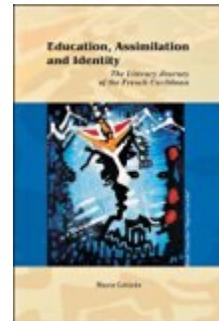


Marie Létécée. *Education, Assimilation and Identity: The Literacy Journey of the French Caribbean*. Coconut Creek: Caribbean Studies Press, 2009. xviii + 202 pp. \$24.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58432-554-3.

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Recognizing Selfhood

In *Education, Assimilation and Identity*, Marie Létécée describes the struggle to create a French Caribbean self-identity. He begins by describing the school system and how it is designed to eliminate blackness and “otherness” in pupils while instilling a French identity in all students. The struggle, then, is to create a positive self-identity while fighting the negative self-image that comes from the belief that “all things French” are better than “all things Caribbean.”

The Caribbean is unique in the Latin American region in that it was a French colony rather than an area conquered by Spain or Portugal. Because of this, there are several unique challenges facing the region. One of these is accepting selfhood for natives and Africans. Since colonial times, the French have considered themselves civilized and the native and African races less so. Although contemporary people recognize that this is not the case, hundreds of years of schooling have left a permanent psychological mark on society, which frequently manifests itself in negative self-images in African and native people.

There are three phases of acceptance of a Caribbean self-identity. The first is Negritude, the belief that it is acceptable to be black, or something other than French European. The second is *Antillanite*, or the ability to go beyond “not French” to recognizing a unique self-identity. The third is *Creolite*, which is, finally, the acceptance of a positive and unique self-identity and the rejection of

France as the arbiter of the concept “civilized.” Létécée finds a creative way of describing these three phases. He focuses on literature, and specifically educated characters who attended French schools on their respective islands. Although these people are not actual historical figures, because they are literary figures, they are able to more perfectly describe the ideals that they embody. Characters representing the Negritude movement, which is a movement of writers who find solidarity in blackness and, theoretically, reject the idea that France is the definition of civilization, actually idealize France to the point of moving there, even though, for most people who support the movement, this move would be financially impossible. Characters representing *Creolite*, on the other hand, completely reject France despite their education and training. How realistic these characters are remains to be seen but using them allows Létécée to explore the three phases in a way that most allows the differences to become obvious.

Because the authors Létécée describes most likely intentionally used their characters to demonstrate the ideals that he finds in them, they are almost archetypal examples, which would be impossible to find in history. Indeed, one character is a sex trade worker, directly representing the exploitation of the Caribbean by the French. This character, ultimately, is able to define herself in a positive manner as a Caribbean woman.

Education becomes important in the story because it

was designed to bind the French Caribbean people together through a shared history. Unfortunately, that history is the same one teachers impart to students in France, and it is thus Eurocentric. It intentionally tries to eliminate blackness. Both the authors that the author writes about and the characters in the books he cites have gone through this French education. In the Negritude movement it is obvious, as both authors and characters idealize France. In the other two phases, the authors must move past their education in order to write characters who are also able to move past their education and gain a positive self-identity. What the reader ultimately learns about the education system is that it is an agent of oppression by the French government that must be overcome in order to gain a Caribbean identity. This education is dangerous because it threatens to eliminate Creole as a language and culture.

The biggest problem with this book is stylistic. Specifically, the author chose to keep French and Creole quotations as well as translating them in brackets after the French version. This ends up being very distracting to readers who do not know French. Another problem is that it is never stated how representative these fictional characters are of real people. Although it seems

that they should represent their authors' ideas, this is not supported well enough.

This book combines original research with literary analysis, which could give it a larger audience amongst both historians and researchers of literature. In addition, it is written well enough that it could be used at the undergraduate level in a literature course as it does a wonderful job of showing how literature can be used in historical research, and how research on literary sources should be done. The conclusion of the book changes the work from descriptive and analytical almost to the point of pro-Creole activism. This allows readers to see the importance of the work that preceded it directly. Undergraduate students will see how imperative historical research can be through this touching ending. However, the book is a questionable addition to the historiography on education. Because all of Léticée's examples are fictional characters, it is unclear how much they represent real schoolchildren and how much they represent the opinion of adults on how schoolchildren should think. If it were established that these fictional children behaved and thought like real children, then it would be an excellent addition to the literature on the history of education.

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