific
educational backdrop. The 1950s to 1980s see progressively implemented and eventually
momentous changes in official and practical approaches to the teaching of French as a first
language. The school experience of Chamoiseau’s protagonist begins together with these
evolutions in institutionally legitimized approaches to book culture – as they are happening in the
Metropole, at least. The négrillon’s educational journey may or may not be impacted by those
changes. It will, for sure, be affected by the situation specific to Martinique, instruction-wise and
beyond.

Change and continuity? The evolution of literature education in 1950-70s Martinique

Chamoiseau’s story of nascent authorship and the history of Martinique are to be seen as
necessarily intertwined – to the point that Knepper considers the represented childhood to be
a site of tension whose narrative repeats in a compressed time scale and _en miniature_ the collective history of instabilities that have contributed to the cultural psyche of Martinique. (131)

In part, _Ecrire en pays dominé_ recounts the formation of that "cultural psyche", starting with a compelling summary of the effective and symbolical violence marking local history:

> Le vieux guerrier me laisse entendre … je suis né dans l’Archipel des Antilles, sur une île raflée par les colons français en 1642; ils en ont éliminé les Caraïbes puis amené des milliers d’Africains comme esclaves de plantations, et transbordé mille autres peuples au gré de leurs besoins. Cette colonie a été déclarée en 1946 département français. Elle n’a pas suivi le mouvement de décolonisation des années 60, mais des mutations subtiles de son rapport à cette métropole… (_Ecrire en pays dominé_ 22)

The experience centered in _Une enfance créole_ coincides with these times of “mutations” in Martinican social and institutional dynamics at large:

Chamoiseau grew up in the urban environment of Fort-de-France where he was witness to the modernizing transformations of Creole culture (Knepper 10-1)

Chamoiseau was born seven years after departmentalization. By then, the project of assimilation had … made urban marooning the only form of opposition available to the marginalized (Walsh 34)

Before it could possibly be "'undermined', like the mangrove itself" (ibid. 32), or like the wider order that it represented, the French education model had to become the norm. Free schooling for all Martinican children was introduced in 1848, following the abolition of slavery, and made compulsory for youth aged 6 to 13 years-old at the beginning of the 20th century, when French education laws started to apply to the overseas French territory. We ought to remember that Chamoiseau, along with Raphaël Confiant, Edouard Glissant, or 'father' of the French Caribbean childhood memoir Joseph Zobel, belongs to a generation of Antilleans who were among the first to have access to education and thus to have the opportunity of advancing to the aspirational status of the bourgeoisie, through a complicated system of examinations and scholarship. (Hardwick 15)

By mid-century, four out of every five Martinican children are estimated to attend school regularly. The urban-rural disparity is immense: official reports from the late 50s acknowledge that two-thirds of Martinique’s secondary school students live in Fort-de-France, while the quality of
education across the island had come to suffer from a shortage of primary school teachers as well as from important limitations related to materials and facilities (Hardwick; UNESCO). The educational situation in Martinique mirrors the difficult process going on elsewhere in the postcolonial Francophone world. The system that Hardwick or Walsh depict is one entangled in opposite forces:

The quest for literacy, education, and upward mobility are shown in direct contrast to the colonial imperatives still at work in society and its institutions. (Knepper 21)

This is the paradoxical context of Chamoiseau’s autobiographical storyworld. The child protagonist’s enfance créole coincides with this “moment très particulier de bascule”, as Chamoiseau himself often acknowledged: Martinican children pursue primary education in much greater numbers but they still face drastic limitations to secondary school access and a colonial mindset dominant at all institutional levels – including, one might anticipate, in the French language and literature curriculum. Meanwhile, as described earlier, the possibility of an evolution in approaches to literature education takes shape in the Metropole. The changes envisioned include the progressive introduction of modern, unabridged narrative texts supposed to trigger emergent readers’ interest in addition to the panthéon initial as well as the progressive detachment from a moralist and historical approach to literature education to favor reading as “une fin en soi”. The French assimilation project would theoretically require that these changes be promptly implemented in French overseas departments as soon as they become effective in the mainland. We also know, however, that a great part of the vision and practices of literature instruction remain alive and well in French-speaking areas throughout the 1950s and beyond (“l’élève est invité à vénérer un objet culturel prestigieux qu’il s’agit non pas de s’approprier selon les codes actuels mais de mettre à distance”, Dufays et al. 25). Given the context in which primary and secondary level education is delivered in 1950s Martinique, chances are that this state of affairs applies even more to the dynamics of young Chamoiseau’s French language and literature instruction and therefore to his ‘literary’ reading development.
If Chamoiseau’s childhood memoir unfolds against a backdrop of evolving forms of resistance to the French neo-colonialist governance of Martinique, it is important to understand that both the domination and the opposition to it are largely fostered in school settings. While Joseph Zobel’s *La rue Case-Nègres* (1950) depicts a Caribbean school experience lived through the 1920s and 1930s, Chamoiseau’s *Chemin-d’école* largely engages with “the role of the educational system in repressing Creole language and culture” in a mid-century urban context (Knepper 21). As in other regions under French ruling, the French Caribbean assimilation project at the time is, in theory and policy, to be implemented first and foremost by means of education. It is also, on the ground, to be met with the budding excellence of indigenous youth in producing “permutations’ made possible by the Creole language” and in speaking truth to power in that way. It makes sense that “[t]he politicized exploration of language and schooling” would be, as Walsh observes, “a recurring theme in Francophone Caribbean *récits d’enfance*”.

A greatly desired mystery treasure, school will not come as a given to Chamoiseau’s central character. One day, the *nègrillon* – a pejorative appellation converted by the narrator into a bitter-sweet, affectionate one – expresses the desire to follow his older siblings without actually knowing where the latter spend their days:

> Alors, en toute gravité, le regard chargé d’exigence et comme d’une lueur d’espoir, Man Ninotte lui souffla:
> - A l’école. (*Chemin-d’école* 22)\(^7\)

Man Ninotte’s gravity contains the magnitude of the stake: getting into school represents a chance for the *nègrillon* born in mid twentieth-century Martinique, as much as a chance taken on him. The *nègrillon*’s *Envie*, however, involves an idealization that is largely unrelated to such earthly matters. His prayer (“une supplique ténue à la divinité”, CE 33), which extends over nearly 50 pages of *Chemin-d’école*, relies on a slowly developed *métaphore filée* inviting one to consider the analogies between the path leading to school and a religious journey, and validating Guiney’s view of the imaginary entity *Ecole* as spiritually loaded:

> Nul ne le lui avait dit mais la craie, le cartable, le départ matinal vers ce lieu inconnu, relevaient à ses yeux d’un rite de pouvoir auquel il voulait s’initier. Alors, chaque jour, chaque jour, il réclamait l’école. (32)
The usual approach to representations of school experience in Chamoiseau focuses on its association with the notion of survival (after which one part of Chemin-d’école is titled) and the assumption of hardship on which the choice of this notion relies. The Envie (… to be granted the formidable right to become a student: “la journée d’avant le premier jour d’école fut la plus longue du monde”, CE 34) is quickly counterbalanced by a somber reality. It is easy to infer that L’Ecole will overall stand for a place of closure featuring “racist and colonial values tragically assimilated by [the négrillon’s] teachers”, rather than a space for opening (Crostia; Knepper 131). The pathetic quality of this universe of “bénédiction franco-universelle” (CE 150) is repeatedly underscored by Chamoiseau’s narrator. The child’s progression throughout the school system seems to amount to a catastrophic journey, literary initiation unfolding away from and in spite of this experience. The understanding that Chamoiseau’s protagonist essentially resists a Francocentric ideology (literary and other) imposed on him is a dominant axis in research on Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing. These are indeed the very terms of the narrator’s sentence opening and closing the chemin-d’école:

… l’esprit du négrillon s’aiguisa sur l’idée de survivre aux rigueurs de l’école. Survivre. S’en sortir. (CE 104)

… le négrillon, penché sur son cahier, encrait sans trop savoir une tracée de survie… (ibid. 202)

It is true that Chamoiseau’s coming-of-age trilogy partly provides a stereotypical picture of school as “equated with domination” and the reproduction of discourses saturated with “colonial clichés”. The négrillon’s school days tend to appear “structured by the ‘mission civilisatrice’, and the Maître is figured as its most ardent devotee” (Hardwick 70). But Chamoiseau’s and his child proxy’s relationship to formal literature education is many-sided and potentially more positive than here suggested by Hardwick. Contrary to Louichon’s assertion that formal education plays no important role in the development of an ability to engage literarily with texts (and / or to engage with literary-reputed texts) in autobiographies de lecteur, Chamoiseau pays great attention to l’Ecole. We know that the imaginaire littéraire – which includes highly positive representations of
literary initiation – and formal education – which is supposedly deprecated in the *imaginaire* – are very much dependent on each other. As the ideological foundation of literary initiation, the school most likely nurtures the literary imagination. Soon enough, school-fostered engagement with book culture will be promoted as a necessity: “compagnons d’existence, [les livres] s’instauraient en outils de survie” (ABE 35). In the three-part *Une enfance créole* and its complement, *Ecrire en pays dominé* – just as in Philippe Lejeune’s polyphonic address to teacher trainees – the tension between the search for references and the drive to free oneself from them is inexorably intertwined.

In the following pages, I would like to inquire into Chamoiseau’s reader trajectory narrative following the list of characteristics recurrent in depictions of literary initiation according to Louichon et al. Each time, I will highlight the manifestations of the *institution Ecole*, which I contend is ultimately a key theme. Another one is the generic dimension of texts, which will be examined in the next chapter. For now, I will address, in this order, representations

— of texts (the *classique*, as opposed or analogous to the *livre-fétiche*);
— of contexts (spaces of learning);
— of interactions (with others, with oneself);
— and of transitions (curricular, imposed ones as well as developmental, effective ones).

**Texts, 1: patrimonial reading**

The canon is the institutional corpus par excellence. Created and consecrated by a few legitimate spheres, it gets perpetuated and to some very limited extent transformed, in educational settings first and foremost, the latter thus shaping a critical part of social representations of literariness as explained in Chapter 1. Although the 1950s and 60s prepare the ground for a reorganization of the French canon, patrimonial reading remains a foundation stone of literature instruction at the time of the *négrillon’s* formal education:
depuis plus de cent ans, l’approche classique, avec son canon d’auteurs reconnus et son corpus de textes relativement stable, constitue un socle apparemment inébranlable (Gabathuler and Védrines 64).

Fourtanier’s approach to the centrality of the classiques in the French language and literature curriculum helps understand the part of Chamoiseau’s narrative that is dedicated to the négrillon’s engagement with the French canon; in both, radical arguments coexist with traditional representations. Fourtanier shows ambivalence as regards the dominating presence of sacralized classiques in formal literature education. Indeed, the didactic perspective that she wishes transformative actually favors heavy classroom offering and use of such classiques, which she also repeatedly assimilates to internal(ized) colonialism:

Malgré tout, malgré le saccage intérieur causé par le mépris de l’école pour les cultures des élèves, ce sont bien les lectures proposées (imposées ?) par les maîtres qui permettent le mouvement alternatif de fécondation et de développement de l’imaginaire. La lecture des œuvres patrimoniales en classe agit comme un ferment susceptible de faire lever la pâte hybride de pratiques culturelles diverses et entrelacées, de lectures de tout-venant, d’échanges et de rêveries. (Fourtanier 2017, 105-6)

This last metaphor sanctions patrimonial reading as the essential nourishing ingredient without which the “pâte hybride” of alternative verbal experiences (which could as well be mud) could not produce anything elevated. Fourtanier goes on to turn the tide of her initial argument (traditional reading education amounts to symbolical violence) into a strong suggestion of canonical textuality’s fruitful potential. This is the literary imagination at work. It is also, in an indirect manner, quite an accurate picture of Chamoiseau’s representation of the négrillon’s experience, which aligns with Fourtanier’s conflicted didactic positioning toward patrimonial textuality.

Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing does not feature much engagement with the canon. Whenever it does, it is in a distant manner; however, these mentions are more seductively than repulsively connoted. The notion of a mysterious textual world of reference is introduced early in the négrillon’s initiation, on his very first day of school. This world, for now inaccessible to the child, can still be immediately identified as a locus / corpus of the highest dignity and importance, as it is conveyed by the teacher’s discourse:

A l’appel de son nom, le négrillon bondit sur pieds comme un élastique, bafouilla son Pouézan, et retomba dans sa place … Le Maître, hélas, n’avait pas eu le temps de le voir et le cherchait des
yeux. Qu’ai-je cru ouïr? Notre classe se verrait-elle hantée d’une présence fantomatique à l’instar de Roncevaux qui, depuis le preux Roland, effraye le voyageur? Montrez-vous, s’il vous plaît… (CE 53)

Allons allons messieurs, pas de quoi en faire une tragédie racinienne… ni grecque d’ailleurs… (ibid. 106)

The classiques make a definitely positive comeback much later in the initiation, after the literary reader trainee gains access to the obscure world of the beginning (“le chemin s’était fait”). The livres endormis have opened by now:

Et ces poèmes qu’il marmonnait souvent, de plus en plus longtemps, et qui finirent par baigner son esprit, en des mantras inattendus: ce Lamartine, cet Hugo, ce Rimbaud, ce Baudelaire, les poètes-doudous du pays, et bien sûr les foudres de Césaire, fourriers en devenir des questions et violences… (ABE 293)

The order in which the authors who have come to matter to the négrillon are listed says much about both the domination of a Francocentric, largely Romantic, completely canonical textuality in the young reader’s personal literary landscape, and a lasting foreign quality of this legitimized corpus (“ce”). The négrillon’s admiration, and even more the narrator’s, are obvious in mentions of the classiques:

… allusions to Perse, Césaire and Zobel force the reader to situate Chamoiseau’s childhood memoirs within a wider Antillean literary context, while references to La Fontaine, Sand, Daudet, Saint-Exupéry, Chateaubriand and Hugo are reminders of the value placed on an Eurocentric education in the Antilles, which nonetheless convey the narrator’s admiration for their work. (Hardwick 78)

Dinh Van defines the “faillite poétique” of Chamoiseau’s initially resistant instances as resulting from

une lutte mimétique contre l’autorité du texte dominant … emblématique d’une fascination qui s’exerce à son insu: celui qui prétend ainsi se poster dans la figure du détracteur de ‘l’orgueil dominateur de [la] langue’ trahit son adulation vis-à-vis du canon contesté. (Dinh Van 174)

As the growing négrillon seeks to reclaim a form of power over the world, he might have consciously or unconsciously found out that mastering the classiques makes control possible – knowledge being power, especially in a neocolonial world – while a focus on the Creole Merveille deprives of such command.
Chamoiseau’s representation of the négrillon’s conflicted engagement with patrimonial textuality fits the general trend in expressions of such an engagement within the autobiographies de lecteur studied across the humanities and social sciences spectrum. Equally rejected and adored (by students as well as teachers), the canon is an incontournable of literary initiation. Like Chamoiseau, many authors have narrated budding awareness of, and paradoxical feelings toward, the existence of a legitimate literary-reputed corpus. As far as the canon is concerned, representations of literary initiation seem not to have changed much from Sartre to Chamoiseau. Patrimonial reading is perhaps nowhere more set off than in children’s and youth literature, both then and now, as Gilles Béhotéguy’s research demonstrates. According to Béhotéguy’s comparative reading of a large corpus of contemporary teen fiction (discussed in Chapter 2), early reading scenes favor a strongly conservative and arguably typically French predilection for high-brow cultural legacy. The sacralization and assignation of a particular corpus to educational spheres is vivid in today’s perceptions just as it is in Chamoiseau’s descriptions. Miquelon, among others, found out that teachers’ conceptions of reading practices rely on a very clear rift “entre la littérature qui est bonne à lire à l’école et la littérature qui est bonne à lire dans la sphère privée” (47) which distinction teachers themselves often aren’t comfortable with. In Une enfance créole, the teacher’s almost comical embrace of legitimate textuality brings to a fever pitch an attitude proved enduring by qualitative studies. But to a subtler extent, the négrillon does enact it too. His equivocal “adulation vis-à-vis du canon contesté” (Dinh Van 174) expresses a dissonance culturelle made possible and durable by formal education. The School brings the livres endormis to existence and makes it possible for the négrillon – much later, at the end of an initiation also fostered in the classroom – to preside over their awakening.

The négrillon’s undecided stance is an individual-level illustration of the dilemma underlying, up until today, the institution’s attempts to renovate approaches to literature. The canon happens to remain the primary pivot of literature education. As already mentionned several times, formal literature instruction curricula and – most importantly – teaching and learning
practices continue to center canonical reading from the 1950s to the 1970s, and even beyond, against a growing institutional aspiration to corpus opening:

l’école entretient le canon littéraire qu’elle a elle-même créé en le considérant comme une transmission nécessaire de générations en générations (Bishop 2009, 151)

Texts, 2: le livre décisif

The one reading event depicted as setting off an upheaval of the négrillon’s world – seemingly the absolute turning point in his literary initiation – does not involve a classique. This text’s forthcoming importance is suggested early on:

Un jour, saisi de compassion, l’Algébrique avait montré au négrillon cette phrase qui soulevait le grand astre … voici les cent pur-sang hennissants du soleil parmi la stagnation … Elle se trouvait dans le recueil de poèmes d’un dénommé Césaire. Cet événement allait par la suite modifier bien des choses, mais sur le moment le négrillon n’y vit que le pouvoir d’ordonner au soleil … Tant de pouvoir à un simple lacis des lettres de l’alphabet! (ABE 209)

The author of Ecrire en pays dominé insists on the disseminated nature of the psychological impact announced by the above passage. The writing of Aimé Césaire is going to permeate the developing literary reader’s mind in a progressive fashion best pictured as a spiral curve (“de lectures en relectures ma Négritude césairienne se déploya”, 54) rather than a linear, step-by-step advance:

L’impact du chant poétique d’Aimé Césaire fut sur moi progressif. (58)

Il me faudra du temps pour épuiser la Négritude, libérer mes lectures du cimetière des épigones qui caillaient l’horizon. (60)

First the hearing, then the reading of Césaire frees the négrillon from the problematically internalized supremacy of a legitimized corpus. The latter corpus, however – the only one rejected – is not the Francocentric but the ‘ethnographic’ one. The works of the écrivains-doudous, first recognized writers of the Caribbean world conveying it in French and exotic idealizations, compose the corpus that the poetry of the Négritude allows to overcome:

avec elle, au bout de ce petit matin, j’entamai une autre lecture du pays-mien … Contre l’absolue beauté des écrivains-doudous, on débusquait la laideur. Tout était détestable. Tout était diminué. (EPD 60-1)
The discovery of Césaire is made possible by a *passeur de littérature* belonging to the out-of-school world: the *négrillon’s* big brother. Césaire will himself embody a kind of *passeur* as the intimacy that the protagonist progressively develops with his work culminates in the encounter with another prominent figure, this time of the literary Créolité: “C’est Edouard Glissant qui allait m’ouvrir la barrière de corail” (87). Glissant however does not play as important a role in the young reader’s development as Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) whose force, “de lectures en relectures”, imbues the budding author’s view of himself and the world as well as his *rapport à l’écrit*.10 *Ecrire en pays dominé* still resonates with this lyricism of a “poésie-tambour, violente, solennelle, qui me nommait Nègre dans le monde et faisait de moi un fils de l’Afrique perdu aux Amériques”:

> Formidable exutoire de mon mal-être. Je récitaïs ces vers comme des prières ésotériques, des vocalises vibratoires qui enthousiasment des souches inertes en moi. (58)

Chamoiseau here comes within the scope of a general trend according to research relying on (prompted or spontaneously produced) *autobiographies de lecteur*: there is almost always such a thing as a *livre fondateur* in representations of one’s literary reading development. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that Marie-Claude Hubert emphasizes the recurrence of this motif in autobiographical accounts of former students themselves bound to soon deliver literature instruction. A typical reading trajectory narrative will include “un livre qui a contribué à construire l’identité de la personne ou qui se rattache à un événement fort de son existence”, which book would very often be “à l’origine du goût et du plaisir de lire” (Hubert 212). Rouxel’s work on emergent ‘literary identities’ (2004) likewise underlines the role of a particular text in identity construction. So does Louichon’s, based on a literary-reputed body of texts. In this respect, Chamoiseau’s *autobiographie de lecteur* perfectly fits the model reproduced with constancy in reader trajectory narratives written in French, no matter the distance between the French ‘center’ and the author’s position.

But the *livre décisif* does not appear ex machina. The inclusion of this trope in *Une enfance créole* and *Ecrire en pays dominé* must be considered within a progression nurtured by
formal education. *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, and with it the poetry of the Négritude, surely constitute a crucial turning point in the négrillon’s initiation. Yet, the experience being a turning point implies that something preceded it. Something, in fact, laid the groundwork for it. The initiation to the musicality of language took place in the classroom. The journey toward the livre-déclencheur (cherished for its oral power) comes as a result of the slow grooming of an appreciation for the sonorities of language first, then of certain written uses of language. This particular development originates in mesmerized attendance to the teacher’s read aloud. It is then, in the early years of primary school, that declamation becomes the core of the négrillon’s infatuation with textuality, way before one particular text crystallizes the fascination.

The augural familiarization with new representations of the pays-mien also occurs in an educational setting. The encounter with Césaire is depicted as unique largely by contrast with the written production of the poètes-doudous introduced in the secondary-level literature classroom. In fact, the latter body of works plays a key role in supporting the transition from (Francocentric) conformist to (culturally decentralized) explosive reading experiences. The horizon of Césaire’s violence is understandable and valuable because the Grand matin made possible by it gets reached “au bout de ce petit matin” (EPD 60).

Formal education does not directly enable nor frame, as a setting, the decisive reading. It does, however, create the conditions for it, both at the level of form (sensibility to the musicality of written language) and content (familiarity with textual representations of one’s world of reference). In that sense, the School is once again the center from which literary possibilities emanate.

**Context: a world divided**

Neuroscience has long shown that the retrieval of any past experience comes with memory traces of its context. In representations of literary initiation too, surroundings matter. They affect the way in which a particular reading event unfolds, will be remembered, and shapes one’s worldview, as rightly pointed by Fourtanier:
Dans la construction de l'imaginaire importent donc, outre les livres lus, les films ou les images regardés, les histoires écoutées, les personnes présentes lors de ces activités, les lieux environnants, les événements concomitants… (2010, 169)

Louichon also emphasizes the mnesic interlacing of text and context. Characteristics of the immediate setting of a reading experience always “colore(nt) le souvenir”:

le souvenir de lecture est très régulièrement une scène de lecture, située dans un espace singulier, à laquelle se rattachent souvent des sensations concernant les bruits, les odeurs, les lumières (2009, 95)

Le souvenir de lecture est souvenir des lieux et des jours, du monde au sein duquel la lecture a eu lieu. (ibid. 99)

Conversely,

[t]out espace/temps est non seulement coloré mais informé par la lecture d’une oeuvre … le contexte affecte la lecture et la lecture affecte le contexte (2009, 98-9)

As far as literary reading development goes, the context is made of distinct spaces of learning. The environment in which the emergent literary reader evolves as such is essentially two-fold, composed of the school and out-of-school worlds, of the scapes of formal and informal learning. Scapes, according to Arjun Appadurai, can oftentimes be approached as “ideoscapes” – “a gathering of images that are often political in nature”. Different ideoscapes (such as those cultivated in the distinct spheres of home and school) could collide in representations. Representations of literary initiation tend to insist on the gap between those spaces particularly in terms of types of textuality explored in each. Fourtanier notes that “la lecture des classiques et des ouvrages considérés comme sérieux” is typically opposed to the “tout-venant des habitudes et des traditions familiales, des idiolectes, des jeux et des lectures de l'enfance”. The second cultural resource bank is deemed

un passage obligé de toute autobiographie d'écrivain ou de toute oeuvre romanesque racontant la formation d'un sujet (2017, 99)

From the perspective of both a teaching practitioner and expert in autobiographical writing, Lejeune shares this dualist vision:

une culture, analogue à celle du lycée, mais plus libre et naturelle, que je trouvais supérieure.  
(2005, 149)

Since the 1980s, French didactics have actively worked at reconciling ‘private’ and ‘school’ reading, perhaps the greatest challenge faced by contemporary reading education (Miquelon 142-3). The first volume of Chamoiseau’s autobiographical trilogy depicts the wonders contained in early life exploration of a world in constant expansion, up to the point where the young nègrillon steps out of a warm and culturally congruent comfort zone to ‘conquer’ the larger, soon-to-be hostile universe. Leaving the nest means entering the sphere of formal education. Just like in Lejeune’s perception, the school space does appear limited, and limiting, in many instances (“tout en dehors de l’école devenait plus grande école encore”, CE 195) during the nègrillon’s progression throughout an education system that imposes the “fracturing of consciousness”:

What is experienced as a split consciousness, a Creole private self and a French public self, is pulled apart and knit together through the fictions of memory (Knepper 142)

If the outside world of reference is valued by the child, adults are partial to school culture whenever textuality is concerned. Home-based engagement with (most often narrative) textuality is therefore connected to educational failure, and the child threatened for reading:

Cette la-guerre avec Man Ninotte dota les livres d'un surcroît d'intérêt. C'était lire encore plus fort que de lire en cachette. C'était lire magique que de lire dans le noir juste poinçonné d'une bougie qui roussillait les pages. … Je ne voyais plus les mots, je ne lisais plus, je ne tournais plus les pages, je n'avais plus de livre entre les mains: j'étais digéré par une histoire-baleine qui m'avait avalé. (EPD 36)

In theory, the nègrillon’s Creole and French selves are bearers of different cultural “funds of knowledge” that are not necessarily bound to remain hermetically distinct:

Students draw on their lifeworlds (everything that exists outside of school) in addition to the school-based worlds to make meanings (Ntelloglou 59)

Chamoiseau initially draws a definite line between these two spaces respectively representing freedom and constraint. But as the narrative develops, the boundary gets blurry.
This is the first way in which Chamoiseau’s approach to the spaces of literary initiation diverges from the French autobiographical tradition. In lieu of rigid delimitation, *Une enfance créole* progresses toward great flexibility and interpenetration of the two scapes. The story that Chamoiseau tells is very much one of an ever-evolving symbolical spatiality. Even more than the ‘interior and exterior landscape of the self’ (Crosta), it is the child’s always ephemeral, precarious position in an ever-transforming environment, his changing relationship to social, cultural, and material spaces, that appears of uttermost interest to the writer. For academically privileged négrillons, the sacrifices are numerous, and equally numerous are the French Caribbean childhood memoirs drawing attention to “the dislocations … which accompany academic success”, “the social codes and taboos which [pupils] must navigate” (Hardwick 16). “Navigate” is the most important word here. In Walsh’s words, “the Antillean’s remarkable adaptability to the shifting terrain of his environment” is definitely one of the key elements that structure Chamoiseau’s childhood in at least two out of the three volumes of *Une enfance créole* (31). Because it is a matter of *Survie* in a neocolonial environment, the négrillon must develop blending virtuosity.

In this universe defined by relation and movement, there still remains a hierarchy, albeit one that goes counter Louichon’s and others’ contention that school plays a secondary or negative role in representations of literary initiation. Surroundings matter – but school wins over “[t]out en dehors de l’école” as a context of literary experience. The négrillon’s formal education environment is shown to color engagement with textuality and its memory more powerfully than any other. The hypotyposis that conveys the teacher’s mystic read-aloud (“le Maître lisait pour nous mais, très vite emporté, il oubliait le monde…”, CE 161) is paradigmatic in that regard. School also takes primacy as a space for self-development. The school, indeed, does not stop at the classroom walls; it includes the playground, a confined space where textuality-based pretend play, Gros-Lombric’s *Parole*, the very ‘literary’ encounter with the petites-filles can take place, during recess and right after release from school. These disparate events, which exist and increasingly take space through reiteration, will anchor and propel the négrillon’s literary coming-
of-age in different ways. What should be noted here is that these critical first-time experiences all
unfold in the extended space of the school.

This is where both notions of spatial interrelations and the major, at least partly positive
role of school come to converge. As a space, school in Chamoiseau is more than an ‘ideoscape’. It stands as a multiple, polymorphous scape that encompasses outside spaces. School enables
the realization that the two worlds at stake in a négrillon’s education are not to be hermetically
defined. It is explicitly a constraining space, yet implicitly – by the growth and, ultimately, by the
freedom of textual expression that it contributes to – an open one. As such, the school space
takes precedence over the out-of-school one, in Chamoiseau’s representation, as a ground for
literary empowerment.

**Interactions, 1: the adult Other**

In Chamoiseau, the one figure epitomizing the school institution is overall made to
embody oppression as well, consolidating the classroom / survival analogy:

dans le deuxième tome d’Une enfance créole, la description qui est faite du Maître d’Ecole souligne qu’il ne développe pas une pédagogie adéquate … il devient le véhicule par lequel seront infligés au protagoniste des traumatisces fondamentaux, ressentis d’ailleurs aussi bien de manière physique que psychologique, en particulier autour de la problématique de la langue française imposée face à la langue créole et au mode de pensée qui l’accompagne. Tout ceci fait écrire à Patrick Chamoiseau qu’il lui fallait “survivre aux rigueurs de l’école. Survivre. S’en sortir” … ces mots démontrant tragiquement l’inadéquation de la réalité du contexte scolaire avec le discours pédagogique bienveillant qui est affiché. (Bollut 83-4)

Mostly depicted in contexts of literature instruction, the Maître stands as the bearer of a
“béatitude franco-universelle” (CE 150) intimately related to Hexagonal literary ideology, as
shown by Guiney, Sachs or Védrines (see Chapter 1). He is a triste sire, or a somewhat tragical villain, to the extent that he himself endures the law of the oppressor, having been imposed the colonizer’s literary worldview which he had no choice but to internalize as the most valuable and advisable one.\(^{11}\) He reproduces this logic by expecting his pupils to “coûte que coûte abolir la distance en opérant une fusion mentale avec notre Mère lointaine” (EPD 45). Forced to attend
the spectacle of the "rituels idolâtres autour de la langue et de la culture du Centre" (ibid.),
overwhelmed by the weight of foreign literary references and representations, the young Creole
learner is portrayed as both mesmerized and “s’éteign[a]nt comme une bougie de cimetière” (CE
150):

Cet écrasement avait été rendu inévitable par la fascination que les terres du Centre exercaient sur
nous. C'était l'endroit de la culture, de l'esprit, du progrès, du vrai, du bien, du juste, du beau. (EPD
45)

Fourtanier points out that the Maître, together with the Directeur, are “des figures bon gré mal gré
tutélaires, même si elles apparaissent parfois pathétiques” (2017, 105). The neutralizing
conflation performed by the plural is significant, as all the maitres, in Chamoiseau, are indeed one
and the same, whether they provide access to engagement with textuality or deny their students'
rights to any other world of reference than the one they value. Literary initiation is “orchestrée par
les maîtres d’école qui … érig[e]nt ces livres en tabernacles” (EPD 48), a category that includes
the Maître-indigène, initially a promising figure that will prove disappointingly familiar:

En quelque jour de grande magie … le Maître fut atteint d’un mal-rein. On nous envoya un autre
Maître. Celui-là était un tac bizarre. … Il occupa le poste un peu plus d’une semaine et nous
secoua le monde. (CE 181)

The Maître-indigène will be judged inherently helpless, his power and ability to make a durable
impression drastically limited by his substitute status:

Comme il n’était certainement pas né coiffé, le Maître-indigène fut transformé en comète: fugace et
inutile autant. (182)

In any case, the Maître-indigène, under the veneer of his affirmed africanité, does not differ much
from the Maître francisé. He is subtly portrayed as culturally irresolute: “Sans l’utiliser lui-même, il
tolérait notre créole pour mieux déployer le français.” (181). Just as the Maître, he swears by
specific authors – one in particular, whose work will later be transformative even though it sounds
as foreign as the writings of Balzac or Homère when conveyed by the Maître-indigène: “Il avait lu
un poète crié Césaire, le citait tout le temps, et se réclamait de négritude” (ibid.).
Declamation and sermon, brain-washing methods among which the use of quotes as bullets: the instructional behavior of the *Maître-indigène* mimics the one of his more legitimate colleague. He might display a much welcome revolutionary posture but his ‘pedagogical’ gestures are as flaw-ridden as the ones of the regular *Maître*:

Il était en opposition. Nous n’avions pourtant pas le sentiment d’avoir affaire à une autre personne que le Maître. C’était comme si l’ombre d’après-midi de ce dernier s’était levée du sol, pour se mettre à vivre comme un diable-ziguidi. Il nous comprimait autant. Nous conformait autant. (CE 182)

Je pense à ces jeunes instituteurs, militants-anticolonialistes, qui luttaient contre l’aliénation culturelle en inversant les termes qui leur étaient offerts … Une contre-dépendance au modèle, tout aussi aliénante. (EPD 249)

Both the *Maître* and the *Maître-indigène* hold literariness as a supreme value even though they recognize it in different works. Once literariness has been located and defined, students are denied the right to other kinds of engagement with it and other conceptions of textuality. Only one world of reference – Hexagonal or, for a moment, West African – is considered valuable and ultimately acceptable in the classroom. Like the *Maître-indigène* himself, this world is fundamentally “en opposition” to others (ibid.). Therefore, there is only one figure of the *Maître* as well: “Premier Maître, tu porteras en toi tous les autres. Vous releviez du même principe” (CE 56). This principle primarily consists in forced transmission (which to some extent does translate into empowerment) as much as in the denial of emergent readers’ imaginary development.

Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing is riddled with variations on the teacher instance. There are, in *Une enfance créole* and *Ecrire en pays dominé*, as many *passeurs de littérature* as there are sub-spaces of learning. The figure of the Creole storyteller is particularly present in the preschool experience centered in *Antan d’enfance* in the person of Jeanne-Yvette, who initiates, for the writer, “the process of recuperating the nascence of the artistic self” (Knepper 132): “She teaches him about many of the figures who will later populate his fictions” (137). Another important female figure will precede the appearance of the *Maître*: “Là, d’emblée, inoubliable, se tenait sa première maîtresse: Man Salinière” (CE 36). Jeanne-Yvette introduces the boy to the Creole *Merveille* whereas Man Salinière provides access to the universe of French tales, both
substantially contributing to the expansion and complexification of the child’s imagination. What Man Salinière indirectly teaches him too is the porosity of the boundary that presumably separates reality and fiction:

Il savait les problèmes de la Belle au bois dormant … Il expliquait à Man Ninotte que les sorcières volaient avec de longs balais, et que des heures comme ça, elles pouvaient entrer dans ta maison en dévalant la cheminée… Il la rassurait en lui révélant l’existence des bonnes fées qui du bout de leur baguette magique dispensaient le bonheur. (ibid. 44)

Both women figures fade away once the Maître establishes himself as the sole legitimate conveyer of oral or written prose. But is he really? In the very same space of the school he is rivalled by an unexpected alter ego: Gros-Lombric, the négrillon’s classmate who spontaneously takes charge, just outside the classroom, of “la dette des contes et légendes, de la langue créole” while the Maître, before and after recess, asserts and performs “la dette des livres”

(Fourtanier 2017, 100):


Also acting within the space of school, at the high-school level this time, the librarian of the Lycée Schoelcher embodies the morally conformist local literary canon to which he initiates the young reader on the look for a storyworld of his own:

Le conservateur de la bibliothèque Schoelcher serrait le[s] ouvrages [des poètes-doudous] dans une armoire grillagée qu’il ouvrait avec une boule de précautions, en me jaugeant d’un regard soupçonneux. C’était pour lui une oasis intime dans ces murailles de livres qui ne parlaient jamais de nous. Il me fit découvrir quelques romans de mulâtres qui se déroulaient dans la ville de Saint-Pierre d’antan, évoquant les rigueurs de l’esclavage, racontant avec la meilleure compassion du monde d’honorables rebellions. (EPD 50, emphasis mine)

The contrast between two (traditional vs. progressive) reference models operates out of school too. According to Louichon, the “pourvoyeur”, “médiateur”, “passeur de littérature” (2009, 101) typically practices her influence outside of the formal education sphere. Chamoiseau scholars usually consider that the négrillon’s father represents the French literary tradition whereas Man Ninotte embodies a Creole textual world of reference. They would endorse these
roles quite passively. Certainly, their teaching is mostly indirect. It is, however, crucial.

Chamoiseau partly depicts the négrillon’s home as “un univers de livres endormis”:

Ninotte ma manman ne lisait presque pas; et le Papa, bien que récitant de mémoire Jean de la Fontaine, ne s’intéressait qu’à l’almanach Vermot. (EPD 32)

Members of the négrillon’s family do read, but books only emerge to soon return to sleep:

Chacun semblait considérer qu’un livre lu était chose terminée. On les conservait comme les boîtes de conserve, les bouteilles, le papier: pour si en-cas… Man Ninotte … les préservait sans plus, au nom de l’Instruction. (CE 199).

L’Instruction is repeatedly enacted by the father, indeed always immersed in the almanac and prone to impose the literary-reputed Fables onto the child, which Fables he was most likely made to memorize himself at an earlier age:

il allait direct s’allonger sur le lit, relisant à mi-voix une fable de La Fontaine ou quêtant quelque plaisir dans l’almanach Vermot (ABE 51)

Du Papa, il aura le souvenir de cette présence altière, qui passait en silence, ne lui parlait jamais, ou qui parfois, au moment de la sieste, lui lisait une page d’almanach ou une fable de La Fontaine… (ibid. 73)

As noted by Knepper, the father is “associated with the paternal influence of proper French as well as French literature” (12) and thus should be seen as an avatar of the Maître. However, the almanach does not pertain to the legitimized body of classiques and therefore materializes a rather subtle dissonance with the world of the Maître. Man Ninotte takes this dissonance to a whole new level. She represents a powerfully contrasting form of engagement with textuality and above all resistance through Creole orality: “[s]ymbolically, it seems that Chamoiseau’s mother represented the maternal language of Creole” (ibid.). But Man Ninotte is also a passeuse of French textuality in her own right as well as the representative, in Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing, of an alternative approach to engagement with French textual culture.

Providing the emergent reader with highly diverse textual material, she endows him with the freedom to decide what counts as French literature. Her neglect of generic hierarchy highlights the relevance and value of egalitarian, inclusive reading. In Ecrire en pays dominé, Chamoiseau recounts that
his mother played an important role in forming his democratic reading habits and tastes … He records with delight the free intermixing of high and low genres of literature (Knepper 12)

First, Man Ninotte does – distantly, yet feverishly – embrace reading practices, cherishing any “livres rescapés” even though she almost never opens them. Because her capacities are likely limited when it comes to written literacy – and because she is generally more busy taking care of the family than the father, in conformity with a patriarchal division of labor – Man Ninotte essentially engages with a corpus of “journaux italiens couverts de photos” that she skims “d’un oeil dubitatif juste avant son sommeil” (ABE 191), which corpus I will discuss in Chapter 7 together with other generic ensembles. But her display of profound respect toward book culture – that she knows to be a “tracée de survie” before the child does – is the most powerful catalyst of the future reader’s interest in textual objects:

… je fus seul avec ces livres endormis, inutiles mais faisant l’objet des attentions de Man Ninotte. C’est ce qui m’avait alerté: Man Ninotte leur accordait de l’intérêt alors qu’ils n’avaient aucune utilité. (EPD 33)

Secondly, reading, to Man Ninotte, is a matter of “activ[ation] [d]es centres d’intérêt”. She ‘confusedly’ knows that motivation propels effective learning, attends to any budding cultural curiosity and proceeds to sustaining its development:

Man Ninotte me charroyait tout ce qui lui paraissait être un livre … qui aimait lire recevait ce qui se lit, qui aimait la musique se voyait attribuer de quoi gratter du son, qui aimait jouer avait de quoi faire-zouelle. (ibid. 41)

Her modus operandi makes her a strong anti-figure of the Maître, more pedagogically aware than the supposed expert. The awakening of the négrillon’s writer identity will be supported with the same dedication:

J’avais l’habitude de lire mes poèmes à haute voix … Man Ninotte n’offrait pas son avis sur l’affaire. Que cet enfant végétatif écrire des choses-qu’on-ne-lui-demandait-pas-et-qui-ne-serviraient-à-rien demeurait dans l’ordre de ses bizarreries. Mais, comme à son habitude, elle m’approvisionna (cahiers, papier, crayons, rubans d’encre…) du nécessaire pour apaiser cette soif nouvelle. (ibid. 70)

She will feed the child’s reading fervor before and after actual reading acquisition, following a model recurrent in French récits d’enfance:
Lorsque le lecteur devient techniquement autonome, que la lecture devient un acte solitaire, les autres demeurent néanmoins présents en ce qu’ils sont pourvoyeurs de livres. Les amis, les parents, les amours le sont tour à tour et on en trouvera mention dans toute autobiographie de lecteur. (Louichon 2009, 101)

No matter the area of her pupils’ interest, she goes for quantity as well as diversity of material, valuing French generic heterogeneity in what is presented as a quintessentially Creole manner:

Man Ninotte (comme le djobeur d’ailleurs) n’établissait aucune hiérarchie entre ce qui lui paraissait être des livres. Romans policiers ou recueils de poèmes, photos-romans italiens ou essais-sans-images, bandes dessinées ou classiques littéraires… tout cela lui était égal-même-ici. (EPD 43)

The neighborhood bouquiniste is, in fact, a surly version of Man Ninotte, opposed in her ‘specialization’ in generalist, low-brow book offering to the high-school librarian whose ‘literary’ book collections are carefully compartmentalized:

Elle s’était spécialisée dans les romans policiers d’occasion, et dans quelques récits de guerre, d’espionnage, d’amour ou de science-fiction. On pouvait pour trois sous en acquérir une grappe puis l’échanger après lecture contre une nouvelle grappe. … Elle ne me conseillait rien. (EPD 44)

Let us go back to school for a moment. In French reader trajectory narratives, l’Ecole, notes Louichon, seems “incapable de permettre le souvenir d’une rencontre … [s]auf à ce que l’école s’incarne en une figure, celle d’un professeur unique” (2009, 103). Throughout the second volume of Une enfance créole, the Maître stands as the paradigmatic figure of the passeur de littérature as well as a more complex allegory than his first layer might suggest:

Ce que proposent les récits d’apprentissage de Chamoiseau, c’est le refus des identités figées aussi bien des élèves que des maîtres d’école. (Fourtanier 2017, 105)

The Maître does reproduce a French model of axiological approach to literariness and often violently ensures that Creole students be conditioned to it as well. Less obvious is the fact that he also, in a subdued way, enacts transmission of textuality and hope, which validates Fourtanier’s observation:

Les Maîtres, tout brutaux et/ou naïvement décalés qu’ils puissent être dépeints, apparaissent comme des passeurs de savoir, des maillons porteurs de connaissance et d’imaginaire … (ibid. 105-6)
The *Maître* remains one of the two adult instances that most decisively foster the “rencontre fondatrice” (Louichon 2009, 121).

Indeed, most of the *passeurs de littérature* featured in Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing ultimately are adaptations of these two central and antithetical figures: the mother, the teacher – as in the majority of French reader trajectory narratives which rely on “ces voix réelles, souvent voix de mère ou voix d’enseignants, qui ont ouvert les jeunes lecteurs au monde des livres” (ibid.). The mother and the teacher are shown to affect the *négrillon*’s ‘literary’ reading development in very different ways. By exposing the child to textual material of all sorts, Man Ninotte deconstructs cultural hierarchies up to the supremacy of literariness. By exposing the student to the romantically foreign world of ‘literature’, the *Maître* provides access to sacred territories. The one decisive take on textuality, from the narrator’s and from a developmental point of view, seems to be the mother’s. The teacher’s input however is valuable as well. Their respective approaches to engagement with textuality are often opposed in a configuration that also characterizes the relations between other *passeurs de littérature*, all organized in pairs: Jeanne-Yvette versus Man Salinière, Gros-Lombric versus the *Maître*, the librarian versus the *bouquiniste*… But another interpretation of this configuration is that the two perspectives (on corpuses, on pedagogy) complement each other – which implies that the institutional approach to textuality is at the very least as important in reader development as out-of-school experience. Seen from this angle, formal literature education not only weighs on memories of literary initiation but does so in a rather positive manner. The text remains partly equivocal in this regard.

**Interactions, 2: orally delivering and reinventing literariness**

The encounter with textuality enabled by the *passeurs de littérature* unfolds orally for the longest part of recounted literary initiations:

La voix du lecteur adulte est … une forme particulière de médiation et elle appartient au souvenir comme les lieux et les jours, comme l’odeur des livres cartonnés de l’enfance. (Louichon 2009, 121)
In Chamoiseau, orality remains a central medium of engagement with written culture even after the reading acquisition process is completed. *Chemin-d'école* features a crucial scene of introduction to ‘literary’ characteristics of textuality and of engagement with them by means of oral, choral reading by the *Maître*:

Le négrillon aimait entendre le Maître leur lire de petits poèmes magiques ou des textes choisis de George Sand, d’Alphonse Daudet, de Saint-Exupéry… Le Maître lisait pour nous mais, très vite emporté, il oubliait le monde et vivait son texte dans un abandon mêlé à de la vigilance. Abandon car il se livrait à l’auteur; vigilance, car un vieux contrôleur demeurait à l’affût en lui-même, guettant l’euphalie désolée, l’idée amollie par une faiblesse du verbe. Alors une révolte intérieure lui remuait un sourcil. Il trouvait matière à réprobation chez Hugo, ou chez Lamartine. La Fontaine et Chateaubriand, par contre, le maintenaient en extase. Ce plaisir de lire à haute voix, il nous le communiquait en fait sans le vouloir. Le négrillon suivait bouche bée, non pas le texte, mais les goulées de plaisir que le Maître s’envoyait par les mots. (CE 160-1)

 Somehow, in between the child’s first experience of the *Maître’s* classroom and this precise scene, reading must have been taught, as students are expected to partake in the exhilarating *Cène*. Yet when commanded to read, “[i]ls basculaient du rêve pour s’écraser, hagards, contre le livre ouvert” (CE 163). This is not a representation of learning in process. Even children who might correctly pronounce typed words appear unable to confer them meaning. The teacher himself might hide his lack of comprehension behind absorption into passionate recitation. This, Louichon points out, is a topos of *souvenirs de lecture*. The excerpt of Pierre Michon’s *Le Corps du roi* that she uses as illustration strikingly resembles Chamoiseau’s above tableau:

On n’y comprenait rien, l’instituteur non plus… Ces instituteurs avaient une croyance dans le texte, une croyance dévote. Ils pouvaient bien ne pas comprendre grand-chose à un poème de Hugo (ils comprenaient bien des choses, mais pas le détail), ils le disaient avec cet éclat, cette voix chantante.12

Specific to non-metropolitan autobiographies is the fact that the issue indirectly addressed through such scenes is one of second language acquisition, now profusely discussed in educational linguistics research. We know that the inability to identify specific words will often prevent further engagement with a text, but it has also been established that children lacking the world of reference (or ‘cultural schemata’) appropriate in a given reading context will struggle to engage even more.13
Transcendent but meaningless recitation is a very French educational tradition, believes Guiney, who himself was for a limited time a pupil of the *Education nationale*:

I was often perplexed by the beautiful-sounding verses that we memorized, presented to us like valuable objects to hold briefly in our hands … Although some effort was spent on explicating these texts even in the earliest classes, words and sometimes entire stanzas were swallowed whole and unprocessed, not only by me, who could blame these mysteries on my lack of familiarity with the language and culture, but by my native-born classmates as well. (Preface, XIII)

Guiney proceeds to compare the ritual to the Pledge of Allegiance “which children notoriously fail to understand”:

In both cases, understanding and analysis are unimportant; some other goal is being achieved, one that the vast literature on good educational practice does not explain, because the goal cannot be justified according to valid pedagogical principles. (ibid.)

There is, indeed, another goal at stake. Of greatest interest to both the protagonist and narrator in Michon and Chamoiseau is the trance in which the *Maître* gets carried away as he orally performs immersion in literariness. What the students then discover is not the meaning-s of written language but its musical quality. To Chamoiseau, and increasingly to the *négrillon*, this aspect stands at the core of literary experience. The very disconnect that this incantatory ceremony shows to be problematic is also ‘magical’: out of unrelatable sounds, of again another language, students build imagined worlds. Language becomes music and children themselves come close to an ecstatic state as they attend the transformative process, an event evoked in those terms by Michon too:

Dans la classe, pour les enfants qui venaient du fond de l’arrière-campagne, c’était quelque chose comme de l’incantation qui les subjuguait totalement.¹⁴

Orality is a powerful mnemonic tool, almost a guarantee of memorization and thus of impression of literariness on the emergent reader. In the absence of meaning, the focus gets transferred onto sounds and rhythm, ultimately onto a form devoid of referent. An important point is here highlighted: comprehension isn’t the object of representations of literary initiation; mystery, access limitations, aesthetic taste development are. Hypnotic introduction to literariness is the true initiatory ritual that these scenes reflect, a particularly significant one in neocolonialist contexts, as suggested by scholars researching education in formerly French territories:
En proposant un regard historique sur les soubassements de l'école coloniale et sa transformation à la suite de l'Indépendance et en consacrant une part importante de son analyse à l'école élémentaire au Sénégal, Abdoulaye Elimane Kane montre à quel point la récitation peut être un exercice structurant, et l'entrée la plus naturelle au cœur de la parole poétique. (Fraisse)

Written language is thus imbued with powers approaching those of the Creole Parole. The Maître induces students to revere arduous yet transcending landscapes of resounding wonders; outside the classroom, the children entertain magical, imprecation-based conspiration. Foreign enchanting worlds (two versions of the “monde de la Merveille”) are conveyed by uniquely powerful spoken word-s in both cases. The elevated or the subterraneous Paroles are sides of the same coin; they are equally capital.

In Chamoiseau's narrative, one will still end up symbolically annihilating the other. The Parole represented by Gros-Lombric is doomed to “destruction”; ignored by the Maître, the word-mighty child stops sharing “une parole, un proverbe … un conte” (CE 194). Before anyone other than the négrillon notices, Gros-Lombric leaves the Marvel for another space: “la vie” (ibid.), reminding us that the referent (life) is excluded from the wordly transcendent experience of the Parole, whether the latter is delivered in the classroom or at recess.

The négrillon is able to preserve the inner presence of the Creole Parole because of his infinitely positive appreciation of the French one. Formal literary instruction scenes in Chamoiseau do not convey the negative weight of the written word as much as its radiant power whenever it gets orally shared. In the négrillon’s development, the limitations imposed by semantic failure turn out to foster literary engagement competence. Willing to obliterate the referent and focus on what his empirical adult self will come to define as the possibility of oraliture – a tentative combination of orality and literature – the young protagonist trains himself not to mind “the gap between the oral tradition of Creole and the imposed limitations of the (French) written word” (Walsh 41):

The techniques of oraliture, which characterize so much of Chamoiseau's work as the Word Scratcher, find their origins in this childhood experience of learning to suppress the space of translation, a space that ultimately becomes the home of the writer. (Knepper 145)
Classroom orality not only prepares the ground for the évènement Césaire. It also spurs one to perceive the French vision of literariness as unexpectedly close to the Creole conception of textuality and it creates the conditions enabling the desire for oraliture to emerge together with embryonic strategies to concretize this desire. Much later, largely thanks to school experience of orality, Chamoiseau’s writing will rely on a “créolisation poétique” not involving the Creole language as much as a hybrid orality which

opère à l'intérieur de la phrase, donnant la sensation d'une 'oralité retrouvée', bien que créée de toutes pièces. (Auzas 117)

**Transitions, 1: toward the literary self**

The seemingly impenetrable secret of literary culture, in which the négrillon’s taste for form and genesis of oraliture originate, is in fact two-fold: partly secret of the text (“découvrir la littérature…”); partly secret of the self (“se découvrir à son miroir”, Rouxel 2004, 145). Indeed, literary initiation is typically seen and narrated as an introspective journey of identity development and exploration. Initially, the text conceals a secret in that it resists understanding both during oral and silent (attempts at) reading. What drives engagement with textuality is this recalcitrance and enigmatic aura (“l’enjeu de la lecture se situe bien dans cette attente de la révélation” (Louichon 2009, 126):

... les livres conservaient des secrets que son imagination ne parvenait pas à compenser. Quand il avait terminé son histoire, le texte reprenait sa placidité indécodable. Le livre redevenait compact. Clos. A cause de cela, il prêta une attention particulière aux séances de vocabulaire du Maître, il se mit à retenir les mots, à les utiliser, à s’en souvenir, à en augmenter sa parole quotidienne ... Le mystère des livres le rendit attentif aux séances d’écriture: comprendre comment cela marchait. (CE 201-2)

Je m’émerveillais de leur complexité achevée dont les raisons profondes m’échappaient. Je les chargeais de vertus latentes. Je les soupçonnais de puissance. (EPD 31-2)

The resistance of – rather than to – the book is both an obstacle and a catalyst to self-discovery and development because it ultimately symbolizes the mystery of one’s own identity. So is the souvenir de lecture “par nature un souvenir de soi” (Louichon 2009, 140):

[[les souvenirs de lecture sont majoritairement cela, des souvenirs de la découverte de soi, via des livres, un livre ‘qui porte en lui un secret qui parle au mien’, le secret de mon secret. (ibid. 129)]]
Emergent readers get ‘initiated’ to written textuality when young enough for textuality to be experienced as an invasion – either assault or sudden force-feeding – of their budding personalities. As the négrillon observes, it feels too early to engage with written culture: “On le précipita face à la lecture et l’écriture alors qu’il ne savait rien de lui-même” (CE 185). The child’s growth as a subject then comes to unfold in parallel and, according to representational trends, in conjunction with literary reading development, with one impacting, often reflecting, and at times blending with the other:

... si les livres importants sont ceux qui révèlent le secret des choses, dire les livres c’est dire les secrets qui habitent le lecteur, c’est mettre à nu une histoire … (Louichon 2009, 137)

The analogy is pervasive in autobiographies de lecteur. It also relies on a classical, previously discussed dichotomy: literal versus distant reading (c.f. Chapter 1). In addition to implying, as most often in representations of literary initiation, that literary reading development amounts to a journey from the former to the latter practice, it strongly suggests that identity formation at large is a matter of distancing from one’s world of reference. Reading practices that involve staying grounded in and carried by the – narrative, fictional – monde de l’histoire are more or less subtly depicted as less valuable than form-centered, distant ones. The supposedly subjective “modalités d’appropriation du texte” (Rouzel) represented as hierarchized are assigned social connotations and evaluated according to a socially-constructed axiological system. Both prompted and spontaneously produced autobiographies de lecteur not only powerfully enact the “caractère socioculturel de l’activité du sujet lecteur” but also reflect a judgement as regards the facets of this activity (Falardeau et al. 122). To become a distanced reader very often means to escape one’s unfortunate social condition. For the longest time, the French approach to literature education privileged both the literary / identity development analogy and the discriminatory vision of imaginative engagement with textuality as characteristic of culturally deprived pupils. Particularly in the time and place of the négrillon’s formal education, literary / identity development must be experienced as the process of leaving the dirt of imaginative reading and
culturally impoverished environment to access the gold of detached verbal and aesthetic mastery.\textsuperscript{16}

Chamoiseau scholarship implies that the author continuously seeks to counter such detrimental representations by proposing an alternative vision of text-mediated self-development. However, the extent to which this vision differs from the hierarchical, axiological one valued across representations of literary initiation is a debatable point. Granted, Chamoiseau does bestow heightened symbolical power on the lower rungs in the hierarchy. The négrillon’s modalities of engagement with textuality grow increasingly diverse and complex enough to make him, in fine, much more resourceful than the Maître in this domain. The child overall never ceases to primarily value textuality in terms of its potential for imaginative development, which is the most disconsidered approach in socially approved conceptions. Yet, representations of literary initiation in \textit{Une enfance créole} also support the idea according to which the activation of an elusive “goût littéraire” is the purest possible \textit{rapport au texte}. The mystery of one’s identity and of this thing called literariness remain tightly connected, no matter the recurring temptation of rhizomatic, undirected, disorganized incursions on textuality’s wonderland. Dominant in the classroom, the conception of literary taste as the one goal to strive for is fast internalized by the student whose developmental story is also one of aesthetical taste formation. Of the two visions of ‘literary’ engagement and identity development at stake, one is transversal (several genres, multiple possibilities), inclusive and progressive, while the other is vertical (one literature, one path to elevation), exclusive, conservative, and is the one projected and promoted at school. They alternate throughout the emergent reader’s trajectory, whose polymorphic shape materializes the protagonist’s, narrator’s and (arguably) author’s struggle to determine which approach is more valuable in a development-focused perspective.
Transitions, 2: The *lignes de démarcation* of literary initiation

The three volumes of *Une enfance créole* have evidently been conceived as a story of development; the whole point of an *autobiographie de lecteur*, of any *récit de soi*, is to render “une avancée, un parcours, voire une traverse” (Fourtanier 2017, 103). The *négrillon’s* journey would logically adopt a specific structure made of successive *aventures* leading to some sort of aesthetic revelation. How paradigmatic is Chamoiseau’s work in terms of structure? Scholars typically see it as neatly divided up “into epochs and shifts” delineating specific “phenomenological, linguistic, and biological changes”:


By “[s]plitting childhood into distinctive stages” and offering a very linear depiction of both the “pérille scolaire” (a turn of phrase that appears in *Ecrire en pays dominé*) and “the slow drama of childhood development” (Knepper 130), Chamoiseau can “recognize that childhood involves a series of dramatic transformations and ruptures of consciousness” depicted, in *Une enfance créole*, as successive steps towards literary accomplishment. The culminating point where initiation is fulfilled constitutes both the most important stage and the most difficult to picture. The second, central volume of the trilogy is itself divided into “deux temps successifs et deux parties … [c]omme dans *Les Mots* de Sartre” (Fourtanier 2017, 103). Interestingly, Suzanne Crosta perceives the two-part structure of *Chemin-d’école* as both the explicit reinforcement of a partition of development into somewhat hermetic stages (“les désirs de l’enfant – *Envie* – et ses modes de réalisation – *Survie*”) and the meaningful expression of an “oscillation”.

There is indeed, in Chamoiseau, an “oscillation”, a back-and-forth movement between these different stages, each of them in fact appearing relevant several times and making comebacks at various points of development. His autobiographical writing – in particular *Chemin-d’école*, the central and school-centered volume of *Une enfance créole* – represents a mostly non-linear literary initiation, a fact acknowledged by Fourtanier herself:
The négrillon’s experience is largely a story of coil-shaped progress throughout appropriation of written culture, as the few following examples demonstrate.

— Multimodal texts come and get dismissed first, before making a sensational return. Following an initial period of fascination, the suggestive nature and limitations of images propel engagement with written language, thus losing power. Yet soon enough, the emergent reader will partake in a passionate retour sur images through ceremonial, collective comics reading sessions.\(^\text{18}\)

— Pretend play is another uniquely important ‘stage’ at the beginning of the initiation process, in various ways (preschool mimetic writing / reading practices, active identification with written narratives’ characters). It makes a comeback as the process nears its end. Playful approaches to reality and gamification / fictionalization of the latter, built out of early pretend engagement with textuality, eventually come to shape the négrillon’s world.\(^\text{19}\)

— One last expression of this systematic retour du refoulé: at some point in the négrillon’s development, narrative-bound immersive imagination takes the back seat while the child’s attention to language features grows strong. The négrillon is supposedly mature enough by then to engage with the sacred space of ‘literariness’ as it is defined in social representations. From the preschooler passion for fictionality and the new student’s sustained interest in narrativity to the advanced reader’s recognition of a sanctified world of poetics, “le chemin s’était fait” (ABE 293). However, at the very same time, the négrillon’s reality becomes entirely shaped by fictional and narrative dynamics, up to the point where these dimensions are centered by the narrator. In the end, textuality matters first and foremost as a prompt for imagination.\(^\text{20}\)

None of these ‘stages’ is ever passed or closed, as a linear progression would imply. The value of each of the types of engagement described above (i.e., with visual features, with fiction, with
fictional narrativity) is validated at least twice, at different points in time, nullifying their very status
and function as ‘stages’: they are not steps to be climbed, thresholds to be passed, but recurring
elements of a nonlinear system offering a wealth of combinations. Chamoiseau depicts literary
initiation as a back and forth between various savoirs en construction that alternatively counter
and reinforce each other in a somewhat unpredictable way, rather than as a series of successive
and neatly delineated thresholds, which is how the process is typically represented. The
négrillon’s initiation journey is reminiscent, in its form, of a uniquely fertile figure dear to
Chamoiseau, whose novels are known to
refuse[r] la linéarité traditionnelle et explore[r] toutes les strates d’une narration en spirale,
‘tournoyante’. (Auzas 116)

This structural characteristic of Chamoiseau’s fictional narrative production also happens to be
the primary one shaping representations of literary initiation across his autobiographical work. In
a somewhat metaleptic move, the protagonist’s experience mirrors the author’s narrative
composition. Just like the narrative, “[d]errière l’apparente chronologie des évènements”, the
child’s literary initiation “s’emmêle”, “se met en suspens”, “se retourne sur elle-même comme en
une spirale” (ibid. 116-7).

The spiral, interestingly, is a crucial figure in contemporary French didactics as well.21 In
the Francophone areas most closely studied in the field (which are France, Switzerland, Quebec,
Belgium; unsurprisingly, the French-speaking ‘Global South’ is more often centered in
anthropology), French language and literature education has been tendentially moving toward
“progression spiralaire”, or “approfondissement concentrique”, over the last decades.22 The
planification of reading instruction “par cercles concentriques” (contents are “repris de façons
différentes à différents moments et âges d’un cursus de formation”) is described as the one truly
democratic conception in opposition to the elitist “progression qui planifie en ordonnant les
contenus par paliers”:

La logique de la formation par cercles concentriques vise la formation de tous auxquels il s’agit de
tout enseigner. (Thévenaz-Christen and GRAFElect 40-1)
The establishment of a “progression spiralaire” is undermined by a very persistent “organisation en rupture” of the literary reading education continuum from primary to secondary school.23 As autobiographies de lecteur recount a time (1950-1990) when the reorganization of progression grapples with this great tension, they could be expected to offer a window into the effect of institutional and pedagogical approaches to progression24 on the experience of emergent reader protagonists in this particularly interesting timespan and of its adult recollection.

In fact, in the Antillean child’s world, the structure of formal reading instruction and actual process of reading development do not coincide. The abovementioned tension is quasi absent from Chamoiseau’s representations of reading education which was evidently conceived in a very traditional, linear manner (specific competences, corpuses and aspects of written culture addressed at specific levels, with no review of skills supposed to have been acquired and practices considered elementary). In the neocolonial classroom environment orchestrated by a considerably brain-washed teacher and thus characterized by a slightly nostalgic Francocentric “béatitude”, classical approaches to education hold strong. The Maître’s methods evidently prevent the child from engaging with textuality as enthusiastically as he would like. There is no observable discrepancy within the educational project as such (full responsibility is taken for the traditionalist perspective). But there is one between the approach promoted by the institution and the one instinctively adopted by the child. Chamoiseau’s child protagonist eventually returns with delight to most of his early discoveries (fictionality, narrativity, imagery…). Chemin-d’école in particular not only displays but valorizes this spiral-shaped process that notably features a great comeback and celebration of fiction. What Chamoiseau quite clearly provides with its spiral-shaped depiction of reading development is an image of curricular progression as it should be, as didactic scholarship nowadays wants it to be. Une enfance créole, and particulary Chemin-d’école, stage and promote an ideal(ized) “progression spiralaire” featuring mutual feeding and complementary development of reading competences, rejection of distinction (Bourdieu) and of generic hierarchies.
By indirectly advocating for a back-and-forth between various elements of a system that allows it and best serves the development of an advanced ability to engage with textuality, Chamoiseau seems keen to demonstrate the pointlessness of classical approaches to curricular progression. Representing institutional approaches as missing their target, he supports the evolution soon to be fully in motion in French language and literature didactics. However, the traditional conception of reading education as necessarily linear and rupture-based isn’t pictured as constraining only. The representation of literary initiation in *Une enfance créole* is marked by the same paradox that has been shaping approaches to progression in French literature education for several decades now: Chamoiseau seems to embrace arguments for a spiral-shaped curricular progression that would accommodate for the cyclical return to various nodes of text-related *savoirs* – but he also valorizes a number of clear-cut ruptures within the storyworld (between physical spaces, cultures of references, types of engagement with textuality), a logic that affects the unfolding of his character’s reader trajectory too.25 The most flagrant instance of validation of the perennial threshold-centered vision of literary initiation is the upholding of the idea of an intrinsically antithetic relation between two modes of engagement with textuality, to be tackled during different developmental periods. *A bout d’enfance* and *Ecrire en pays dominé* repeatedly center the Grail of literary-reputed textuality through subtle tableaux of the shy childhood quest and radiant teenage conquest. *Ecrire en pays dominé* in particular tells a slightly different story than the trilogy, one in which childhood and adolescence are to be seen as distinct as well as antithetical periods in literary initiation. Each has its own temporality; childhood’s slowness and torpor will be brutally interrupted by the “déflagration” of the first grown-up reading – Césaire’s *Cahier* – which will be followed by a frenetic acceleration of engagement with literariness (EPD 32). While championing *progression spiralaire*, Chamoiseau represents the climax of literary initiation as an aesthetic revelation. As the journey nears completion, the supremely longed for and valued chapter of the *entrée en littérature* takes place. This culminating stage – truly a defining one, in this case – is distinctly delineated, assigned an established
position within the trajectory and shown to radically differ in status from the elements preceding it in the character’s reading development experience.

**Transitions, 3: l’Entrée en littérature as an encounter with the sexual and linguistic Other**

For the négrillon, the unlocking of a grown-up world of aesthetic pleasures coincides with the first vision of the capital “Personne, accoudée à la rampe de l’escalier de chez elle, yeux perdus dans le vague” (ABE 230). Gabine’s apparition immediately precipitates the “apprenti sous-écuyer” into a French version of the Merveille:

*C’était comme si le merveilleux avait quitté les contes, et se concrétisait là, dans cette fugace chabine, presque inconcevable … elle n’était pas diablesse, ni princesse et ni fée, et, aux dernières nouvelles, n’avait l’usage d’aucun miroir magique ni d’un quelconque carosse par lesquels s’échapper. (ibid. 232-3)*

The late stage of literary initiation in Chamoiseau, as in many other autobiographies de lecteur, is hardly dissociable from romantic and sexual awakening, a characteristic of its representations (notably pointed by Louichon) that will be explored in the following pages. The connection is here made explicit in no time: “C’est elle, peut-être, qui le renvoya aux livres jusqu’alors délaissés” (ibid. 292).

Just like with the very beginning of literary reading initiation, advanced engagement with textual content does not come naturally to the child even if now prompted by love interest.26 Books get picked randomly and fast abandoned by a disengaged reader who “les compuls[e] sans les voir, les ânonn[e] sans les comprendre…” (ibid. 293). Slowly though, the miracle happens:

*ces poèmes qu’il marmonnait souvent, de plus en plus longtemps … finirent par baigner son esprit, en des mantras inattendus: ce Lamartine, cet Hugo, ce Rimbaud, ce Baudelaire, les poètes-doudou du pays, et bien sûr les foudres de Césaire, fourriers en devenir des questions et violences… le nectar se répandait en lui, et escortait, de ligne en ligne, sa soif d’il ne savait plus quoi… (ibid.)*

Sensual or literary thirst indeed… or both? Eventually,

*L’Irréelle l’avait installé en lui-même. Le chemin s’était fait. … Il ne poussait plus de questions vers le ciel. Ne cherchait plus en dehors l’estuaire des grands espaces. Il vivait maintenant dans un vaisseau de poèmes en dérive, sur ces criques de vin noir que sut voir le Poète, dans les*
murmures de perroquets, des soupirs de fougères et des plaintes d’orchidées… Un pâle soleil tombait des voilures, et baignait sur le pont sa fixe contemplation du nacre craquelé d’un lambi de vingt ans… (ibid.)

The sensual awakening / literary initiation analogy is indeed a trope of the reader trajectory narrative tradition:

lecture et sexualité sont associées … le plaisir charnel et le plaisir de lire se rejoignent dans le souvenir. La solitude et l’engagement du lecteur dans la fiction littéraire sont proches de la fiction érotique (Louichon 2009, 128).

One of the reasons why sexual and literary reading development can be simultaneously brought to the narrative forefront is that one is seen as mirroring the other, operating according to similar principles. It is also possible that the former turns out to propel “le passage à d’autres lectures par la quête des mystères du sexe” (Petit 100-1). The analogy is well alive in Chamoiseau where it materializes in two active motifs: the use of the sexe-canon and the awakening of the livre endormi. The potential power of the first is discovered by the négrillon at a time when a French medieval fantasy world, partly infused with Creole references, is taking over the children’s reality. We are humorously told about the protagonist’s new interest in his private parts and the integration of the latter into the narrative fiction he and his friends are immersed in. The ti-bout becomes a weapon:

Selon qu’elle était puissante ou débile, cette arme pouvait vous propulser au faîte de la gloire ou vous expédier dans les viscosités de la honte… (ABE 87)

The narrator’s humor verges on irony when the polysemy of ‘canon’ (which no reader of an autobiographie de lecteur would expect to refer to anything else than a body of classical literary-reputed works) is made to contribute to its desacralization: “Il sut donc que c’était un canon…” (ibid. 87). Quite a brilliant play on the ambiguous idea of a “lecture incorporée (in corpore, mise en corpus)” (Demougin 2010, 28). It is now up to each emergent reader to decide for himself what he wants his personal canon to be – Creole, African or French, polemical or consensual, low- or high-brow, ancient or contemporary:

Considering “[l]e questionnement autour de la sexualité” in the context of reader trajectory narratives, Louichon acknowledges that it may well result in compulsive engagement with the text as a symbolical substitute for sex (2009, 141). Many 20th-century Francophone autobiographies feature sexual sub-patterns such as a “lecture avide et presque aveugle” (compulsive immersion), clandestine and involving prohibited literary objects, embodied in languid postures, threatened by adult presence (transgressive immersion). It is the case, to a soft and limited degree, in Chamoiseau. But the blending of both initiations may also translate in the advent of a novel “attention au texte, une découverte des phénomènes de polysémie, d’ambiguïté”, which is particularly important in Une enfance créole (ibid.). The relevance of close reading becomes progressively obvious to the négrillon as he encounters, then seeks to understand the petites-filles (who interestingly remain just as ‘undefinable’ and ‘unsettling’ as literature, sharing with it the status of a langue étrangère, “autre”, “pas normale”):

Sa première impression fut celle d’une altérité franche. Mais, à force de les observer, il se sentit des proximités troublantes avec elles – proximités qui demeuraient indéfinissables et qui ne les rapprochaient pas de lui pour autant. Elles semblaient vivre des choses identiques aux siennes, mais les vivre autrement, de manière pas normale. (ABE 114)

The négrillon thus learns to pay attention to the textuality he is surrounded with and fallaciously thought he knew. Once again, fiction and reality are approached as one:

Il découvrit avec stupeur qu’elles étaient presque partout: dans les bandes dessinées, dans les films, dans les livres, dans les photos-romans, dans la rue… (ibid. 126)

Like the petites-filles, books – to the négrillon, the most esteemed category of printed material – are presented and considered as “objet[s] fantasmagorique[s]” (CE 198) deserving of an infinitely cautious approach even though they are highly charged in sensual power. It is often the case in autobiographies de lecteur that books are considered to conceal a secret, which makes for a good part of their attractiveness, but it is their overwhelming materiality (“la taille, le poids, les couleurs, l’odeur”, Louichon 2009, 92) that is usually remembered in detail, that is suggested to matter as much as, if not more than, textuality:
les livres sont d’abord des objets … peut-être est-ce dans cette matérialité aussi que l’on peut trouver l’explication de la prégnance des images dans le souvenir (ibid. 91)

J[Je me souviens de mon premier toucher de livre … J’en connais l’odeur, la couleur éteinte, l’aspect compact de la tranche … la pulpe vivante des pages… (EPD 27)

Chamoiseau’s *livres* remain *endormis* for a long time. But as a soon-to-be *apprenti-chevalier*, the *négrillon* considers it its mission to engage with these Sleeping Beauties. His sensual exploration of book culture is not faced with any resistance at home:

Personne ne m’avait jamais incité à lire quoi que ce soit, mais la boîte ruminait dans la pénombre d’une penderie; la boîte était close … cela suffisait pour que je dénoue les fils de fer, que j’écarte son couvercle, et que je sorte un à un ces livres endormis. (ibid. 26)

Jamais elle ne lui interdit d’y toucher, de les manipuler, de les aligner, de les superposer… (CE 198)

These preliminaries will prove decisive in the emergent reader and writer’s trajectory:

Le temps me renvoie à ce geste quand je sollicite le point de départ de mon écriture. Il est là. Dans ce rapport équivoque à des livres endormis manipulés longtemps. (EPD 28)

This “rapport équivoque” (sic) is already a form of engagement with the books’ existence (ibid. 27-8) and indication that the *négrillon* will succeed in bringing them back to life. Way before the initiation is complete and literary textuality made accessible once and for all, the *livres endormis* are said to “reprendre vie entre [l]es mains” of the *négrillon*,

non par le déchiffrement que j’aurais pu en faire – je ne savais pas lire – mais du fait de leur seule existence hélée par mon esprit. Je ne comprenais pas ce qu’ils étaient. Je les abordais en totalité: couverture, caractères typographiques, images, épaisseur, âge, fragilité, achèvement, taches … Je me reliais à eux par un geste global de la main, des yeux, de la peau, de la tête, de l’imagination, de la peur (ibid. 28)

These highly carnal sequences take place in the secure privacy of the *négrillon’s* home. How could the public space of the school allow for such adventures? In the classroom, books are scarce and typically the teacher’s property. The arid, moral- or grammar-heavy “livres proprement scolaires” do not have much in common with the colorful “livres rescapés” by Man Ninotte. Yet, classroom experience will indirectly contribute to the emergent reader’s sensual and literary awakening:

Je t’accorde, cher Maître, l’élévation du livre en moi. A force de vénération, tu me les as rendus animés à jamais. Tu les maniais au délicat. Tu les ouvrais avec respect. Tu les refermait comme
There are other surprising ways in which the school is made to represent a space of sexual liberation throughout Chemin-d’école. It is “à l’école, dans la pissotière de la récréation, au pied des tamariniers de la cour”, that the child unveils the mystery of the ti-bout’s function (ABE 87). It is there, too, that he can start to envision the sphere of the petites-filles, which he learns one day to locate just on the other side of a closed door between two playgrounds – a “voie d’accès à l’autre dimension” (ibid. 108) that is again a direct reminder of the rupture-based process of entrée en littérature. The analogy between literary and sexual initiations is particularly powerful when enacted in a formal education context. It then stands for a direct substitute to another analogy, denounced by Guiney, Sachs and Védrines: literature education as a religion d’Etat.

If the intimate connection between literary and sensual initiations is in effect a topos of the French reader trajectory narrative contemporary tradition, Une enfance créole conforms to the norm and illustrate a continuity within the culturally diverse corpus of contemporary autobiographies de lecteur. But alterity in Chamoiseau is far from only sexual. Chamoiseau’s scholarship distinguishes the trilogy from metropolitan autobiographies by addressing the négrillon’s entrée en littérature as an encounter with the linguistic Other. The teacher embodies the latter on the much-expected first day of school that quite violently introduces the child to a new linguistic reality: “le Maître parlait français” (CE 67). How to express anything in French, wonders the boy, when “les joies, les cris, les rêves, les haines, la vie vivante” have only been acknowledged and addressed in Creole so far? As he becomes aware of this division de la parole, the négrillon also sets foot in what might be the actual path awaiting him: “le chemin de français”, carrier of entirely different images and sonorities, of a different sort of knowledge possibly (ibid. 68).

Even on that first day, the négrillon senses that this chemin is one of much higher prestige than the one he daily roams. In the “espace littéraire mondial”, writes the Swiss education sociologist Leonora Dugonjic,
The French linguistic identity was defined in terms of its literary potential. French literariness is a social and institutional construction whose power is unique in the galaxy of literary currency. This is true of the global scene, but it is truer of a neocolonial space such as the one in which Chamoiseau’s young alter ego is educated. At school in particular, “the power balance is rigidly set against Creole” (Hardwick 74) whose complexity and poetic quality get superbly ignored:

Within the teacher’s system, the ability to speak Creole fluently becomes a marker of the uncivilized, the backward, the colonized, and blackness while the ability to speak French fluently brings the individual closer to the ‘civilized’ metropolitan of French whiteness. (Knepper 144)

[Chamoiseau] neocolonial education placed emphasis on canonical works of Western literature and the acquisition of standard French. (ibid. 13)27

The “chemin français” is the only one offered as a “chemin d’école” – the only one also supposedly leading to literary revelation (“le chemin s’était fait”). ‘Standard’ French is already a foreign language to the new student. But he is ultimately expected to comprehend a second one, ‘literary’ French – which Louichon deems the language of an Other, of another mind. The encounter with literary textuality would involve being equally disturbed and charmed by something both foreign and familiar, whose innutritio would compose the core of the “souvenir du texte” which tendentially focuses, according to Louichon, on a “conscience de l’existence en soi des mots de l’autre” (2009, 120). But it is ultimately, in Louichon’s perspective, literature itself – rather than a human Other – that speaks this “langue étrangère … qui parle haut parce qu’on ne la comprend pas” (ibid. 123).

Language and literature can hardly be disentangled in Chamoiseau, too. The author’s approach to ‘literary’ narration essentially relies on a particular use of language – “as a site of resistance and transformation”, which is a common approach in Caribbean narrative traditions (Knepper 66; see Chapter 5). There are expressions of this resistance in the storyworld too. Une enfance créole features markers of a fluid, hybrid identity construction, while also bringing attention to attempts at undermining the power of “the French language and culture imposed on
him in school” (Walsh 41). The oppressed Creole speaker withstands by deliberately re-embrazing his cultural identity, in the content just as much as in the form of the narrative:

Le Maître d’école de Chemin d’école avait bien tenté de chasser les kawo et autres déformations de ‘patois de petit-nègre’, l’écrivain ne craint plus les coups de liane. Et voilà l’accent créole qui ressurgit dans la bouche des personnages! (Auzas 112)

When the grown-up author inverts the stigma by recreating ‘literary’ expression, he extends the work started by his child reflection, who, according to Une enfance créole, began forging a language then.

Initially, excellence at writing in French as well as at appreciating the poetic nature of the Creole language and culture appears to amplify the identity conundrum faced by the négrillon:

Le gros créole était le signe du fruste et du violent. L’équilibre linguistique du négrillon s’en vit tourneboulé. Sans remède. (CE 92)

la culture créole se trouve discréditée, voire niée, au bénéfice du patrimoine littéraire et culturel dispensé par l’école colonial… (Fourtanier 2017, 102)

Submission to the dominant vision might be expected. But the négrillon’s story will fast become one of adaptation and mobility. In the négrillon’s world, school provides the first, crude, cruel yet soon productive experience of a “confluence of languages and cultural influences, including local, French and world literatures” (Knepper 13):

In Chemin-d’école, the exploration of linguistic hybridity will prove the most potent means with which to argue for the recognition of the plurality of Caribbean culture. (Hardwick 73)

Just as today’s Mexican-American students “move back and forth between and among different languages, social classes, and artistic forms”, the child will embrace a logic of “fluent movement between cultural frames” (Hornberger, after Richardson-Bruna). The interlacing of French and Creole verbal universes in the child’s trajectory is marked by constant shifts in axiological, emotional, esthetic hierarchies within the narrated world, at the very level of child perception: “Désespoir du Maître: les enfants parlaient par images et significations qui leur venaient du créole.” (CE 93). The “valeur heuristique” of Chamoiseau’s work is typically deemed to be that “l’émancipation du ‘négrillon’ va passer par une difficile mais irrémédiable hybridation” (Fourtanier 2017, 102). In more than one instance, the “linguistic sway leaves the négrillon in an impasse”
(Walsh 44) from which he gradually learns to grow an idiosyncratic, as well as communal, parole, which parole will be later understood as the “hallmark of Chamoiseau’s poetics” (Knepper 13).28

Resistance through flowing movement is the strategy of the author and narrator of Une enfance créole. There is something of an ironie tragique in the fact that both know that the négrillon is bound to develop this ability to navigate and eventually merge cultural worlds – while things remain slightly more complicated in his immediate universe:

In the French classroom, the child experiences bouts of linguistic ‘asphyxia’ … ‘plunged in breathlessness [le souffle abîmé]’ … as the teacher denounces Creole speech in favor of the ‘civilized’ French. He is forced to abandon his maternal language and to consider how French will distance him from a ‘Creole proximity’ on the way to a transformed identity. (Walsh 45)

The distance established between the child character and adult narrator also tells of the different ways in which each instance gets to experience another crucial distance, this time “between writing and orality – or the space of oraliture”, that “is not the same for Chamoiseau and the négrillon”. According to Walsh,

The child is fascinated by the written word, whereas Chamoiseau and the narrator understand the stakes of writing a creolized French. (41)

The rapport au language appears an absolutely central issue in Chamoiseau both at the level of the narrator’s discourse and character’s journey, although differently in each case, as the narrator has presumably overcome the suffering induced by linguistic oppression that the character is still lost in. The colonizing of “la petite langue créole de sa tête” by French vocabulary, however, is not only the result of cultural oppression (CE 201). Before he becomes able to transcend language hermeticity and elaborate a new communication paradigm, there is this point where the négrillon stops resisting and chooses to welcome “les mots de l’autre” (Louichon).

The primary reason for this conscious decision is the attractiveness of the printed fictional narratives he passionately engages with, and the frustration of not being able to engage further because of language limitations. The négrillon needs access to textuality, which is made possible by formal education, to continue to develop what nourishes him the most – imagination. Chemin-d’école and A bout d’enfance depict both a quest and a conquest that have to do with language,
for sure, but with the world of narrative even more. The issue of language is essentially addressed from a metatextual point of view. Narrative is the négrillon’s immediate object of desire and catalyst of growth. Language is but a medium to book content. The development of narrative and fictional competences entirely lay the ground for reading acquisition, and the main point of the latter – again made possible through schooling – is to foster the former. From this perspective, we must consider that the content and generic specificities of the texts the protagonist is shown engaging with deserve much more attention than they are generally granted. In the next chapter, I will therefore consider the négrillon’s relation to textuality through the prism of text genericity.

1 Sachs 190.

2 Modern French curricular progression is often designed in a spiral shape (each new learning experience building on previous layers of knowledge acquisition, to a certain extent modelling… sedimentation) and marked by ruptures of its own (such as the gap between representations of emergent literary reading between primary and secondary school).


4 “From Freire’s perspective, the job of critical educators is to provide students with the necessary skill and information so that, ‘by taking more and more history into their own hands, they [the people] can shape their history. To shape history is to be present in it, not merely represented by it’” (Warner Connor 43).

5 Some of these texts – a number of which have been published in Gallimard’s “Haute enfance” series – will be discussed in the general conclusion.

6 French literature curriculum design did go through important changes across the 20th century (see Chapter 1). Literary-reputed works are excluded entirely from the early-century primary school reading curriculum and reserved to the secondary-school elite. In the 1950s, a landmark reform opens the secondary track to all students, forcing a complete reappraisal of the ends of elementary reading education. From the 1960s to the 1970s, “les pratiques traditionnelles sont remises en question, ce qui va entraîner le mouvement dit de rénovation du français” (Bishop 2009, 143-145). It is important to note however that such periodizations are not hermetic ones. For instance, in curricula spanning across 1945 to the late 1970s, reading is presented less and less as a mean to an end (moral education) and increasingly valued “comme une fin en soi”. One could even argue that “le grand changement par rapport au panthéon initial” effectively unfolds over the entire first half of the century. But the 1970s is considered to truly mark a revolution. It is then that the mission of French language and literature education definitely ceases to consist in “donner à lire et à retenir des poèmes édifiants”, “faire apprendre et pratiquer la belle langue” and honor the “grandes figures” of literary history (ibid. 147-8). The texte seems to oust both the enduring Belles-Lettres and reigning littérature. Societal evolutions will now be seriously taken into account, as emphasized in the Instructions relatives à l’enseignement du français à l’école élémentaire published in 1972: “l’écolier d’aujourd’hui, tout à la fois mieux pourvu et plus démuni que ses prédécesseurs, subit la fascination qu’exercent sur lui cinéma, radio, télévision, disque, publicité, bandes dessinées.” (150). Nonetheless, as recounted in Chapter 1, the
didactic rupture of the 1970s is also bound to encounter resistance and backlash: to face, in a nutshell, the literary imagination.

7 For the remainder of this dissertation, I will refer to Chamoiseau’s works using the following abbreviations: AE (Antan d’enfance); CE (Chemin-d’école); ABE (A bout d’enfance); EPD (Ecrire en pays dominé).

8 Fourtanier’s proposition is to favor engagement with the classiques by means of “l’accueil à l’école de textes de lecteur conçus comme des espaces de déchiffrement du monde” (2017, 106). Such writing workshops would, in fact, modulate and moderate the violence occasioned by patrimonial reading, the latter continuing to enable the encounter with literariness whereas the former would foster practices of world-deciphering, the world being considered separate from the Word – in a manner completely opposed to Freire’s perspective.

9 The child reader character in Sartre’s Les Mots thus goes through “l’apprentissage de la distinction culturelle” via progressive acknowledgment of “l’indignité d’une partie de ses propres pratiques”, yet still very much embrace school-promoted ones (Lahire).

10 “Many of Chamoiseau’s early writings [starting before graduation from the lycée] – poems, plays, and comic books – reflect the influence of Négritude as well as the lyricism of Césaire’s poetic voice.” (Knepper 14).

11 Pre-service teacher education used to be an area where the traditional form of the introspective self-narrative was imposed and routinely practiced in a number of African countries under French ruling. Colonial institutions were as interested in teachers’ reader autobiographies as today’s didacticiens de la littérature and sociologists of reading practices, for obviously different reasons. To the former, it was a matter of engaging with the obscure colonized subject’s experience so as to both enrich Western knowledge and rule - critically through education - in a more informed and effective manner: “students were often expected to speak both as ethnographers and native informants, to offer at the same time an ethnographic monograph and an account of their own journey to become the modern, colonial subject who could speak as the author of the text” (Warner 2). Warner’s study of the cahiers Ponty – a relatively famous corpus of close to eight hundred texts composed by West African teacher trainees as part of their prestigious École Normale William Ponty education – convincingly invites one to discern “the rhetorical and narrative strategies Ponty students employ to produce legible accounts of their own socialization as modern subjects”. Warner shows the complex process through which students not only attempt to subtly include culturally-specific narrative features, but also handle the “racialized double-bind” demanding that their writing express engagement with the French ‘literary’ canon as a foundational piece of one’s identity formation while at the same time managing not to use such canon-defining formal and thematic traits as a reference for their own narrative: “what was and what was not literary was absolutely at issue in the negotiations between the students, the teachers, and the institution” (Warner 2).


13 See for instance Verhoeven, Ludo and Sven Strömqvist, editors. Narrative Development in a Multilingual Context. Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2001. In this volume, Ruth A. Berman mentions the existence of studies focusing “on the content of narratives produced by children from different backgrounds” while others suggest that what constitutes a good story from the point of view of narrative discourse, and not only of content, may differ from one culture to another” (426).

14 Michon, ibid.

15 Among scholarly approaches to literary and identity development that tend toward merging the two, Rouxel’s impressionistic attempt at delineating “figures” or “identités de lecteur” reproduces the cultural hierarchy at work in the imaginaire littéraire. Lowest on Rouxel’s developmental scale, the fugueur considers literature as an “évasion de soi et de la réalité”. The spectateur, who receives the text as if it addressed her own life experiences, would be the typical high-school level profile. The bohème is portrayed as a romantic figure associated to a college-level posture of “lecteur dilettante, amateur”, definitely not subject to immersion in narrative since he is mature enough to “musarde[r]” rather than look for adhesion to and evasion in a storyworld. The critique – who is familiar enough with literary production to make use of intertextual knowledge and who attends to the “enjeux de l’écriture” – can be visualized at the top of the
hierarchy; he is the only one described as a “lecteur expert” (Rouxel 2004, 146-7). The spectrum goes from immersive reading to detached “sensibilité” aux effets du texte et attention à sa forme, from naive engagement (a short paragraph) to knowledgeable distanciation (two pages).

16 The didactic consensus today is that all subjective modalities of literary reading development must be equally welcome, which suggests that the culminating point of this journey does not have to amount to the acquisition and “expert” use of detachment skills. Still, literary reading development is considered a foundation of identity formation – and the enduring social conceptions of literariness are likely to affect interpretations of this position to the point where damaging hierarchies are maintained in formal education.

17 “Together these three works deal with different stages in the life of the child: pre-school experiences, early school years, and the end of childhood marked by the onset of adolescence.” (Knepper 130).

18 Across Chemin-d’école and A bout d’enfance, the perception of images evolves. Rather than considering them in isolation, as individual windows opening on always changing imaginary horizons, the négrillon develops (through advances and regressions) awareness of their function as beacons in a narrative whole. The child’s development of narrative competences and expansion of fictional ones begins with images, which initially stand as a symbol of freedom. But image-based imaginative travel ends up feeling insufficient to compensate for textual silence. It is time, then, to conquer written language. So does the child deliberately start paying close attention to the Maître’s vocabulary sessions, memorizing with passion and laboriously expressing himself in French. Later on, disturbing the then well-oiled mechanics of the child’s “oscillation” between veneration of words and attraction to worlds, the introduction of the bande dessinée has a multifarious impact on the emergent reader’s trajectory. Most importantly, it launches a new form of ceremonial reading (after the Maître’s), this time entirely narrative-focused, and for the first time collaborative. Together with the narrative fusion of images and text, the power of the ‘bookclub’ configuration is shown to multiply the intensity of the reading experience. In an exploratory tourbillon, images have enabled the understanding and interpretation of words, sentences, paragraphs, “aventures”, up to the frenzy of written language consumption. The progression again underlines the fundamental ambivalence in Chamoiseau’s representations of literary initiation: word mastery is meant to serve the discovery of narrative worlds, yet the initiation does not seem to be complete until narrative is approached in stylistic – linguistic – terms again.

19 The négrillon’s educational journey starts with visual, tactile, and mimetic engagement with reading education, via the livres endormis and postures of older siblings. Pretend reading, however, proves a source of frustration the same way that images do. Imagination does not satisfy the non-reader’s drive to comprehend and learn. Still, mimetic play will turn out to be a decisively enabling practice: pretend emergent writing practice will open the way for pretend reading pleasure. The négrillon simultaneously internalizes the axiological dynamics at work in representations of literary initiation: the apparent stylistic expertise of the Maître becomes a model to emulate. As the end of the trilogy nears, the sphere of pretend play is not kept distinct from the landscape of written narratives anymore. It now actively includes it. While the child develops meta-narrative competence (notably through discovery of stereotypes and their presence in both Creole and French narrative corpuses), pretense, and thus imaginary worlds, become reality.

20 The négrillon’s preschool experience is rich with positive discoveries – of the possibility of a graphic materialization of language, but above all of French tales that the child perceives as a new knowledge capital, a body of resources distinct from the corpus of Creole narratives he is already familiar with. School beginnings come as a hard awakening. Imagination is suddenly expected to take the back seat while classroom work focuses on the premiers pas sur le chemin de français. Narratives continue to be used though not as a catalyst for imaginative development anymore; stories matter in that they are a vehicle for moral and language acquisition. The négrillon thus ceases to seek evasion in tales. Nonetheless, throughout these early days of school, imagination remains the négrillon’s primary voie de survie. During the first encounters with literature which are orally mediated, the Maître and his students truly experience a form of Relation that happens by means of ‘literary’ communion. Collective ecstasy relies on the words’ meaninglessness: the two semantic disconnects experienced by the students (between words and significations, between the text’s and their worlds of reference) foster the charming quality of oral literature (bound to later found orallité). Fiction however comes back to dominate the child’s textual world of interest, whether it is performed by Gros-Lombirc or the Maître, in a poetic or narrative vein. Written culture was introduced too early, we are told, resulting in little enthusiasm for the study of the written word.
By the end of *Chemin-d’école*, the development of fictional, then narrative competences, which is hybrid in terms of the (school / out-of-school) spaces involved, has paved the way to the major ongoing accomplishment of written language acquisition. Returning to the early days and pages of this volume, we notice indeed that it all started with imagination: that the initial development of poetic and narrative competences that followed, in a forward-moving yet circular move, to imagination again ("chimère informorable que les images des livres aggravaien sans mesure", 32); and that no other resistance than an imaginary one – the impossibility to picture the world of the text – will motivate familiarization with writing practice.

The protagonist of *A bout d’enfance* is described as a virtuoso world-switcher prone to navigate the porous boundary between fiction and reality as well as the two corpuses of Creole and French fictional narratives. Books are now open and “à lire”. Obsessed for a time by the *roman photo*, the *négrillon* might claim not to be interested in ‘the story’, he still strives to decipher its overall plot and detail. The poetic quality of a text then makes a strong comeback, largely through the *négrillon*’s own writing practice. The style-sensitive *négrillon* develops an embryonic ability to name the core of ‘literariness’ and essential value of literature: the pinning of a *point fixe*, a unique scene, often but not always a love-related one. But outside of textuality, the culture of fictional narrative competences continues to dominate, constantly expanding its realm and eventually enacting the Glissantian concept of the *Tout-Monde* (possible worlds, worlds of reference all interconnected). At the end of this third volume, which concludes the path to *entrée en littérature*, fictional narrativity stands as the most important contribution of textuality.

21 All Francophone curricula have been shaped by a tension between the great democratic ambitions of the French government that underlie the founding and development of national public schooling, on the one hand, and the temptation of selectiveness and social reproduction by means of acquired cultural distinction (Bourdieu), which is also very characteristic of the French society, on the other hand. These opposite forces have led to internal contradictions in approaches to progression.

22 A key expression of this overall trend is the recent, subtle but attested contamination of primary-level approaches to textuality by those privileged in secondary school: it is increasingly true that “très tôt déjà … l’étude du texte porte sur le sens second, la métaphore, le discours indirect” (Thévenaz-Christen, Ronveaux and Schneuwly). Yet, the transition from primary to secondary school continues to represent a particular challenge to curricular coherence and learning experience.

23 A result and reflection of a “sédimentation de strates historiques” according to Thévenaz-Christen, Ronveaux and Schneuwly, this split conception “continue à agir puissamment à travers la formation différenciée des enseignants et dans la mémoire de la profession et de la société civile.” (Daunay, Reuter and Schneuwly).

24 As a didactic concept, progression refers to the temporal organization and implementation of “suites d’activités” in a given level and throughout school years. Transition naturally is a closely related, equally important concept in education design: “L’organisation de l’école se traduit dans les transitions ou autrement dit dans les continuités et les ruptures du curriculum prescrit et réel” (Thévenaz-Christen). Progression is, in general, a complex process from an instructional point of view because it demands to take into account a range of institutional and practical constraints, for one, and to arrange the “savoirs à enseigner” not only in the best possible chronological order but in the shape most conducive to learning (“linéaire” or “concentrique”) as well. In French didactics, progression could, and arguably should, have elicited more discussion than it has so far; Schneuwly and the GRAFÉlect research group regret that both first and second language education research have not granted much attention to an issue that is the backbone of teaching methodologies. When didacticians do seize on the concept, they more willingly approach it from the perspective of the “savoirs” and “compétences” to teach than from the student point of view (“normes de développement établies notamment par la psycholinguistique, représentations des élèves”) (Daunay, Reuter and Schneuwly).

25 Chamoiseau is aware that memory is a reconstructive process, that traces are stocked and retrieved according to their salience, that each retrieval makes a particular memory more likely to be retrieved and modified again: “que de mensonges dans ces fragments de souvenirs, ce clignotement de la mémoire soumis à des odeurs, des associations, des sensations, et des reconstructions que l'on sait fausses mais qui dessinent du vrai!” (ABE 105). This is ultimately what matters to the author: “La cordelette est fausse, mais le collier est juste”. There is no questioning of the greatness of the rupture between child and grown-up reading experiences even though the latter has been many times remembered, considered, possibly
exaggerated in the process, and in any case transformed, most likely according to the stereotypical, socially-constructed vision of literary initiation as linear. While the narrator of Une enfance créole can claim that development happened in a chaotic yet smooth circular way, that “rien ne pose de balises au parcours … Rien ne conserve les dégrés d’une fulgurante évolution” (227), the négrillon’s experience is also often pictured as one of definitive transitions from one hermetic stage (“degré”, “balise”) to another: “Maintenant quand un loup lui venait à l’esprit, il pouvait lui envoyer un chevalier.” (ABE 43, emphasis mine).

26 L’Entrée en littérature is largely a matter of affect, in Chamoiseau as well as in most autobiographies de lecteur. Rouxel’s analysis of reading trajectory narratives (2004) shows that the emotions triggered by reading are almost systematically evoked in such context. Fourtanjier (2017) notes the same about literary-reputed autobiographies: “Les écrivains livrent … assez volontiers le récit des émotions provoquées par leurs lectures”. Quite predictably, affective experience, whether or not triggered by engagement with textuality, is almost always dissociated from formal education: “Ce qui comptait, c’était un lot de choses intérieures, qui l’animaitaient, le touchaient, et auxquelles les Maîtres demeuraient étrangers.” (CE 185). Things are more nuanced however across Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing which features a number of scenes of emotional connection with textual content or form introduced in the classroom, including the previously discussed scene of ecstatic attendance to the Maître reading-aloud.

27 Chamoiseau did master written French early on, notes Knepper, “impressing his teachers with his written analysis and juvenile fiction” (13). Ecrire en pays dominé also tells us that as an adolescent, he would compose poetry in French with urgency and great delight. Speaking, however, is another story: “Quand le Maître posait une question seuls les petits-aïguisés qui revenaient de France (ou dont les parents avaient fait du beau-parler-français un principe de leur vie) pouvaient se lever et oser la parole sans buter sur les u et avaler les r. Parler devint héroïque, voilà ce dont je parle.” (CE 88). In classroom environments, individual students’ language and cultural backgrounds have been shown to importantly affect input selection (which instructional cues are attended to), input processing (language and cultural differences may impede comprehension of / engagement with content or form of text, teacher, peers input), response of other actors to students’ contributions (Rueda). The additional issue in this case is that the French spoken by the child (since there is one) does not coincide with the one expected by the Maître, the bon français accurate in terms of grammar and sonorities as well as endowed with literary legitimacy: “Le français (qu’il ne nommait même pas) était quelque chose de réduit qu’on allait chercher sur une sorte d’étagère, en dehors de soi, mais qui restait dans un naturel de bouche proche du créole. Proche par l’articulation. Par les mots. Par la structure de la phrase. Mais là, avec le Maître, parler n’avait qu’un seul et vaste chemin. Et ce chemin français se faisait étranger.” (CE 88).

28 The notion of counterpoetics (a Glissantian notion par excellence) is often used to describe Chamoiseau’s writing. Walsh identifies “the oppositional function of language” as the other recurrent motif of this structuring twosome (with “the Antillean’s remarkable adaptability to the shifting terrain of his environment”, 31). Indeed, “Chamoiseau chooses to write in the language of the colonizer but also scratches through an oral tradition that heavily inflects the French. Therefore, it is possible to see his word-scratching as disruptive of standard, literary French” (41). Combe notes that as a “langue de l’humiliation, [la langue créole] est traditionnellement dévalorisée par rapport au parler ‘Blanc-France’, au français normé, langue d’écriture, qui constitue un fort capital symbolique … Mais c’est cette origine même qui, à l’inverse, lui donne sa puissance de suggestion, et lui confère le prestige de la langue humiliée devenue langue de la révolte contre l’oppression coloniale” (99). Many scholars however consider that Chamoiseau’s writing overall evolves from a “langue du refus” to inclusive poetics, as Auzas points out: “la pensée des langues de Chamoiseau … s’est sensiblement modifiée. Son imaginaire est devenu multilingue … l’écrivain se sort de la logique oppositionnelle. Opposer le créole et le français, c’est toujours et encore jouer le jeu d’une pensée binaire, taxée de proprement occidentale. … Aussi, une fois l’urgence d’une réhabilitation du créole traitée, l’écrivain peut-il entretenir un rapport plus libre, plus souple avec ses langues.” (Auzas 118-9). The extent to which Chamoiseau’s poetics radically resist – go ‘counter’ – the neocolonial presence thus appears debatable. In the end the search seems to be for a conciliation rather than for a revolutionary liberation; for a compromise that makes the text almost fully accessible to the reader representative of the colonizer.
CHAPTER SEVEN

“Ces genres illustrés prenaient en charge sa poisse mentale...”:

Textual Diversity in *Une enfance créole*

Somewhere in the course of her analysis of *souvenirs de lecture*, Louichon considers the extent to which the genre of a text might affect memorization of the latter. Her conclusion is that the generic variable plays a non-significant role in proportion to the high impact of literary quality. What she means by literary quality is, as often, elusive. The literary résidu supposedly involves a stylistic component even though it eventually proves unattached to lexical characteristics. It could likely center a theme, yet just as likely some evasive atmosphère. It is, in any case, what remains.

Louichon does not immediately get there. In fact, she first concedes that genre might not only contribute to the way in which a text is remembered, but that it could be the one dimension shaping (“produisant”) the very form of mnesic representations (“des types de souvenirs”, 2009, 109). Her – regrettably not elaborated – hypothesis here focuses on narrative qualities: “[l]a lecture du narratif a des propriétés particulières”, one of which would be to narratively structure the souvenir of this reading itself (111). In Louichon’s next argumentative move, however, this generic inflection or conditioning does not resist the power of the literary imagination:

> il apparaît que l'intrigue fictionnelle, qui rend la lecture possible, passionnelle, mémorable, sitôt dénouée, se délite, au profit d'autre chose, qui se noue autrement, à un autre niveau, dont il reste trace et qui n'est pas l'intrigue (2009, 113)

Something else, taking place on another level – something again definable only through exclusion (“une (re)composition qui n'est plus de l'ordre du narratif”, 114). Narrative structure is said to dissolve (“les fils du texte se décomposent”) as the literary résidu of the experience or the text surfaces and takes precedence. At that point, Louichon does not discuss the memory’s form anymore, but the remembered text at its core. The reader protagonist, she asserts, does not retain the content of – fictional – narratives; she most specifically cannot hold on to plots. In
contrast, she often proves able to retrieve details of poetic texts in a lexically accurate manner and mentions remembering poems in their entirety, sometimes even quoting those, within *autobiographies de lecteur*. Still, the poem “peut se prêter à des reconstructions tout aussi évanescentes que le roman” (115). Its structural features are first to get loose, then lost. Its lexical substance eventually vanishes, in good part. Memory for poetry would eventually boil down to the souvenirs d’un motif (celui du désir de lire), ailleurs d’une image, d’une atmosphère… La mémoire du poème, comme la mémoire des œuvres lues, est “oublieuse des mots”. (116)

According to Louichon’s final interpretation, then, text genre plays an insignificant role, if a role at all, in representations of literary initiation, since memory of any type of content is ultimately reduced (or, in an axiological perspective, upgraded to) the résidu littéraire. The interest – truly, the existence – of generic specificities gets refuted, for text genres all amount to one and only superior essence in the end.

**Different genres, different values**

The approach to generic diversity enacted in *Une enfance créole* contrasts with Louichon’s analytic take, which values their supposedly ‘literary’ residue above all other aspects. The respective qualities of various text genres very much matter as such in the négrillon’s ‘literary’ journey.

Chamoiseau’s own account suggests the preeminence of poetry in the latter:

> Je me récitais aussi *La légende des siècles*, de Hugo, et les poésies de François Villon. Ils sont toujours présents quand j’écris. Ma musique interne reste l’alexandrin, volte musicale de la langue française. (Chamoiseau, in Knepper 12)

Yet the “polyphonic qualities” of Chamoiseau’s writing are equally indebted to the voices conveyed by “[p]olice reports, oral stories, dialogues” and many other “genres of language” (Knepper 64). The négrillon’s textual world is one subtly divided into two materialities: the “livres” stand alongside the “objets imprimés”. The first category theoretically is a subset of the second
one; in the realm of representations, though, it stands apart and above – even though within the sphere of the “livres” itself, textual heterogeneity rules.

The “livres” are mostly brought back home by older siblings until they become, in the child’s environment, the stuff of high school libraries and obscure bookshops. According to Ecrire en pays dominé, a great number of them belong to the canon bound to be formally taught to the négrillon (‘Notre bibliothèque contenait ainsi tous les classiques’, Chamoiseau, in Knepper 12). The narrator of Une enfance créole also conveys the less legitimate romans d’aventure awarded to the frères et soeurs as end-of-the-year school prizes (“des ouvrages de Jules Verne, de Daniel Defoe, d’Alexandre Dumas…”, CE 197). A few texts, such as Alice in Wonderland (“lu très jeune”), appear to bridge the worlds of the French “livres” and the magic realism of Creole folktales. The “livres proprement scolaires” seem to be the only ones not to make it to the treasured shelf and potato box (“[ils] se vendaient ou s’échangeaient avec ceux du programme de la nouvelle année”, EPD 32).

Even more than the “livres”, the “objets imprimés” make for a disparate ensemble:

Quand [Man Ninotte] découvrit son intérêt, elle lui ramena bientôt des abords du marché-aux-poissons (un djobeur y bradait toutes espèces de papiers dans une grande brouette) ce qui était approchant du livre: journaux, almanachs, bandes dessinées, romans policiers, photo-romans, tout… Le négrillon abordait chaque objet imprimé avec la même gourmandise. (CE 199)

The négrillon’s exploration of this (largely low-brow) cultural universe is conducted “with the same delight” as the one involving the (largely high-brow) “livres”. Up to this point, the initiation does not seem to include any strict opposition between “lecture-capital” and “lecture-divertissement” (Bemporad 2014). As he engages with both the “livres” and “objets imprimés”, the négrillon is inducted into the reading of printed textuality as well as into the study of its material and generic diversity.

Beyond materiality, genre diversity in Chamoiseau operates on two levels: discursive form and worlds of reference. Form-wise, genres inflect the young reader’s development differently depending on whether they foreground visual textuality (picture books, comics, roman-photo…), word play (poetry), or structural aspects typical of fictional narratives. The impact of a
given text also depends, in complex ways, on the négrillon’s distance or proximity with the world represented. These aspects remain central in current discussions of generic diversity at school. A close examination of Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing is particularly relevant from a didactic perspective as it shows the author’s own literary initiation to be a conflicted journey toward the *Tout-Texte*, promoting – at least in part, as we will soon see – genre diversity as coherence.

At its core, the generic quality assigned to a text is a tool meant to help the reader by reducing “les possibles parmi l’immense nombre des formes le guidant dans son activité”:

> pour celui qui reçoit, elle limite, selon la formule de Jauss, l’horizon d’attente: pour pouvoir traiter cognitivement des informations complexes, le fait qu’il y ait un genre permet de réduire et de définir l’horizon d’attente (Schneuwly 2007, 14)

Evolving contexts of use make it difficult to teach fixed, stable frameworks, which has recently led Francophone scholars to formulate alternative didactic proposals. The conceptualization of généricité is an attempt by Swiss-based scholars to productively approach generic hybridity:

> Les concepts de généricité et d’effets de généricité ont pour but de penser à la fois la mise en discours et la lecture-interprétation comme des processus complexes. L’étiquette genre et les noms de genres … ont tendance à réduire un énoncé à une catégorie de textes. La généricité est, en revanche, la mise en relation d’un texte avec des catégories génériques ouvertes. (Adam and Heidmann 62)

This socially-oriented, dynamic perspective however remains to be fully integrated into the French reading curriculum. Recommendations to open the corpus to a broader range of genres, which might seem less radical than invitations to redefine the very notion of genre, are similarly slow to be considered by educational institutions. In representations of literary initiation, generic diversity tends to be undervalued as well, as shown by Louichon’s analysis. If we are to follow Louichon’s analysis of the largest corpus of literary-reputed *autobiographies de lecteur* to date, genre specificities and diversity should be of little consequence on a developing literary reader’s experience.

Chamoiseau provides a different account. Both *Une enfance créole* and *Ecrire en pays dominé* point at the central importance of generic differentiation, and the differentiated impact of
various genres on literary reading development. The négrillon’s story demonstrates that exposure to the greatest range of genres and to the specific features of some matters in an emergent reader’s journey. The reader, in this case, is a created character, and as such demands to be considered in relation to the largely shared imaginary afferent to literary initiation. In what follows, I will also ask whether the defining aspects of literary imagination conveyed in Louichon’s conclusion (genericity barely matters in literary initiation and its representations; literariness always is the ultimately remembered and rendered dimension) might overshadow the implicit claim of generic impact in Chamoiseau.

In the first part of this chapter, I will successively examine picture books, comics, photo novellas and poetry, which are all important genres in the young protagonist’s trajectory, although differently. The second half of this chapter will be dedicated to demonstrating the central character of narrativity and fictionality respectively in the négrillon’s reading development, drawing on the role these two dimensions play in the child’s engagement with most of the aforementioned genres.

**Visual textuality, 1: *livre illustré***

In the négrillon’s story of engagement with textuality, pictures are worth a thousand words, before reading and writing acquisition starts as well as during the protagonist’s painful progress toward mastery of the basics. At a time when writing does not yet exceed the single word, book illustrations already compose a full-blown world (“[s]a tête s’emplit du monde des images”, CE 167). The former is of very little use in imaginary development then, despite the négrillon’s attempts at infusing written language with fanciful, immersive power (“manie de compulsier, ou peut-être d’annonner, [ces livres] à travers lesquels il dérivait sans fin”). In contrast, “les images des livres” immediately propel infinite variations of a “chimère informulable” and delectable. The child’s adoration of pictures stands as a reminder of both the fact that access to
textuality initially is a matter of pure iconography and of the primary role of imaginary
development in the reading acquisition process.4

At some point in the négrillon’s development, the written word starts taking precedence
over its revered visual counterpart. Words suddenly are seen as containing multitudes that cannot
be rivaled by the limited potential of pictures. Images however make a comeback upon
completion of elementary reading and writing acquisition. In his sustained attention to illustrations,
prior to and especially after familiarization with the written word, the négrillon aligns with many
other child reader characters; discussing her corpus, Louichon notes that it would be “abusif de
ne parler du souvenir des images qu’à l’occasion de livres découverts antérieurement à
l’apprentissage technique de la lecture” (2009, 94). It must be emphasized, however, that as
literary initiation is shown to begin and to unfold, it is not the image itself that matters to
Chamoiseau’s négrillon and his fellow emergent reader protagonists as much as the idea of the
image.

The idea of the image is nodal to representations of literary initiation. It implies the
possibility for quintessential yet blurry, disparate expressions of some fundamental human
experience to crystallize in an extremely precise image that becomes, in the written text, a form of
fetish for both the author and reader. In literary imagination, the value of literature largely resides
in this capacity to capture “le taffetas changeant” that life is made of capturing what is otherwise
unthinkable in a few uniquely powerful tableaux.5 From ancient folktales to contemporary novels
and, indeed, autobiographies de lecteur, some memorable images recur, remain, become part of
an active process of perpetuation. While the imagining reader is a figure depreciated in social
representations of literary imagination past a certain developmental stage, as it suggests an
inability to overcome referential reading, the notion of imagination may be considered in relation
with literariness as long as it is tied to the idea of the image as image fixe, or arrêt sur image. The
point and subtlety of the latter gets described in Une enfance créole:

Mémoire, cette scène immobile constitue toute l'époque. Un arrêt sur image. Un repeat incessant. Il
faudrait l'écrire mille fois à l'identique, avec de subtiles variations pour en sortir l'ampleur. Lui,
accoudé à son escalier, et elle en face, dans une distance d'environ huit mètres. … Un fixe où
pourtant l'émerveillement fluait en multiples explosions. (ABE 260-1)
In limitation (the image’s framing), limitlessness (of the image’s power); in recurrence, transcendence; in the arrêt sur image, literary achievement. This vision pervades representations of literariness. Algerian writer Rabah Belamri begins his collection of autobiographical tableaux with a quote by René de Ceccatty that relays the said vision in terms very similar to those chosen by Chamoiseau:

Les écrivains, c'est-à-dire cette espèce particulière de l'humanité qui a décidé que la communication la plus fondamentale devait être soumise aux lois de la littérature, entretiennent avec le temps une relation singulière. Le temps, pour eux, se fige, le plus souvent dans leur enfance, mais aussi à telle période de leur vie, dès lors infiniment répétée, sous toute forme possible, avec de multiples travestissements dans leur œuvre. Leur mémoire n'est même plus sélective: elle est obsessionnelle. Elle ne suit pas le cours de la vie, comme une docile parallèle, elle le traverse et isole un point lumineux qui, de livre en livre, sémara ses reflets irisés. L'œuvre tout entière est pareille au spectre de lumière, à la fin, peut-être, reconstituée dans sa blancheur éblouissante. (Ceccatty, in Mémoire en archipel)

One example of this practice in Chamoiseau that is conducted both parodically and truthfully is the reiterated, progressively refined portrayal, in A bout d’enfance, of Gabine standing in the stairs, rejoicing in the protagonist’s contemplation. There surely is a spoof on medieval literary representations in Chamoiseau’s insistence as well as an expression of the sexual-literary initiation analogy. But this choice also indicates a belief in the power and necessary illusion of a “point lumineux” (Ceccatty) – in Chamoiseau’s textual construction just as much as in the négrillon’s early experience of visual images fixes, themselves representing crucial human experiences (love, death, adventure…):

Ô mémoire, que d'images, que d'images…! ... Chaque image d'un livre était un monde touché par l'infini… (ABE 33)

From passion for illustrated books to recognition of and attempts to reproduce literary images fixes, the initiation to the sway of visual crystallizations depicted in Une enfance créole starkly reminds of the homology between literary awakening and spiritual / religious coming-of-age evoked by Guiney and others, which includes a shared adoration of sanctified reliques (see Chapter 1).
In this perspective, the role assigned to illustrated books within the global literary development journey of the négrillon is not one of opening to a progressive vision of engagement with textuality, a praise for means of expression other than verbal, or an invitation to consider multimodality as a counterpower to literariness. Rather, the child’s fascination with images is understood by the conniving narrator and reader to support the socially legitimate story of literariness as an almighty quality. The function of illustrated books in the négrillon’s progress toward literary awakening is to introduce the idea of the image fixe as crystallization and fetish, a conception that will soon materialize in literary textuality and the developing reader’s engagement with it. Illustrated books in Une enfance créole can therefore be seen as props enabling literary initiation rather than resistance to traditional representations.

What matters in “[c]haque image d’un livre” is precisely its individual (“chaque”) value as an adorable object, rather than its being part of a typically narrative ensemble that includes but is by no means limited to it. Narrative chains of events are not frozen on any image, instead constantly moving and mutating toward an uncertain ending. The focus on an image to the detriment of all those surrounding it in the chain and of the extent to which one image ensues and / or responds to another one negates the flow and concatenation of textuality in general and narrative textuality in particular. As conveyors of visual fixity, illustrated books consolidate that view. But there are not the only expression of multimodal textuality in Une enfance créole.

Visual textuality, 2: bande dessinée

Literary initiation is generally conceived as a solitary process (see Béthotéguy). In Une enfance créole, though, the encounter with bande dessinée isn’t an encounter with oneself as much as with the experience of reading collectively. The craving for comics will unite the disparate “clique” of petites-personnes as never before: “[l’]acte fondateur de la tribu” is a “mise en commun” of money ‘borrowed’ to the Manmans and invested into the acquisition of market-sold BDs (ABE 38). Before they can enjoy these treasures on their own, the children organize
'reading ceremonies’ – an interesting (and subversive) reminder of Guiney or Vuillet’s religious analogy… Rituals would be devoid of meaning without the community:

le plaisir … était de s’assembler autour … De sortir un à un ces ouvrages, se les passer … Enfin, ensemble, de se jeter à corps perdu dans une lecture fiévreuse. (ABE 38, emphasis mine)

According to these scenes, individual identity is to emerge from a collective identity, a conception that transcends diegetic levels in Chamoiseau’s and others’ autobiographical writing:

In postcolonial literature, autobiography has been reinvented as a genre in which the forging of selfhood simultaneously seeks to forge a collective identity by triggering collective response… (Hardwick 7)

A communal and celebratory activity, the exploration of graphic narrative is also shown to introduce the developing readers to the process of engagement with narrative features and effects. Even though the bande dessinée follows on from the livre illustré, the image in this case is not interesting per se; what fascinates the children is the narrative structure in which images are embedded and the worlds of reference that they together allow to emerge. Happy ends are expected (“toujours une clé pour s’en sortir”) but still, the disposition of events leading to them remains unknown, hence captivating. What matters in the bande dessinée is the narrative system in which particular images are an apparatus, while in illustrated books their fixedness, their sacral nature take absolute precedence on any other possible aspect of interest. The representation of engagement with this particular genre announces the importance of narrativity (to be addressed later in this chapter) in the child’s later – and ultimately overall – reading development.

**Visual textuality, 3: roman-photo**

The rapport à l’image expressed in reading scenes involving livres illustrés tends to support traditional and socially legitimate representations of literariness, while BD reading experience would serve a more progressive perspective on reading development. The roman-photo is one more different, and to some extent hybrid, story on the palette of multimodal genres. Discovered through the intermediary of Man Ninotte, these “journaux italiens couverts de photos”
quickly become the object of collective investigation, just like the *bandes dessinées*: "Mille photos-romans furent ainsi découpés" (ABE 192); and they are shared with peers "dans un cercle studieux pour en éclairer la structure organique". Like with the *bandes dessinées* also, the boys are initially interested in "structure" rather than individual image. Yet soon enough this particular pursuit is hindered in two ways. First, the *roman-photos* are very disappointing narrative-wise, no narrative structure being perceivable from a visual point of view:

Des hommes en veston-crayon, des femmes à grands cheveux, toujours face à face en train de se parler... Ils se parlaient c'est tout, parlaient encore, parlaient toujours. (ibid. 190-1)

None of the storyworld components familiar to the child are present: "Ils n'avaient ni pistolet ni épée, aucun dragon ne les persécutait". It is no surprise that they are considered guilty of "raconter des histoires insipides" bound to bore the *négrillon* and his peers (ibid. 191). Their narrative power is further weakened by the fact that they all feature one and one only memorable frame, the last one, indeed quite exceptional from the boys' perspective: the representation of the "Bo", or *baiser*. It is clear to the *négrillon* that this is the one still shot to remember; that it does picture a major event. The causal chain thus concluded remains inaccessible to the emergent reader, who is unable at that developmental stage to comprehend complex dialogues as well as to make any sense at all of interminable dialogues in a supposedly narrative context. Hence does the closing representation of the Kiss become the *image fixe*, the "point lumineux" to be valued over narrative form and content.

The child's engagement with photo novellas aligns with his forthcoming discovery of literariness in other ways, and to this extent fosters it. The encounter with the *roman-photo* directly and transparently nurtures the *négrillon*'s sensual awakening – a kind of awakening which is typically constructed, in *autobiographies de lecteur*, as the carnal version of literary initiation and as unfolding simultaneously with the latter. In the child's development, the discovery of the very concept of the Bo precedes engagement with *roman-photo*, but the latter genre will make it possible for the fascination to reach its peak:

Le nouvel éclairage sur le Bo [baiser] força l'espèce entière à récapitulation, et à de nouvelles explorations des zones du monde déjà inventoriées... Il y eut donc d'interminables errances,
Other, more subdued markers of validation of the literary imagination in the context of engagement with *roman-photos* include the reproduction by the children of gestures performed by the *Maître, passeur de littérature* par excellence (photo novellas are kept and “entass[és] au-dessous de leur lit comme autant de trésors”, ibid. 191); and the clandestine dimension of the reading activity, equated with *a moment volé* and therefore excessively precious.

One could validate the idea that the *roman-photo* prepares the child to the internalization of representations of literariness later to be imposed upon him. For one, a condition among others for a text to be considered part of the *culture légitime* – to become literary-reputed – is that it create the conditions of emergence of a uniquely fragile and powerful apprehension of human experience (the *résidu*, the *image fixe*). Then, “lecture et sexualité sont associées” (Louichon 2009, 128). Third and fourth, the reading of *roman-photo* is depicted as a secret, intimate rapture and the *roman-photo* itself as a treasurable object. All of these aspects are considered basic features of reader trajectory narratives (c.f. Part 1). But all of them are also here associated to one of the lowest possible genres in the established cultural hierarchy. The fact that its readership is overwhelmingly female notably ensures that the *roman-photo* remains less worthy than the already much dismissed *bande dessinée*. Hence, the very same elements that match those constituting socially shared representations of literary initiation are the ones that undermine them in Chamoiseau’s depiction of engagement with the *roman-photo*. Assigning features borrowed from representations of literariness to such a genre somehow makes each and every depiction of engagement with it a small act of resistance to established conceptions of textuality. It is in this sense that the *roman-photo* is a hybrid case with regard to the extent to which Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing supports the literary imagination or rather counters the dominant narrative of literariness and literary initiation.
Narrativity, precisely, is the only aspect about which the situation is unequivocal. The perceived absence of a plot seems barely offset by the presence of an immortalized Bo, which again strongly asserts the child’s ever-growing interest and even need for this dimension.

**Moving imagery: the audiovisual ‘text’**

The advent of the *bande dessinée* is part of a larger “changement de régime médiatique” beginning at the time of the protagonist's childhood and bound to disrupt reading practices and expectations of young readers (Lesage). This evolution is very much multimodal: “la révolution du transistor” will soon transform radio content and youth involvement with it; visual textuality will open new reading horizons. Advances in cinema production and ease of access to both content and theaters are bound to deeply affect the cultural practices of young people. Movie watching is evoked a few times in Chamoiseau. The most significant description of cinematic experience occurs in the terminal pages of *Antan d’enfance*. It shows cinema to matter both for the cheerful and enchanting escapade it involves (which is enjoyed by the character) and for the most brutal symbolical violence it implies (endured by the protagonist, acknowledged by the narrator):

> Dans les westerns, les Indiens apparaissaient justifiables de tous les massacres … Les nègres y surgissaient à moitié imbéciles … Le négrillon lui-même ne percevait entre lui et cette représentation aucune commune engeance … Nous étions Tarzan et jamais les demi-singes qu’il terrassait. (AE 171)

This intimate analysis of the devastating impact of mid-century movies on a child spectator of color has been conducted in very similar words by other important writers, including James Baldwin (1965), or much more recently (2019), by Johny Pitts, author of *Afropean*:

> Afternoon TV was full of Westerns from the 40s and 50s, which were so convincing in their negative depictions of Native Americans that when we played cowboys and Indians in the school playground … we always thought of the cowboys as the good guys. (Pitts 103)

> what this does to the subjugated – is to destroy his sense of reality … It comes as a great shock around the age of five, or six, or seven to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians when you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you. (Baldwin, in Peck and Baldwin 23)
I will return to this appalling aspect of the young Black viewer’s experience in the conclusion. For now, I would like to point that there is another dimension of it that might explain why cinematic reminiscences are only granted a fraction of the space allotted to descriptions of engagement with still pictures in *Une enfance créole*. The moving image presents major inconveniences compared with the unique and perennial *image fixe*, or even the ephemeral BD panel. Movies surely are a welcome distraction from melancholy moods (“[l]e film réussissait à dissoudre ses absences”, ABE 286) to the extent that they expose viewers to the succession of always vanishing visual content and therefore require unfailing attention as well as induce a form of meditative state. The distraction, however, is reduced to futility by the resurgence of the eternally superior image fixe figuring a supreme real-life experience (“sîtôt qu’apparaissait la Belle, et pire: quand surgissait le Bo, il s’écrasait dans un retour à l’Irréelle”, ibid.). The contrast is a reminder that as a still, the latter image is best featured in printed material:

> Au cinéma, le temps est une donnée indépendante du spectateur: le film a une durée déterminée, et une fois démarré, le spectateur n’a pas prise sur son déroulement … Et si suspendre la projection ou revenir en arrière est toujours possible, cela demeure un acte qui s’inscrit contre le flot du film, dans lequel le spectateur est censé se laisser emporter. (Lesage)

Conversely, one of the most important features of engagement with printed images to the *négrillon* is that he is the one in charge. He may choose to focus on one memorable panel, return to another, skip some pictures, change pace. As Lesage puts it, “si le cinéma est également un art mêlant écrit et visuel, il diffère principalement de la bande dessinée … par le rapport au temps”. It is a form of validation of the institutional reluctance, today still, to integrate movie productions to the French language arts curriculum. Chamoiseau’s treatment of images in *Une enfance créole* suggests that only a partial opening to multimodality (the *bande dessinée*, maybe) could be justified, because the primary relevance of early contact with images in the context of literary initiation is to provide an introduction to the notion of *image fixe* – delineated visual or textual caption perpetuating a canonical *tableau* while offering an innovative version of it – as ultimately accomplished in literature, hence to the image as first and foremost a *framed still*. 
Multimodal genres in a nutshell

The négrillon’s experience with visual textuality is as diverse as the set of graphic genres he gets to engage with in the course of his journey. It partly resonates with shared representations of literary initiation (within which images are worthy of attention only as a quickly concluded prelude to picture-devoid textuality) and partly questions them (by means of promotion of other modes of engagement with printed material that are very much tied, every time, to the specific characteristics of the genres at stake). All of the three multimodal text genres addressed (livre illustré, bande dessinée, roman-photo) are shown to affect the négrillon’s trajectory, for specific reasons each time, whether they are complementary or contradictory. One genre (the illustrated book) fits representations of literary initiation to the extent that it is conceived as an introduction to one of the primary markers of literariness, the translation of an absolute vision. The others offer mixed and somewhat perplexing traits, pointing to both the irrelevance and accuracy of particular dimensions of the literary imagination.

The child’s interest in images follows the back-and-forth dynamic described in the previous chapter. As mentioned then, this initial passion for visuals comes to a halt when he starts to suspect that written language is imbued of higher power; it then makes a comeback through intuition of the supremely literary nature of the image fixe and transcendental dimension of collective reading. The emergent reader’s experience with written textuality unfolds according to a similarly spiral-shaped logic. Early triggered and vanished interest returns later in development.

If the representation of engagement with various visual text genres raises questions as regards the pertinence of an imaginaire littéraire that notably promotes linear progression and obliteration of multimodal textuality, other aspects of the reader trajectory narrative conveys double-binds, one of which is the surfacing of a particular genre as the most ‘literary’ of all: poetry.
I said earlier that initiation to the potentialities of language as well as to those of sensual interaction are motifs of the greatest importance in the négrillon's journey of self-discovery through literary engagement. They are also the two pillars supporting the erection of poetry to the status of temple of literariness. For one thing, love interest and the promise of sensual attachment are the affective motors that propel the first urge to wholeheartedly engage with poetry even though the child brushed against the genre earlier. The baseline situation is one of profound distress and imperious need to communicate with Gabine, an emotional background itself captured in rhymed verses:

Elle lui était devenue nécessaire.
De lumière et de vie sans jamais être solaire. (ABE 243)

Elle brisait le contact, disparaissait dans la maison durant quelques secondes, pour revenir, s'accouder, raffermie. Dans cette relation à distance, il se sentait immense. Elle le regardait vraiment, lui souriait vraiment, faisait corps avec lui. (ibid. 254)

By all available means, then, the young lover's destiny is – quite parodically for now – shown to be “expédi[é] en poésie”, Gabine's appearances affecting the protagonist “à chaque fois comme un houle de soda sur une langue impatiente, jusqu'aux flaveurs des succulences parfaites” (245).

Already pervasive at the level of narration by this point, poetry enters the storyworld:

L'écriture vint à son secours, comme durant ses mutités scolaires ou l'ère de la pensée magique. Il décida de lui écrire. Pas de recopier quoi que ce soit mais d'écrire comme il pouvait. Il avait tant à raconter, tant à dire, et tout à demander. (ibid. 272)

C'est pourquoi, dans son désir de capturer une Personne, il entreprit d'écrire, surtout de reproduire quelques missives fournies par Gros-Lombric mais déchiffrées par on ne sait quel docte moitié savant moitié sorcier… (ibid. 209)

Passers de littérature make it possible for the emotional cause to infuse the act of writing with meaning. An incubation period (or a pregnancy) begins, the surging of the process' end result being described as a delivery:

Ce fut sans doute vers cette période qu'il griffonna ces contractions de vocables, graphèmes hallucinés, parcours d'étonnements, d'invocations et autres fulgurances… Il y eut un jour une combinaison de mots errants, de blancs, de virgules et de grigris. Sans doute un poème. (ibid. 272-3)
Although unable to understand the ins and outs of his production ("Il l'examina, essaya de comprendre, n'y comprit hak", 274), the child appears confusedly capable already to identify it as different; readable yet opaque as a prayer; artistic; poetic.

This initial encounter with the genre is conducted through mimetic practice, not of physical action anymore but of stylistic composition, and through writing rather than reading activity, which is notable in terms of agency. The second strong manifestation of interest in the genre will occur much later in the child’s development, although it is indirectly announced early on by one-time oracle Jojo:

Un jour, saisi de compassion, l'Algébrique avait montré au négrillon cette phrase qui soulevait le grand astre… voici les cent pur-sang hennissants du soleil parmi la stagnation… Elle se trouvait dans le recueil de poèmes d'un dénommé Césaire. Cet événement allait par la suite modifier bien des choses, mais sur le moment le négrillon n'y vit que le pouvoir d'ordonner au soleil… Tant de pouvoir à un simple lacs des lettres de l'alphabet! (ibid. 209)

“Cette phrase qui soulevait le grand astre”: in order to engage with poetry again, a few years after its awkward use in the context of a fantasized idyll, the négrillon must be ready to see language not only as a medium of access to storyworlds but as a world per se. The recognition of a purely formal pouvoir du verbe, in the work of Césaire first, is an illumination for the teenage reader figure that occupies much of Ecrire en pays dominé:

Je récits ces vers comme des priéres ésotériques, vocalises vibratoires qui enthousiasment des souches inertes en moi … (EPD 58)

The narrator crucially notes that the youngster’s poems to come, modelled after the poetry of the Négritude, in fact "aspirait au monde du Maître – à quelque humanité analogique – par l'oncection de sa langue" (EPD 65). But the character sees in Césaire’s “voix altière, grave toujours, hugo-claudélienne” (58) a horizon of liberation by means of stylized language. The notion of a “féerie dont on ne conserve que de petites bombes de rêve disséminées dans la lucide incertitude des phrases" superbly fits Louichon’s conceptualization of the résidu, the always elusive, crystallized remainder of the literary experience, “miette de glace au coeur du feu” (EPD 40). Poetry remains valued as an expression of inner affective life (“l'écriture avait surgi au fondoc
d'une blessure”) but the fascination now centers the very *verbe incantatoire* even though its exact virtues “demeuraient mal identifiées” (56). Lyricism has taken another meaning entirely (“on était sorti des gratuités écolières”); poetry is not a means to an end (“capturer une Personne”), it is the end. Having reconnected with poetry through reading first, the teenager resolves to further the exploration of poetry’s autotextual qualities by means of writing, as he had done years before. I must emphasize once again here that modern social and institutional representations defensively cultivate the *valeur-poésie* on these very grounds: “l’autonomie la plus forte [est] incarnée par la poésie” in a *champ littéraire* favoring autotelic practices overall (Védrones 20-1).

Poetic experience thus starts with romantic attachment (emergent reading-writing development) and peaks in aesthetic *recognition* (early teenage years). This two-branched event is depicted as a major one in the literary initiation process. From the discovery of the power of poetic language to express (… externality) up to the revelation of its primarily verbal (inner) value, from passion for fictional storyworlds to devotion to a *stilistique de l’écrit*, “le chemin s’était fait”.

In the developing reader’s journey, reaching adolescence proves necessary to fully comprehend poetry’s supremacy as a genre. The advanced years of literary initiation are simultaneously marked by disaffection with the charms of fictional narratives. A new definition of literary growth is thus provided: to achieve literary maturity, one must become immune to the charms of narrative prose, enter the realm of poetic language, and wish to frequent the latter exclusively, *à mesure à mesure*:

Un bon roman policier déclenchait une consommation-arrachée … jusqu’à ce que la veine s’épuise sur une histoire qui dévie mon attente. Pareil pour le théâtre, la poésie, toutes les mises du roman. J’avais mes moments que je conserve encore. Mais, à mesure des troubles d’adolescence, la poésie allait prendre le dessus. (EPD 45)

The case of poetry is one where the négrillon’s literary development clearly aligns with the afferent collective imaginary whose hierarchical features, among other, are partly shared by Chamoiseau’s representation despite suggestions of the contrary, as illustrated by the above quote. Contrary to other genres whose appropriation and effect are less dependent on the nature of language (Creole and French tales appear equally welcome and impactful), poetic worlds only
exist in French throughout the *négrillon*’s development, which is also consistent with Francophone representations of literariness internalized by the young writer and all surrounding adults:

J’écrivais … des poèmes dans une langue française que je n'interrogeais pas. Elle ne me posait pas de problèmes. Elle était dominante, et de l’arpenter m’emplissait d’une certitude active qui semblait créatrice. … (EPD 65)

Mes poèmes furent un point de bascule. A cause d’eux, les grandes-personnes me considérèrent comme un être humain. Leur impact ne provenait pas d'une valeur reconnue, mais sans doute d'une écriture célébrant messe avec la magie d'une langue dominante. Donc, à tout hasard, on me criaît le poète. … Si j’avais écrit en créole, je serais demeuré plus invisible que les crabes-mantous lors des grands secs de février. (ibid. 74)

Poetry is also represented as the very first text genre allowing writing and reading experiences to directly complement each other in a form of sacred union of practices and visions:

Ecrire-lire était devenu pour moi une transhumance de sensations totales qui soumet l'esprit solliciteur aux estimes chaotiques de la glace, du feu, de la terre, du vent, de l'ombre, des lumières… (ibid. 42)

Most importantly, by moving from a humorous portrait of the romantic poet in training (“un des plus lamentables poètes des terres américaines” in the early years) to a stunning and truthful description of one teenager’s linguistic-spiritual awakening, Chamoiseau validates the vision of the aesthetical supremacy of a genre ultimately detached from – fictional or factual – narrative contingencies. It seems clear that the intervention of the *verbe poétique* is the decisive one in the *négrillon*’s literary coming-of-age.

Nonetheless, in *Ecrire en pays dominé*, Chamoiseau alludes to a different version of the child’s *entrée en écriture* whose validation would require consideration of Chamoiseau’s account of literary initiation in a new light. Maybe engagement with writing is in fact a story of desire, the desire for story:

Les insatisfactions s’amplifient au fil des lectures. On en veut plus. On en veut mieux. On n’est pas d’accord avec tel dénouement … On se trouve forcé de créer de nouvelles histoires à partir de tel monde … L’insatisfaction suscitera ma première écriture (EPD 37-8)

Mes premières lettres, écrites sans projet, sinon celui d’imiter tel auteur ou de poursuivre telle histoire … (ibid. 29)

Maybe what matters most in textuality, across developmental stages, remains narrativity.
World play: narrative fiction

Contemporary educational frameworks make it quite evident that all novels, or fictional narratives, are not equally worthy of attention. In France even more than in other countries, literary-reputed works and a fortiori the *classiques* (“la littérature canonisée”, Baroni 2017, 20) continue to dominate curricular contents. At the time of the *négrillon*’s education, fictional narratives are divided into unequal subgenres, just as they are today, the critical difference being that the genre as a whole is still very much undervalued and under-exploited. Then and now, however, both curricular progression – as engraved in educational materials – and effective reading development – as reflected in autobiographical accounts – tend to reflect an obsession with the issues raised by the genre’s existence. The ways in which education stakeholders value and distinguish not only between narrative objects but between text genres are infinitely complex; yet, evaluation processes most often appear to center fictionality, narrativity, and their boundaries as a problem. It is an issue of tremendous importance in Chamoiseau too. From the moment one puts down the poetry-focused lenses that are explicitly foregrounded by both the author and his critical readers, it becomes increasingly clear that the *négrillon*’s journey toward literary illumination is all about narrative fiction.

The child’s elementary school years are a mixed bag as regards appraisal of this “macro-genre” (Williams). Upon his dramatic entrance in *maternelle*, he first encounters the alphabet; the next big novelty is the universe of French tales, which he approaches as a full body of knowledge, legitimate as such. The epistemological value of this narrative corpus gets denied, however, as soon as the ‘school’ is revealed by the Grands to be in fact pre-school. The *négrillon* thus sets to consider that storytelling is the stuff babies’ turf is made of. He is then led to internalize that narrative is only interesting for the lesson it conceals: in early oral readings by the *Maître*, narrative is nothing more than a vehicle for morals.
The child moves on to understanding the sphere of fictional narratives as divided into subgenres as he observes that the books awarded to more advanced students in the family mostly comprise *romans d'aventure* originally written in French as well as translated from English. They are not granted the same care as the *livres d'école*, from which they are physically separated:

Les Grands, au fil des années, avaient reçu d'autres livres, c'étaient des prix d'encouragement ou des prix d'excellence. Des ouvrages de Jules Verne, de Daniel Defoe, d'Alexandre Dumas, de Lewis Carroll, de la comtesse de Ségur, de R.L. Stevenson… Man Ninotte les conservait dans une boîte à laquelle le négrillon avait accès. Il ne pouvait toucher aux livres scolaires, mais on le laissait volontiers approcher de ceux-là (CE 197)

Clearly meant to be read outside of school, the prize books are framed as useless in a youngster’s education. Quite paradoxically, they come as rewards for outstanding students’ achievement and as such could also be considered more valuable than the *livres d'école* shared by all pupils. The *négrillon* seems to oscillate between these views – all the more since the prize books are kept ‘in the name of Instruction’. Dives into the box’s content – “mondes fabuleux” and layers of golden dust – are described in exploratory metaphors, which mimic the main characteristic of the books’ dominant genre, and in terms that would be expected to apply to *classiques*: the *romans d'aventure* “semblent venir, presque intacts, d’un autre âge” (CE 200).

They actually do, since they belong to a particular binational 19th century canon. They are “intact” in another sense. At the time, schoolbooks typically are *mélanges* of *morceaux choisis* (selected excerpts from classical literary-reputed works, a notorious concept that I shall return to) while prize books may be read in their entirety.

**Reading to the end… The power of immersive engagement**

Throughout *Chemin-d'école*, the reading of prize books is often characterized as a languid, addictive, and passive activity. In contrast, engagement with the *livres d'école* conjures up images of battlefield and conquest (“comme si, taraudés par cette inexistence, nous voulions assujettir le monde en l’avalant entier”, EPD 253):
Il avait aussi connu des périodes conquérantes ... Il prenait seul ses cahiers d’écriture. Ouvrait sans attendre de menace ses livres de leçons. (CE 37)
Parfois, il abandonnait l’envie de dominer le monde. Devenait silencieux, immobile, réfugié dans un de ces livres ... à travers lesquels il dérivait sans fin (32)

The absorbed, indolent reading of novels – whose consequence might be “cette fatigue irrémediable d’où germe l’échec scolaire” (EPD 35) or an irredeemably subversive attitude – unfolds according to the institutional and more broadly social conceptualization of narrative immersion as a threat to individual and collective sanity. It is worth emphasizing that complete fictional narratives are depicted as a source of enchanted helplessness whereas collections of literary-reputed text fragments get approached with an active warrior mindset. The longer and more exhaustive the story, the deeper the reader’s imaginary drift, submission to the mechanics of fictional narrative (“Impossible de savoir si ces personnes abandaient leur livre pour se répandre en lui, ou si c’était plutôt lui qui leur tombait dedans”, ABD 34), but also ability to resist integrating a world of colonialist violence:

Literature becomes a refuge, opening up the possibilities of imagining rather than seeking to dominate the world, particularly as [the child] begins to explore the interfaces of European literary and Creole storytelling traditions. (Knepper 146)

Initially supported in his reconstructive enterprise by adult feedback, then by disparate visual markers, the child soon develops autonomy and competence to elaborate fully formed narratives from scratch, up to the early signs of addiction:

Bientôt, il n’eut pièce besoin de questionner quiconque. Il construisait ses propres récits, les diffusait dans les lettres incompréhensibles et les suivait obscurément de phrase en phrase, comme cela, jusqu’à la fin ... On eut l’impression qu’il faisait mine de lire; en fait, il lisait vraiment ce que sa déliante imagination y projetait à chaque fois. Le petit jeu du départ (macaquerie destinée à le grandir aux yeux des autres) devint une nécessité plaisante qui nourrissait les aventures de son esprit. (CE 200-1)

The child is now equipped with full-blown narrative and fictional competences – which according to him still qualify as nothing serious, even though pretend-play has led to actual “nécessité”.

Here again, narrative structure is attractive mainly in that it is complete, and narrative projection interesting in that it includes elaboration of a closure (“jusqu’à la fin”). Mastering reading matters to the négrillon because it means access to the specifics of a succession of
events. Even after basic reading skills are acquired, ensuring – knowledge or creation of – an ending remains a primary motivation:

Un allant m'emportait … dans la soif de savoir comment mes créatures échapperaient à leurs passes difficiles … Malgré la brûlure des yeux, l'agonie de la bougie, il fallait lire au moins cette dernière page, et puis au moins celle-là, juste celle-là pour finir… (EPD 35)

Beyond the anxious need for a resolution, the "soif de 'savoir la suite" (ibid.) is pointed by the narrator of *Ecrire en pays dominé* as the real motor of reading activity. The narratological system recently theorized by Raphaël Baroni accounts for the emergent reader-writer's drive to “connaître la suite, de savoir où ça va” (ibid. 37). As Baroni explains,

Pour comprendre la dynamique de l'intrigue, il est essentiel de tenir compte à la fois de la fin effective du texte et de ses fins possibles, des structures textuelles inscrites dans le récit mais aussi d'un acte de lecture qui articule les structures actualisées avec des structures actualisables, des histoires qui ont un mode d’existence virtuel, potentiel ou alternatif. (2013)

Adolescence does not immediately free the young reader from such an urge – providing it does at all. Indeed, the pre-teen’s encounter with the *livres-doudous* is described in those terms:


Even before this point, enabling the emergence, progress, proliferation of fictional narratives has become an obsession for the *négrillon*:

On se trouve forcé de créer de nouvelles histoires à partir de ce monde. Seul exorcisme à cette possession: l'épuiser à force d'histoires. (37-8)

Just as the English word ‘story’, “histoire” is used and understood as a synonym of fictional narrative in many social contexts, including those in which Chamoiseau’s protagonist and narrator are situated. This notion of fictional narrative reminds us of the bidimensionality of "histoires" which are made of both a fictional nature and a narrative structure. One question as far as the *négrillon’s* experience is concerned is whether the emergent reader’s drive to consume and produce fictional narratives primarily stems from the attractiveness of the former or the latter. It is an interesting point because, as I suggested earlier in this dissertation, fictionality, narrativity,
their interrelations, and the apparent weight of each in a given reading experience, are all major factors both in educational decisions as well as in effective reading and imagination development.

**Suspension of intuition. A narratological approach to the emergent reader character experience**

Even though the négrillon initially engages more actively with the livres d’école, the impact of full-length fictional narratives on the child’s reading development soon trumps the effect of any other written object. He quickly learns to rely on beginnings unmistakably identifiable as such, even by non-readers, to elaborate des histoires. Incipits become the first nutrient fostering obsession. The child’s urge is to move forward, move through the story – an intrinsically narrative drive. This drive predates access to written textuality, but early engagement with books seems to immediately multiply it. As he pretend-reads and yearns to comprehend a still undecipherable ocean of symbols, the child keeps asking for “explications”: what happens here? And there? Obstacles to narrative progression are unbearable (CE 198).

Louichon provides strong arguments for a narrativity-focused understanding of this experience. Her study of autobiographies de lecteur includes a full chapter dedicated to a particular aspect of the reader character experience that she considers illuminating in this respect: representations of reading activity across her corpus, she explains, very often highlight the practice of rereading.8 Rereading would exemplify the unique power of narrative structure, which notably makes it possible to experience reassurance and uncertainty all at once. “L’anticipation euphorisante du relecteur, qui est ‘en avance d’une phrase’, est celle d’une forme”: Louichon’s exploration of the suspense-stability tension founding the attractive character of rereading is pertinent in a developmental perspective, and her case for the major importance of narrative dynamics convincing (2009, 147). It intuitively makes sense in regard to Chamoiseau. Nothing seems to capture the child’s attention and sustain his motivation more than narrative progression, that is, the verifiable existence of a sequence, balanced with constant challenges to
imagination through either ‘fictional’ or ‘factual’ suspense. Should one conclude that the narrative dimension of *histoires* matters to the *négrillon* above all other aspects defining narrative fiction, the extent to which *histoires* refer to the real world, and specifically the child’s world, would appear of little importance.

**Suspension of disbelief. A fiction-centered approach to the emergent reader experience**

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the initial preeminence, then disappearance of narrative fiction to the benefit of poetry in the character’s development. Such succession – from the world to the word, in a nutshell – fits cultural representations of literary initiation. In terms of genres, resistance to these representations, which bestow the highest mark of distinction on distant reading, has one main channel to operate through: immersion into storyworlds. Fictionality might be the most consequential dimension of fictional narratives, in Chamoiseau at least, for a variety of reasons that include empowerment of the reading subject.

Imagination, as defined by Vygotsky, threatens established social orders, most specifically the one in which the *négrillon* is raised, because it enacts mobility and extension of the mind-space in all directions, notably transversal (between genres and experiences), in direct contrast with figures of linearity and rupture (both of which happen to define traditional conceptions of reading education). Chamoiseau typically pictures imagination as a weapon of resistance. After school gets deprived of its former charm, namely its potential as an imagination catalyst, the world outside of school takes over. Inside, imagination is the pharmakon that alleviates immobilization and physical violence. Emblematic hypotyposes abound:

L’esprit du négrillon se mit à faire papillon. Chaque fois qu’il se retrouvait greffé à son banc, des envols irrépressibles s’opéraient en lui-même comme pour compenser l’immobilisation anormale de son corps. Lui-même ne s’en rendit pas compte, l’envol de l’esprit est sans annonce, duveté des silences d’un vaisseau fantôme. La voix du Maître bourdonne, la classe s’efface en demeurant dans le regard, des images ondulent … Un mot du Maître, une histoire, une phrase incompréhensible, ameutaient en lui des vertiges sans fond, comme si sa rencontre avec le monde n’allaient qu’en bousculade avec le songe. (CE 106)

Les déchiffrages laborieux des uns et des autres laissaient à chacun loisir de gober les vols de rêves qui traversaient la classe. Songs, visions, chimères, ameutés par le bruitage de ces lectures magiques, se mettaient à nichier parmi nous. Ils transportaient des mers, des rivages, des goûts de...
proies vivantes. Ils délivraient des augures. Ils dénouaient des présages. Ils nous happaient du bec et des serres. Et nous les avalions, ivres, immobiles. (163)


All genres can be said to support the use of imagination, defined as the human capacity to entertain a great number of cognitive representations (“[en] ce temps-là, chaque lecture était bonne … Seule prière: m’emporter dans l’épaillage du rêve”, EPD 41). None does so more actively however than narrative fiction, which unfailingly sustains elaboration and expansion of fictive, or possible, worlds.9

In the négrillon’s trajectory, poetry marks a break between two kinds of relation to fiction. Pretend play rules the early hours of initiation. At that time, imaginary situations are mimetic, fully inspired by the surrounding reality; the négrillon engage in ludic, albeit productive imitation games centering writing and reading. Pretend play is already endowed with the power to reframe monotonous activities into exciting ones. The child also remains absolutely aware that what he does is “feindre de lire” or “griffonner sur son ardoise” as opposed to read and write. The distinction can be considered quite clear in this case even for the projecting subject. Yet, it remains strong later on, when the child resorts to the content of histoires and bandes dessinées to enrich his daily experience. The content of fiction is central to the child’s development, but always as fiction, without confusion:

Durant ces jeux incessants, le négrillon, comme tous les autres, s’affublait volontiers de leur force corporelle pour un usage imaginaire et autant abusif… Hercule, Robin des bois, Lancelot, Tex Tone, Maciste, Buffalo Bill… se rencontraient dans des contrées inattendues, et s’affrontaient dans des lieux qu’ils n’auraient pu imaginer. En fin de journée, cette profusion métamorphique lui permettait de retrouver sans trop de désespérance les insuffisances de son corps maigrichon. … A force d’être Lancelot, il y avait comme un plaisir à retrouver un petit corps fragile, harassé et humain. Comme un repos. (ABE 42-3)

What Chamoiseau describes here is the enactment of ‘decoupling’ thinking (Schaeffer) which allows children to repeatedly and non-consequentially immerse in fiction, the possibility of “découplage” solving Cave’s interrogations:
Comment se fait-il donc que l'enfant sache, sans se troubler ou se désorienter, passer la frontière, dans les deux sens, entre jeu et réalité empirique? Comment arrive-t-il à contrôler ces substitutions de fonctions en puissance vertigineuses? (Cave 21-2)

The négrillon’s fictional representations are impactful before they even get narratively structured. The child’s random imaginative travel during classroom read-aloud, or early pretend-play outside of school, (presumably positively) affect his development. Engagement with the image fixe of children’s books does too. It will take some time until images can be apprehended as mechanisms in a greater narrative scheme deserving interest for itself – notably in that narrative structure is likely to foster learning from fiction according to research in imaginative development (see Hopkins and Weisberg). But even exempt from narrative framing, pictures appear to be catalysts for imagination.

I said before that poetry appears to be a major game-changer in the child’s modality of experience in that it seems to mark the end of imaginary worlds and definitive entrance into symbolical ones. Narrative fiction however soon makes a comeback, once again supporting the vision of development as spiral-shaped, cyclical and built up through successive reinforcements. There are important differences in the way in which fictionality gets woven into the négrillon’s existence before and after the poetry interval. The emergent reader’s post-poetry return to fiction can in fact be considered his true induction into it. Imagination is the situation initiale of the child’s journey. Then come, in that order, narrative and poetical competences. The acquisition of the latter is followed by a return to imagination. Put differently: imaginary resistance – the impossibility to imagine the content of one or several text.s – will be the incentive for written language development; then again, poetry beats narrative fiction for a while as a source of interest, until fiction (rather than narrative) becomes the stuff of life – which happens when the child starts to read his world as a tale.

For any developing reader and indeed individual, there are, at some point, decisions to be made as to whether to operate knowledge transfer from fictional to real world, or to insulate information contained in each. Research on the phenomenon of generalization from printed narrative fiction notably raises an issue known as the ‘reader’s dilemma’, namely the
simultaneous and conflicting drive to do both. What most of the concerned studies have found out – and this is a critical point in regard to Chamoiseau’s narrative – is that children know that fiction is different from the real world… yet they admit, contrary to adults, that the boundary is not a hermetic one. Just as the négrillon can move between the two spaces of school and home with great fluidity, he is able and prone, like most other children, to seamlessly navigate the two worlds of fiction and reality. His increasingly regular use of this heightened transfer capacity does not imply the confusion of those spheres. The child is well aware of the distinction and truly the actor of the cross-integration. He appears knowledgeable enough to deliberately resort to specific components of narrative fiction to enrich his world of reference.

This agency is the result of a developmental process. After the poetry interlude and a first disaffection with fiction, the négrillon is now familiar enough with the need for / potential of imagination to eagerly and expertly operate decisions as to whether to regard particular aspects of fiction as strictly fictional or worth integrating into reality. What matters to the evolving child is “la manière appropriée d’interagir cognitivement et émotivement avec les scènes” much more than the “caractère réel ou irréel” of these scenes (Pelletier 124). The appropriate manner is fully his, at a given time, in given circumstances. The father can become a ‘personnage’, Man Ninotte a blend of fairy and witch material, and the boundary between real and fictional worlds joyfully porous, with this porosity always under control.

Fiction in the négrillon’s life has a function other than the nurturing of imagination. It enables the child to comprehend the real. Fictional content comes to inform his perspective on surroundings and events that often lack clarity. Not only can the child navigate between the two dimensions, one dimension (the fiction he gets exposed to) also helps him better understand the functioning of the other (the reality he has to deal with). The protagonist’s approach to gendered otherness is a great example of the recourse to fiction as commentary and resource:

Sa nouvelle lucidité lui fit comprendre que Blanche-Neige, Cendrillon, le Petit Chaperon rouge, la Belle des contes créoles étaient en fait des petites-filles et qu’elles avaient toujours été là. … Il approfondit son enquête littéraire pour bien comprendre la cause de cette méprise. Au fil des histoires, ces personnages petites-filles étaient avant tout adorables. Elles affrontaient les mêmes peurs et les mêmes monstres que lui. Opprimées par les Grandes-Personnes, elles vivaient des
 choses que lui avait vécues ou ressentait encore. C'est pourquoi il était facile de les transfigurer en héros proches de lui - et humains comme l'étaient d'emblée tous les héros… (ABE 146)

In the same movement, however, fiction comes to supply the négrillon’s imagination with stereotypical representations:

Mais il y regarda mieux. … En lisant comme il faut (c'est-à-dire avec la perte du ti-bout glissée dans les non-dits), il découvrit qu'elles n'étaient plus si héroïnes que cela… Elles n'étaient jamais porteuses d'épée. Ne se dressaient devant aucun dragon. … Elles étaient au contraire à moitié impotentes, irréfléchies, et inaptes à se sauver seules. … A en croire ce qu'elles étaient devenues dans les contes, la perte du ti-bout était ce qu'il pouvait arriver de plus grave à un être-humain. (ibid. 146-150)

These representations directly inflect the child’s apprehension of his world of reference:

Il avait beau lire ou se ressouvenir des contes qui lui servaient à vivre, il y retrouvait toujours des petites-filles autrefois familières. Mais elles n'étaient plus que des survivantes, désenchantées, et se conformaient mieux à ce qu'il supposait d'elles. Plus que jamais il voulut ne pas leur ressembler … (ibid. 150)

If “les contes lus ou racontés” can be considered to shed light on reality, then tale-based knowledge building may be detrimental just as much as profitable, in that it could lead the child to condone problematic real-life events:

Les Personnes se voyaient recluses dans le camp familial sous une surveillance stricte. Man Ninotte … se méfiait sans doute de leur aptitude innée à s'enfoncer dans les ennuis comme Cendrillon, Chaperon rouge, la Belle des contes créoles ou cette idiote de Blanche-Neige… (ibid. 213)

Fiction in any case is used as a resource bank for fantasmatic activity as well as for the understanding of reality, the négrillon teaching himself cognitive representations that are bound to endure:

C'est à travers ces personnages disséminés au fond de lui qu'il vit en face (sans encore les connaître) la mort, la douleur, la peur, les tortures, les abandonns, les trahisons et autres catastrophes ordinaires… *Oh que d’images que d’images!* … * Alice, Sinbad, Ti-Jean, Tom Pouce, Jim de l’île au trésor, Jack le tueur de géant, Tintin*… Avec eux, il sut que le monde était plein d’ombres et rempli de lumières, malaxé d'échecs et de réussites, mais qu'il y avait quand même moyen de survivre à bien des avanies… (EPD 34-5)

Throughout this process, the distinct existence of factual and fictional realms is never lost to the subject.
Knowledge transfer between the two spheres of fiction and reality goes intuitively and unfolds rather smoothly for Chamoiseau’s child character. There are cases, however, where some aspect of the text appears to undermine the process despite the négrillon’s intention and motivation. Research in developmental psychology shows that causal properties, protagonists’ and settings’ features, visual or linguistic specificities of the text could all impact the more or less conscious decision of a given young reader / listener to proceed with information transfer (see Hopkins and Weisberg’s review). One important factor uncovered by studies on children’s processing of narrative fiction is the distance between the worlds at stake, one of which is fictional and the other real. The effect does not necessarily play out in the most obvious direction: the fantastical nature of a narrative might quite surprisingly prove a facilitating ground for information transfer to the real world, while realism of story content would unexpectedly complicate the circulation of knowledge (e.g. Hopkins and Lillard). But in Chamoiseau, all situations of reader (character)’s dilemma in front of potential fiction-to-reality import of information involve specifically and ostensibly French – as opposed to non-metropolitan – storyworlds. The child’s predicament reminds of Marie-Laure Ryan’s foundational claim that “whenever we interpret a message concerning an alternate world, we reconstrue this world as being the closest possible to the reality we know”, which thesis is known as the Principle of Minimal Departure (1980, 403). The maximal departure from his world of reference that is asked from the emergent reader character seems to exceed his capacity to engage with alternate reality.

These cases of imaginative resistance (Gendler) foreground in systematic fashion the issue of culturally congruent content, as we will soon see. There is a history of international scholarly interest for this very question. There are dividing lines, too, between cultural approaches. The French, more largely (Northern…) Francophone perspective and the American one are worth considering side by side. The comparison highlights a dimension of the imaginaire littéraire that some – such as Chamoiseau or Védrines, each in his respective field of action – try to both render and counter: the alleged importance of exposing emergent readers to (story)worlds radically different from their own.
Story/worlds of reference: Francophone perspectives

As part of a section dedicated to sociological perspectives on the ‘literary experience’, Louichon mentions Lahire’s pioneering research on engagement with textuality in France’s “milieux populaires”, noting that Lahire is wary of a premise shared by most studies of reading practices (and one that should sound familiar by now): the antinomic relation between ‘aesthetical’ and ‘practical’ predispositions toward reading – again. Lahire suggests that variation in practices between and within socially different groups of readers is to be located at the level of engagement with fictionality and is less a matter of “rapport à la littérature” than of “rapport au réel”. Readers identified as belonging to “milieux populaires” would emphatically reject storyworlds or storylines perceived as foreign to their own world of reference (Lahire 1998, 161).

Narratives introduced as fictional could trigger referentiality-tied tensions of another sort, which reader autobiographies such as Chamoiseau’s allow to surface:

En décrivant comment se rencontrent le monde du texte et le monde du lecteur, [l’autobiographie de lecteur] permet d’observer quelle place tient le processus d’identification dans la réception des textes et à quels phénomènes de dédoublement identitaire sont conviés les sujets lecteurs durant l’acte de lecture. (Rouxel 2004, 137-8).

It is likely, particularly in France, that the archi-lecteur (or reader as a projected figure) who chooses to engage with a genre, but also a content deemed superior in terms of cultural settings and events depicted (e.g. “la vie amoureuse bourgeoise”, Lahire), will be granted higher distinction both in school and the larger social environment. This attitude amounts to discrimination against individual / group preferences, as suggested, in a group-centered perspective, by Lahire’s study of lecteurs populaires who significantly call for more congruence between text content and their own world of reference (Lahire 1998, 161). It also obliterates the fact that fictionality can be a catalyst as well as an obstacle to optimal reader development and identity construction more generally. The inability to relate to a given fictional world – a phenomenon theorized by philosopher Tamar S. Gendler and henceforth known as imaginative
resistance – may impede knowledge transfer, consequently blocking the aesthetical approach to the text that is expected to succeed referential reading. A reader who suffers from not finding her own environment reflected in a text (impossibility of the “dédoublement identitaire” evoked by Rouxel) will struggle just as much to focus on the text’s form (impossibility of a “dédoublement” of the text into content and form).¹³

From his Swiss-based position, Védrines also calls for textual diversification within French language and literature curricula, specifically for a larger range of narrative forms. Like Lahire, he observes, based on his own teaching practice and empirical research, that the difference in engagement with narrative might have to do with fictionality even more than with perceived literariness: readers’ rapport au réel and their willingness / ability to let go of referentiality would be decisive. His argument centers the fictional / factual divide and calls for a radical change in focus within narrative corpuses.¹⁴ For Védrines, the particularly rigid, socio-cognitivism-proof process of genres classification within literature education, as observable in France primarily, stems from an elitist ideology and feeds it back:

le choix du corpus des textes influ[ë] sur le développement théorique qui construit la littérarité, qui à son tour trace une frontière, excluant les genres factuels. Ces différents genres et leurs contraintes énonciatives ne répondent pas à la même demande sociale et en privilégier un pour définir la littérature engage également une discrimination dans les usages des activités langagières. (293)

The affiliation of literariness with fictional rather than factual narrative implies that referential reading should be considered la lecture du pauvre and surmounted at all costs. Fictional narratives are bound to be read as such, according to the largely shared and substantiated view that generic perception affects reader expectations and experience. However, the ability to distance oneself from a familiar world of reference isn’t a given. The needs to feel anchored, seen, to comprehend one’s condition or stay true to one’s background, all of which are arguably unequally distributed across the general student population, perhaps impact a reader’s positioning more deeply than generic framing. When Louichon insists on the idea that “la possibilité de l’expérience littéraire ne suppose pas adéquation et similitude entre l’univers du lecteur et l’univers fictionnel”, Védrines might point out that she accepts as a premise a highly
problematic process: "il suffit", adds Louichon, as if it was a mere formality, "que le lecteur puisse entrer dans le monde du texte" (Louichon 2009, 34). Some students will appear more at ease than others with world-switching. Considered from the deconstructive orientation that Védrines embraces, this disparity is a dimension of social privilege as it expresses itself in the development and evaluation of an ability to engage with texts in school contexts. The establishment of the novel as a predominant genre in literature education could have detrimental effects on students’ reading development, preventing a good number of them from exhausting their drive toward referential reading, from learning to approach fictional and factual narratives with different attitudes, but also, ultimately, from perceiving their intuitive interpretation as worthwhile. The extent to which emergent readers are discouraged from engaging with the referential dimension of the texts they are exposed to, especially within a school system that distinguishes between two (distant / immersed) rapports au réel supposedly antinomic in nature and value and especially in cases of social and / or cultural vulnerability, is likely to largely condition reader trajectories, later reading activity and emotions afferent to textuality. The drastic hardening of dominant attitudes toward referential reading along curricular progression, mostly visible in instructional practices, heavily factors in reader development. The evolution in rapport au langage that can be observed from primary to secondary school in fact raises similar questions and to some extent partakes from the same movement. The stylistique de l’écart supposedly defining a literary rapport au langage amounts to steering clear of literal meaning, hence of the référent. 

Other than by a strictly hierarchized rapport au genre, literariness is defined by a particular conception of and engagement with language, a fact mentioned several times already. Representation of literary initiation in autobiographies de lecteur very often include positive depictions of out-of-school or pre-school forms of expression and rapports au langage. But the true awakening happens at the time of encounter with the déviance du langage littéraire, a concept enshrined in literary imagination as well as in French public education, including at the scholarly level.15 Literariness against les mots de la tribu: this partly Romantic, partly formalist approach still underpinning French literature education relies on the assumption that it would be
possible to isolate a poetic, aesthetic function of language operating on a mode – opacity – absolutely distinct from all other functions, whose common orientation is transparence.

Literariness means intransitivity. “Ainsi … le style se définit en référence à l’autoréférentialité” rather than in reference to the world: “toute autre valeur … ne peut apparaître que comme résidu, ou pis-aller” (Védrines 289). In France, the presumably egalitarian vision of communication gets definitely shattered somewhere along the transition to high school. As ‘the ideology of literary autonomy’ increasingly matters in engagement with fictional narrative, promoting “un traitement spécifique de la référentialité” (its primary role overall, according to Védrines)

cé rapport au réel et à la vérité se double d’une hiérarchisation littéraire des consommateurs de littérature (293).

Ultimately, readers’ intellectual and even moral obligation to distance themselves from their own worlds of reference, at least in their reading activity, lies at the core of literary imagination (l’imaginaire littéraire) and is a pillar of Francophone literature education (l’idéologie littéraire). Distance from the referent gets abruptly moved up to the top of the hierarchy of reading practices through two routes that actually converge: transformation of the rapport au genre, and of the rapport au langage.17

The narratives surveyed by Louichon as well as many of the theoretical works discussed in this dissertation contain countless mentions or suggestions of the "rapport au réel" being the key to understanding variation in reading development. The phrase and its implications – both difficult to convey in translation – deserve to be dug into, which Louichon does not do. To comprehend the construction of literariness in opposition to referentiality and the central importance of such an opposition in reader identity development would indeed demand to recognize the decisive impact of schooling on emergent readers’ experience, another step that Louichon does not take. Many Francophone literature and literary reading researchers fail to acknowledge that systematic inclination toward referential reading, or the widely spread existence of reading practices built on “le rejet du ‘fictif’” (Lahire 1998, 161), are enduring issues as well as ones that importantly shed light on the social variation of narrative reading experience. We do not
know much about how this resistance plays out in the early years of engagement with textual culture and how it affects both the latter and future development. Védrines' attention to the possibility for students to relate to the texts they are expected to engage with is a rarity in the Francophone landscape.

**Story/worlds of reference: American perspectives**

Culturally specific lenses *obligent*, the aspects of the problem that researchers increasingly seek to draw attention to are different overseas. American education scholars – together with the many American teachers conducting action research – have long considered the impact of narratives' worlds of reference on students' engagement and development as readers. It is admitted that opportunities to relate to storyworlds should be consistently offered to readers of any age and competence. Social and racial diversity is taken into account to an increasing extent in this context. One issue identified and recognized as important in current literacy research is distance from storyworlds. This distance is explicitly seen as reflecting the general occultation of cultural experiences different from the white middle-class normative one; the rejection of referentiality gets denounced as an unacceptable blow to identity development:

> When educators encounter students like Breianna, who imagined that Hermione looked like her as she read, their attempts to make connections between text and self may be misunderstood as a lack of comprehension. Since … different readers experience the same text differently, the differences among readers themselves must be taken into account in the classroom, lest some text-to-self connections be privileged over others. (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 329)

Rather than calling for more factual narratives, American literacy scholars such as Thomas and Stornaiuolo demand more storyworld diversity within fictional textuality. The point isn’t to exclude “mirrors, windows, and doors into others’ experiences”, which are deemed beneficial to students’ growth too, but to listen and respond to young readers’ need “for their own experiences to be represented in literature and, by extension, in the literacy curriculum” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo):

> It is true, of course, that good literature reaches across cultural and ethnic borders to touch us all as humans … However … historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books
as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both. (Bishop 2012, 9)

In the American context as well, literariness weighs on the discussion. Teachers sometimes appear acutely aware of the connection between this construct and discrimination against referential reading, particularly when the referent is culturally distinct from its socially validated version. Such is the case of Dina Nayeri, born in Irak and raised in the US, whose perspective on the topic is notably shaped by her personal trajectory:

More than one parent advised me that Bharati Mukherjee and James Baldwin are not important when these kids have yet to read ‘classic writers’ such as Harper Lee (because how could they develop their literary taste if they hadn’t first grounded themselves in the point of view of the impossibly saintly white family?).

Literariness here, as in American ‘intellectual’ and educational contexts more generally, has less to do with language – *stylistique de l’écart* – than with narration and representation. Who speaks, and about what? Interestingly, Thomas resorts to a notion dear to Chamoiseau, *la survie*, when describing the struggle of historically underserved populations of readers:

Canonical texts historically assumed a White male readership as their imagined audience, and, in turn, people from other groups had to read those narratives to attain print literacies and acquire the codes of power … Not only was it necessary for people from the margins to identify and comprehend the societal metanarratives and metadiscourses contained within the canon in order to gain access to the professions, but often familiarity with canonical White male subjectivity was also vital for their very survival. (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 317)

According to this line of research, the “counterargument that children and teens do not necessarily need to see themselves inside of books” clearly and legitimately stands as a culturally insensitive one. As pointed above by Bishop, “children need both” windows and mirrors. Yet, the legacy of oppression with which certain populations must comply and cope leaves inheritors of intergenerational trauma and shame yearning for representation: “marginalized readers have always had to read themselves into canons that excluded them” (Thomas and Stornaiuolo).

Children and adolescents in particular should be provided mirrors as much as – if not more than – windows:

for those children who historically had been ignored—or worse, ridiculed—in children’s books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up (Bishop 2012)
According to critical literacy research again, and again legitimately, the confusion and humiliation endured by a black Caribbean child growing up exposed only to metropolitan characters, white-washed storylines and idealized representations of French culture are nothing but the result of an appalling social prejudice rooted in systemic racism. Considered in this context, Joseph Zobel’s apparently neutral description of his Francophone education, which his masterpiece La Rue Cases-Nègres (1950) elaborates upon, is just as powerful as any judgement:

Je regrettais de ne pas trouver à l’époque quand j’étais à l’école … des situations, des paysages et des gens, qui ressemblaient à ceux qui m’avaient entouré. Avec l’enseignement qu’on avait à l’école, qui était dans une pédagogie d’assimilation, même ceux qui auraient écrit, qui essayaient d’écrire, ils n’écrivaient jamais de la Martinique, ni créaient, ni racontaient une histoire dont les personnages étaient les gens de la rue, de Fort-de-France, les gens travaillant dans les champs de canne d’un petit village.¹⁹

Zobel, like Chamoiseau, was raised and taught in Martinique. Chamoiseau, like Zobel, depicts a school world devoid of culturally congruent storyworlds, a longing for the latter, yet at the same time, a fascination for the landscape outside the window.

“Des temps de blonde enfance”

The négrillon starts facing the imposition and hegemony of a foreign storyworld of reference in the earliest stages of the reading acquisition process. At that time, silent reading remains the sacred territory of the Maître. The class partakes in oral, sometimes choral recitation initiated by the teacher, sole possessor of the Book from which he dispenses parables as if they were gospel. The Book ‘speaks’, then, through the voice of the teacher, and its Word conveys alien imagery:

Les textes de lecture parlaient de fermes, d’oies, de violons d’automne, de sabots, de lièvres, de cheminées, d’écureuils… Les revenus-de-France faisaient mine de savoir; mais les autres petites-personnes découvraient ces étrangetés du fond d’un ravissement perplexe. (CE 163)
Petit-Pierre, a famous child character of traditional *comptines* and *historiettes* typically portrayed against a French countryside background, embodies the textual – white, metropolitan – alter ego of the *négrillon* and his peers, to whom he first appears an “extraterrestre”; yet,

> pour [Gros-Lombric], comme pour la plupart d’entre nous, à mesure des lectures sacralisées, c’est Petit-Pierre qui devenait normal. (ibid. 166)

The mid-twentieth-century French little boy character stands as the emblem of a world to which Chamoiseau’s children protagonists progressively get accustomed, to the point where Petit-Pierre and his universe of *vendanges*, *vergers* and *champs enneigés* are internalized as the standard:

> the self learns to assimilate to an imagined community that has little bearing on the realities of the world in which he lives. (Knepper 144)

White (French) becomes the new black (Caribbean). This change is welcomed with pragmatism of various kinds by adult relatives who recognize the absurdity of it as well as – in the case of Man Ninotte – its necessity in the prospect of the *négrillon*’s survie. The scene hereafter recounted by Knepper is illuminating in that regard:

> That night the boy repeats the lesson, ‘I will not pick apples that do not belong to me’, to his family and receives another form of instruction when his father wonders aloud where the boy thinks he could pick apples as they all have to be imported to the island by boat in closed crates and arrive half rotten. Unfazed, the boy proceeds to draw a picture of their Creole home with apples and police with truncheons and produce pictures of tall, pointy castles, a church steeple, and a wolf. (144)

To Knepper, such drawings enact symbolical violence, another expression of which is the failure of the Maître to comprehend his students’ laborious attempts to simultaneously fit in (storyworlds they know not to be theirs) and stay true (to a referent diverging from those). As an indoctrinated adult reflection of the young French subjects in training, the Maître himself used to be and still is a victim of this violence even as he administers it. The backlash he experiences when he audaciously half-opens the glassdoor separating him from the *négrillons* to try and understand where they come from (or, more accurately, bring them to understand where they should go), complete with his denial of the event’s meaning, is an indirect reminder of his colonized status.

For the students, the sense of reality remains strong amidst efforts to adjust to the French norm, as made clear by the superficially humorous anecdotes recounted by Chamoiseau’s narrator:
Parfois, le Maître tentait de confronter la lecture à notre réalité. C'est ainsi qu'un jour, il tomba sur Gros-Lombric ... Il lui demanda, à l'instar de Petit-Pierre, de décrire sa maison, son lieu de travail, la lumière de sa chambre, son moyen de locomotion pour venir à l'école ... Le Maître ... en fut atterré. Son univers de fermes idylliques, de moulins, de bergers, de féeries d'automne auprès de mares musicales, achoppait ci-là. (CE 164-5)

The Maître's desperate need to believe in the existence and supremacy of an idealized way of life, even as this belief is cognitively dissonant with the daily encounter with a different referent, is just as tragic as Gros-Lombric's inability to connect the school text and his context:20

Par un effort céleste, il fallait coûte que coûte abolir la distance en opérant une fusion mentale avec notre Mère lointaine. Cette alchimie était orchestrée par les maîtres d'école qui nous érigaient ces livres en tabernacles où pouvait se puiser ce que l'Humanité a de plus essentiel. (EPD 45)

It is no coincidence that the Maître-indigène appears to systematically and quite radically work at making storyworlds relatable to students, in this case at least contrasting entirely with the Maître.

The substitute teacher is aware that in narrative fiction lies the nerf de la guerre:

Durant les lectures, il transformait à haute voix l'univers de Petit-Pierre: les mûres devenaient des calebasses, pommes et poires se transformaient en dattes. Les images étaient modifiées: Haut comme trois pommes se disait Haut comme trois amandes, Maigre comme un loup en hiver devenait Maigre comme la hyène du désert. (CE 182)

But the substitute’s influence is known by the children to be short-lived no matter their temptation to absorb it. French representations seem to irremediably make progress toward complete colonization of their imagination. The Maître is about to come back. Books have never left. Direct engagement with storybooks outside of school indeed contributes to the process way prior to reading acquisition:

Tête perdue, le négrillon s'était engouffré plus d'une fois dans chacune de ces illustrations. Il avait porté du bois mort, ramassé du blé, il avait sué aux vendanges, foulé des baiilles de raisin. Il avait, dans les étendues désolées de la neige, chanté l'inaltérable verdure d'un beau sapin. Il avait, dans l'accumulation virginale de la neige, modelé des bonshommes au cœur froid. Il avait cueilli la violette et respiré le romarin nouveau. Il avait, en des temps de blonde enfance, rouge aux joues et yeux bleus, couru dans le printemps des prés. (ibid. 167)

Idyllic environments and stereotypical characters conveyed by pictures, all sprung from the French imagination, lay out the breeding ground that classroom read-aloud will fertilize. Any and all forms of artistic representation simply and firmly deny the existence of the négrillon and the relevance of his surroundings. The one time that cinematic experience is colorfully detailed
over a few pages, in *Antan d’enfance*, shows it to shape the child’s worldview and self-perception in the same way:

> La technologie de l’œil véhicule des images et une idéologie qui amènent l’enfant à se considérer autre qu’il est. (Crosta)

> Nous nous identifions aux plus forts, toujours blancs... nous enfonçant sans le savoir dans une ruine intérieure. Le négrillon devra par la suite opérer la formidable révolution de se considérer nègre, et apprendre obstinément à l’être. Plus tard, il doit apprendre à être créole. (AE 171)

Then, the négrillon starts reading by himself. As suggested in *A bout d’enfance* and substantially recounted in *Ecrire en pays dominé*, advanced reading experience remains subjugated to the French cultural law even as the protagonist’s coming-of-age as a reader is experienced with a euphoric sense of freedom:

> L’adolescence fut une saison de trouble dont je n’ai plus la teneur ... Mes lectures m’avaient propulsé dans une énergie aérienne qui ne prenait pas sens. (EPD 55)

Paradoxically, the négrillon completes the internalization of his own negation through the very achievement of a newborn sensation and pride in his supposedly grown-up understanding of the human condition, as analyzed by the narrator of *Ecrire en pays dominé*:

> J’avais tout rencontré: la mort, la femme, la haine, la trahison, les regrets, le courage, le dépassement de soi, les châtiments, la plongée dans les ténèbres intimes, la fréquentation de l’inexprimable, le goût de vivre, la souffrance d’être... Et ces forces s’étaient imposées à moi avec l’autorité impérieuse de leur monde qui effaçait le mien. Elles m’avaient décuplé de vies mais en dehors de moi-même. Elles m’avaient annihilé en m’amplifiant. ... Je ne percevais du monde qu’une construction occidentale, déshabitée, et elle me semblait être la seule qui vaille. (47)

The corpus held responsible for this écrasement is quite eclectic: it includes the literary-reputed canons of two national cultures, lowbrow genres and subgenres, 17th-century texts and mid-20th-century popular fiction. The distinction between transparently and treacherously positive textual influences operates on other grounds.

*The poètes-doudous* are a case of interest here. Their production is explicitly poetic, which would demand a focus on linguistic form on the part of the reader. Yet, what matters most to the passionate teenage reader is the world they depict. Indeed, for the first time, storyworlds resemble his own. As mentioned in my section relative to the *livres décisifs*, this particular corpus
makes its entrance at the time of the négrillon's secondary education. It does not seem to be part of the official curriculum, but is featured in the Lycée's library collection:

durant ces temps scolaires, j'avais rencontré la littérature des poètes-doudous. Ces derniers étaient le plus souvent des mulâtres du pays, moitié-Blancs moitié-Noirs, qui avaient pu échapper ainsi à certaines déchéances de l'esclavage … Le conservateur de la bibliothèque Schoelcher serrait leurs ouvrages dans une armoire grillagée qu'il ouvrait avec une boule de précautions, en me jaugeant d'un regard soupçonneux. C'était pour lui une oasis intime dans ces murailles de livres qui ne parlaient jamais de nous. (EPD 49-50)²¹

Even the manner in which the poètes-doudous idealize the pays-leur does not belong to them, for it mimics the principle of French romanticized representations such as those encountered by the reader at a younger age. The older négrillon is well aware of the fraud:

Ces ouvrages étaient plaisants mais leurs résonances demeuraient un peu inertes en moi, comme si elles désertaient le point d'ébullition. Le pays mien dans ces livres était mis à distance. (ibid. 50)

Yet, he is willing to suspend his disbelief, and disappointment:

Sonnets de papillons et de ciel bleu. Rimes d'alizés, de soleil et de fleurs odorantes. Métrique de scènes pittoresques et de languissantes créatures. A leur lecture, près de trois siècles après, je me laissais bercer de paradis offert. (ibid.)

Je lisais donc leurs gracieux textes et m'émutais d'y retrouver un peu de moi-même, comme une ombre du pays-mien que ces écrivains avaient remisé dans les soutes d'une citadelle étrangère. Citadelle que les livres déifiés avaient dressée en eux, avaient plantée en moi … reflets volés à la lumière du Centre et que l'on impressionne minutieusement en soi afin d'accéder aux illusions d'une existence. (ibid. 54-5)

The tragic dimension of this writing will elude the youngster though it is clearly and sadly identified by the narrator:

A ces écrivains, il ne restait de solution que les exemples du Centre dominateur vers lequel ils étaient aspirés. Ils s'y abandonnaient avec béatitude ou chargés des fausses armes d'une mimétique contestation. (ibid. 54)

Ce regard sur eux-mêmes reproduisait celui des voyageurs occidentaux … Poètes hoo, vous étiez dominés. (ibid. 51-2)

These books, all the books, “avaient écrasé” the négrillon (44): “Cet écrasement avait été rendu inévitable par la fascination que les terres du Centre exercaient sur nous.” (48). In one way or another, until the discovery of Césaire, the Centre dominateur looms large in every possible storyworld of reference, even those created by the aspiring author:
Chamoiseau here validates Thomas and Stornaiuolo’s contention that

would-be readers and writers from nondominant groups have to accommodate textual self-erasure while reading written prose, viewing artwork, and the like. (317)

Thus, add the authors, “there arose an imperative to read and write marginalized selfhoods into textual existence”. Césaire, not formal education, will empower the négrillon to do so.

Mirrors or windows? Pays-mien, pays intérieurs

The romantic conception of reading experience as an “échappée belle, hors les murs de la famille et de la maison” is identified by Michèle Petit as a classical component of reader trajectory narratives. The image does stand out as perhaps one of the most consensual metaphors used to address representations of literary initiation according to the studies covered in the first part of this dissertation. The dominant French scholarly position aligns with those representations in supporting the idea that sustained access to storyworlds dissimilar from our own world of reference ensures emancipation from one’s limited condition, and that it should be promoted and defended fiercely on these grounds. There need not be any limit to the extent of possible estrangement; actually, the perspective implies that the greater the amount of defamiliarizing content the student is exposed to, and the wider the gap between his environment and the storyworld he is instructed to engage with ("l’écart entre le réel connu et le fictif inconnu", Louichon 2009, 34), the more fruitful the rencontre de l’Altérité. But in France too, perspectives are slowly starting to shift, as exemplified by the plea of French author Laura Nsafou – born to a Congolese father and a Martinican mother – whose content echoes progressive American scholarly arguments:
On se construit par rapport aux médias que l'on voit, à ce qui est véhiculé, représenté, que ce soit dans les livres présentés en classe par les enseignants, les manuels scolaires, les dessins animés… Si ces supports ne nous montrent pas, on a l’impression de ne pas exister. On grandit en ayant la conviction d’être différent parce qu’on est “invisibilisé”. … si on ne se voit pas, comment peut-on se célébrer, s’aimer, avoir une estime de soi, se penser, s’imaginer…? C’est impossible et on demande à des enfants très jeunes de faire un effort d’imagination pour se valoriser à un âge où ils sont en pleine construction. Aujourd’hui, c’est un véritable enjeu, d’autant plus que le livre est vraiment l’un des premiers supports accessibles aux enfants, en tout cas dans le milieu scolaire.22

This survey of Francophone and American perspectives underlines an inverted symmetry: on one hand, a tradition relying on defamiliarization as a valeur sûre; on the other hand, a movement pushing for more relatable narrative content for all pupils. Representation of historically invisible populations and milieux, rehabilitation of referential reading, and equity through curricular integration of narrative subgenres – those have only recently been identified as “véritable[s] enjeu[x]”. At the time of the négrillon’s education, the topics simply did not exist as such within Francophone institutional discourses or social representations more largely. But Chamoiseau shows these issues to disrupt the child’s understanding of his world. The négrillon is confusedly aware that something is rotten in the state of fiction… Knowledge transfer gets hindered. Yet, the négrillon’s attitude toward alien fictional narratives is intrinsically paradoxical. So is the narrator’s account of this complicated reception.

**Owning the story. Imagination and agency**

Imaginary resistance takes different shapes as the young reader develops a voice and an agency of his own. Being confronted with fictional worlds whose referent eluded him doesn’t always result in endured imaginary resistance. In a few instances, the narrator of Une enfance créole underscores the child’s pure delight in engagement with worlds that he does not seek to comprehend but only to absorb:

> chaque image lui ouvrait d’autant mieux l’infini qu’elle n’entretenait aucun rapport avec son entourage… ce monde relevait de l’ailleurs. C’étaient des paysages de steppes, de déserts, de glace, de forêt… Les personnages y arboraient des habits fascinants, se délectaient de boissons inconnues, respectaient d’insolites traditions… Cela ouvrait au négrillon d’improbables perspectives qui devenaient sans peine des pays intérieurs… (ABE 40)
Regularly in his development as reader, the négrillon goes through phases of great despair, being torn between his craving for narrative fiction and his repeated failure to get involved in its French-centered content. In between these phases, other experiences take place in which the reader, no matter how young, proves to be an actor – auctor? – already. Following his discovery of the petites-filles, it is in a very willful manner that the child proceeds to explore, with great rigor, a corpus of tales he himself delineates (ibid. 146-50). This moment is a key event. From then on, the child will often manage to enter those worlds that at other times remain closed to him, by resorting to a single, very effective trick: the projection of his own concerns, needs, desires onto the storyworld at stake; not knowledge transfer, but emotion transfer. When the narrator of Ecrire en pays dominé describes himself as forever indebted to textuality, specifically narrative fiction, for his emotional growth, he neglects to acknowledge the fact that what he learned, he learned only because he “animait de ses envies” those worlds that would not come to life and feelings without his involvement and contribution. Une enfance créole contains several suggestions of the child’s active role in his development as a reader of fictional narratives, among which are the following descriptions in A bout d’enfance:

Le négrillon s’envolait par ses fenêtres ouvertes, revenait à ses affres, puis s’en allait encore, jusqu’à finir par condamner les gens de ces illustrations à vivre ses propres sentiments… Il les animait de ses envies. Les remplissait de son mal-être. Les engluisait de petites tragédies… (33)

Au fil des ans, les héros ne se transformaient pas. Leur permanence précieuse pouvait accueillir la tourmente de ses âges et d’une conscience en devenir. Si ces héros changeaient ce n’était qu’avec lui, en fonction de ce qu’il y projetait. (40)

Progressively, from an unconscious process (a reflex refusal observed with distress), imaginative resistance has turned into a deliberate act, a major change whose completion will occur in adolescence:

Je résistais aux auteurs qui tentaient de m[en] forcer [aux bascules de l’imagination] avec l’histoire qu’ils racontaient ou avec les exotismes de leurs décors (EPD 42)

For the teenager, staying at the edge of a given story/world of reference ensues from a choice and can apply to a full range of fictional narratives, including those produced by local authors. It is active resistance and rejection, devoid of connotations of helplessness and defeat. The négrillon
now owns the process of imaginary resistance that was initially an expression of his oppressed status. In a way, he has reversed the stigma. Here lies the character’s most glaring resistance and one of the strongest parts of the narrator’s counternarrative: yes, windows are perhaps more important than mirrors, as claimed by representations of literary initiation; but to a large extent, the reason they matter is because the reader, his voice, his choice, said so.

In the end, Chamoiseau shows text-based imaginary development to be a multifaceted process because it can be fostered or constrained by the same textual material depending on circumstances. A given fictional narrative may fulfil the role of either or both window and mirror, if we are to admit that the reader’s emergent ability to project his own inner experience onto the most alien storyworld turns the latter into a bifunctional transitional space.

I said earlier in this chapter that narrative fiction means more to the négrillon than a reservoir of imagination-enhancing material. It is perceived and used by the child as an epistemological resource supporting his understanding of the world, hence his personal (intellectual, emotional) and social trajectories. Confrontation with storyworlds that are realistic (as opposed to fantastical / supernatural), yet non-congruent with the young reader’s reality, disrupts the fluidity and productivity of his interaction with the story’s features. It is possible to extrapolate from Chamoiseau that this situation is the paradigmatic case of imaginary resistance in culturally or socially minoritized readers of narrative fiction. For such populations, distance between storyworlds and their world of reference might be constructive only up to a certain point: too wide a gap between the two instances of realistic universe prevents reader immersion and adhesion to a given narrative proposition.

In Chamoiseau, the more or less conscious rejection of the latter isn’t definitive nor all-inclusive. It is very much about circumstances; besides, only specific aspects of the story could be concerned. Fictional narratives in general remain a resource. When resistance happens, however, it does so strongly enough that for a moment, it seems impossible to overcome. The blending of reality and fiction, and knowledge transfer a fortiori, become unconceivable. For a
moment, sometimes for an entire book reading experience, narrative fiction loses its empowering quality.

Let us visualize imaginative resistance to culturally alien storyworlds as a dot on a straight line: it would be placed on the far right, representing the point where the boundary between reality and fiction is most hermetic. In the middle is the standard case of intentional transaction: reality and fiction merge in the emergent reader’s fantasmatic activity, but the distinction is known (beyond Chamoiseau) and shown (by Chamoiseau) to be clear to most children, which does not prevent them from blithely blending elements of both, a mastered magic act that is largely out of adults’ range according to research in imaginative development. Then, a point would be located on the very left, standing for the highly notable instances where the child yields to (or presides over) the complete merging of referential and unfamiliar worlds, of reality and fiction, up to a sense of annihilation of their frontiers.

In Chamoiseau’s autobiographical trilogy, there is only one such instance. The phenomenon unfolds throughout a textually and symbolically sensational episode that I will refer to as the Quest.

From storyworld hermeticity to the Tout-Monde

Early on in the child’s trajectory, attraction to scenes of battle and propensity for the blending of French and Creole fictional worlds of reference appear correlated. In those years preceding pre-teen illumination, elements from the two worlds are granted equal space in the négrillon’s imagination:

`Et c'est ainsi que le Chat botté mena bataille contre des diablesses à cornes et ne dut la vie sauve qu'aux lapins du moulin de Jemmapes… Robinson Crusoe en lieu et place de Vendredi fit la rencontre d'une Manman Dio qui lui causa bien des soucis… Le Petit Poucet dut affronter Basile la Mort qui le traquait de sa grande faux… (ABE 34)`

Such descriptions act as a prelude to the overt, decisive advent of the Quest as a motif and framework. As the récit d’enfance quietly transitions into a récit d’adolescence, “the language and
descriptions of the narrative conform increasingly to the language of the quest narrative” (Knepper 149).

The notion of quest narrative can be considered to subsume the French medieval genres of the roman en prose – most notably the cycle arthurien – and the grand chant courtois, or romance (e.g. Lorris and de Meun’s Roman de la rose), which share two notable features: they are narratively structured as an exploratory, obsessional pursuit; the exact nature of the desired and unattainable object remains partly obscure. Both the Grail and reciprocal love – the two privileged objects of the Quest – belong, in different ways (the Grail standing as a concrete representation of the specifically Christian marvel), to the world of the merveille. In romance specifically,

The quest involves confrontations with marvels, but it is the marvel of love that typically serves as a driving force. (Knepper 148-9)

It definitely does in the third volume of Une enfance créole, the first marvel being the existence of female alter egos, whose encounter initiates the integration of the canonical textual template:

Chaque membre de la Table-trouée avait des soeurs qui avaient des copines …. Elles désorganisaient l'esprit des chevaliers (ABE 267)

The négrillon truly assumes the part of the questing knight when the peuple des petites-filles splits into a group of secondary characters, the adjuvant messengers, on the one hand (“les filles de Man la Sirène, ambassadrices plus ou moins mandatées”, 243), and the Dulcinée, Dame, "Irréelle" that is the young Gabine, on the other hand:

C'était comme si le merveilleux avait quitté les contes, et se concrétisait là, dans cette fugace chabine, presque inconcevable… (ibid. 232)

With Gabine’s apparition begin "les épreuves de l’amour et du refus, de la douce souffrance, du mal d’aimer” (Strudel 17). From then on, in compliance with the canvas of the roman arthurien (which essentially combines “trois ingrédients: l’amour, l’aventure et le merveilleux”), the négrillon’s trajectory will be reworked

in the form of the adolescent's encounter with a modern-day case of medieval lovesickness and his accompanying quest challenges as a member of the Round Table. (Knepper 136-7)
“Virées de chevalerie”, “duels à l'épée”, “table ronde d'après les sales batailles”… chivalric metaphors proliferate from the beginning of the last third of A bout d’enfance to the end. Meanwhile, the adored Dame is presented as responsible for the progressive blending of factual and fictional elements, ultimately for an inflection of the négrillon’s metaphysical experience:

“Pour le négrillon, ces apparitions causaient une contraction du monde” (243).

In fact, Gabine’s appearances will catalyze a contraction of world-s. Throughout the last third of A bout d’enfance, (storyworld) components and (narrative) constituents typical of the traditional Quest story flood the négrillon’s fiction-filtered perception of reality. The invading of the négrillon’s narrative by the Quest features, as recognized and valued in French literary culture, for a moment happens in a completely unidirectional fashion and the absence of any equivalent Creole influence, as the following paragraph exemplifies:

Alors, levant la tête, se dressant tout debout sur ses grands étriers, pâle, effrayant, pareil à l'aigle des nuées, l'invincible roi…, qui se prenait pour un digeste d'Arthur et de Charlemagne, le regarda de travers durant près d'une minute. Puis il confia son sort à la bande de Lancelot, Aramis, Lagardère, Perceval, d'Artagnan, Roland, et autres déments tombés d'un fouillis de sagas incertaines. (ABE 257)

One may discern in the above excerpt the horizon from which salvation will come. The cavalry here described is impure, Dumas’ mousquetaires and the elected characters of the canonical Quest taking turns. Soon enough, the Quest subtext gets undermined by the intrusion of narrative imaginaries from other cultures and times:

The Emerveille functions through admixture and juxtaposition to mobilize legends, myth, fables, inexplicable events, and stories by mixing and cutting them together in a strange and fantastic manner. (Knepper 24)

The Caribbean world of reference is only one of many in this process, and in effect, although reinstalled, it is minoritized. Actors and scenes are borrowed from the Creole storytelling tradition; but the child’s heroic imagination mostly absorbs characters and actions from French and American bandes dessinées, parables, movies. Fragments from this great variety of textual environments make their way into the Quest the same way some of them do into the "sylve
originelle, infestée de serpents, de zombis et d'une série de monstres tombés des films d'Hercule :

Il glissait sous les fougères, tarzanait aux lianes pour passer les ravines, rebondissait de roche en roche dans les zones chaotiques où des racines ouvraient des gueulées de sorcières. Tony, qui devait relever d'une lignée apache, dénicha trop vite l'outil de l'ordalie: un vieux nid de guêpes rouges. (ABE 249)

Le seigneur Kit Carson obtint une dérogation pour ajouter le revolver de Jessie James au pommeau de son sabre. Perceval fit savoir qu'il conserverait au poignet la montre étanche de son anniversaire. (ibid. 280)

The progression of the négrillon-turned-chevalier toward his romantic destination gets hindered by successive obstacles up to a final épreuve. The balance between Creole and other storyworlds of reference comes… to stay, as it closes the autobiographical trilogy. This concluding episode of the “contact froid du mabouya” (279) centers a lizard whose contact is considered lethal in Martinique and thus worthy of being made the culminating épreuve of the Quest. It positions the chevaliers and the typically Caribbean, allegorically charged creature, their respective cultural spheres, as well as the fictional and referential dimensions to which they each pertain, as equals in power. The leveling of cultural influences seems complete. Story contents stemming from different cultural and generic traditions have not only blended but been granted the same status within this third imaginary space. Now united, they may, together, launch the last attack on reality.

This quite spectacular merging of storyworlds within the Quest narrative template (in Knepper's perspective, “the reworking of popular culture and high literary forms”; in Dinh Van's, a “dialogisation des imaginaires au départ déliés et frontiérisés”) has led many to assume that Chamoiseau’s use of the Quest motif should be read as a “creolized parody of French literature” (Knepper 150). More precisely, Chamoiseau’s climactic creative writing would amount to a conscious act of textual emancipation from the French literary imagination, and generally French cultural oppression, through hierarchical inversion. Now littérature, claims Dinh Van, is “plac[é]... sous le signe de l’émerveille”:

Le rire opère la resacralisation des textes mortifiés sous l’étau anesthésiant des imaginaires dominants. Il resymbolise l’archive raidie dans le canon patrimonial en la branchant à ces
Parody, notes Knepper,

plays a particularly useful role as a trope that introduces the possibility of critical difference and with difference the possibilities for an alternative kind of autoethnographic expression. (153)

Chamoiseau resorts to the Quest motif at a very specific point in his autobiographical trilogy. It comes to frame the négrillon’s early adolescence or coming-of-age. This choice can be considered purposefully “reminiscent of the medieval practice of composing ‘enfances’”:

This common practice served to close the cycle of poems relating an individual knight’s story, much as they seal Chamoiseau’s exploration of childhood. (Hardwick 80)

The story of the knight-to-be, in this case as in many others across the European and particularly French canon, is primarily one of literary awakening: “Like Dante, Chamoiseau reworks the theme of the lovesick writer who is led by love to literature” (Knepper 149), By reflexively playing with the Quest model, Chamoiseau disrupts reader expectations grounded in literary imagination in two ways at least, simultaneously desacralizing one of the most ancient and revered French literary forms and one of the narrative canvases dominant in French cultural institutions: literary initiation. Even more than with the traditional themes of chivalric discourse, the auctorial deconstructive intent most likely has to do with French representations of literary coming-of-age, which also involve a quest, a Grail, and a conquest.

The story thus becomes one of radiant mastery and ownership. The French literary imagination, we are told, is revisited with great virtuosity, the monopoly of rigid French cultural schemas invalidated. There is, however, an important problem with this interpretation: it reads a content-level phenomenon (i.e. inert, disparate elements of the fabula; inserted contemporary and / or Creole subjects and objects, most notably) as if it were a discursive action.
Progressive substance, conservative expression

Scholarly attention to this closing episode typically focuses on the level of narrative discourse, neglecting to distinguish between the content and expression planes of the récit d’enfance, as exemplified by Knepper’s commentary:

The initial antagonisms and oppositions of the neo-colonial and French imaginaries give way to a discursive reconciliation of these vying tendencies. This hybrid parody of quest literature offers a satiric reconciliation of the lament and the ludic, the neocolonial and the Creole. (147)

The reconciliation happens. However, contrary to what Knepper suggests, through qualifiers such as “discursive” or “satiric”, it does so at the storyworld level. Chamoiseau exhibits a storyworld in which all references – indeed tous mondes – are deemed equal. There, elements from all cultural spheres come to compose a “space of otherness in which to commemorate and inscribe the emergent sense of self” (Knepper 136-7). The formation of this third space indeed occurs, then. But I argue that it does so within narrated content only. At the level of narrative discourse, the episode of the Quest in fact never deviates from the traditional, legitimate composition.

It is true that narration interweaves references and humorously reshapes the nature of story components. The original form of the Quest narrative, however, isn’t affected. More than ever before, “le récit se donne à lire comme une ‘suite ordonnée et close d’unités narratives’” (Hélix and Bertrand 78), the récit d’initiation strictly following the narrative progression of the original Quest. The delineation of sub-episodes by means of titles is unprecedented. With the “mélancolie première” (ABE 228),

Une aventure survient … créant une faille (au double sens de ‘manque’ et de ‘rupture’) dans ce monde a priori harmonieux. (Hélix and Bertrand 77)

The négrillon goes on to “relever le défi et chercher à combler ce manque, en menant une quête” which, although shorter than “un an et un jour” (ibid.), feels like “cent mille siècles d’attente” to the chevalier, “interdit de cérémonies” yet made to endure series of “épreuves destinées à permettre aux damnés de sauver l’honneur” (ABE 246-7). Altering the substance yet respectfully preserving the frame, the narrator gets to truly “impressionner” his readership and signify its allegiance to
French literary culture. Faithful recuperation of the canonical template allows him to portray himself as having, just like the négrillon, “tellement lu et relu de légendes, qu’il p[e]ut … impressionner par ses études du Graal” (ibid. 256-7). He, too, gets to expose his knowledge of the geste arthurienne, partly at the level of content (“pour les anéantir, il leur cita le nom exact des douze”), mostly at the level of form. The final episode indeed much differs from the rest of the trilogy, and perfectly models the Queste del Saint Graal, in that

on ne repère nul morcellement excessif dans le récit, qui suit les aventures de chaque chevalier ‘par ample développements aux contours nets’. (Hélix and Bertrand 77)

In short, there is no resistance to the Quest template in terms of narrative structure (statements, organization, type of commentary) – no show of intention to conceive an alternative one. To this extent, the “remapping of the Creole adolescence in Martinique” is not framed as a “new textual landscape”, a “neo-medieval space”, as much as a neo-colonial one (Knepper 150), despite modulations in content. The bending (Thomas and Stornaiuolo) of substance instead of structure, the integration of diverse influences into the former rather than the latter, results in a counter storyworld rather than a counternarrative.

I said earlier, building on the dominant scholarly view, that Chamoiseau’s parodic intent likely targets both the constraints attached to French literary imagination in general and to social representations of literary initiation in particular, the latter initiation underlying a Quest that can be read as a palimpsest. This observation may now be reconsidered in the light of the above argument. At the level of content, the protagonist’s awakening to textual culture seems to be open to non-traditional influences. We saw that genres traditionally perceived as low-brow make their way into the négrillon’s reading trajectory, supporting the development of his ability to engage with ‘literature’, if not decisively contributing to it. That is a key point, however: comics, photo novellas, illustrated tales pave the way to a textual world and experience they are not ultimately part of. For most of the Quest, which stands as the conclusion of the négrillon’s trajectory, references from greatly diverse storyworlds coexist – yet the progression is narrated in a linear fashion and leads to the bestowal of a new status and stature on the child. There is a reason why
others’ attempts to identify the object now owned by the chevalier, “que chacun cherche à voir apertement” (Hélix and Bertrand 77), or “le grade mystérieux auquel il était parvenu” (ABE 299), are bound to fail:

Le texte est perçu comme une énigme qu’il s’agit d’élucider et qui a pour conséquence un accès très limité des élèves au sens. (Gabathuler and Védrines 59)

For those left at the edge of literary induction, there shall be no senefiance. As we know from the first chapter of this dissertation, literariness is made to remain precisely this: a mystery. By complying with the Quest’s conventional structure in the organization and expression of its conclusive constituents, the author returns to the traditional representations – of both literature and literary initiation – that his creative reworking at the content level was made to counter.

“Qu’y a-t-il de [neuf] dans tout cela?”

The Quest episode shows fictionality to offer a space of freedom and exploration. For the négrillon, engagement with unnatural, fantastical storyworlds had made it possible to overcome imaginary resistance (the latter typically involving, in the school experience of minoritized students, realistic universes diverging from one’s own). For the author, fictional substance here becomes a play- / battleground where disruption of French representations of literary content (in this case, the canonical Quest’s) is pursued and achieved. Yet, the resulting, joyful chaos of references remains constrained by an admirably untouched narrative framework. The indirect consequence of this configuration is the reestablishment of narrativity’s symbolical prevalence over fictionality as it is suggested in literary ideology: attention to narrative form is an important step away from immersion in the monde raconté and yielding to imagination – an important step toward access to literariness (Louichon, among others). Swearing allegiance to one of the most ancient narration templates in the French history of littérature, Chamoiseau indirectly validates the primacy of the colonizer’s narrative logic. “Qu’y a-t-il de vrai dans tout cela, en dehors du mouvement général?": can the existents and events making a given Francophone coming-of-age
narrative (and the norm-adverse imaginative journey they nurture in that case) be claimed to even exist outside of the French initiatory plot recognized as culturally legitimate since the emergence of *Littérature*, i.e. to be valuable independently of the colonizer’s model (ABE 298, emphasis mine)?

*Une enfance créole* relies on constant allusions to a literary-reputed intertext that includes the canonical medieval reference as well as absolute paragons of ‘literariness’ – by the time of the trilogy’s writing – such as Proust (the rewriting of the mnesic resurgence trope) or Baudelaire (the synesthetic experience), particularly in *Antan d’enfance*. There is a general consensus among Chamoiseau scholars on the fact that these repeated hints at the French literary tradition are humorous expressions of its definitive appropriation; they presumably make it possible for a Creole, ultimately creolized voice to emerge. An essential corollary to this interpretation is the – also consensual – view that what counts as literature gets entirely redefined in the process. Now, let us remember that the ‘literary’ idiosyncrasies of Proust and Baudelaire, two of the most obviously legitimate figures in the late 20th century Hexagonal culture, are also alluded to in Lejeune’s address to French teacher trainees (c.f. introduction). In fact, exactly like Lejeune and in accordance with Védrines’ terminology, Chamoiseau’s narrator *connives* with his initiated, ‘distinguished’ implied audience. Resorting to a French canonical model of narrative structure – the Quest – to frame the supposedly most significant episode of the trilogy – the conclusive, decisively emancipatory one – the narrator surrenders to a validation of the *imaginaire littéraire*, when he could have foregrounded the liberating power of fiction rather than an autotelic approach to textuality.\(^24\) It might even be possible to go as far as to consider that we, like the author of *Ecrire en pays dominé*, are entitled to think of the narrator of the Quest as an instance of the formerly mentioned activist teachers who used to fight cultural alienation

\[\text{en inversant les termes qui leur étaient offerts ... Une contre-dépendance au modèle, tout aussi aliénante. (EPD 249)}\]

The proposed r/evolution in representations of literariness and literary awakening – which representations are one expression of “the continued French colonization of the Creole
imaginary’ – is once again multifaceted, conflicted, and to some degree offered in the form of a double-bind.\(^\text{25}\)

Speaking from a scholarly standpoint, Gabathuler and Védrines observe that even when discourses venture into contestation of the scriptural model of ‘literariness’ and literature education, the radicality seldom materializes into

\[
\text{des propositions … qui dépasseraient fondamentalement ce qu’on peut définir comme la pierre angulaire de l’approche classique: l’instauration du texte comme littéraire par les discours … littéraires sur le texte en tant qu’objet réputé littéraire par le fait même de pouvoir être l’objet de tels discours. (65, emphasis mine)}
\]

Story rereadings, said Louichon, provide the satisfactory illusion of simultaneous stability and change. Contemporary Francophone writers, like Francophone language arts teachers and literature education scholars, are all compelled to come to terms with the problematic conundrum of literariness, which inevitably retains them in its clutches while also leaving them (leaving us), former French literature students torn between fierce progressive beliefs and internalized conservative values, reassured to some ineffable degree… that the statue at issue will not be removed.

\(^1\) ABE 34.

\(^2\) “Pour répondre à la diversité des représentations des élèves, nous sommes d’avis que les corpus littéraires scolaires devraient être sélectionnés de manière à proposer aux élèves des lectures littéraires diversifiées – différents genres, différentes plateformes de lectures, textes issus de différents continents, de différentes époques –, augmentant ainsi les possibilités pour chaque élève de vivre des expériences de lecture littéraire signifiantes.” (Miquelon 144).

\(^3\) Outside the Francophone world as well: “literacy educators often consider the out-of-school or leisure reading activities, which include engagement with trash literature, to be supplementary at best and, as a matter of course, undervalued as pedagogical devices in the classroom” (Gibson 214).

\(^4\) For a meticulous study of the album (or illustrated book) aimed at an audience of Francophone education specialists, book culture professionals and artists, see Van der Linden, Sophie. Lire l’album. Le Puy-en-Velay: L’Atelier du poisson soluble, 2007


\(^6\) I previously noted that representations of engagement with predominantly visual genres in Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing tend to convey either great enthrallment with narrative structure (bande dessinée) or disappointment at its apparent absence (roman-photo). The existence of a plot that he does not get to grasp
for lack of reading ability is typically frustrating to the négrillon: “ces genres illustrés prenaient en charge sa poisse mentale par le biais de mille mésaventures dont il ne maîtrisait que le point de départ…” (ABE 34). Yet, the apparent impossibility to understand and control is somehow enticing as well. From a larger representational perspective, Louichon sees the need to comprehend the ‘full picture’ as central in reader characters’ experience: “le désir de compréhension de ce qui arrive dans la fiction, ses tenants et ses aboutissants, sont au coeur de l’acte de lire le narratif, que l’on soit enfant ou adulte” (Louichon 2009, 113).

I have argued that scenes of engagement with livres illustrés in Chamoiseau tend to frame pictures as isolated arrêts sur image, autaric entities fetishized as such, all-powerful vignettes both self-sufficient and sufficing to reader satisfaction. A few paragraphs of Chemin d’école, however, propose a major twist to this vision by tying their value to their embedded nature and function in a narrative structure: “Le négrillon recomposait les livres à partir des images. Il imaginait des histoires et s’efforçait de les retrouver dans les textes imprimés toujours indéchiffrables. … Il sut s’élancer d’une image jusqu’à atteindre une autre en s’y adaptant bien.” (CE 200-1). In the end, the value of narrative takes primacy on the value of the image.

7 “L’intrigue, lorsqu’on la considère non comme une configuration statique, mais plutôt comme une forme en mouvement, comme une transformation dont la nature fondamentale est d’introduire et, éventuellement, de résoudre une tension, ressemble davantage à un labyrinthe qu’à une belle architecture classique, symétrique et bien ordonnée. L’intrigue mâne des surprises lorsqu’elle s’écarte du chemin attendu. Elle induit du suspense lorsqu’elle raconte des événements importants et dont le développement reste en partie indéterminé. Elle suscite de la curiosité lorsqu’ces événements deviennent difficiles à interpréter, lorsqu’ils sont présentés de manière incomplète ou mystérieuse.” (Baroni 2013)

8 Rereading scenes are a staple of reader trajectory narratives. Even more than repeated solitary engagement with particular books, childish demands to be read aloud the same text again and again (usually prior to acquisition of basic reading skills) concern fictional narratives – almost – exclusively. Louichon chooses to turn to narratological approaches, specifically Raphaël Baroni’s theorization of tension narrative, which presumably best account for the dominance of histoires as an object of inexhaustible cyclical involvement. One concept in particular captures her attention: “Cette activité du relecteur à être emporté par une histoire qu’il a déjà lue et relue, cette image de l’avalement, qui rend compte d’une lecture toujours haletante, est une for­mation d’énigme, que l’on nomme ‘le suspense paradoxal’” (ibid.). The paradoxical character of the process lies in its offering reassurance as well as uncertainty, and in the reader’s simultaneous attraction to both.

Drawing on Baroni’s perspective, Louichon first asserts that each reading of the same text is a new experience and therefore factual suspense always retains the same power. So does language, asserts Louichon using Pera­c’s autobiographical writing as a case in point: “Plus le jeune lecteur [en l’occurrence Perec] relit, plus les mots deviennent ‘lourds de force et de mystère’.” (Louichon 2009, 147). Yet, emergent readers in this situation actually are pretending not to know the story’s content. They look forward to ‘discovering’ a resolution they are in fact already acquainted with. The suspense at stake is ‘fictional’, thus technically the opposite of factual. Still, both forms seem equally impactful, the former apparently capable of reproducing the latter, however precariously. This tension “entre le savoir et le vouloir” (“le lecteur veut ce qu’il sait qui va advenir”) is termed “suspense paradoxal” and recognized as a narrative-bound phenomenon (“œuvres au fort déterminisme générique”, 144).

At the same time, the child reader gets to construct the very idea of the text as a stable entity “par l’épreuve de la relecture” (145). Rereading in general enables the emergent reader to progressively consider the world in a comforting light. Predictable narratives are particularly good catalysts of such development. If narrative states of affairs are durable, reliable (“quelques que soient les circonstances de la lecture … l’histoire est toujours là”), then the self ought to be too: “Au rebours de l’expérience quotidienne, le récit reît, relu, fait advenir un ordre des choses inchangé. Il permet de refonder l’identité par le biais d’une forme inaltérable.” (146). The hereby established security must be regularly balanced with “un peu de nouveau” (155), the alternation defining the dynamics of suspense paradoxal.

Interestingly, Louichon then returns to Rouxel’s notion of identité littéraire and proposes to conceive rereading as a bidimensional (identity / textual) practice – one fostering narrative rather than literary development as far as engagement with textuality goes. Rereading would indeed “associer l’aspect identitaire (se retrouver soi-même) et la dimension narrative (ne pas être perdu)” (146). The largely empirical concept of narrativity thus eclipses, for a moment, the much more abstract and arguably ideological idea of literariness. However, Louichon moves on to use observations from studies involving “faibless lectrices” as a counterexample to the encounter and developmental process described in literary-reputed autobiographies de lecteur. “L’apprentissage d’une posture de relecteur lettré” portrayed in the latter is contrasted with rereading as enacted by faibless lectrices (whatever “faible” means in this context): “Il est peu probable qu’elles y appréhendent quelque chose d’elles-mêmes” (149). In the end, identity construction thus remains
intimately connected to the increase of literary awareness, rather than to the development of narrative competence.

9 It might be possible to read the religious dimension of engagement with books in Chamoiseau (such as the parodic Cène that the BD reading ceremonial happens to be) as recognition of the power of imagination rather than literariness. According to that view, Chamoiseau postulates the primacy of textuality’s potential / reservoir for imagination rather than aesthetic engagement, sacralizing the former instead of the latter.

10 Hopkins and Weisberg (2017) provide a helpful review of research on the topic.


12 Emergent readers’ attitudes toward text-world knowledge and willingness to integrate it into real-world knowledge have been found to differ, for instance, depending on the advent and extent of identification with / sympathy for the characters’ goals and emotions; their ability to postulate a moral lesson; the modality of exposure to the text, e.g. oral versus read; their initial expectations and the extent to which they judge content as too divergent from the latter (see Hopkins & Weisberg for an overview of the related studies).

13 To that extent, intensive exposure to fiction, which is favored by the French educational preference for canonized fictional narratives overall, might hinder learning and self-development in already vulnerable populations. Lahire’s point indirectly supports the opening of French educational corpuses to a greater variety of subgenres.

14 Fictional narratives stand for the narrative genre at large in social representations as well as in educational curricula. Narrative configurations however may be factual or fictional, according to Baroni, who considers the distinction, and thus the institutional preference for one, to be irrelevant if not contestable. Indeed, immersion is a phenomenon likely to occur whether the narrative is factual (e.g. testimony, narrative journalism) or fictional because immersion is tied to dispositifs intriguants. It is therefore regrettable, to Baroni, that factual narratives (together with the analysis of these dispositifs with the students) remain disconsidered in the French ‘literature’ classroom.

15 Marielle Macé, former student at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure and a very public theoretician of literary reading, thus defends “une attention affûtée aux formes, à leurs enjeux, à la façon dont la littérature institue des formes de langage précises, autrement dit des phrases singulières, précises, citables; parce que c’est là sa force : elle propose des phrases inédites, qui peuvent ou non étendre leur justesse sur notre présent. … La littérature est faite pour ça, pour être citée, pour être mobilisée non pas "en gros" mais dans toute sa force de nuances, pour nous permettre d’affûter nos propres phrases”.

16 According to Riffaterre, among many theoreticians of literature, interpretative reading must “refuser le ‘fatras’ que provoque le recours au référent, éviter le leurre mimétique” (Védèmes 291). Pavel Medvedev’s denunciation, in the 1920s, of this very “methodological error” that consists in defining “la langue poétique par opposition au langage utilitaire” (“Où peut-on trouver ce langage utilitaire quotidien qui serait la norme à partir de laquelle on pourrait évaluer la transgression?”) is not new either, yet always a challenge to French cultural imagination. Unsurprisingly, Medvedev’s stance was adopted by the group of Swiss didacticiens to which Védèmes belongs and underlies Védèmes’ own work. Medvedev insists that one needs to recognize and act upon the “extrême variété des énoncés en fonction des sphères et finalités de la communication dans le cadre de la vie sociale”, which deserve to be represented horizontally.

17 An interesting fact to contemplate in this context is that the roman is not equally favored across the range of French educational options. What is true overall is that Francophone literature education overwhelmingly relies on one text form nowadays: narrative. In middle school, all students are exposed to fictional and non-fictional narratives in collection form (“des assemblages de textes d’auteurs”). However, as curricular progression unfolds, the intensity of exposure to fictional narratives and valorization of particular dimensions of the genre vary according to students’ orientation. The fictional variety, le roman, usually dominates the secondary-level academic course of study, while reading and writing education in more professional oriented pathways typically focuses on non-narrative, non-fictional texts (“dits utiles”). To put it bluntly, educational institutions do not seek to develop the same reading competences in all students, more ostensibly so in French-speaking countries other than égalité-obsessed France. The students who choose – with more or
less agency – to pursue a technical education are provided with more factual, non-narrative texts. The near absence of opportunity to engage with narrative in general and fictional narrative in particular throughout the secondary level curriculum forcibly pushes this student population even farther away from the realm of literariness – which haunts those educational settings as well, albeit as a definitely inaccessible abstraction. Even though the prominence of fiction in the language arts curriculum differs depending on the educational orientation, the supremacy of literary reading remains a constant of French formal instruction contexts. By the very fact that overly close engagement with the referent is privileged in non-academic tracks, literary imagination is shown to impact all secondary-level trajectories, literariness being approached either as the desirable object that one should strive to master (academic tracks) or the top of a textual hierarchy that one cannot really pretend to access (professional orientations). Moreover, no matter the variation between post-primary orientations, the rupture dividing elementary and advanced reading education holds strong in terms of rapport au réel.


20 “Freire noted that, ‘it is the latter [the oppressed] who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both [the oppressors and the oppressed] the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle’”. Warner 2012, 42; “Freire believed that ‘the reader’s development of a critical comprehension of the text, and the sociohistorical context to which it refers, is an important factor in our notion of literacy’ … This is why the literacy lessons developed for Freire’s adult literacy projects invariably included scenes from the daily lives of his learners … and passages about the historical context of activities that were important to those learners” (Warner 2012, 45).


22 https://www.etemps.ch/culture/laura-nsafou-jai-coeur-diffuser-messages-afrofeministes-fiction-enfants?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter&fbclid=IwAR1vHjTnjTIW6AtpiJu9-Es3EpVu5DpqQMOGMuff4j-nd3hyOZaDPIoQg.

23 Chamoiseau’s concept of *Emerveille* is largely indebted to Glissant’s *Tout-monde / Relation: “Treatise on the Tout-monde* underlines the notion of relation, which recognizes and accepts diversity in the global world we live in today. In this specific term coined by Glissant, *Tout-monde* quantifies all the differences present in the world.” (https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2015/11/04/edouard-glissant/). In the third volume of the trilogy, indeed, “[t]he Tout-Monde has surfaced, as the global political present alters the manner in which the personal past is depicted” (Hardwick 80).

24 In the internal hierarchy of the *imaginaire littéraire*, however, stylistic features – the *langue littéraire* – trumps narrative ones. Chamoiseau, emphasizing the impact of the “mouvement général” on a reader’s experience, refuses the oppression of the *stylistique de l’écart*, instead underscoring the power of narration in particular and narrative in general, as he does elsewhere in the trilogy. Language can and should be a *langue-monde* inclusive of any and all *mots des tribus*, conveyor of what Alexandre Gegen calls “la richesse des pratiques scripturales” (19); content may become a place of “éclosion d’incompatibilités reliées” (Dinh Van 187); narrative writing is the one tradition to perpetuate, preferably in historically rich formats.

25 Walsh 40.
GENERAL CONCLUSION

Ceci n’est pas une idéologie?

Opposition and surrender to the imaginaire littéraire across the Francophonie

La littérature consiste à forger une langue étrangère dans la langue maternelle et, quand on fait accéder à la littérature les enfants et les adolescents, c’est cet abîme qu’elle crée…

Pierre Encrevé & Michel Braudeau

Et voilà comment on constitue une catégorie sociale, celle des hommes moins libres que soi.

Bertrand Daunay

This dissertation rests on the belief that much can be learned about social and individual representations relative to the development of an ability to engage with ‘literary’ texts, or to engage with texts in a ‘literary’ manner (rather than about the actual developmental process), by attending to the selective memory and rendition of a given ‘literary’ initiation. Non-metropolitan Francophone autobiographical accounts that focus on literary initiation – i.e. a great number of them – expose the complicated bearing of the French literary ideology on recollections involving a variety of geographical spaces not only bound by a language, but permeated by French culture:

Les auteurs du manifeste [Pour une littérature-monde en français, 2007] proclament ‘la fin de la francophonie’ et signent son ‘acte de décès’ pour célébrer la naissance d’une ‘littérature-monde en français’ … Mais ils confirment par là que le cadavre bouge encore … Le nom commun ‘francophonie’ remplit une fonction symbolique par la puissance de ses connotations idéologiques et politiques (Combe 40)

In this work, I have tried to acknowledge both this hetero- and homogeneity in inherited values and worldviews while exploring the hypothesis described above in two main moves.

The first part of my dissertation provided an extensive survey of scholarly approaches to representations of literary initiation. In the introduction, I exposed my definition of this concept and my intention to use it as an operational construct allowing for the most pertinent analysis of the textual surfacing of such representations. There already, I drew from a variety of perspectives on
the notion of representation (cognitive science, didactics, humanities) and explained that "initiation" is a convenient term in that it conveys more than formal education, more than the reader's development (that may or may not overlap with it), and is almost spiritually charged.

Indeed, as my first chapter showed, there is a spiritual dimension to 'literary' reading development, the latter being socially conceived as an extended ritual process culminating in access to the sacralized world of 'literariness' – at least according to the authors whose work I presented in that chapter. All of them defend the idea of a socially shared imaginaire littéraire, if not of an institutionally supported idéologie littéraire, that would not only exist but dramatically affect the learning and teaching of advanced reading in French-speaking areas.

Chapters 2 and 3 were conceived as a two-part survey of theoretical and empirical studies that shed light on representations of literary initiation as they appear, on the one hand, in non-literary-reputed discourses and, on the other hand, in narratives recognized as literary. I successively resorted to scholarly perspectives pertaining to social sciences and literary studies before addressing, in Chapter 4, the detail of one outstanding study bridging these two disciplinary fields. Brigitte Louichon sought to bring these resources together in order to best pinpoint and comprehend the recurring features characterizing representations of literary initiation.

The patterns identified and described in great detail by the didacticienne de la littérature overlap with those observed by her peers in a number of ways. Several elements on the list recapitulating them (see page 84) can be fused, leaving essential nodes to surface. Spatial dichotomy (school vs. out-of-school "scapes") is one version of a general division that also structures developmental stages (before / after the first taste of 'literature') and types, or styles, of reading (literal / distant, to be short); in its axiological nature and comfortable constancy, the two-world logic is a pillar of the imaginaire littéraire. The intimate connection between literary and sexual initiations is somehow ubiquitous too, being manifest, in a synesthetic manner, in the emergent reader's carnal engagement with the book's materiality as well as in her ecstatic experience of adult read-aloud. The encounter with littérature is ultimately an encounter with
oneself mediated by a *langue étrangère* that the adolescent reader (now a distant, distinguished one) recognizes as the most valuable aspect of textuality, being finally knowledgeable enough to prefer the “formules irradiantes qui aident à se dire” (Petit). Before literary coming-of-age is achieved, narrative fiction is considered interesting only to the extent that it functions as a mind-opening window on worlds much different from one’s own, i.e. in opposition to (self-)referential reading. Louichon’s conclusions regarding the aspects that – I contend – go insufficiently addressed across studies of *autobiographies de lecteur* boil down to two assertions: the impact of formal education on the protagonist’s literary initiation is close to nonexistent; generic diversity dissolves in the idea of a literary residue that gives – or denies – each text its value.

Having noted that the two themes of formal education and text genres are barely addressed in existing studies of reader trajectory narratives, including and even specifically in Louichon’s, I decided, in the second part of this dissertation, to verify whether those themes are really unimportant in such narratives, suspecting the contrary – namely that they matter as a core to which all other representational patterns are somehow related in an arborescent fashion. Because it had not been done enough, I chose to focus on the writing of an author from the Francophone ‘periphery’. I concluded Part 1 on this note and moved to confront the substance of this writing to the list of figures identified by Louichon and other scholars.

In Part 2, I ‘asked’ Chamoiseau questions pertaining to the two themes mentioned above, notably looking for a possible impact of geographical and cultural variation on the emergent reader protagonist’s *rapport au genre* and *rapport à l’Ecole*. I found that *Une enfance créole* and at least part of *Ecrire en pays dominé* are much more conflicted, fluctuating, sometimes self-contradictory as regards the features previously discussed than the French metropolitan works examined in the studies I surveyed. What I mean by this is that the *imaginaire littéraire* is both adopted and rejected throughout Chamoiseau’s multi-volume work, whereas auctorial positioning seems less complex in metropolitan *autobiographies* and *autofictions*. However, the sole analysis of Chamoiseau does not permit us to conclude that the observable ambivalence must be imputed
to cultural variation. Only the exploration of an extended corpus would legitimate such a claim or its invalidation.

This is why I would like to allot an important part of this general conclusion to an abridged version of the sort of study I hope to see conducted, or to conduct myself, in the aftermath of this dissertation: the examination of a corpus gathering numerous reader trajectory narratives from a variety of Francophone areas spread over several continents. This interlude is worth including in the conclusion precisely as such because it provides perspective on the work that has been conducted in Part 2 as well as a glimpse into several possible future fields of inquiry roughly sketched in this dissertation.

In this sample study, I will notably refer to writers who, like Chamoiseau, grew up at least partly in the French Caribbean: Gisèle Pineau (*L’exil selon Julia*), Raphaël Confiant (*Le cahier de romances*), Henri Corbin (*Sinon l’enfance*). The Maghreb will be represented by Algerian writer Rabab Belamri and his *Mémoire en archipel* as well as by the collection *Enfances tunisiennes* which includes admirable texts by Rabâa Abdelkéfi (*La fille du Cadi*), Ali Bécheur (*Introuvable*), Abdeljabbar El Euch (*Un hôte inattendu*), Aymen Hacen (*Scout toujours*), Mounira Khemir (*Un coin du carré bleu*), Amina Saïd (*Les racines du monde*), Walid Soliman (*Parmi les livres*). Another collection, French this time, will more or less directly account for the Parisian and provincial early bookshop experiences of Sophie Bassignac (*Le terrier et le moulin*), Arnaud Cathrine (*La Poterne*), Pierrette Fleutiaux (*Mes librairies*), Philippe Fusaro (*Ici se racontent la vie, la mort et les miracles*), Anne-Marie Garat (*Meilleur souvenir d’une librairie*), Lebanese-Canadian writer Abla Farhoud (*Toutes celles que j’étais*) will be cited along with the French Jean-Louis Baudry (*L’âge de la lecture*), Michèle Petit (*Une enfance au pays des livres*), Catherine Millet (*Une enfance de rêve*), Pierre Dumayet (*Autobiographie d’un lecteur*), Régine Detambel (*L’écrivaillon ou l’enfance de l’écriture*), Agnès Desarthe (*Comment j’ai appris à lire*), Annie Ernaux (*Les armoires vides*). The corpus will finally include two works by French-Congolese author Alain Mabanckou (*Demain j’aurai vingt ans, Lumières de Pointe-Noire*).
In what follows, I consider how the features mentioned above apply to these texts and how the latter compare to Chamoiseau in that regard. After doing so, I will return to the information conveyed in the dissertation and connect some of the dots on which my work as a whole has hopefully shed light.

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**On binary dynamics**

Louichon, and with her most other scholars, insists on the inequality of the two spaces that children protagonists navigate as they advance toward ‘literary’ adulthood: anything out-of-school will prove more interesting and be depicted in a more positive light than formal education experience. I have argued that Chamoiseau partly diverges from the *imaginaire littéraire* in that respect: *Une enfance créole* stages an out-of-school space unfit to provide the textual nutriment demanded by a child whose ‘literary’ development will very much rely on classroom and playground – that is, school-based – events. In addition, the family ‘scape’ is devoid of complete autonomy to the extent that it is partly dependent on, even submitted to, French formal education logic. Is the impact of school on ‘literary’ reading development always made to look truly negligible, negative, or both, as Louichon contends? Could an observable shift in this representation be corollary to the social and cultural environments in which the main protagonist – the “je” of the “Je” – is raised? The extended corpus constituted for the sake of this chapter is much polarized on this point and the fault line does not coincide with the one that may be assumed to separate non-metropolitan Francophone writers from authors fully educated in Hexagonal France.

Within the storyworlds I surveyed, a critical prerequisite for ‘literary’ reading development to be clearly exclusive of formal education’s influence is a surrounding out-of-school environment just as clearly favorable to textuality, in spirit and in effect. The situation that first comes to mind
and indeed quickly surfaces is a highly privileged one: an upper middle-class, typically white family of prolific readers; an early 'initiated', self-confident child therefore bound to despise school's introductory literature classes. Privilege ("A la maison, il y avait des bibliothèques partout", Petit 15) makes it possible to conceive and believe a story of ex nihilo reading acquisition:

Dans la classe où je pénètre pour la première fois en cours d'année, j'avance entre les rangées de pupitres, je m'assieds devant le bureau du maître qui m'a appelé, je déchiffrage les lignes du livre qu'il m'a tendu: je sais lire. (Baudry 8)

In these narratives, the slight superiority complex of protagonists who read earlier, more often, more proficiently than the "rest of them" is promptly validated and foregrounded in quite neutral terms even though it should be addressed in terms of cultural, social and economic status. This status also legitimates the perception of formal education as oppressive because it contrasts with a highly empowering milieu:

L'école m'a très rarement donné l'idée que ce qui était enseigné pouvait me concerner. Si j'ai appris quelque chose dans ces années-là, c'est à mes parents que je le dois. (Petit 63)

In addition to oppression, the formal literature classroom is a locus of frustration because the privileged emergent reader decides early on that it will not frame any meaningful learning. The ultimate difference between the two spaces is to be found in the extent to which each one leaves room for a conception of reading as a source of pleasure and freedom ("il ne me semble pas que l'on ait tenté, à l'école primaire, de nous donner le goût de lire.", Petit 50) ; "A l'école, la lecture était une discipline", Detambel; "Le Lagarde et Michard … t'avait dégoûté à tout jamais des études littéraires", Confiant ; "Quant au plaisir de lire, il était très loin", Dumayet). Less privileged social spaces can also provide early access to textuality. In my corpus, the process in such context resembles the one depicted in Une enfance créole: low-brow genres come first (whether at home or in the library bric-à-brac), together with a sense of sacredness that precedes and at first presides over the notion of reading pleasure, even though (and perhaps because) family life precisely does not revolve around book culture. Like Chamoiseau, Pineau for instance fondly
conveys memories of her manman reading romance: “Les lettres réunies d’une certaine façon ont un pouvoir sur elle. Et même refermé, le livre n’est jamais un objet comme un autre”.

School, on the other hand, remains synonymous with a painful experience, particularly so in postcolonial contexts:

Tu n’avais, à dix-sept ans, jamais vu, jamais lu une seule phrase de créole de toute ta vie! Aucun de tes professeurs n’avait jugé utile de t’en faire étudier une (Confiant 220-1).

Negative representations of formal literature education seem – so far at least – to transcend geographical boundaries. In many of these works, the key criterion for book selection from the child’s point of view is that “il ne s’agissait pas d’un livre de classe” (Fleutiaux) – as if the imaginaire littéraire demanded that one take position against such education upon sharing her memories. This urge to condemn institutional approaches to literature can generate contradictory statements, such as a high praise for a particular teacher immediately following a condemnation of teachers as a group (also a feature of Chamoiseau’s Ecrire en pays dominé), or these sentences by Petit:

Le lycée m’a rendu les textes classiques illisibles et je n’en suis pas encore remise. Pourtant, j’y ai appris par coeur nombre de poésies ou de tirades que je regrette d’avoir oubliées (62)

Petit also notes being bored to death by the dictées made to offer “incursions en littérature” – even though dictées appear to foster advanced engagement with language, literature, and knowledge in general when practiced at home (“Je renâclais, mais cela faisait son chemin”, 63). The space of the culturally privileged home in particular is claimed to be radically different from the language and literature classroom’s even as it is shown to validate its structure and mission, which the narrator implicitly acknowledges as a benefit.

Indeed, if its explicit rejection is a staple of numerous reader trajectory narratives, formal language and literature education still imbues the children’s life beyond the classroom and does so with the young readers’ tacit approval. The awareness of the split of one’s textual world into these two spaces, but of the actual porosity of the boundary as well, is particularly marked in
narratives of non-metropolitan childhoods. Abdelkéfi describes the invading of one space by the other as an experience of colonization:

Malgré ma farouche volonté de séparer mes deux mondes, l'école et sa culture firent leur insidieuse entrée dans ma vie familiale. (15)

Here also the ambivalence has to do with the extent to which the influence of formal education is welcome in out-of-school life. Non-metropolitan autobiographies in this case do not include depictions of resistance as much as metropolitan works do. Even though the collision of the “deux royaumes psychiques et culturels” is presumably a tragedy, it is often not perceived as such by the protagonists, a fact that might signify the (neo)colonizer’s success and / or the favorably meaningful complementarity of the two cultural spaces. Bécheur joyfully evokes bringing literary language back from school (“une enfance qui, écartelée entre deux mondes, cherche ses mots. C’est dans l’autre monde que je les ai trouvés”, 24). Despite her attempts to dissociate “vie scolaire” from “vie familiale” – “ces deux mondes ne pouvant, me semblait-il, se comprendre” – Abdelkéfi learns about littérature from her sisters who are themselves discovering it at school (“elles me l’enseignaient”). El Euch, like Chamoiseau, fondly remembers performing storytelling at recess; Saïd is infinitely grateful to the teacher who encouraged her to write for herself, Confiant thinks of his teacher’s advice as he starts to do so; Farhoud had to leave school as a teenager but depicts a personal world on which literature education had a lasting impact. Only one author from Hexagonal France across my corpus makes this confession: “j’ai aimé l’école” (Millet). Still, in most of the French metropolitan contexts under scrutiny, a particular body of texts reveals the non-hermeticity of the two spaces at stake and the variability in children’s feelings toward institutional and social prescriptions as regards emergent reading practices: the Bibliothèque rose and its green equivalent. The (nowadays classical) child literature collection is not included in the school curriculum but it is defined, and typically recognized by parents, as “la seule lecture valide” outside of the classroom:

nos parents avaient foi en l’école républicaine et en mon avenir de postière, voire d’institutrice si tout marchait bien. C’est pourquoi j’avais toute licence de lire les livres de la bibliothèque enfantine. (Garat)
The near hegemony of the two Bibliothèques in the metropolitan (lower to upper) middle class child’s bibliothèque triggers one of two reactions: either a “déconvenue haineuse” or smooth and comfortable engagement with what the protagonist and narrator agree to understand as ‘good’ textuality. While some, like Desarthe, reject the stereotyped nature of the Bibliothèque rose together with the “habit austère, vieillot” of the Bibliothèque verte, Millet remembers adopting them, partly because she was simultaneously offered access to a variety of other books (“livres de poche”, “éditions anciennes”) that provided balance. Garat adopts them too, for the opposite reason: amidst the chaos of non-literary printed material present at home, the Bibliothèques provide a reassuring direction – one approved by the (adult / institutional) authority – and stand as a first step toward literary initiation.

The case of the Bibliothèques and the variability in perceptions of the school’s intrusion in the out-of-school space suggest that in contemporary autobiographies de lecteur, (1) formal literature education plays a role as a prescriptor in ‘literary’ reading development even outside of school; (2) this role isn’t systematically negative; and (3) both observations hold true independently of geographical boundaries.

On developmental ruptures

Louichon considers that reader trajectory narratives follow clearly delineated developmental stages that are also steps in a linear, hierarchical evolution. To this vision, Une enfance créole opposes the notion of a coil-shaped progression implying regular reinforcements of previously encountered funds of knowledge – the very notion on which current research in didactique du français is being erected. Yet, Chamoiseau’s text also suggests the existence of foundational ruptures, most notably between two types of reading.

In this case, the scission within my corpus is noteworthy: with the exception of Corbin, authors who emphasize the latter distinction were all educated in the Hexagon. Desarthe’s, Baudry’s and Detambel’s protagonists all identify a “savoir vraiment lire” that they respectfully
long to gain access to. Early on, Desarthe censors her fascination with the cartoonish Marsupilami on ‘literary’ grounds:

Ce n’est pas ainsi que je vais pénétrer le monde secret que partagent mon père et mon frère, ce n’est pas ainsi que je vais réussir mon initiation. (28)

Fusaro, a keen reader of the Bibliothèques evoked earlier, describes enjoying and taking the greatest care of these volumes as well as, later on, of those published in the Folio collection; and still: “La littérature est venue plus tard”. Before literary coming-of-age happens, the child “ne lit pas vraiment ou plutôt il lit comme on ne lira guère plus tard” (Baudry 97), both reading styles appearing extremely hard to define other than by intimate conviction:

J’en revenais toujours à cette évidence: je ne savais pas lire … Mais il y eut des moments où j’eus le sentiment de lire enfin (52)

To perform expert reading and enter a sacralized world, the reader must “renonc[er] aux apparen
ces pour pénétrer plus profond” (Detambel). Corbin relentlessly transcribes excerpts from the classiques, hoping to teach himself to appreciate “les tournures luxuriantes des Belles Lettres, à me forger un embryon de culture” for which “sentimentalité” is of no use. In the same way, the “romans” (Les lettres de mon moulin, Les misérables…) cannot be compared to the “difficile voix poétique” (sic) of Césaire and Glissant. The journey will be long – and linear for sure; one day, the négrillon or écrivaillon finds out that it happened: “il savait lire” (Detambel).

In Chamoiseau, the mother figure offers an alternative pathway to and throughout textual awakening even if the institutional shadow looms large. She acts as a passeuse de littérature in a non-traditional way, providing the négrillon with a multitude of genres, showing surprise at his appetite for reading yet encouraging it in all possible ways. In only one instance, she appears worried at the sight of “son petit dernier, effacé dans ses draps, inanimé dans ses lectures” (EPD 43). The parents in my corpus behave in a much more inconsistent manner when it comes to emergent reading practices. Most of them are explicitly described as ambivalent (“admiration”, “inquiétude”, “agitation”, “paradoxe d’une obligation … et interdiction”) regarding the protagonists’ sustained engagement with books:
il sort de la maison, va vers sa voiture et revient deux minutes plus tard avec un petit livre qu’il tend vers moi … Comme je mets trop de temps sur une page, mon oncle m’arrache le livre des mains. — Michel, ne lis pas! C’est des choses que tu ne peux pas comprendre pour l’instant. (Mabanckou 2010, 149-50)

—Toi, tu te moques de ce qu’il nous arrive. On va peut-être arrêter ton père, cette nuit, et tu es là à regarder ton livre! (Belamri 81)

In a number of texts, reading is supposed to empower the child as a student rather than as a person:

On aurait voulu que l’enfant sache lire avant d’avoir appris, mais on ne souhaitait pas non plus le voir en possession d’un pareil pouvoir. (Baudry 14)

Meanwhile, Petit’s parents attempt to enforce “quelque chose à quoi il fallait se plier, un Ordre de la lettre”:

Aux écrits que l’on me recommandait était attachée l’idée de ‘bons’ livres. Ils se donnaient les apparences de livres, mais n’en étaient pas. Ils étaient le véhicule de la volonté qu’avaient les adultes de s’immiscer dans ce que j’avais de plus protégé. De faire dériver mon désir vers ce qui était conforme au leur (50)

The attitude of metropolitan parents in particular imposes onto the child a representation of reading as split into types, which vision the child alone probably would not have considered. They are, in this sense, truly teacher figures as they unconsciously contribute to perpetuate the ideological conception of ‘literary’ reading as superior. By all means, the avid reader must be distracted from the lowbrow reading material he adores:

On avait désormais interdit à l’écrivaillon de lire et d’écrire … Pour que les jouets servent de tremplin à l’élan créateur que tous les enfants doivent connaître pour s’épanouir, on avait confisqué son bureau, caché les sept tomes de Tout l’Univers (Detambel)

On nous avait reproché de ne pas lire, mais subrepticement on nous empêchait de lire. (Baudry)

Non literary-reputed and/or institutionally validated fictional narratives are considered with particular suspicion (“aux yeux de nos parents ces livres ne méritaient pas la dépense du temps pour les lire”, Garat). As the Manman in Pineau’s narrative asserts, “la vie, c’est pas des romans” (217). Life is tragic, like the content of the “vraie littérature” that Petit’s parents hope to eventually initiate her to – and that will indeed become Petit’s (as well as Millet’s) “délice de l’âge adulte”.

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On sensual experience: listening

Louichon emphasizes the importance of oral textuality (read-aloud, storytelling) in emergent reader protagonists’ out-of-school life. *Une enfance créole* partly deviates from this model in that it grants equal formative weight to oral, notably choral reading performed in the classroom and to the Creole *Parole*, both paving the way to the explosive discovery of Césaire’s poetry. In my sample corpus, orality is clearly attached to the space outside of school but the manners in which it manifests itself and the reasons why it matters to the protagonists seem to be culturally specific. Tales belonging to traditions other than the one promoted by l’*École* give Caribbean and African childhoods their tempo. Beyond the difference in their respective families’ social-economic status and access to French high-brow culture, Tunisian Khemir, Saïd, Soliman, Algerian Belamri, French-Congolese Mabanckou and Lebanese-Canadian Farhoud all reminisce about the “récits et légendes” shared by parents and grandparents. The recurrent mentions of family storytelling can be explained – and indeed are usually explained by narrators – in reference to the fascination and respect for a priceless cultural inheritance perceived as such even in childhood. But the gift of an ancestral narrative isn’t remembered for its symbolical dimension as much as for its mesmerizing content, which can in fact be quite eclectic and suggest, already, the relevance of perceiving the text as a *Tout-Monde*:

Les récits de Man Ya ourlent d’autres visions tirées des *Contes et Légendes des Antilles* de Thérèse Georgel, bâties des débris et brocards de la télévision (Pineau)

The worlds conveyed by the Lebanese, Tunisian or Creole narrative *bric-à-brac* are both estranging and familiar; they capture and retain the young audience’s interest in a way that the sole characteristics of the declamation could not achieve. It is mostly about the story – and the awareness of cultural transmission. Metropolitan *biographies de lecteur* on the other hand foreground the children’s attention to expression: style; cadence; tone; poetic quality. Petit is introduced to 16th-century poetry through an electrophone, Millet to Balzac via a radio read-aloud:
Desarthe describes an early addiction to a tale’s audio version in which the “voix suave du narrateur” plays a heavy part. Dumayet recounts the impact of a translated radio adaptation of Conan Doyle that he experienced as a “lecture amplifiée”. There is a pattern to notice here: the oral storytelling experiences described in metropolitan childhood narratives very often rely on a disembodied medium. In-person storytelling involves intense physical dramatization that turns narrative developments and characters’ temperaments into a highly concrete matter, favoring a focus on content rather than on discursive form: the story “feels real”. It also feels familiar, in that the storyteller typically is a relative of the child, which consolidates the likelihood of a particularly deep attention to the recounted twists and turns: the nuances of the voice and prosody conveying them are not surprising or intimidating anymore. Those on the radio are. The child listener confronted with unknown enunciation is naturally driven to scrutinize the tone and vocabulary, to remember details of the phrasing, to rapidly assign value to stylistic features – all the more since the impersonating performance that might redirect her interest onto the story (specifically gestural and facial expression) is absent. The future ‘distinguished’ readers who discover fictional narrative read-aloud in this way are privileged in regard to the social expectations conveyed by representations of literary reading: the conditions of the discovery foster early distance-taking from the monde raconté and accelerated development of an awareness of ‘literary’ form. Indeed – and this is the third aspect in respect to which recorded and live, embodied storytelling differ – the oral text, in such a case, is in fact written. As mentioned before, it is read aloud (“lecture oralisée”, Ronveaux and Ragno Paquier 20) to a young audience that is therefore introduced to a specific kind and quality of language. In Chamoiseau already, one of the most important scenes of engagement with written language centers oral reading:

A toute lecture, le Maître buvait un fin sirop. Il prenait plaisir à sucer lettre après lettre le français déployé sur des scènes bucoliques. Dévoué au concert des syllabes, il les détachait de manière emphatique, les rythmait selon une loi intime. Sa voix se creusait aux virgules. Sur les points, elle s’immobilisait tandis que son regard sévère nous contrôlait. Il faisait du point-virgule une culbute de silence. Le point d’exclamation aspirait, pour les rompre, des gonflades de sa voix. Une mise entre
parenthèses le déplaçait de deux pas sur la gauche, en retrait, avec le ton des apartés … Paragraphe achevé, il baissait la paupière pour suivre en lui-même le cheminement religieux de ce qu’il venait de lire. (CE 160-1)

This language, the formal one, is identified as superior by many of the child protagonists who feel torn between two cultures. When the protagonist in Hacen’s Scout toujours improvises an oration in front of an audience of peers, he does not seek to reproduce the familiar storytelling veillée. Rather, he aims to distinguish himself with “un moment de poésie française” that notably involves exhibiting the “accent franco-français” admired by the elders (“brillamment [il] lisait et parlait la langue de ceux qu’ils vénéraient autant qu’ils les méprisaient”) (Hacen 107-9). The child does not belong to the group of protagonists who are consistently and early provided with out-of-school access to the “oralisation d’un texte littéraire”, who are smoothly initiated to its langue étrangère by means of an “image acoustique typifiée” (Ronveaux and Ragno Paquier 20). School enabled his demonstrated mastery. In semi-fictional accounts of non-metropolitan childhoods, memorable form-centered oral language experiences take place in the classroom first, just as they do in Chamoiseau’s narrative, because encounters with oral foregrounding of formal language features very rarely happen before school beginnings.

On sensual experience: physical contact

Analyses of reader trajectory narratives, and those conducted by Louichon in particular, indicate the essential role of materiality in representations of literary initiation. The carnal dimension of the children’s interaction with the objet-livre mirrors the development of their own libido, which seems to start with those intimate moments and to intertwine with progression toward ‘literary’ coming-of-age. Some protagonists additionally draw from book content to explore emergent sensual urges, further blurring boundaries between the two sorts of development. The reader of Une enfance créole is regularly reminded that the négrillon’s adventure in the sensory wonderland of book culture is also a tale of two initiations. The staging of his longing for Gabine – who stands for both an embodied petite-fille and a Dame pictured according to representations of
the coveted sexual object in medieval romance – celebrates the confusion. Chamoiseau’s narrative fits the *imaginaire littéraire* in that the sexual dimension of literary initiation essentially reveals itself in an out-of-school setting. But the French language and literature classroom also ensures moments of intense carnal connection with ‘literary’ book culture as the mesmerized student observes the *Maître*’s attitude and gestures which he will later replicate. When the analogy between literary and sexual initiations materializes at school, it substitutes itself to the religious analogy (or the spiritual adoration of a sacred *reliquie*, as identified notably by Guiney) which makes it even more powerful.

In my Francophone corpus, the material nature of engagement with textuality and the expansion of libido that it propels are ubiquitous and most often connected themes. Books appear to have a skin (Pineau, Millet), a body that is initially pure but subject to stains and scratches, a body that is also a unique source of “plaisir” and “trouble” (Detambel): “Il en est des livres comme de certaines femmes” (Baudry 61). The analogy can be more subtle, like in this description of an interaction with wilted volumes:

*Je les ai caressés quand même, avec un peu de pitié pour la marquise de Merteuil qui voulait sûrement apparaître dans sa même splendeur.* (Pineau 218)

Throughout the corpus, the kind of sensual transgression fostered by engagement with books overwhelmingly happens outside of the classroom:

*Si j’ai commencé à lire d’autres livres que des bandes dessinées ou des romans scouts, mes quêtes des mystères du sexe y furent donc pour beaucoup. L’école, en revanche, pour rien ou presque.* (Petit 61)

A foundational difference between school and out-of-school reading practices is to be located at the level of bodily and emotional freedom. Text content and book materiality are equally important in the sensual discovery process:

*L’érótisme discret que distillait à merveille cet auteur italien contribuait à assouvir tes fantasmes d’adolescent en proie à la puberté.* (Confiant 114-5)

*l’écruillaon continuait de promener ses yeux et ses doigts sur le papier, pour sa douceur, son odeur ... En vérité, ce livre, l’écruillaon ne l’a pas lu mais seulement cajolé.* (Detambel)
In Farhoud, teenage infatuation proves the decisive accelerator of ‘literary’ awakening (e.g. Musset). Dumayet, Baudry additionally convoke the spiritual analogy evoked earlier: “le verbe devenait chair” (Baudry). So do Millet and Belamri – but in both cases, religious education (bible study, Koranic school) frames sensual elevation just like l’Ecole does in Chamoiseau. Although it is not the rule, educational institutions may indirectly make it possible for this kind of subversive experience to surface, at least in memory; and there is no cultural divide within my corpus as regards this configuration.

On memorable books: the odious classic, the livre qui délivre

In Une enfance créole and Ecrire en pays dominé, equivocal evocations of the pathway to the livre décisif, of the role of patrimonial textuality in literary awakening, and especially of the respective roles of generic diversity and specificities are all expressions of a difficult negotiation with the imaginaire littéraire. Chamoiseau maintains a slight ambiguity regarding the nature of the impact of the traditional French canon on the négrillon’s ‘literary’ reading development. The topos of the classiques – endured in and for the institution – is more distinctly present in my extended corpus, and its impact most definitely negative.

The works imposed on the children protagonists by the institution are part of a corpus scolaire that remained largely untouched from the 1920s to the late 1960s despite notable progress toward a reappraisal of the ends and means of language and literature education (see Bishop 2009, among others). From the 1950s on, in particular, evolutions (in conceptions of reading, in curricular design) get counterbalanced by continuity (in the imaginaire littéraire and its practical enactment). Two visions of literature education coexist: literature as a means to an end (moral education) and literature “comme une fin en soi” (Bishop). During these years – which see the development of most of our protagonists – the curricular pantheon is still very much devoted to 17th to 19th century authors; it invariably features Victor Hugo’s poetry, the Fables de La Fontaine, Bossuet’s Oraisons, the plays of Molière, and other works considered supportive of
education’s moral and cultural mission, all reduced to *morceaux choisis* in the notorious *manuels* ("J’essaie de penser aux livres qu’on a lus en classe mais c’est que des petits bouts…", Mabanckou 2010, 120). Modern and *complete* works suitable for a young audience (by Anatole France, Pierre Loti, Marcel Pagnol, Jules Renard) largely remain to be included in the *corpus scolaire*. Until then – provided that the latter texts are favorably welcome by the student audience – emergent reader characters are bound to suffer:

> je me crois doué d’une solidité invulnérable me permettant d’affronter l’étude des Classiques enseignés scolairement, mais ces génies suscitent partiellement mon intérêt, vu l’emploi fastueux de leurs mots défraîchis, leurs palabres sous un lustre, leur embrouillamini mythologique. (Corbin)

> Quant aux textes étudiés en classe, je les ai oubliés. (Je les ai retrouvés par hasard.) Je crois me souvenir qu’on nous apprenait à démonter les tragédies, comme nos adjudants, un peu plus tard, nous enseignerait l’art de remonter un fusil: les yeux bandés. Comme si nous avions envie d’écrire des tragédies, à la barbe de Corneille. (Dumayet)

> Malgré les prouesses de tes différents professeurs de français, il était hors de question pour toi d’imaginer une carrière tout au long de laquelle tu passerais ton temps à tenter d’intéresser, par trente degrés de chaleur, des nègrillons et des petits mulâtres à des *morceaux choisis* de Boileau, de Montesquieu ou de Balzac. (Confiant)

To the crushing *Belles Lettres*, Confiant and Corbin oppose the vibrant, alive and kicking *littérature* (sic) that they will have access to one day, surely outside the classroom. There might even be some hope for the classics to reveal themselves interesting after all, when they get rediscovered in the daylight, like Chamoiseau’s *livres endormis*:

> Jamais je n’ai eu la chance, dans ces années, de tomber sur l’un de ces enseignants qui vous feraient croire que les classiques ont été écrits juste pour vous, qu’ils sont frais comme un œuf du jour. (Corbin)

> Tu en avais conclu qu’à l’école (et à l’université forcément), on s’occupait surtout des ‘Lettres’, tandis que, dans la vie réelle, on avait affaire à cette chose magnifique, multiforme, enthousiasmante, délicieuse qu’était la ‘Littérature’. (Confiant 235-6)

From the protagonists’ point of view, what matters most about the works at stake is whether or not they belong to the *corpus scolaire*; should it be the case, they cannot be worthy of attention, either because teaching methods make it impossible to appreciate them, or simply because they are imposed by a generally oppressive institution, which implies that they must be detestable. Rimbaud’s *œuvre* was long excluded from the French curriculum (“à peine mentionnée dans mes *manuels scolaires*”, Corbin) and it is in those times of absence that three of our protagonists find
deeply enlightening meaning in his *Illuminations*, discovered out of the classroom – together with “Apollinaire, Artaud, Saint-John Perse, Michaux, tous ces poètes qui, en marche, consolident, refusent, ensorcellent, fondent” (ibid. 33). True poets refuse (and are refused by) institutions; their wor(l)d is constant movement; they generate energy on and off paper… At least they are perceived as such in explicit contrast with the “Classiques enseignés scolairement”. While Chamoiseau rather chooses to focus on his own inability to engage with the *livres endormis* before a certain age, it is the imposing presence of these *livres* into the official curriculum (together with the relatively inept approaches to their teaching) that is considered highly regrettable across my corpus – even though the inclusion of other texts, among which Rimbaud’s, might foster new rejections: the *Illuminations* are considered a classic today and are repudiated on these grounds by entire cohorts of students.

Chamoiseau’s *négrillon* encounters his own *livre décisif* outside of school, but the initiation to poeticity had started within the classroom; in Chamoiseau at least, school partly enables the surfacing of an ability to ‘literarily’ engage with textuality that precedes and lays the ground for the advent of literary coming-of-age. In this sense, the *imaginaire littéraire* does not entirely define the perspective on the topos of the *livre décisif* that underlies *Une enfance créole* and *Ecrire en pays dominé*, just like other features of the literary imagination are approached with nuance throughout Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing. On the other hand, the decisive text in the *négrillon’s* trajectory evidently stands out by its stunning poetic quality – its use of language, its “voix” – way before the content gets considered, which fits traditional representations of literariness. The situation goes the other way round in my larger corpus. The determining reading events evoked unfold against an out-of-school background essentially; in this sense they match representations of literary initiation. The dissonance this time involves the suggested reasons why a *livre* turns out *décisif* in an emergent reader’s life, which themselves demonstrate the importance of generic diversity and specificities in advanced reading development. The decisive text may be literary-reputed or assigned to low-brow culture; it may be recognized – and valued – as poetic, as narrative, or as purely language-focused. Across the corpus, these books make for
a widely eclectic ensemble both in generic terms and in respect to the traditional hierarchy. From a praised short story by Sartre (Cathrine) to San Antonio and Le Petit prince (Mabanckou), from the now completely forgotten Madame Thérèse (Dumayet) to Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, again (Corbin), the levels of cultural legitimacy shown to impact the development of a future ‘literary’ reader are many. As far as livres décisifs go, fictional narratives, poetry and (quite surprisingly) dictionaries cohabitate. Rimbaud plays havoc with the minds of Corbin, Mabanckou and Dumayet’s protagonists. Petit, Hacen, Baudry, Corbin, Detambel all identify the dictionnaire as the definitive catalyst of advanced reading development. To Petit, the dictionnaire is, because of its size, material perfection unlocked; Hacen sees it as a bridge connecting two worlds; Baudry turns to dictionaries after getting disappointed by the fictional narratives he is exposed to; Corbin’s and Detambel’s child personas use the dictionary in a deliberately strategic manner, to gain control over lexical items and the realities they refer to (words and worlds) as well as to ideally reach a “certaine aisance stylistique”:

je négocie un pacte avec le dictionnaire, ce vieux compère à l'aspect éléphantesque, vêtu d'une jaquette grisâtre et usée. D'abord méprisé, je l'avais exilé sous mon lit pour écarter de ma vue sa monstruosité rebutante … mais un jour effaré dans le labyrinthe d'un mot coriace à décortiquer, j'implore sa pitié, il me pardonne en être compatissant et m'ouvre les portes de son grenier culturel dans lequel, désormais, je me mets à puiser fructueusement. (Corbin)

Il se moquait de l'orthographe, mais il apprit, par un effort de volonté, à faire mouvoir le mot comme il le désirait. (Detambel 71)

Attraction to fictional narratives spans across the corpus independently of geographical areas. Soliman cherishes the Mille et une nuits until the discovery of Camus’ L’étranger, the latter being recognized as important but definitely less powerful than the former. Belamri is captivated by the animal protagonists’ adventures featured in the Fables de la Fontaine. Confiant finds solace in Glissant’s novel La Lézarde which is published as he enters the Lycée and finally provides a first experience with a familiar storyworld. Collections of tales offered by unidentified adult acquaintances are foregrounded in both Pineau and Millet and mirror each other in an interesting way. Millet is “extrêmement impressionnée” by a book titled Contes et légendes du Moyen Âge français (“adaptation de chansons de geste, de fabliaux, du Roman de Renart et de récits
courtois")]; Pineau dedicates countless hours to "piller les pages" of her copy of *Contes et légendes des Antilles*:

les Antilles n’en finissent jamais d’emplir les sacs vides de ma quête. Là, rien ni personne, pas même le temps, ne meurt jamais tout à fait. (Pineau 163)

**On generic diversity**

Picture books and *bandes dessinées* abound in my extended corpus together with a multitude of perhaps unexpected *imprimés*. Like Chamoiseau, Petit and Baudry detail an initial fascination for *images fixes* and its dissolution as the attraction (verging on addiction) to narrative dynamics takes over. We know that reading events are almost always remembered together with a specific emotional state, and it is interesting that Petit, Baudry, Desarthe and Millet all associate children’s literature reading with angst, infinite sadness, or terror; interesting in part because they all are metropolitan authors. Chamoiseau notably never mentions any such potential aspect of the *négrillon*’s experience – while the writers above listed dedicate full paragraphs to these feelings:

Rien ne sera plus jamais comme avant. On m’a révélé un secret très grave, très menaçant … des trillions d’éclats de verre pénètrent parfois, quel malheur, dans l’œil d’un enfant qui devient alors atrocement méchant (Desarthe 23)

La cruauté inouïe d’un livre de lecture qui nous fut distribué suscita en moi un état neurasthénique (Millet 107)

The *bande dessinée* on the other hand propels passionate, almost euphoric reading sessions. Like in Chamoiseau, the narratively organized assemblage of panels, estranging storyworld and adventures, awaited succession of episodes ("ces merveilles renouvelées chaque semaine", Petit) provide children with endless delight:

J’ai rarement retrouvé en lisant l’enchantedment absolu que j’ai eu dans ces moments-là … Grâce aux bandes dessinées, je décampais, à toutes jambes … C’était encore la juxtaposition, le rassemblement des vignettes qui m’exaltaient. (Petit 36-7; 43)

Astérix, Lucky Luke, les Schtroumpfs … C’est vertigineux. (Desarthe)

[L]es héros, séquestrés dans cette pièce, avaient du mal à repartir pour d'autres aventures parce que nous les retenions, de peur qu'ils aillent fasciner d'autres gamins de l'étranger. (Mabanckou 2013, 238)
Audiovisual media (cinema, TV shows) also make frequent appearances. They indirectly play a twofold role in the protagonists’ developing engagement with textuality. First, movies in particular highlight the highly memorable power of (active) reading as opposed, in this case, to (passive) watching:

... les souvenirs que je garde de Blanche-Neige, je les dois bien davantage au petit livre cartonné que l'on m'offrit par la suite. (Baudry 94)

While Confiant finds himself easily distracted by unrelated thoughts at the movie theater, “[p]ar contre, l'espace-temps de la lecture était ... totalement inviolable.” (174). To Petit, who struggles to see the “vitalité” granted to Disney movies in the ancient-looking “albums du Père Castor (“auxquels je conserve toute ma tendresse”), a crucial issue with cinema, which is indirectly raised in Chamoiseau, is that it prevents the viewer from holding to anything. Images are just glimpsed at before they fly by. Because of that, to many protagonists, going to the movies mostly means enjoying a moment de rêverie (“se laisser charroyer par la féerie des images”, Confiant 184) hardly imaginable in other times or places: Millet does not exclude movies from the media worth considering but only insofar as they will satisfy a need for “rêvasserie”. To children protagonists raised in areas haunted by colonial violence, audiovisual media mean something else as well. This is the second way in which movie or TV watching affects the emergent reader, echoing this time the effect of many of her readings past and future:

Tu y décelais la toute-puissance du monde des Blancs car, à quatorze ou quinze ans, tu savais bien que ces personnalités grotesquement vêtues à tes yeux régentaient la terre entière. C’était si vrai que, les deux ou trois fois où apparurent sur l’écran les visages noirs-charbon de présidents africains, ils te parurent empruntés dans leurs costumes-cravate trop amples, des sortes de pantins de carnaval, des guignols dont on tirait les ficelles en coulisse. (Confiant 185)


The on-screen absence of relatable characters negates the youngster’s identity and questions the value of her existence in an equally brutal and disarming manner (“Ce monde froid et gris –
'Gaumont-Actualités’ était en noir et blanc – te semblait irréel et fascinant à la fois”, Confiant 185). The two definitions of screen watching as a space for “rêvasserie” and as symbolical violence are present also in Chamoiseau, although they are not discussed in studies such as Louichon’s.

Plays, however, are never evoked in Une enfance créole. In my corpus, they rise to the very top of the affective hierarchy of text genres in two young female characters’ trajectories. Farhoud and Desarthe both find in theater “exactement ce qu'[on] ne trouve pas dans la lecture” (Desarthe): bodily engagement with textuality intense enough to boost self-confidence, to develop language and story expertise, to offer a kind of life education that books will never be able to provide (“Sur les planches, les textes classiques vivaient, ils dansaient le menuet, ils riaient, ils tremblaient.” (Farhoud 69). To Farhoud, theater quickly becomes a “rampe de survie” the same way that writing turns out to be a “tracée de survie” for Chamoiseau’s négrillon; survival strategies are demanded of the immigrant child and his Creole counterpart by worlds intrinsically hostile to their assigned Otherness.

Beyond children's literature or bandes dessinées, there are a myriad printed genres that come and go in our protagonists’ lives, some to lastingly leave their mark. They may or may not be books; in the latter case, they are easier to access thanks to their lower cost, the volume of their postal travel, their availability in bureaux de poste across the Francophone world and abundance at the market librairies par terre evoked by Caribbean and African protagonists. Magazines are therefore cross-border essential reading. In Petit, Cathrine, Millet, Hacen, Confiant, Pineau, “Pif le communiste” proves a great hit closely followed by Le Journal de Mickey, Spirou, Salut les Copains and funnily enough, Lui. Catalogues (La Redoute for Mabanckou, Le Bon Marché for Baudry, anything toy-focused for Dumayet, anything at all for Pineau) hold a strong second position. Other than these two classiques (sic) of low-brow printed culture, the leisure corpus that emerges is an entanglement of genres and cultural values bringing together the Liaisons dangereuses, billiards and mineralogy treatises, France Soir, river fishing manuals, encyclopedias, Les Fleurs du mal, the Manuel des Castors Juniors, the now famous dictionaries
– and even school books. All boils down to Dumayet’s word: “Il y avait une certaine cohérence
dans tout cela”. Indeed, Chamoiseau emphasizes the importance of exposure to a great variety of
text genres and the differentiated influence of each on ‘literary’ reading development, two aspects
that Louichon sees as insignificant factors in reader trajectory narratives…

On narrative fiction

As a genre, narrative fiction stands out throughout the négrillon’s emergent reader
trajectory. For one, its proliferating influence exposes both the distinction and porosity between
reality and fiction. More importantly, the recurring centrality of narrativity and fictionality in the
child’s journey questions the dominant conception according to which interest in ‘literary’
language would at some point take precedence over an early hunger for fictional narrative
content. Last but not least, it brings to the forefront the underexplored issue of children’s need for
(self-)referential reading. All the texts in my extended corpus refer in one or several instances to
the two transitional functions of books as either windows or mirrors. In so doing, they reveal
culturally different experiences. Non-metropolitan protagonists are entirely aware of the
discrepancy between their world of reference and the storyworlds they are continuously exposed
to (“[t]out cela contrastait très fort avec l’insolence solaire de ton île…”, Confiant), a disorienting
gap that eventually triggers highly memorable emotions ranging from helplessness to anger and /
or acceptance. The child initially wonders about the impossibility to find a reflection of her world in
the printed objects she is surrounded by, sometimes choosing to cling on to plain and simple
imaginative resistance (Gendler):

[M]aman Pauline se penche vers moi, me touche juste la tête, mais ne me donne pas un baiser
comme dans ces livres qu’on nous lit en classe et qui se passent en Europe, surtout en France.
(Mabanckou 2010, 22)

Tu ne la voyais pas du tout blanche, elle ne pouvait ressembler à une femme de gendarme. Non!
Nana était une chabine à la chair plantureuse, une femme créole délurée et brusquante tout à la
fois. (Confiant 177)
Then comes frustration:

Très tôt, je regardais longuement des albums reçus en guise de prix de fin d'année, comme Martine à la foire. Mais moi, je rêvais d'une foire orientale qui aurait pour seul et unique parfum la LIBERTE. (Khemir)

… tu aspires à lire des livres qui parlaient de chez toi, du pays, de ses légendes, qui évoquaient ses paysages. (Confiant)

Pineau’s child protagonist, upon returning to Martinique after several years in metropolitan France, evokes essentially one hope:

je vais trouver là-bas des livres qui racontent des vies d'hommes et de femmes noirs, des histoires d'amour, des récits d'aventures où tous les héros sont des Noirs. Des Petits Poucets, des Belles au bois dormant, des Chats bottés noirs. (232)

Swimming in an ocean of Caucasian characters and Northern settings, the emergent reader is affected in his emergent creative writing as well:

Un nègre-marron, voire le plus banal des personnages antillais, pouvait-il vraiment employer l'expression ‘faim de loup’? Quant à ‘automne de ma vie’, cela te fit franchement rire, à la réflexion. Ici-là, point de printemps, d’été, d’automne et d’hiver. Seulement deux saisons, foutre! (Confiant 214-5)

Mabanckou’s protagonist decides early on that books in general cannot be trusted given that the only world they offer for consideration is the European one. The encounter with self-referential textuality (“Enfin un livre antillais! Un livre qui parlait de toi. De toi-même.”, Glissant 208) is depicted as a milestone in advanced reading development. In Mabanckou, the first printed object amidst the French fatras of the librairie par terre in which the youngster and his peers find a reflection of their community and surroundings is quite strikingly titled Sang d’afrique. Like the production of the poètes-doudous evoked at length in Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writing, the two volumes of the novel by Guy des Cars (published “dans ces années 50 où le Nègre se débattait toujours pour prouver aux yeux du monde qu’il était un homme pareil aux autres”) provides a considerably biased, exoticized representation of an African identity and experience. But like in Chamoiseau too, it is perceived and received as an important step in the right direction: for the first time, “c’était notre propre histoire que nous lisions” (Mabanckou 2013, 172). In this extended corpus, the need to read one’s own story often emerges earlier than in Chamoiseau,
whose négrillon will powerfully acknowledge the magnitude of the endured “écrasement par le Centre” once a teenager; before then, books are sincerely appreciated as “fenêtres ouvertes” (ABE 33) even though the narrator remembers clearly the first book’s “hiérarchies de couleurs qui attribuaient celle de notre peau au laid, au méchant, au sinistre” (CE 166).

Self-reflective readings are hardly accessible to young readers in former or current overseas French territories during the concerned protagonists’ education, other than by forced entry. This absence is shown to weigh heavily on their confidence in themselves, in their future and in the world. At the same time, many of them, like the négrillon, do find some enjoyment in engagement with foreign content. The way they do, however, is another testimony to their need for mirrors: storyworlds radically out of the reader’s ordinary may be fulfilling only to the extent that she can find elements to relate to, as opposed to defamiliarizing aspects. The urge to escape one’s environment through story-prompted imaginative travel – which is identified as a recurring feature of representations of literary initiation – is less of a priority to these children than the search for reassuring, recognizable pieces to hold on to; for experiences that closely resemble their own:

Je me presse de dévorer le roman en son entier, car il me rappelle ma condition d’orphelin … (Corbin)

… le parfum de cette Provence lointaine me rappelle celui de mon île … (ibid.)

… en d’autres endroits du monde, au même moment, il doit se trouver des enfants qui vivent encore comme Anne Franck. Des fils invisibles nous relient pour que nous restions debout sur la terre. (Pineau)

It sometimes happens, but is definitely not the rule, that estranging universes are resented by metropolitan characters for the same reason that repel Caribbean and African emergent readers exposed to European storyworlds: the need to be textually represented. Petit’s child persona, who is socially privileged and raised in an urban setting, cannot stand – because she cannot identify with – the quaint and often miserable countryside living described by popular authors whose works she deems old-fashioned (and which very much resemble the ones imposed on the négrillon):
Yet, the dominant trend in reader trajectory narratives depicting French metropolitan childhoods differs from the one observable in non-metropolitan texts. Numerous protagonists, like Desarthe’s, first and foremost rejoice in engagement with radically foreign storyworlds (“je suis prête à tout envisager, à avaler des kilomètres de phrases, pourvu qu’un décalage avec le quotidien s’exhibe”). Fairy tales are Desarthe’s estranging genre of preference, while Millet appreciates any book that can ensure a true échappée belle. *Peter Pan* or *Tintin* number among Petit’s favorites because they open windows on worlds yet to discover.

“It hurts”, notes Johny Pitts, “to reevaluate such gentle remembrances”:

> Coming to terms with the ways the European superiority complex has found its way into your psyche is tricky because it has been transferred through a thousand intimate moments [such as those spent with *Tintin au Congo*], planted in the fertile, innocent and happy memories of a childhood. (104)

Pitts adds that “this is true on both sides of the fence – the injustices of colonialism messed up the subconscious of the colonizers and the colonized” (ibid.). There are quite tragic reverse symmetries of the situation imposed on black emergent readers outside the Hexagon. Petit clearly remembers scrutinizing *Sambo le petit noir*, finding great delight in the foreign, stereotypical and awkwardly eclectic world of reference made of oriental slippers, tigers, palm trees and sunshades. The most famous elephant protagonist of modern Western children’s literature and the exotic landscape in which his adventures unfold are mentioned by both Baudry and Petit (“J’ouvre un Babar et parfois je me perds dans le tracé d’un palmier, d’une pièce d’eau où il s’ébat”, Petit 31). Both these texts convey more or less overtly racist universes. An initially British colonial tale turned international classic, *Little Black Sambo* was published in 1899 and was immediately a success in the U.S. for the abominable reasons we know – but it was also adapted in French in the 1950s and reissued many times in the Hexagon, despite its blatant racism. The polemics continue to rage regarding the “amiable king of the elephants, one of France’s best-loved exports”: ten years after an American philosopher of education denounced
an unacceptably reactionary storyworld – in the aptly titled Should We Burn Babar? – a French scholar interviewed on the topic commended Babar’s world for being "one of poetry and nostalgia … closed, rich and reassuring". In the 1960s, though, colonialism was not yet “the past” evoked as such by Babar’s author to dismiss criticism; many would argue that it still is not.⁴

Although my corpus is divided on the topic, several protagonists, on both sides of the divide, look for – or dream of – a way to reconcile their need for both mirrors and windows.

Pineau’s sees herself as

[u]n livre qui ouvrirait des mondes fantasmagoriques … un pays où toutes variétés de personnes vivent ensemble: Gauchers, Arabes, Noirs, Chinois, Blancs, Africains, Marquise et Princesse, Droitiers, Cow-Boys et Indiens. Gens des villes et des champs… (Pineau)

Having mentioned her protagonist’s longing for a narrative harmoniously mixing "les palmeraies et la neige", the narrator in Petit expresses hope in the possibility for non-represented readers to eventually learn to bend such disappointing narrative fiction so as to make sense of it: “la langue, la littérature ne vous font parfois aucune place; mais on peut, un jour, tenter de leur faire dire autre chose.” (Petit 102).

Another important issue in Chamoiseau is the nature of the primary incentive for heightened engagement with narrative fiction: is it the story? Or is it rather the stylistique de l’écart presumably characteristic of ‘true’ literariness? The encounter with a langue étrangère, the “expérience de l’incompréhension” so described by Louichon seems indeed to motivate (and, to the narrators, legitimate) reading in many of the narratives constituting my corpus:

les livres avec lesquels nous aurons vécu enfants nous apprenaient qu’il existait une langue dont nous ne percevions que l’écho résiduel … En lisant des histoires, si banales, étranges, mièvres et puériles qu’elles fussent, il recueillait à même les pages … la pellicule de son intériorité. C’était cela qu’il allait d’abord chercher dans les livres … Un langage autre, langage venu des autres, s’est incarné dans sa propre voix (Baudry 51; 104; 123).

“L’espace de l’intimité s’en trouvait aussitôt indéfiniment élargi”: this is Millet’s and Confiant’s experience too. Baudry’s and Confiant’s descriptions of this language-based enhancement are greatly congruent with the imaginaire littéraire. They include references to the echoing “mystères” of literariness and of one’s self, to (the necessity of) nebulosity, patience, and divination:
Tu devinais que le langage n'était qu'un passage obligé, emprunté par tous, vers des zones obscures de ton moi, du moi de chacun … (Confiant)

… le jour où j’ai deviné plus précisément la nature de la mystérieuse et inépuisable offrande que l’on peut recevoir des livres (Baudry 88).

However, in all the cases at stake, this drive for a disruptive “effraction d’un langage autre” that supposedly supports identity “transmutation” (Baudry 43) through confrontation with Otherness and is considered a clear sign of literary coming-of-age gets counterbalanced with innumerable ‘narrative relapses’. The latter might be interpreted as regression; they more likely suggest that narrativity and fictionality remain essential stimuli and enhancers of reading experience throughout ‘initiation’ and beyond. To Ernaux’ protagonist, institutionally legitimate textuality and book culture in general represent a priceless opportunity to acquire the linguistic weapons (“ces livres ne parlent pas comme nous”) that will allow her to escape a much resented social condition. At the same time, books prove essential also because they are imagination catalysts, the foundational passport for “un monde plus beau, plus pur, plus riche” (76). Desarthe’s love of “chapelets enchâssés, enjambés qui, d’une phrase, en font jaillir deux” coexists with a passion for fictional universes. Confiant’s analytical interest in the conception of incipits (“avant d’aller à la page que tu avais cornée, tu relisais lentement, avec une délectation sourde, la première phrase du texte”) comes second to an immersive engagement with novels that is everything but distant and the source of a “plaisir inouï” (235):

Tout le jour, ses personnages, le déroulé de son intrigue n’avaient cessé d’occuper le moindre espace libre parmi tes pensées … tu te retrouvais comme par enchantement au cœur de l’histoire, imaginant sa suite, inventant de probables destinées à ses personnages, t’émouvant de telle description de scène amoureuse ou de tel dialogue particulièrement bien venu. (171)

Millet sees in literary excellence, which she primarily defines as stylistic expertise, a privileged means to “se soustraire au sort commun”; she seeks to establish a “complicité avec les poètes et les écrivains” through control over the secrets of this “langue étrangère”. Yet, “le roman remplit le vide, éclaire les zones d’ombre” in a way that poetic language alone cannot. Narrative mechanisms and fictional content – in Millet’s case (as well as in Petit’s) those of the collection Signe de piste and more generally “les aventures de guerre et d'espionnage” – emotionally
support the reader “dans les moments les plus périlleux” of her young existence. Petit claims that past a certain age, what is needed above all (i.e. above narrativity and fictionality) are words “agencés en phrases irradiantes” (78), those very words that she learned years before from the endless “pillage” of dictionaries and that are now ready to be uniquely assembled. In fact, the reason for this switch in interest is in large part the struggle to find food for imagination in grown-up reading. In absolute terms, narrative fiction retains the immense power it had in the golden age of bandes dessinées, when “la scansion de l'intrigue, cet arrêt soudain sur un cri, une porte ouverte, un danger annoncé” was all that mattered to the budding reader (43). Baudry’s narrator is the most vocal about “l'existence essentielle à notre vie d'un usage non immédiatement utile du langage” (106). But even as he postulates that “ce qui pousse vraiment l'enfant à s'enfoncer tant d’heures durant dans des délices mystérieuses, immobiles et frénétiques, [est] surtout le pur besoin de langage” (101), the mnestic traces he refers to most often involve narrative components (places, characters and their emotions) rather than éléments de langage.

This coexistence of the two concurrent tendencies is observable across the corpus; cultural variation seems irrelevant in this case.

The liminal space separating – or connecting – reality and fiction is one last locus of interest. The négrillon is generally able to distinguish between the two with the disconcerting blend of steadiness and fluidity that characterizes children’s navigation of fictional worlds according to psychologists of imaginative development (see Hopkins and Weisberg). Although it does not prevent him from easily drawing and validating information from either reality or fiction, the difference still is clearly identified. The situation deviates from this ‘norm’ in only two cases: when the child faces French metropolitan storyworlds that do not offer any referential anchor point, which hinders imaginative involvement as well as the knowledge transfer process; and at the opposite end of the spectrum, when imagination ‘colonizes’ the young reader’s reality so much as not to be containable anymore. In both cases, however, the négrillon ends up regaining control over the divide and over his agency as a citizen explorer of both universes. Many narrators in my extended corpus emphasize children’s astonishing capacity to gracefully move
from reality to fiction and back, to treat both worlds of reference as equally valuable resource
banks and to often use elements of each in conjunction so as to best comprehend everyday
events:

Pendant l'enfance uniquement, réel et imaginaire coexistent sans conflit. … L'un et l'autre restent
pleinement possibles parce que nous ne disposons encore de la force, ni du pouvoir, ni surtout de
l'illusion de les confondre. (Millet 117-8)

Mabanckou similarly notes that such peaceful coexistence cannot be maintained anymore come
adulthood. Meanwhile, our protagonists enjoy their privilege as much as they possibly can.
Pretend play is everywhere in Millet and always clearly delineated as a space for fiction within
reality, using and ultimately serving reality. Detambel’s emergent reader character is also shown
in total control:

Il regarde dehors, par la fenêtre, et, très vite, revient au livre: il appelle cela accomoder. Passer
ainsi d'un monde si proche à l'autre, tellement lointain, s'accomoder du réel et de la fiction, avec
la même aisance, ce serait vivre heureux.

Moments of confusion are scarce, but they happen. Confiant, for instance, stops being able to
distinguish between Zola’s Nana and his own teenage crush Cécile. To Confiant, fictional
characters such as Emma Bovary or Fabrice del Dongo belong to the realm of the real and his
being forced to recognize that they do not triggers distressing disappointment. The tragic
anecdotes recounted by adults are received by Pineau’s protagonist as reports of real events
even if the narrator acknowledges their partly fictional nature; they become tightly intricated with
the purely fictional content of picture books in her imagination, “pren[ant] possession” of her
dreams instead of being actively boxed and retrieved at will. Most often though, like in
Chamoiseau, the confusion itself is under control, a result of deliberate action:

J'enclenche le mécanisme. Je quitte l'habitacle de l'auto, je laisse ma famille derrière moi, je
deviens le tout et le rien, l'univers et les personnages qui le peuplent. Une ruine au bord de
l'autoroute A6 se change en château hanté, mon propre regard croisé dans le rétroviseur devient
celui de la sirène, de la licorne, de la fée. (Desarthe 21)

The other situation involving the reality-fiction divide, namely the inability to enter a storyworld too
foreign to one’s own world of reference, overwhelmingly remains the burden of non-metropolitan
emergent readers. Most metropolitan protagonists value estranging content precisely for its
defamiliarizing nature. This configuration aligns with Lahire’s observation that socially vulnerable readers struggle to engage with narrative fiction that is not referential enough from their perspective. This observation is less of a concern in *La culture des individus* (2010), but according to the author of *L’homme pluriel* (1998), the need to see one’s own environment, community, behavioral norms reflected onto the page might be higher for “lecteurs populaires” as a group and individuals. One could speculate that it is generally the case for readers whom a history of enforced inferiority left oppressed by the historical enforcer and discriminated for their perceived ethnicity (whose reflection is absent from most legitimate literature and otherwise distorted). More often than not, these are readers ‘deprived’ of legitimate cultural capital – because they might have been less exposed to it depending on socio-economic status, but also because they might have resisted inculcation of distant reading postures more vehemently than others.

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School, to take only this topic, matters throughout Chamoiseau’s *négrillon* journey in a way that scholarly interpretations of reader trajectory narratives do not acknowledge. Memories of resistance to the *savoirs enseignés*, on one hand, and of positive literary reading development outside the classroom on the other hand (an opposition identified as a pattern in *autobiographies de lecteur*) make for only one facet of Chamoiseau’s story. Another is the narrator’s subdued recognition of the reassuring legitimacy of the institution as well as its possibly emancipatory role and the underlying tension inherent to this experience. The young reader’s drive to reject constraining approaches to literary reading development is compensated by his embracing elements of the institutionally promoted ideology. The *négrillon*’s experience is remembered and transcribed that way, even though the narrator otherwise seems to subscribe to a romanticized social construction of engagement with literariness that leaves little room for the influence of formal literature instruction. It is, in fact, in the underexplored relation between depictions of
formal literature education experience and the reader’s actual reading development (Chapter 6), which importantly includes differentiated engagement with different genres (Chapter 7), that modulations of representations of literary initiation are revealed.

I have hypothesized that such modulations are potentially tied to cultural variation from one Francophone area to the other. The relevance of this claim is generally difficult to assess given that cultural group identity may be considered to affect the rendering of one’s reader trajectory narrative or rather not to factor in it enough to be seen as significant, depending on the analyst’s perspective (c.f. Chapter 5). An interpretation of the former sort is always at high risk of falling into the essentialist trap. But it is also important to explore possible cultural dissonance – especially as it might occur within a Caribbean and African corpus, the reader trajectory narrative research landscape having so far blotted out most of these works. The literature scholars who conducted studies of reader trajectory narratives either adopt a comparatist perspective that involve texts from other Northern “centers” (English, American, German) or, when they focus on the Francophone tradition, work on corpuses almost exclusively constituted of autobiographies de lecteur penned and set in Hexagonal France.

Let us go back for a second to the topic of formal education. It is true that Chamoiseau’s autobiographical writings “do not report on or represent the reality of the school in any simple, mimetic fashion”; but the French metropolitan artworks of interest to Sachs do not either (23), which suggest that autobiographies de lecteur from the Hexagon could follow the same equivocal trend contrary to Louichon’s unequivocal conclusion on the cas ‘Ecole’. Should we then consider that the ambivalence marking the négrillon’s apprehension of the methods and contents of literature instruction is a staple of metropolitan reader trajectory narratives too? More generally, how pertinent is it to look at the complexity of Chamoiseau’s reader trajectory narrative in the light of the négrillon’s – and the author’s – status as a Creole subject torn between cultural injunctions? The second part of my dissertation shows that there are, for sure, aspects of Chamoiseau’s representations of literary initiation that are not granted much attention or no attention at all in the studies surveyed throughout my third to fifth chapters. Some of these
aspects, like the specific dynamics of imaginary resistance to estranging storyworlds, are markedly prominent in the Caribbean, African and South-to-North migration narratives I have selected in contrast to metropolitan ones, which seems to support the cultural variation hypothesis. Still, this hypothesis itself will need to be refined eventually and my findings to be interrogated in depth before they can be generalized. Obviously, this division into two sub-corporuses that I am now suggesting and therefore the validation of the highly problematic representation according to which the Francophonie makes for one literary body (see Chapter 5) must be deconstructed eventually by attending to each area’s history and cultural specificities. The above study, like my examination of Chamoiseau, is limited and only meant to offer a preview of this appealing line of research.

What is clear is that the imaginaire littéraire pervades the examined corpus in the same way it diffuses through Chamoiseau’s writing. For one thing, narrative engagement with literary imagination either implicitly criticizes or approves its substance. Moreover, both these positions can take different shapes depending on the topics at stake. For instance, all texts are ostensibly partial to out-of-school reading experience, but all also imply that institutional approaches to textuality may in fact affect this experience in a notable and even empowering way. There are no significant nuances to be observed in terms of representational content. However, the ways in which this ambivalence manifests itself are much less consistent across the corpus than they are within each of two geographically distinct subgroups: metropolitan reader trajectory narratives, on the one hand, and non-metropolitan ones on the other hand. In the first case, school is the object of expressions of contempt hateful enough to raise doubt about the authenticity of the experience that is so intensely and intensively condemned – all the more knowing that the same texts feature subdued albeit positive memories of indirect institutional influence on the characters’ literary initiation. In the second case, feelings about formal language and literature instruction are more overtly mixed. Attitudes toward the latter’s “intrusion” in out-of-school environments are more openly welcoming in this sub-corpus as well.
On some topics, the *imaginaire littéraire* or the resistance to it are homogeneously enacted. There is great uniformity in descriptions of parental influence: contrary to Man Ninotte who truly offers an alternative (favoring neither cultural hierarchy nor developmental linearity) to the socially- and institutionally-imposed vision of *l'initiation littéraire*, adult relatives of the child readers in my corpus are shown reinforcing a dichotomic conception of reading types and stages, and subtly enforcing the one internalized as most advanced. The out-of-school nature of (always ecstatic) engagement with the material, carnal dimension of book culture is foregrounded in all texts. Almost out of principle, the *classiques* are denied any quality cross-corpus; their classroom study appears simply unbearable to the young readers and the texts themselves are deemed uninteresting once and for all. Conversely, *bande dessinées*, magazines, catalogues are praised cross-corpus. The *livre décisif* may pertain to high-brow or low-brow textual culture and be of any genre, the infatuation with this one reading will be equally intense, no matter the child’s cultural or social background. However, it will retain attention for different reasons which are essentially related to its generic qualities, especially in the case of engagement with fictional narratives where craving for immersion and narrative mechanisms systematically end up overriding the appetite for ‘literary’ language. Exposure to a great variety of genres and the acknowledgment of generic specificities prove important in all of these semi-fictional *autobiographies de lecteur*, like in Chamoiseau’s writing and in contrast with Louichon’s little interest in text genres as a topic.

There are also a few fundamental differences between the two sub-corpuses, such as in depictions of introduction to formal oral language. Metropolitan reader characters get to focus on the aesthetics of a text’s “voice" because of their privileged – and depersonalized – extensive access to recorded readings outside of school. But the starkest differences become manifest when the corpus is examined from the angle of differences between text genres. Only metropolitan characters associate children’s literature with feelings of fear and sorrow, for reasons to be elucidated. Meanwhile, it is crystal clear why only African and Caribbean characters are left with a lump in their throats following exposure to movies and TV shows. Engagement with defamiliarizing story content is described as a delightful, even essential activity
in one case, a deeply distressing one in the other. While all children are citizens of fiction, welcome it into their reality and manage to remain in control of possible overflowing, the reverse situation (in which a character does not manage to enter fiction) is one mostly faced by non-metropolitan protagonists.

Together with the second part of this dissertation, the study above allows for the formulation of several conclusions. One is that the *imaginaire littéraire* is of transversal essence: it manifests itself in texts from the Francophone world at large. *Une enfance créole* reproduces many features of the French literary imagination in a non-critical manner and Chamoiseau dedicates great efforts to deconstructing elements of these representations which is but another way to refer to it and thus assert its influence. The situation is the same, in different configurations, within the other works examined. The protagonist advancing toward literary coming-of-age is always a French subject first – even when her country’s institutions are not anymore – because the *culture légitime* she is immersed in and made to internalize remains the French one. The power of the *imaginaire littéraire* holds strong in Francophone reader trajectory narratives whether the representations this *imaginaire* contains are embraced or shown to be fallacious / detrimental. Contrary to the scholarly suggestion according to which non-metropolitan autobiographies are intrinsically different from metropolitan ones in content and therefore cannot be compared to the latter (see Chapter 6), the representations of literary initiation conveyed in both cases are similar, if not similarly addressed.

Second, formal education weighs on these representations in two ways: as a latent presence and influence in all the patterns common to Francophone contemporary reader trajectory narratives; as a key role player in the perpetuation of the *imaginaire littéraire* that infuses these texts. The first observation is notable since the scholarship explored in the first part of this dissertation would rather lead us to believe that the effect of school (and of the differentiated quality of engagement with different genres) is nihil, unfavorable or even damaging to the protagonist’s literary awakening. It does in fact make sense for the literature classroom to be part of the *imaginaire littéraire* as it is, after all, the privileged locus of reproduction of the
idéologie littéraire – which brings me to the second observation. The institutionally fostered idéologie littéraire detailed in Chapter 1 must be distinguished from the imaginaire mapped by the scholars discussed in Chapters 2 to 4... but literary imagination directly draws on literary ideology. The former is somehow passively shaped and spread through the social fabric on the basis of representations actively promoted by educational institutions before, throughout and beyond the 20th century. It should be no surprise, then, that the texts are not uniformly negative but rather ambivalent toward the impact of formal literature education on emergent reading development. Interestingly, this internal conflict mirrors the one at work within French didactics themselves as they undergo minor and major changes in the 1950s-70s and start to acknowledge the duty of formal education to reflect the actual, tradition-disruptive needs and practices of emergent literary readers. The undecided stance regarding traditional approaches that traverse many reader trajectory narratives questions or validates the important bifurcations soon to be taken in curricular and pedagogical terms (see Chapters 1 and 6). The négrillon’s experience, for instance, sheds positive light on exposure to generic diversity as well as on the fact that unofficial curricula (sometimes brought up in the classroom although not legitimate) and educational paraspaces (such as the school library) make space for local ‘literary’ production in non-metropolitan Francophone areas. This in turn suggests that the relative progress in the area of French language and literature instruction during the 1950s-1960s (in theory and perhaps in metropolitan classrooms at least) as well as the 1970s rénovation du français are worthwhile advances even though they are not necessarily perceptible in Martinique at these times (or in France, for that matter). Literary-reputed contemporary narratives of childhoods most often unfold just before the 1970s and the turning point that this decade would represent in the history of French literature education, as it did for society more generally. This topic opens an intriguing area of possible inquiry: to what extent do discursive representations of literary initiation align with and / or support the state of didactic perspective and pedagogical reality at the time framing the monde de l’histoire or the text’s writing?
Third, if literary-reputed depictions of early engagement with textuality include untouched features of the *imaginaire littéraire*, they also show divergences vis-à-vis the socially legitimate vision of literary initiation. But the “cultural” quality of such differences must be better described. A child’s *rapport au réel, rapport au langage* and ultimately *rapport à la littérature* is intersectional in nature, which implies that the variation depends on a variety of “cultural” factors: the social capital of a child’s family; the specific colonial history of the country in which she grew up; her ethnic, racial and gender identity; her potential migratory journey. To go straight to the raw nerve: what does “cultural” even mean? I have approached the idea of a culturally congruent space in the same way Védrines does with the concept of “communauté discursive” in relation with educational settings: to my mind, both entail “un entrelacement à l’équilibre fragile de pratiques, de croyances, de rituels” that sets the norms of a cultural / literary imagination (Védrines 46). It is useful to adopt a broad definition of culture (i.e. a set of shared beliefs and values anchored in a situated, collective experience) but also dangerous from an intellectual and ethical point of view not to very precisely specify, as part as one’s conceptual framework, what “cultural” implies in the analytical context at stake, nor to clearly discriminate between the different aspects above throughout the analysis itself, especially when dynamics of social and racial discrimination are at stake. In retrospect, I consider myself guilty as charged. There are many ways to fall into that trap, some more problematic than others. Two fundamental postulates of another study of Chamoiseau conducted by an eminent *didacticienne de la littérature*, Marie-José Fourtanier, are (1) that the partition between school and out-of-school practices entirely overlaps with other key divisions such as those between dominant and dominated, majority and minority “cultures” no matter the context because (2) school would be an inherently oppressive setting independently of systemic and societal differences between areas of formal education’s implementation (i.e. the very concrete history of the *Education nationale* as an indoctrinating institution in peripheral and colonial France). Fourtanier strongly suggests that all students, across all educational systems (modelled after the French one at least), endure “cultural” discrimination:
The colonized child’s experience is thus explicitly extended to the continental European situation ("nos élèves" as well as the generic “les classes” undoubtedly referring to Western archetypes). The confusion between various aspects of a student’s “cultural” identity (her primary social environment, ancestors’ history…) and obliteration of others (her claimed ethnicity, skin color, self-education practices…) makes it possible to generalize the action of a "colonialisme intérieur" to all formal education contexts without regard to what others would call essential “cultural” dimensions. After all, are not all students, without exception or distinction, “des créoles, des métissés de plusieurs cultures” (101)? To many American scholars and public intellectuals, this would be considered plain and simple erasure – of systemic oppression, generational trauma and community-specific experience. It is possible to compare language and literature education to the invasion of one’s inner territory if one is clear about the metaphorical nature of the expression. It is not if one goes on to present one of the key missions historically assigned to the Education nationale – emancipation through admittedly violent reading education – as having succeeded and continuing to bear fruit for socially vulnerable students specifically, a move that does more than allude to the positive impact of cultural colonization ("est-il une école qui ne soit pas ‘coloniale’"):  

Historiquement, l'école a été in fine pour les enfants des pauvres et des déclassés, pour les 'négrillons' comme pour les enfants des paysans français, un chemin vers la liberté, une liberté conquise par le lire et par l'écrire. (ibid. 104-5).

Neglecting the need to conceptualize “culture” can induce us into denying the importance of some of its definitions, which in turn may result in oversimplification of power relations and identity parameters. Again, I am at least partially guilty of this harmful omission myself and strongly suggest that authors of future studies on related topics and texts make it a priority to address this methodological issue.
A fourth conclusion authorized by my study is that *autobiographies de lecteur* depict engagement with generic specificities of texts as highly memorable contrary to what the general neglect of this topic in scholarship might suggest. In the works I selected, exposure to a great variety of text genres motivates and nurtures one’s development as a reader. At the same time, different text genres have different kinds of impact on it. Fictional narrative dynamics consistently stand out in *souvenirs de lecture* and in memories at large as they seem to interact and often to affect the protagonists’ lived reality, as explicated in Chapter 8. For this reason, it would be important, in future studies inquiring into the topic, to (1) better define the notion of “genre” and explore the concept in depth prior to textual analysis, (2) more precisely address “fictionality” and “narrativity” by resorting to some of the many theoretical writings concerned with the “fictional / narrative” entity. As observed by Charles Bazerman, the immensely rich concept of genre has generated “many approaches to understanding and teaching genre … in many regions of the world” (Bawarshi & Reiff XI). In the United States, for instance, three general trends can be observed,\(^5\) one of which consists in the relative interchangeability of the “narrative” and “fictional” dimensions as categories, both being seldom conceptualized and alternatively chosen as criteria for a very volatile distribution of genres into two sets, or “macro-genres”: narrative / non-narrative.\(^6\) In the Francophone world, Swiss contemporary research has pioneered the theorization of genres as textual forms stabilized by cultural uses, their fashioning proceeding from choices made by social formations in order to adapt the texts read and produced to the activities they are commenting on, a given medium of communication, and particular social stakes (Bronckart 2014).\(^7\) Nowadays, this social and situated approach to literacy that foregrounds text genres as catalysts and objects of learning is the dominant paradigm internationally. If genres are always perceived as characterized by formal and structural regularities, they must be understood as part and product of culturally anchored situations of interactions. One will have to emphasize and unfold this perspective when researching cultural modulations of the *imaginaire littéraire* in the future. Other perspectives to consider are those of the many narratologists who have addressed the concepts of narrativity and fictionality in great detail. There is no consensus on the
definition of the former which is conceived either as an attribute assigned by the reader or a quality inherent to the text at stake, which might or might not adapt to different contexts of use or required functions and whose importance in a given text might or might not be measurable (see Fludernik, Ryan…). Fictionality is an even more polemical construct but one worth considering as distinct from narrativity in any case (see Hakemulder, Kneepkens and Zwaan…). Both of those dimensions would indeed amount to different types of immersion that in turn call for different attitudes or competences on the part of the reader – “fictive ability” (Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh) maybe preexisting to engagement with fictional textuality… The characteristics of fictionality’s and narrativity’s inter-relational dynamics are the object of many questions (does one require the other? Does the latter encompass the former? Would the effect of fictionality be maximized or transformed by the presence of narrativity, and on which level? Etc.) that could be of great relevance to the study of developing engagement with complex textual content and – more to the point, as this is where research is lacking – the narrative representation of this development.

Within such study at least, it is of little importance whether the recounted experience is claimed to be the empirical author’s (nonfiction), a fully invented protagonist's (fiction) or an intermediary figure (autofiction) from the moment a narrator adopts an autobiographical stance. In all of these scenarios, (re)construction is at work. Memories are always filtered and rewritten. But when reading development gets centered in a narrative, they additionally reflect the social construction of literary initiation. Rather than treating literary-reputed reader trajectory narratives as a direct source of knowledge about developing reading practices, we should consider that they reflect the representations held about these practices and the patterns structuring them. The existence of attempts to use literary-reputed autobiographies de lecteur as authentic accounts in the context of didactic scholarship leads us to ask whether the close reading of such works can contribute at all to better seize the actual “réalité des pratiques de lecture” and to elaborate recommendations sound enough to boost the improvement language arts instruction. In Louichon, la mémoire lettrée, which designates the content of literary-reputed reader trajectory narratives, both excludes and draws on ideological bias, the objectivity-connoted “memory”
entering into contradiction with the fantasy-charged “lettrée”. The phrase seems impossible to define otherwise than by mentions of what it does not refer to, a characteristic of literariness itself, as seen in Chapter 1: "la mémoire lettrée, ce n'est pas (seulement) la mémoire des textes … et ce n'est pas du tout le résumé d'une oeuvre". La mémoire lettrée is a literally charming concept in that it is bound to remain elusive, therefore the locus of projections. In this example lies an additional reason to stay clear from the temptation to consider semi-fictional reconstructions of subjective experience as reliable témoignages providing evidence of effective “literary” reading development, and to use them as such in didactics: when concerned with littérature, scholarly work itself often relies on fiction. Many didacticiens de la littérature would surely define themselves and their mindset as lettré-e-s even while pursuing an eminently practical, scientific, anti-ideological purpose.

Representations of literacy, like literacy itself, are “ideological, shaped by local and global cultures” rather than a “decontextualised, neutral or universal set” of cognitions (Ntelioeglou 58):

Cette communauté ‘inavouée’, fragile et incertaine des littératures francophones malgré elles, si hypothétique ou problématique qu’en soit la dénomination, interroge la littérature elle-même. (Combe 23, emphasis mine)

Memories of literary reading development are formed according to what makes sense within an overall development narrative, which itself should be considered in relation to social imaginaries, institutional histories and cultural specificities. When Francophone spaces are concerned however, we must adopt such socially minded angle. Francophone reader trajectory narratives are inherently likely to reproduce and validate problematic representations of what literary initiation, literariness, literature are or should be. This has to be acknowledged and considered aside from the fact that there is no way out of discursive bias to access others’ – and even one’s own – emergent reading experience.

In this dissertation, I have discussed representations of literary initiation as they are discursively enacted in contemporary, literary-reputed autobiographical writings by Patrick Chamoiseau as well as by other former French language arts students. I have tried to demonstrate that the internalization of a specific and constraining vision of advanced reading
development is a matter of concern in general and across narrative depictions of formal and informal reading experiences. I have also asked whether these depictions might be affected by the variation in cultural frames of reference depending on Francophone contexts. I have not come to a definitive answer, in part because some of the core issues – e.g. the relation between imaginaire and idéologie – and the constructs I have relied on – such as the concept of “culture” – demand to be more extensively and pertinently addressed. What I hope to have shown is that l’initiation littéraire stands at the core of a constellation of thought-provoking topics, some of which are already being tackled in excellent Francophone research deserving of more American recognition (see Chapter 1) while others still call for further investigation. The representations of literary initiation conveyed in Francophone reader trajectory narratives do not teach us about developmental and educational processes past or future as much as about the importance of understanding and embracing “the imagination as a social practice” (Appadurai 61). Despite the Glissantian call to “ouvrir l’imaginaire” (577), the ideology-based imaginaire littéraire might be here to stay. But we, Francophone humanities scholars and professors, would benefit from considering the subterranean implications of this symbolical and empirical rhizome within our own fields of inquiry and practice. There is also room in the extended scholarly world for academics researching contemporary literature and / or language arts education to start a cross-national conversation about the many dots pointed above and their connections. Non-Francophone theorists and practitioners of literature education are ultimately concerned (almost) as much as we are – because so are, evidently, the empirical readers whose ‘initiation’ teaching specialists wish to comprehend and support. We shall bear in mind that the view according to which the emergent ‘literary’ reader is an incomparably enlightened citizen in the making – as Picard claims and many international scholarly voices suggest – is a painfully double-sided representation:

Si la ‘lecture littéraire’ est ‘si importante pour l’être humain’, c’est nier à celui qui ne maîtrise pas cette lecture son statut d’être humain à part entière. (Daunay 2004, 239)


5 The two other trends include the relative supremacy of the argumentative genre, at least in representations. Mastery of the latter, which is considered to top the Anglophone hierarchy of genres, is a priority of reading and writing education and explicit objective of the American Common Core standards. In this context, many researchers regret that students would be excessively exposed to non-argumentative genres – specifically fictional narratives – in the early years of schooling; the exact nature of the features (narrativity? fictionality?) with which young children would be led to over-engage, however, remains unnamed.

The third trend has to do with unidentified generic objects, or the category of texts recognized as hybrids (“ambiguous grey genre”, Leal; “multiple genre texts”, “mixed-genre texts”, “blended texts”, Elster and Hanauer), which induces growing scholarly attention and teachers’ frustration in the U.S. The repartition of text genres into two master classes typically labelled fiction and nonfiction would not accurately reflect nor do justice to the complex reality of the written wor(l)d and emergent reader engagement with it, most texts read and produced by students being composite genre-wise.

6 The non-narrative set is alternatively called “expository” (in which case autobiographical and most historical texts belong to the former category), “informational” (where autobiographical and most historical texts belong to the second category), or nonfiction.

7 Text genres are, in that sense, simultaneously structures and processes, relatively fixed discursive objects and social constructs undergoing constant transformation. The French (and Swiss) contemporary approach to genre pedagogy in general is inspired by the work of social theorists such as Bakhtin, Vygotsky, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Habermas and demands that teaching focus on the macro-level of discourse while explicitly situating writing (and reading) activities within a panoply of genres used in different communicative contexts (Bawarshi and Reiff 75-6).
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