

POESÍA Y NACIONALISMO EN LEONORA DANY BÉBEL-GISLER

BARBRO LUCKA KELLEY
University of Virginia

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse l'oeuvre intitulée *Leonora, l'histoire enfouie de la Guadeloupe*. Elle est considérée, littéralement, comme un point de départ de la recuperation de l'histoire sociale dans laquelle une femme incarne la prise de conscience collective. C'est à travers le récit de l'histoire personnelle d'une femme, que Dany Bébel-Gisler évoque également l'histoire collective des natifs guadeloupéens, en nous révélant le cheminement potentiel de la création d'une identité nationale. L'article analyse donc les techniques et les thèmes du discours nationaliste dans le développement littéraire de Bébel-Gisler, comme par exemple, l'idéal du "paysan noble", ainsi que le rôle important des proto-élites, de la notion de la pureté culturelle, de son authenticité et d'un programme idiomatique.

SAMENVATTING

In dit artikel wordt *Leonora. The buried story of Guadeloupe* geanalyseerd als de uitdrukking van de sociale geschiedenis, waarin een vrouw de collective "prise de conscience" vertegenwoordigt. Via de persoonlijke geschiedenis van een vrouw vertelt Dany Bébel de collectieve geschiedenis van de bewoners van Guadeloupe met de bedoeling om een soort nationale identiteit te scheppen.

Het artikel analyseert technieken en thema's van de nationalistische discours die Bébel-Gisler gebruikt in haar literaire werk, zoals het ideaal van de "noble peasant", de belangrijke rol van de proto-elite, het idee van de culturele zuiverheid en authenticiteit en taal planning.

THE POETICS OF NATIONALISM IN DANY BÉBEL-GISLER'S *LEONORA*

BARBRO LUCKA KELLEY
University of Virginia

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at *Leonora. The Buried Story of Guadeloupe* as a textual enactment of the recuperation of an entire people's history, in which one woman represents their collective *prise de conscience*. By recounting one woman's personal life story, Dany Bébel-Gisler also uncovers a collective history of Guadeloupeans, thereby revealing a potential path for the creation of a national identity.

This paper analyzes some of the techniques and topics common to nationalist discourse that Bébel-Gisler adopted in the development of her poetics — the ideal of the "noble peasant," the important role played by protoelites, the notion of cultural purity and authenticity, and language planning.

The broad theoretical framework of nationalism and language are played out within the narrative, both at the textual level foregrounding *Leonora's* life as representative of her people, and at the metatextual level focusing on the poetics of nationalism.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza la obra titulada *Leonora. The buried story of Guadeloupe*, como un literal punto de partida de la recuperación de la historia social, en la cual una mujer representa la *prise de conscience* colectiva. Mediante el recuento de la historia personal de una mujer, Dany Bébel-Gisler también alude a la historia colectiva de los nativos de Guadalupe, con lo cual revela el camino potencial para la creación de una identidad nacional. El artículo analiza técnicas y temas de discurso nacionalista en el desarrollo literario de Bébel-Gisler, como son el ideal del "noble campesino", el importante papel de las proto-élites, la noción de la pureza cultural y autenticidad, y la planeación idiomática.

El amplio marco teórico del nacionalismo y la lengua se aplica en la

narrativa, lo mismo en el nivel textual, poniendo en primer plano la vida de Leonora como representativa de su pueblo, que con el nivel metatextual, enfocando la poética del nacionalismo.

Dany Bébel-Gisler has long been at the forefront of the nationalist debate in the francophone Caribbean, often through her sociological defense of the Creole language. With degrees from the Université de Paris III in sociology, sociolinguistics, and ethnology, Bébel-Gisler has been active in the organization and promotion of the social sciences since the 1970s. Her focus, as chair of the sociology department of CERC at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Guadeloupe, has been on the French Antilles and African and West Indian immigrants in France. But her most fervent texts stem from her interest in Creole, both as language and cultural practice, which she sees as discordant with the imposed French metropolitan system. Her work has evolved from sociolinguistic studies through cultural studies to a literary text, reflecting the changes in the discussion of nationalism in general and the tactics of nationalist movements more specifically. Her *Cultures et pouvoir dans la Caraïbe* was published in 1976, followed by *La langue créole, force jugulée* in 1976, and *Les enfants de la Guadeloupe* in 1985. It was also in 1985 that *Leonora* was first published in French, with the complete title of *Léonora: l'histoire enfouie de la Guadeloupe*, followed by the English translation by Andrea Leskes in 1994.¹ And *Le défi culturel guadeloupéen: devenir ce que nous sommes* is (to my knowledge) her most recent book length work, dated 1989. During the past 30 years, literary nationalism has become a lively topic in the Caribbean and has contributed to the larger political process through the debate over *antillanité* and *créolité*. I should like to examine first how language and literature contribute to the nationalist debate in general terms,² in order to reveal why Bébel-Gisler moved from

¹ Since this paper was originally conceived and written in English, all quotes will be from the English translation by Leskes, published by the University of Virginia's CARAF Books (1994). This edition is also useful thanks to the critical apparatus which follows by Vera Kutzinski and Cynthia Mesh-Ferguson.

² In this section I will focus on arguments and terms in Joshua Fishman's *Language and Nationalism* because it is this text that has formed the basis of my argument. Although others have written on the relationship between language and nationalism (see, for example, Anthony D. Smith's (1983) *Theories of Nationalism*, and Fishman, Charles Ferguson, and Jyotirinda Das Gupta's (1968) *Language Problems of Developing Nations*), it is Fishman's approach that I find most compelling. Indeed, as an accomplished social scientist herself, I believe Bébel-Gisler is actualizing in *Leonora* many of the precepts found in Fishman.

the sociological defense of Creole to the literary genre of *testimonio* as a contribution to the nationalist struggle in the Caribbean.³

The overarching goal of nationalist movements is to form a political entity (a nation) where one did not previously exist, a goal which is often accomplished through non-political means such as the confirmation of a mythical common origin (a *patria* or a fatherland), the affirmation of an authenticating vernacular language, or the participation in a shared culture. These factors —origin, language, and experience— must be significantly different from those of the surrounding, existing, or controlling nations and yet also similar enough to attain the movement's broader integrating goals. To that extent, the vernacular is championed by nationalist movements, and the authority of the "nation" to exist is identified with that language. In other words, the vernacular represents an instrument of power through which the "nation" asserts its cultural rebirth and the "people" their self-consciousness as members of the "nation". The experientially unique identification of authority with language safeguards the sentimental and behavioral links of the people and links the past with the present. The mother tongue is a representation of the soul, of national essence; it is the spirit of the people made manifest.

Literature can consolidate the nation-forming power of language, be it oral or written, because it provides the masses with an emotional link between the vernacular and the nation. For those leading the nationalist movement, this link exists not at the emotional level, but rather at an ideological level put into practice by the intellectual program. The utility of the vernacular for this purpose depends on several factors: an accepted orthography, a uniform grammar, an ample lexicon, a recognized phonology, and a variety of styles or registers. It is clear that, to date, Caribbean Creoles other than Haitian have not succeeded in fulfilling this role because of a lack of one or another of these necessary factors.

When Bébel-Gisler wrote *La langue créole, force jugulée*, it seems to me that a major goal of the text was to prove Guadeloupean Creole's capacity to accomplish the role of unifying vernacular. She attempted to make evident Creole's functional capacity to fulfill each necessary factor: she proposed an orthography, grammar, and phonology, wrote a compelling text (full of abstract subtleties often noted as inexpressible by developing languages) in the vernacular which required an extensive lexicon

³ This section will borrow from Roberto González-Echevarría's (1985), *The voice of the masters* and Vera Kutzinski and Cynthia Mesh-Ferguson's (1994) afterword to the English translation of *Leonora*.

and several styles. However, this rather singular attempt did not appear to be enough—although this is by no means the only factor in the failure of the Guadeloupean nationalist movement. Bébel-Gisler thus began to introduce cultural history into her arguments for independence. This tactic fits nicely into the overarching goal of nationalism through the pushing of a shared cultural experience of the people in order to unify them and bring them to a sort of cultural awakening, which would then (presumably) lead to a political awakening. It is in this vein that I see Bébel-Gisler using the literary genre of *testimonio*, for it includes by its very nature the individual and the collective, the cultural and the political, the literary and the sociological.⁴

Leonora is perhaps best described as a text that resides between generic dimensions and is the product of a practice at once social-scientific and artistic. The point is that *Leonora* purposefully straddles divisions between fictional and nonfictional, between literary, historiographical, autobiographical, and social-scientific discourses [Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson, 1994, 269].

As suggested in the title, *Leonora: The buried story of Guadeloupe* is more than the account of a certain Guadeloupean woman's life story. For Dany Bébel-Gisler, as author and as social scientist, the text functions as a catalyst to engage the population in the socio-political reality of Guadeloupe. Looking at the text as a political device inevitably reveals the author's own personal agenda, which comes to inhabit a metatextual level of the narrative. In the author's instrumental use of the text, *Leonora* serves as more than a cultural informant/consultant in the ethnographic realm of the text, and as more than a narrator/protagonist in the narrative realm. Instead, Bébel-Gisler uses *Leonora* as an ethnocultural representative, one of many Guadeloupeans who, through simi-

⁴ The general definition of testimonial literature, writes Miguel Barnet, author of *Biografía de un cimarrón*, is "a literature that is both testimonial in the sense of being a witness account and a kind of memorial" one which "should contribute to the articulation of a collective memory, a we not an I" (cited in González-Echevarría, 1985, 114, 119). This idea is echoed by Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson: "The contribution of the *testimonio* or testimonial novel to tradition is the knowledge of a reality through the knowledge of a language. In that sense, it can revitalize literature even as it resists overt literariness" (1994, 272). And, according to Ivette Romero, testimonial narrative "traces a movement from the marginalized, silenced, and battered body, seen as a tool by others [...] to produce changes for their communities and future generations" (1993, 30). She continues, "While testimonial texts attest to a people's resistance and affirmation, they also seek to inspire others and to incite them to action" (1993, 252).

lar backgrounds, have come to recognize their personal identity in terms of the larger Guadeloupean socio-historic experience. Leonora can also be considered the prototype for realizing the author's agenda because she is an idealized example of the *prise de conscience* of an entire people, an example for countless Guadeloupeans to follow in order to escape the neo-colonial trap of assimilation.

Because of the multiple levels of Leonora's role in the narrative text, her personal development functions as an enactment of the metatextual development of her author's "true meaning," the overriding goal of the telling of Leonora's life story — the recuperation of Guadeloupean (hi)story, as the title suggests. Much of the theoretical framework guiding the textual enactment centers on the ambiguous nature of the text as literature, whether it is autobiography or fiction. With respect to genre, testimonial literature plays a defining role because, as we will see, *testimonio* is an ideal choice for Bébel-Gisler's purpose as, too, is socially engaged. This aspect of the genre allows the author to play out and enact the broad theoretical framework of language and nationalism within the narrative text. It is this "poetics of nationalism" that becomes the primary concern of the author at a metatextual level, while the textual level provides a narrative frame in which Leonora's life story is foregrounded and yet ultimately becomes only a secondary concern.

In the literary space between autobiography and fiction, testimonial literature tends to serve a connecting function. Within this relatively new genre,⁵ the autobiographical aspect is seen through the protagonist's relation of his or her own life story to the author, who then writes it down and recounts it to an audience. The fictional aspect of testimonial literature is implicit in the author's framing of the life story, through choices such as the order in which to inscribe the related events, the details to include or exclude, the type of language (standard/non-standard, formal/informal, high/low) to use, etc. Because of this generic ambivalence, testimonial literature is an ideal choice through which Bébel-Gisler can claim the text as her own, labeling it fiction, and yet have Leonora speak in her own words, thus allowing the autobiographical aspect to dominate the narrative. "Bébel-Gisler insists on calling it [*Leonora*] a *roman*, a novel, specifically a *roman témoignage*, or testimony novel"

⁵ Generally speaking, *testimonio* does not predate the Cuban Revolution, and the text that is considered the first example of the genre is Miguel Barnet's, 1968, *Biografía de un cimarrón*.

(Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson, 1994, 262).⁶ This ambiguity of the testimonial genre is not the only reason for Bébel-Gisler's choosing it to recount the story of Leonora. An inherent quality of testimonial literature is the presence of a political/cultural agenda that is actualized through the narrative process which shows the narrator/protagonist moving from an apparent state of social innocence through a state of social awareness to a final state of social engagement and action. This agenda is clear evidence of the author's role in the framing of the testimony to reflect this progression.

Testimonial literature, also known as documentary literature, has its origins in journalism and similarly,

betray[s] the desire to bypass literary entrapments, or to dissolve the literariness of the narrative by turning to its sources [...] Journalism also tends to diffuse the question of authorship [and] fosters the illusion that incidents write themselves into history [González-Echevarría, 1985, 115].

According to Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson, "this form of socioliterature [*testimonio*] [...] requires that the self of the writer or sociologist be suppressed or suspended: in other words, that the presence of the author in the text be kept to a minimum" (Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson, 1994, 272). There is no doubt, however, that the story related is that of Leonora and not of Bébel-Gisler, but there is also no doubt that the author has made significant defining choices in the creation of her text. In the case of *Leonora*, the autobiographical aspects of the testimonial take place "inside," or within the story itself, as Leonora recounts her life.⁷ Ironically, the fictional aspects of the testimonial take place "outside," both in the framing of the story as well as in the extensive ethnographic endnotes provided by Bébel-Gisler, intended to serve a purpose of clarification to help readers understand the text. Since the endnotes represent a social scientific explanation of indigenous cultural information, they would seem to be part of the "truth factor" belonging to the autobiographical aspect of the text. However, because the endnotes distance the author from her narrator, they expand the space in which fictional creativity

⁶ According to an unpublished tapescript of a talk given by Bébel-Gisler at Columbia University entitled, "Who Is the Other?" (noted in Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson's afterword), Bébel-Gisler reiterates her insistence that *Leonora* is, in fact, a novel.

⁷ The oral account of Leonora in Creole is what is known in French as the *récit*, what we call here the story. The written text by Bébel-Gisler in French (and translated into English) is what is known as the *narration*, or the narrative/narration. What I call "inside" is the *récit*, and "outside" is the *narration*.

takes place. The reader is able to make the author/narrator distinction clearly, thus also identifying some of the narrative techniques used by Bébel-Gisler in the framing of her own intended "story," the "real" story the author hopes to relate through the inscription of Leonora's personal life story. As a result, the ethnographic endnotes also serve the purpose of displacing the narrative from the position of a personal life story to the socially engaged position of the recuperation of the group (hi)story of Guadeloupeans. The lines between author and narrator are once again blurred in the postface, which can be seen as residing both inside and outside the narration itself. Here, Bébel-Gisler claims that her own socio-political agenda closely resembled that of Leonora, thus limiting the distance between author and narrator and leading toward an autobiographical reading of the narration. However, the differences between the author's own personal background and that of her narrator maintain the distance between them, a space in which the narrator is romanticized by the author, thus leading toward a fictional reading of the narration.

In order to understand how Bébel-Gisler effectively blurs and defines the differences between herself and her narrator, we must ask ourselves, what are the background, sociopolitical agenda, and goals of the author? The answers to these questions reside not only between the front and back covers of *Leonora*, but also in Bébel-Gisler's other sociological writings. We know from the postface that Bébel-Gisler was born of a white father and black mother and that she spent a significant amount of time in France receiving a university education — a more privileged background than that of her black Creole peasant narrator. We learn from *Le défi culturel guadeloupéen: devenir ce que nous sommes* that her social scientific research focused on a "village africain" d'Ivry, dans la banlieue parisienne (1989, 37), dealing with immigrant African workers in "une pratique militante d'alphabétisation" (1989, 36), and that she also founded and heads the Centre Bwadoubout, "un Centre qui accueille des jeunes en difficulté et qui, par une pédagogie de l'imaginaire et de la libération, ancrée dans la culture populaire, tente de leur donner le goût et les armes pour qu'ils puissent vivre et travailler au pays" (Bébel-Gisler, 1989, 40) — placing her firmly in a position of acute social awareness and engagement. Through frequent citations of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, as well as through her forceful statements regarding the necessity to elevate the masses, we discern that she is a traditional Marxist — a clearly defined political stance that Leonora herself never articulates, and represents a political party Leonora never joins. In *La Langue créole, force*

jugulée we discover that Bébel-Gisler's socio-political agenda entails not only the economic elevation of the masses but also the cultural-linguistic elevation of Creole (the language of the masses) as a means of achieving independence from France:

Détrôner le français reviendrait donc à détrôner symboliquement les masses dominantes soucieuses d'être le représentant de la vraie civilisation et par-tant, d'être pour le pays tout entier le signe qu'il est un pays civilisé à l'instar des métropoles occidentales [Bébel-Gisler, 1989, 200].

In other words, dethroning or overthrowing the French language as the dominant language of Guadeloupe would in turn dethrone the controlling Guadeloupe as a part of France with an indigenous notion of Guadeloupe as an independent entity. "For Bébel-Gisler, Creole designates a set of specific linguistic and cultural practices whose rehabilitation may be a vehicle toward Antillean independence" (Kutzinski and Mesh-Ferguson, 1994, 267). The author's thinly veiled yet overriding agenda in *Leonora* thus combines Marxism, support for Creole as the "official" language of Guadeloupe, and independence from France. It is through these lenses that one can filter Leonora's personal life story in order to catch a glimpse of the text's role in advancing the author's agenda both of recuperating Guadeloupean (hi)story and of directing the future of that (hi)story.

Because of Bébel-Gisler's socio-political background and agenda as well as the narrative choices she made in framing *Leonora*, the text provides an enactment of the very processes of increased social awareness that the narrator experiences in her life story. As Leonora undergoes the process of transformation leading her from innocence, to awareness, to action, so the text undergoes a process of transformation leading it from the retelling of an individual story, to the recuperation of the shared (hi)story of Guadeloupe, to the fostering of nationalist movements. In order to reveal this mimetic process, it will be necessary to understand how *Leonora* serves as a staging of Bébel-Gisler's independentist aspirations through the notion of nationalism as well as the relationship between nationalism and language.

According to Joshua Fishman, an ethnic group develops into a nationality as it moves beyond "primarily local self-concepts, concerns, and integrative bonds" (1975, 3) toward a wider conception of society. This group process of national awareness parallels the individual process of

social awareness in testimonial literature generally, and in *Leonora* more specifically. It is important to note that nationality/nationalism are terms that do not depend on a political unit. Instead, nationalist movements arise in an attempt to create a polity/nation where it does not yet exist. Guadeloupe is an administrative entity, yet it is not a nation; rather it is a French *département*, politically, socially, and economically dependent on the former colonial power.

Il n'existe donc pas de pays nommé Guadeloupe, mais un département français, pas de peuple, mais une population, pas de culture, mais un folklore, pas de résistance culturelle, mais une assimilation forcenée réussie [Bébel-Gisler, 1983, 2004].

Nationality and nationalism are, however, terms that denote a highly effective organization of beliefs, values, and behaviors shared by the ethnic group (Fishman, 1975, 4). This organizational behavior and ideology focuses directly on the preservation, strengthening, and development of the shared customs and values of the ethnic group that are perceived as distinct and unique. In *Leonora*, many of the instances of folk culture are clustered in the beginning chapters. Chapter one describes the ways in which society has changed since "the good old days," according to *Leonora*, focusing on the old traditions including child-rearing, household chores such as cooking and making *carapate* oil and manioc, telling folktales — all shared customs and values of *Leonora*'s neighborhood and surrounding areas. Chapter two reveals the socialization and assimilation process entailed in children attending school. Chapter three involves traditions regarding the vigils and burials of the dead, including word games, *léwoz*, storytellers and singers.

Also in chapter three, *Leonora* begins to question the meaning of these old traditions, stating, "It's strange. In telling this I realize that our ancestors left us all these customs without any explanations [...] I've always seen these things done but never been able to ask why" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 55). And from this point on in the text *Leonora* begins to muse about why things are the way they are in her world, and these musings focus on the present-day relevance of ancient tradition.

When I think about all these traditions, I realize that they used to have special meanings. Some people know what they are, but most of us repeat the gestures without having a clue. The ancestors went about their business

without saying a word. They kept their secrets by keeping silent [Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 55-56].

The beginnings of social awareness through the recognition of the importance of shared values and traditions is keenly revealed at the end of chapter three when Leonora states, "I'm not really sure, but somehow I feel that the words and deeds of the elders and their understanding of the world are rooted in all of us, good as well as bad. And that's what has made us, we Guadeloupeans" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 59). In this passage Bébel-Gisler betrays the narrative process as she points to the direction in which Leonora's story (and the text itself) is headed — toward a definition of Guadeloupe and Guadeloupeans through ethnocultural tradition and social engagement.

In the development from ethnic group to nationality, the first step is thus one of recognition of the population's shared ethnocultural character and conviction of the importance of their ethnocultural uniqueness. As part of this growing recognition, allegiance begins at a local level (the "primarily local self-concepts, concerns, and integrative bonds" mentioned above) and centers around religious, political, or cultural elites who have non-local ties that have exposed them to a wider conception of society through ethnocultural unity (Fishman, 1975, 6). In the second half of *Leonora*, Father Chérubin Céleste is the local leader around whom such allegiance develops. The means by which he preached first captured the attention of the parishioners of Lamentin: it was not theoretical, but rather revealed the priest's own humanity and thus sensibilities to which his parishioners could relate. He placed himself among them rather than above them, encouraging them to handle their own problems rather than turning to him for solutions. "That was how he started, pushing us into small acts, small acts of sharing" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 160). Once the parishioners of Lamentin began to examine their own "self-concepts, concerns and integrative bonds" (e.g. ways for neighbors to coordinate and develop groups for studying the Bible, internal means of dealing with "problems that are usually kept hidden, not spoken of" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 165), and success in reconciling two feuding families through group meetings), they were strengthened as the group came together and eventually achieved unity.⁸

⁸ I would like to note at this time that, although Leonora and her peers come to believe in liberation through the church, liberation theology is not the ideology driving the

The second step in the development from ethnic group to nationality involves the expansion of the scope of the perceived commonality of ethnocultural character beyond its original bounds. In other words, the increasing inclusion of similar ethnic groups within the nationalist movement as the shift from local concerns to wider societal concerns takes place. Through Father Céleste's encouragement of parishioners coming together to study the Bible, the group's focus extended to their own lived reality: "We soon found it difficult not to stray from the text if we wanted to study the reality of our country, to answer questions regarding our lives in Guadeloupe" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 161). Here again, Bébel-Gisler betrays the narrative process and leads the reader to follow the path of Leonora — to stray from her own text in order to study the reality of Guadeloupe. Broader unity is the result of the recognition of the relationship and interdependence with others, rooted in ethnocultural similarities. During Father Céleste's hunger strike (his means of protesting the treatment of cane field workers and of supporting their work stoppage), parishioners and workers alike labored together to protect their leader and to spread the word of unionization to workers across Guadeloupe. Haitian workers had been hired to replace the striking Guadeloupeans, and to these men too parishioners spoke of unionization and solidarity. However, certain people insisted, "The Haitians are stealing our work. We must beat them up" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 216). Rather than agreeing with these people, parishioners pointed out that the Haitians were to be considered as part of the group because of their shared experience of oppression: "To those who said that, we replied: 'Yes, the Haitians are working in our places, but they've come looking for a way to live too'" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 216). The ethnocultural similarities between Guadeloupeans and Haitians led to broader unity through the inclusion of the Haitians in the fight for social justice. As a metatextual

narrative, Marxism is. It may, however, have been the driving force behind Leonora's personal *récit* or story. Liberation theology can be defined as: "1. An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor. 2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it. 3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor" (Berryman, 1987, 6). In my view, liberation theology is a bottom-up phenomenon focused on the poor (not an organized group), despite the need for a local priest, nun, or other pastoral person. "If Marxism were their primary frame of reference, [...] theologians and those doing pastoral work would be very concerned to identify the genuine proletariat, the potentially revolutionary class, in order to work with them. In both their pastoral activity and theology, however, they are centered on those who are poor for no other reason than that they are poor" (Berryman, 1987, 33).

example, this scene serves as a demonstration of how recognizing ethnocultural similarities between groups leads not only to broader unity but also to more forceful acts of social, political, and/or economic resistance to French authority. The author uses textual examples of groups coming together in the past to demonstrate that when Guadeloupeans unite they are a powerful force. This is just the type of action Bébel-Gisler would like to see repeated in the future, if not today, as Guadeloupeans stand together for independence.

An important component of nationalism is the stressing of "authenticity, purity, and nobility of the beliefs, values, and behaviors" of the group, which are to be found in the lower classes and in the distant past (Fishman, 1975, 8). The lower classes represent a source of authenticity because they are seen as less corrupted by outside influences as well as more faithful to the preservation of ethnocultural distinctiveness. The distant past serves as a source of purity, authenticity, and greatness: it refers to a time when the ethnocultural characteristics of the group were defined and developed in contradistinction to outside forces, and it serves as a reference point of ethnocultural birth. This emphasis on the lower classes in the development of nationalism also fits into Bébel-Gisler's own Marxist socio-political agenda. "Nationalism seeks to 'render the present a rational continuation of the past,' [...] indeed, it seeks and creates a usable past" (Fishman, 1975, 8). This process is integral to the author's recounting past successes (such as the scene described above) in order to spur Guadeloupeans on to future and greater social engagement and action. Acknowledgment of past greatness encourages the restoration of the past to create a nationality leading toward renewed greatness or even "greaterness," while nationalism itself is an ethnocultural solution for the rootlessness⁹ and meaninglessness experienced by the masses due to colonization.

Another way the author suggests a "rational rendering of the past" is by using the Creole language as a reflection of the distant past. Bébel-

⁹ Bébel-Gisler's text does not demonstrate a feeling of rootlessness because she is anchoring the founding of a nation on an example of the "noble peasant" who has not been separated from the land or people in question. However, since Guadeloupe became a department of France the number of Guadeloupeans emigrating to France has grown tremendously. But even before departmentalization, the educated elite (or "protoelite") went to university in France and there discovered their "otherness," thus engendering a sense of deracination and alienation from the homeland. See, for example, writings by literary forefathers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Léon Damas, just to name a few.

Gisler strategically positions Creole tradition at the beginning of *Leonora* in order to establish these crucial links to the masses and to the ancestral past. The first words of the text are "*Sété léstravay*. It was the time of slavery" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 1), thus clearly identifying to what past author and narrator are referring. After a brief description of some of the atrocities that befell the black population during slavery, a ninety-eight-year-old peasant woman from Guadeloupe is quoted, discussing the dislocation of the Africans who came to Guadeloupe as slaves. The importance of the lower classes is thus maintained through slavery, and the link to the ancestral past is thus established in Africa. According to Fishman, the scholarly endeavor to find a decisive moment at which ethnocultural birth took place pushed the origins of unity further and further back into the past (1975, 17). As a scholar, Bébel-Gisler, too, pushes back the origins, locating the past at a point that is twice removed: from the present day to slavery, from slavery to Africa.

Then, in chapter one, this past time is once again evoked through the tale of Persillette. The oral tradition of folktales is part and parcel of the Creole ethnocultural past. Bébel-Gisler herself notes in *Le défi culturel guadeloupéen*,

Notre miroir le plus sûr et le plus fidèle, la tradition orale, la culture populaire antillaise, celle d'hier, celle d'aujourd'hui, celle de demain, l' "authentique" [...] c'est à travers elle que nous pourrions confirmer notre identité, que nous prendrions conscience de notre continuité historique sur ces terres des Antilles fécondées par la sueur et le sang [...] des esclaves africains [...] [Bébel-Gisler, 1989, 20].

The story of Persillette frames Leonora's narrative, placing it within the Creole continuum: the folktale establishes a continuous link to the ancestral past at the threshold of the written text. Creole language and tradition must be a part of this framing technique as a sign of cultural value because if the Creole were erased, so (possibly) might be the cultural tradition itself.

In addition to their role as framing device, folktales serve as a connection to the past by introducing well-known Creole characters and experiences through the same stories told over and over for their representative cultural value. In the Persillette tale we learn of a brave little girl battling against the "*soukounyan*." The author adds an endnote describing the "*soukounyan*" and its traditional role in Creole folktales:

"*soukounyans*" are human beings, usually witches or those having signed a pact with the devil, who are transformed at night into a ball of fire that sucks the blood of victims. In this endnote, Bébel-Gisler is careful to lend the authority of veracity to the oral tradition itself, claiming that all the information she gives the reader is from this tradition, going on to explain, "as oral tradition tells us" (Bébel-Gisler, 1989, 239), how to neutralize a "*soukounyan*." The storyteller's role is an Antillean "universal," thereby rendering the tale a "community-owned property" and bringing people together to recall past shared experience through an oral medium. Cultural wisdom becomes the authority through these narrative maneuvers, ending with the statement that this "wasn't the end of the story," first because the tale will be repeated countless times within the oral tradition continuum and second because Persillette is the protagonist for other Creole tales with other lessons for the people who hear them.

The Persillette folktale thus takes the reader away from the narrative of Leonora's life story to the recuperation of the (hi)story of Guadeloupe. The tale's function is not one of adding to Leonora's story, but rather of contributing to the creation of a usable past for the nationalist movement and making sense of the present as a continuation of the past. Like Leonora herself, the Persillette tale is representative, functioning as a reminder of Creole persistence and resistance in the face of terrible circumstances as well as creating a possible solution for rootlessness and meaninglessness through ethnocultural grounding in the great ancestral past.

A critical catalyst to nationalism is a group of "protoelites who are (or feel) excluded from the power and influence they covet and who possess the personal gifts and material resources to move symbols and masses toward the desired socio-political regroupings" (Fishman, 1975, 15). In *Leonora* the author fills the role of the protoelite, serving as the communicator of nationalism to the lower classes, by framing the movement in popular terms stressing authenticity, and by heightening latent awareness so that the masses feel a connection and thus act on the basis of nationality. Although Bébel-Gisler is careful "de respecter la personne qui raconte sa vie [Leonora]. C'est-à-dire que soit transmis avec fidélité son langage, restituée sa culture vécue, sa philosophie" (Bébel-Gisler, 1989, 28), she does guide Leonora's narrative so as to stress the authenticity of her story, to heighten Leonora's early latent awareness, and to lead into Leonora's engagement in social action. Eventually, through this

process Bébel-Gisler relinquishes her role as protoelite at an autobiographical level, entrusting it to Leonora as her social awareness and action develop and she takes on the protoelite's role of unifying the people, cleansing and purifying the past, and differentiating the ethnocultural uniqueness from other groups. However, the author maintains the role of protoelite at the fictional level because the narrator is not aware of her representative function in the recuperation of Guadeloupean (hi)story within the larger framework of the author's socio-political agenda.

According to Fishman, protoelites of nationalist movements sometimes do not come from the same backgrounds as those they hope to organize, and have often lived and were educated abroad or in exile, thus having only marginally ethnic personal lives. We have already seen that this is the case with the author and narrator of *Leonora*: Leonora is a peasant, Bébel-Gisler received a French education; Leonora never left Guadeloupe, Bébel-Gisler has lived for extended periods in France; Leonora is authentic, Bébel-Gisler is alienated. As a result of dislocation, elites become different from "the people," thus causing "part of the emotional and intellectual intensity of their [the protoelites'] work [to be] interpretable as the search for personal identity and a usable personal past" (Fishman, 1975, 17). Protoelites therefore attempt to identify with the masses (based on beliefs of authenticity and purity), but because of their own personal alienation they tend to romanticize the masses as well. We see this identification/ romanticization process at work in the postface. First, the author reveals her own identification with Leonora through a shared ethnocultural experience when she claims,

I never felt myself to be an outsider, removed from her [Leonora's] inquiry, her doubts, her searching. Much of what she told me sounded an echo in me, resonated in my body, caused forgotten sensations to surface [Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 233].

Then, Bébel-Gisler romanticizes Leonora's and other poor Guadeloupeans' plight when she claims:

There is something strong, deep, and solid in this culture, something fundamental that colonialism hasn't yet found, something that has allowed and continues to allow the men and women of Guadeloupe to resist a violence more than three centuries old and to engage in the battles they are now fighting to liberate Guadeloupe from the colonial yoke [Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 235].

The author's alienation is unveiled because she seems to have lost touch with the day-to-day hardships of the masses by focusing on the greater goal of nationalism and independence. However, socio-cultural alienation also provides the author with a broader vision of unity because of nonlocal ties as well as deeper notions of the authenticity in the masses that, for protoelites, contributes to the progression from ethnic group to nationality.

As we have seen, nationalist movements tend to focus on the valorization of lowerclass traditions, practices, and beliefs as a means of authentication and purification. Another aspect of lower-class reality adopted by such movements is the vernacular language (in our case Creole) as opposed to the standard or world prestige language (here French) as the true means of expression of the masses and of the nationalist character. The dependence of Antillean protoelites on Creole reflects their need to communicate with, organize, and activate the masses. In her study "The Creole movement in Guadeloupe," Ellen Schnepel addresses the role of the Creole language in the unionization of Guadeloupean workers and the organization of the nationalist movement and groups such as GONG (Groupe d'Organisation Nationale de la Guadeloupe) and UPLG (Union Populaire pour la Guadeloupe Indépendante).

Through the efforts of these protoelites, speakers of a language can form and be identified as a language group, with the potential for this collectivity transforming into an identity group in which common language—often a weaker or subordinate language—is used as a rallying device for group identity and political mobilization. Later this identity group may become a "control group," involving state recognition and power by which legitimacy is given to the language [Schnepel, 1993, 118].

There is a useful analogy to be drawn among testimonial literature, Fishman, and Schnepel.

Testimonial: innocence	→	awareness	→	action
Fishman: ethnic group	→	broader unity	→	nationality
Schnepel: language group	→	identification group	→	control group

Both "ethnic group" and "language group" denote the early stages of "innocence" necessary for the transformation to "broader unity" and "identification group" that connote a heightened state of "social aware-

ness," and both "nationality" and "control group" serve as the endgame in social engagement and action. As Schnepel points out, Creole becomes an instrument of power towards these social purposes, both for the protoelites and the masses they represent, as it is promoted as the one and only true spirit of the nationalist character.

Along with the use of Creole in union meetings, which liberated workers by allowing them to speak freely and understand the debate, Creole was used by union spokesmen in political discourse at demonstrations and during strikes to organize and mobilize the workers [Schnepel, 1993, 121].

The idea that a people's individuality and uniqueness is found in its language is an old concept related to the idea known as the "holy trinity:" holy people, holy land, holy language. In theory, literacy projects in Creole forge a new bond between people and their language, as well as an awareness of the mother tongue as "part of a rebirth of self and of assertive self-consciousness" (Fishman, 1975, 43). In practice, as Creole became the language of choice among protoelites and peasants alike in the struggle for liberation, "it soon became the symbol of both individual and national liberation" (Schnepel, 1993, 122). In addition to the liberation of Creole, such literacy projects also put protoelites in touch with masses whom they would otherwise probably not have reached or influenced. Schnepel pointed out the role of Creole in the reality of unionization and organization of the nationalist movement in Guadeloupe. As Leonora comes to recognize the theoretical "truth" of Creole's role in her own personal social awareness process, so does the text recognize it in its progression toward group social awareness. To wit, in Leonora, Bébel-Gisler points to the role of Creole in the fictional organization of the people in the Church: "When we used French to comment on the Gospel, we couldn't say much, couldn't go into it very deeply [...] In Creole, it was different. You can express yourself, all your ideas flow freely, you bring the text to life" (1994, 192). Leonora links the use of Creole in the Church to the use of Creole in the unionization movement (1994, 193) as well as to her new abilities of social interaction and of speaking out:

The use of Creole greatly changed our way of interacting, changed for instance, the relationship in the community between a teacher and a farm laborer [...] Now, thanks to Creole, they [the common people] dare to speak

out. I realize that our language, Creole, has a real value, but "they" [the French] had killed it [1994, 196].

Because, according to Fishman, the mother tongue is a collective achievement par excellence (since language cannot be created by isolated individuals, but rather is formed by those that live in constant contact and thus must develop means of communication in various domains of social interaction), it is therefore the most authentic way for individuals and groups to maintain and/or rediscover their inherited ancestral authority as well as to pass it on to future generations (1975, 46). Due to the situation of diglossia that exists in the Antilles in which French is considered the high or prestige language and Creole the low or debased language, Creole was associated with slavery and therefore denoted lower-class status. Creole was also, however, the language of folklore and other Antillean traditions that served as the supreme link to the ancestral past discussed above.

Les esclaves ont su créer des poches de résistance dont la langue créole et les productions culturelles comme les contes, les proverbes et les chansons, continuent à témoigner encore de nos jours, et qui ont constitué autant de modes de cohésion entre les esclaves pour affronter les maîtres-colons [Bébel-Gisler, 1976, 58].

The creation of the Creole language resulted thus not only from the necessity to communicate, but also as a response to forced colonial assimilation. Creole "grew up" as a language of resistance during the time of slavery, went through (or is still experiencing) a period of denigration in comparison to the dominant language, and is entering (or has yet to enter) into a phase in which it is highly valued as the true means of expression of the Antillean ethnocultural reality.

"To impose another language on [...] a people is to send their history adrift [...] to tear their identity from all places [...] To lose your native tongue, and learn that of an alien, is the worst badge of conquest — it is the chain on the soul" (Fishman, 1975, 48). This is exactly what happened to Antilleans during slavery and up to the present day. Leonora describes this situation in a chapter entitled, "The love of French, a malady that drives people mad" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 13, 188). In contradistinction to the chapter "On the road to school" (Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 2, 23), this later chapter is situated in Leonora's phase of heightened social awareness, just before she moves into action.

An té vlé konprann pouki
Gwadeloupéyen enmé palé fwansé
konsa.
Pouki Nèg ka méprizé kréyòl, lang
yo konnèt palé.
An pé di sa lèd: ou pa konnèt palé
fwansé, sé fwansé ou vlé palé.

I'd like to understand why
Guadeloupeans so love to speak
French.
Why the blacks scorn Creole, a
language they can speak. Oh, how
ugly! You don't know how to speak
French, yet it's French you want to
use [Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 188].

Because of the socio-linguistic situation in Guadeloupe, the people have been taught, and have internalized the desire to adopt, the external French norm. Leonora, however, because of an advanced state of social awareness feels that:

Kréyòl sé zépon natirèl an nou,
Dépi an vant a manman nou,
nou ka bennyé adan.
Sòti ou sòti, sé sa ou ka tann palé
a kaz a-ou.
Fwahnsé sé con lenj prété.
Yo pòté-i ban nou
à nau enki varé adan-i kon bèf
a tchou fon. E nou touvé nou pri.

Creole is our natural spur.
In our mother's bellies we're
already bathed in it.
We heard it spoken at home from
the moment of our birth.
French is a borrowed garment.
They brought it to us,
and we plunged into it like
a raw-boned bull.
We found ourselves trapped
[Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 194].

Leonora's social awareness is not only evident within her own words and the text itself, but also in the paratextual citation of Hector Poulet at the beginning of this same chapter, a framing device chosen by the author to indicate the level of social awareness of her narrator.

Chaj an mwen sé mwen, sé lang an mwen, sé-y ki ka di ki-moun ki ka palé
dèyè mwen. An pa ni dwa mété-y anba plat a pyé an-mwen. An pa ni dwa
lésé-y toufé-y pas toufé on lang sé déboujonné Limanité.

My language is my burden, it makes a spokesman of me. I don't have the
right to trample it underfoot, don't have the right to see it stifled, because
stifling a language removes a bud of Humanity [Bébel-Gisler, 1994, 188].

The Poulet citation serves as a moment of transition from Bébel-Gisler's agenda to Leonora's individual story, from group identification to personal identification with language. Readers have progressed to a stage of recognition of the important role of Creole in recuperating

(hi)story as Leonora has reached the parallel personal stage of recognition of Creole in the telling of her own story. The Creole quotations kept intact by Bébel-Gisler have become more profound in their statements, no longer merely reflecting cultural traditions, practices, and beliefs. Instead, the Creole now reflects Leonora's personal social awareness and points to the parallel metatextual group awareness. Through the insistence on the use of Creole in literary and traditional texts, "history" is filtered down to the lower classes (*i.e.* the author uses Leonora's personal story to represent Guadeloupean history to others of Leonora's class) and folklore is filtered up to the upper classes (*i.e.* Bébel-Gisler valorizes folk-tale as a true reflection of Guadeloupean cultural history for non-Antillean readers). Both the lower classes and protoelites demonstrate the necessity of Creole to the inspiring, unifying, and activating stimulus of ethnocultural identity and thus of nationalism. The Creole language must be present in the recounting of Leonora's story for authenticating purposes, and it must be present in the recuperation of Guadeloupean (hi)story as a sign of cultural value. The mother tongue is thus considered "sacred" in this recuperating role, particularly for ethnocultural groups such as those found in the Antilles whose greatness has been buried by colonization and French cultural domination, and is thus not currently self-evident. "For the 'peoples without history,' language and nationalism are two sides of the same coin" (Fishman, 1968, 45).

Within nationalist movements, a particularly frequent source of nationalist language planning is the image of the noble, uncontaminated peasant who kept his or her language pure and intact, precisely as it had been in a golden past (Fishman, 1975, 69). In *Leonora*, the narrator serves as the prototype of this "noble peasant." Again, although Bébel-Gisler is faithful to the factual accounting of Leonora's life story, she as author uses Leonora as an example of the type of person necessary to activate her own socio-political agenda. We are thus brought back to the realization that this text is neither autobiography nor fiction, but both masked in the functionally useful genre of testimonial literature. In the quest for internal authority, the common folk are most privileged to maintain the vernacular as bequeathed by generations of ancestors (Fishman, 1975, 70). To this purpose, the author foregrounds the narrator's experiences with traditional Creole culture and often recounts stories that focuses on Leonora's own personal link to her ancestors.

Leonora is appropriately subtitled *The buried story of Guadeloupe* because it is not simply an autobiographical account of a Guadeloupean

woman, nor is it merely a fictional account created by the author. Instead, *Leonora* is at once the personal story of a Guadeloupean woman named Leonora AND the recuperated (hi)story of Guadeloupe. The author uncovers the buried (hi)story by textually enacting the processes of social awareness described in the narrative. The text serves as a staging or prescription of the author's socio-political agenda: as Leonora reaches social awareness, her story becomes representative of the experience of an entire population. Once Guadeloupe's (hi)story is exhumed at the metatextual level, Leonora serves as an example for Guadeloupeans to imitate in order to attain the next level of social engagement — nationalism and eventually independence. Throughout the text, through recourse to common techniques used by nationalist movements, the author hopes to spur Guadeloupeans on to social awareness and action through the prescription of her own socio-political agenda. Bébel-Gisler's roles as social scientist and author come together as her narrator/protagonist enacts the socio-political agenda (Marxism, advancement of Creole as an official language, and independence) that has been the overriding greater goal throughout the text. Ultimately, *Leonora* is more a fictional account of the way in which language and nationalism (on a broad theoretical level) are played out and enacted textually than it is an autobiographical account of one woman's life story.

BARBRO LUCKA KELLEY
E-mail: barbro@virginia.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnet, Miguel

1968 *Biografía de un cimarrón*, Buenos Aires, Galerna.

Bébel-Gisler, Dany

1976 *La langue créole. Force jugulée: Étude socio-linguistique des rapports de force entre le créole et le français aux Antilles*, Paris, Harmattan.

1983 "De la culture guadeloupéenne [...] de l'indépendance", *Les Temps Modernes*, 39, pp. 2004-2025.

1985 *Les enfants de la Guadeloupe*, Paris, Harmattan.

1989 *Le défi culturel guadeloupéen: devenir ce que nous sommes*, Paris, Éditions Caribéennes.

- 1994 *Leonora: the buried story of Guadeloupe* (trad. Andrea Leskes), Virginia, University Press of Virginia, CARAF Books.
- Berryman, Phillip
 1987 *Liberation theology: essential facts about the revolutionary religious movement in Latin America and beyond*, New York, Pantheon Books.
- Fishman, Joshua, Charles A. Ferguson, and Jyotirinda Das Gupta
 1968 *Language problems of developing nations*, New York, Wiley.
- Fishman, Joshua A.
 1975 *Language and nationalism: two integrative essays*, Massachusetts, Newbury House Publishers.
- González-Echevarría, Roberto
 1985 *The voice of the masters: writing and authority in modern Latin American literature*, Texas, University of Texas Press.
- Kutzinski, Vera y Cynthia Mesh-Ferguson
 1994 "Afterword", *Leonora: the buried story of Guadeloupe* (trad. Andrea Leskes), Virginia, University Press of Virginia CARAF Books.
- Romero-Cesareo, Ivette
 1993 "Eloquent materiality: womens testimonial narrative in the Caribbean", French Department, University of California-Los Angeles, January 22.
- Schnepel, Ellen M.
 1993 "The Creole movement in Guadeloupe", *Creole movements in the Francophone orbit*, Ellen Schnepel and Lambert-Félix Prudent (eds.), *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 102, pp. 117-134.
- Smith, Anthony D.
 1983 *Theories of nationalism*, New York, Holmes & Meier.