

## Discovery of Zobel's lost wartime short story

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### Audiovisual Works

*De l'Autre Côté*. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (Arte/RTBF, France/Belgium, 2002) 103 mins.

*D'Est*. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (Icarus Films, France/Belgium, 1993) 107 mins.

*E-muet*. [feature film] dir. by Corine Shawi (Spectre Productions, Lebanon, 2013) 52 mins.

*Sud*. [feature film] dir. by Chantal Akerman (La Sept-Arte/RTBF, France/Belgium, 1999) 71 mins.

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### DISCOVERY OF ZOBEL'S LOST WARTIME SHORT STORY: 'BO-BO-BO-O' OR 'UP YOURS, HITLER!'

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In the course of my research into Joseph Zobel, I have frequently found myself tracking down, examining and comparing different editions of the author's work. As I argue in my most recent monograph, *Joseph Zobel: Négritude and the Novel*,<sup>1</sup> Zobel's extensive project of revisions and rewriting reveals much about the shifts in his relationship with, and attitudes towards, Négritude, and about the evolution of his thinking on race and identity more generally. The publication history of Zobel's short stories is no less complex and intriguing, and in the present article I wish to draw attention to my recent discovery of a remarkable 'lost' short story by Zobel. I begin by focusing on publication history, before moving to provide an outline of the lost short story and highlighting its significance for wider scholarship on francophone literary culture and history; in the final phase, I consider the factors which may have led to the text becoming lost.

The existence of the story has long been forgotten due to its complete exclusion during one of Zobel's forays into rewriting, and the lost text only came to light when I examined the original edition of Zobel's first short story collection, *Laghia de la mort*, a compelling series of tableaux of everyday Martinican life. *Laghia de la mort* first appeared in 1946 with a private Martinican press,<sup>2</sup> and three decades later, in 1978, was republished under the same title by *Présence Africaine*, with extensive revisions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the 1946 collection itself has a significant pre-history, as many of the stories were adapted and revised by Zobel from the prose fiction stories he published regularly in the Martinican newspaper *Le Sportif*;<sup>4</sup> so began the pattern of rewriting which was to become such a prominent feature of Zobel's career.

The 1978 *Présence Africaine* version is still widely available and studied, while the documented remaining examples of the 1946 edition are held in archives in Martinique and Paris. An online search of the SUDOC library catalogue revealed that one of the extant 1946 copies was held in Paris at the Médiathèque of the Musée du quai Branly.<sup>5</sup>

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The copy was soon winging its way to me via an international library loan. After admiring its cover artwork—a depiction of the *laghia*, a creole combat dance with antecedents in West African tradition and an image which, through its innovative representation of race, itself speaks volumes about Zobel's aims for the collection—I was struck by the appearance, half-way through the original collection, of an unusually lengthy short story, with an unfamiliar and opaque title: 'Bo-bo-bo-o', running from pages 47 to 60.

This is not the only unfamiliar title that crops up between the 1978 and 1946 editions: for example, the 1978 short story 'Le Premier convoi' was originally entitled 'Le Pionnier d'une nuit' in 1946.<sup>6</sup> Despite several changes between the two versions, it is still recognizably the same short story. Yet both the title and the content of 'Bo-bo-bo-o' were quite unfamiliar, and it quickly became apparent that in the 1970s, when Zobel painstakingly reworked the short stories for republication, the decision was made to excise that story completely. There is no record of the text among Zobel's known earliest publications in *Le Sportif*.<sup>7</sup> And so, in the serpentine, transnational publication history of Zobel's works, it had simply become 'lost'.

The rediscovery of 'Bo-bo-bo-o' casts new light on Zobel's literary development by foregrounding his coming-of-age as a writer in wartime Martinique; indeed, it is the only story in *Laghia de la mort* to provide a direct and uncompromising account of race relations in Vichy Martinique. Moreover, as a rare fictional depiction of the French Caribbean resistance movement, known as 'La Dissidence', the story is significant for francophone Caribbean culture more widely and it appears that it is the earliest and only fictional account to have been written contemporaneously with events. This is an ongoing aspect of my current research: as a point of comparison, the next earliest account which I have been able to identify (thus far) is a short story, 'Le Résistant', published in 1972 by the Guadeloupean-Guianese author Bertène Juminier. This two-page short story has its own fascinating publication history, and appeared under the rubric 'nouvelle' in the pioneering Senegalese women's magazine *AWA: La revue de la femme noire*—to which Zobel was also a regular contributor (indeed, he contributed a poem<sup>8</sup> to the issue in which Juminier's story appeared).<sup>9</sup> In the wider context of Antillean cultural responses to World War Two, with its thinly veiled criticism of the behaviour of the *békés* under Vichy rule, Zobel's story is allied to Suzanne Césaire's crushing condemnation of the same phenomenon in *Tropiques* in 1945.<sup>10</sup>

'Bo-bo-bo-o' further develops the themes of war and conflict that are present in *Laghia de la mort* (both editions), particularly in the short stories 'Le Premier convoi' and 'Il était un petit navire'. In marked contrast to those stories, however, it focuses not on the impact of war on solitary female characters, but on communal male experiences, through sustained attention to the perspectives of black Martinican soldiers who were forced to return to their island after the fall of France. Our hero, who emerges as a leader forged in the crucible of these very experiences, is named Justin. The opaque title 'Bo-bo-bo-o' refers to a song by the same name which conveys a raucous anti-Hitler message: indeed, if attempting an English translation, it would be tempting to borrow from a particularly heartfelt verse, and render the story (and song) title as 'Up Yours, Hitler'.<sup>11</sup> The history of the song is directly intertwined with the experiences of this group of black male Martinicans: first created when they headed off to war in France as idealistic young soldiers, it was later revived as an act of resistance, in response to the dire turn events had taken in metropolitan France and Martinique. Zobel's narrative leaves the reader in no doubt that for this group of men—and their female partners, who play an important role at the story's *dénouement*—Vichy rule in their island feels

perilously close to a return to slavery, with racist language openly tolerated, and the reinstatement of whipping as a legally sanctioned punishment creating very real echoes of the *Code Noir*.

Justin and his fellow Martinican soldiers will not accept this situation. They nurse plans to return to the fight in Europe and thereby resist and reject the harrowing prospect of a life of increasing inequality in Vichy Martinique. At the story's climax, a dance serves as the cover for the men to escape from Martinique in small fishing boats bound for what the text refers to as the English islands, from where they will, once again, join the fight against Hitler. In the French Caribbean, this resistance movement was termed *la Dissidence*. The word does not appear in Zobel's text, quite possibly because it was written contemporaneously to the action it depicts—certainly, the story's internal time unfolds just as the concept and practice of leaving in this manner were taking hold. The men, it transpires, have been inspired to leave Martinique and fight because they heard De Gaulle's famous radio address, in which he appealed to all French soldiers who could do so to head for British soil, from where they could continue the fight for free France. This sets the action of the tale on or around 18 June 1940, the date when the BBC broadcast De Gaulle's first appeal. (The appeal was subsequently repeated four days later, and its text reproduced).<sup>12</sup> At the time of rewriting in 1978, the significance of these events had all but been forgotten; the Antillean men and women who fought as part of *la Dissidence* had received only scant cultural representation, and virtually no public recognition. In recent years, Euzhan Palcy—who rose to fame with *Rue Cases-Nègres*,<sup>13</sup> her film adaptation of Zobel's best-known novel—became the first filmmaker to focus on this period and the effect of 'Général Micro', the Antillean nickname for De Gaulle, with her 2006 documentary film *Parcours de dissidents*.<sup>14</sup> This was part of a national campaign to recognize the sacrifice made by Martinican men and women who twice risked their lives in the name of freedom: firstly in their attempts to escape from their island, and secondly in the war itself.

The motives for Zobel's decision to omit 'Bo-bo-bo-o' from the rewritten version are unclear. He may have considered the text too rooted in a particular political context—Vichy France during World War Two—to have withstood the test of time and subsequent political developments. The title itself, which without any context appears strange and rather childlike, might also have dissuaded him from including it; perhaps he felt that a title which resonated with Martinican readers in 1946 had lost all popular significance at the time of rewriting. Further archival research is required into this matter, and clues may exist in the author's substantial personal diaries held in Martinique.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its removal in 1978, in retrospect Zobel's lost story provides some of the most significant insights into Vichy Martinique to emerge from *Lagbia de la mort* and the French Caribbean more generally. The rediscovery of the text is all the more timely in the light of the commemorations of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of De Gaulle's address which took place in 2020 across Europe and in the French Caribbean;<sup>16</sup> Zobel's lost story underscores the fact that this was an appeal which specifically targeted soldiers throughout the empire. 'Bo-bo-bo-o' allows a more complete picture to emerge of the young Zobel's literary ambition to become a chronicler of the intersections between war, gender, resistance and race as he witnessed and experienced them; moreover, viewed against the broader sweep of Caribbean literature and history, the story stands out as a unique example of literary testimony to Antillean heroism during the Second World War.

<sup>1</sup> Louise Hardwick, *Joseph Zobel: Négritude and the Novel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Zobel, *Laghia de la mort* (Fort-de-France: Bezaudin, 1946).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Zobel, *Laghia de la mort* (Paris/Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the extensive analysis of Zobel's contributions to *Le Sportif* in my 2018 monograph, as well as a later work which reproduces many of Zobel's texts from this period: Charles W. Scheel, *La Forge de Zobel: Contes et reportages parus dans 'Le Sportif' de Fort-de-France* (Paris: Scitep, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> <[www.sudoc.abes.fr](http://www.sudoc.abes.fr)> [accessed 19 July 2020].

<sup>6</sup> The 1946 title 'Le Pionnier d'une nuit' was itself taken directly from the first iteration of this short story, a piece in *Le Sportif* published on 12 January 1939 (reproduced in Scheel, pp. 35–37).

<sup>7</sup> Scheel's anthology of Zobel's articles for *Le Sportif* includes four short stories that went on to be included in *Laghia de la mort*—'Le Pionnier d'une nuit', 'Mapiam', 'Il était un petit navire' and 'Défense de danser'—while noting similarities between the published short story 'Laghia de la mort' and the newspaper piece 'Géo Bamboula'. There is no reference to 'Bo-bo-bo-o'.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Zobel, 'Ouvre bien grand tes bras', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire*, numéro 1: nouvelle série, octobre 1972 (p. 21). Thanks to a recent digitization project, *AWA* can now be viewed entirely online. See: <[www.awamagazine.org](http://www.awamagazine.org)> [accessed 14 July 2020].

<sup>9</sup> Bertène Juminier, 'Le Résistant', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire*, numéro 1: nouvelle série, octobre 1972 (pp. 25–26). See: <[www.awamagazine.org](http://www.awamagazine.org)> [accessed 14 July 2020].

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Césaire, 'Le Grand camouflage', *Tropiques*, 13–4 (September 1945), 267–73.

<sup>11</sup> 'Toute la case s'enflamma aussitôt dans une rage: Bo en cul Hitler! / Bo-bo-bo-o!', *Laghia de la mort* (1946), p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Audio recording and transcript: <<https://fresques.ina.fr/de-gaulle/fiche-media/Gaulle00300/appel-du-22-juin-1940.html>> [accessed 19 July 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Euzhan Palcy, *Rue Cases-Nègres* (France-Martinique: NEF, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Euzhan Palcy, *Parcours de dissidents* (France: JMJ Productions, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The author's personal archive, *Le Fonds Zobel*, was donated by his daughter Jenny Zobel to become part of Martinique's cultural heritage. The archive is held at the Musée régional d'histoire et d'ethnographie in Fort-de-France.

<sup>16</sup> For Martinican commemorations, see for example Karl Lorand and Cédric Catan, 'Il y a 80 ans, de jeunes martiniquais partaient en dissidence à l'appel du général de Gaulle', 18 June 2020: <<https://www.rci.fm/martinique/infos/Societe/l-y-80-ans-de-jeunes-martiniquais-partaient-en-dissidence-lappel-du-general-de>> [accessed 16 February 2021]

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## ON THE FRONTISPIECE OF BERNARDIN DE SAINT-PIERRE'S *ÉTUDES DE LA NATURE*

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Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's three best-known works all included illustrations. More unusually, these plates were also foregrounded by Bernardin in his text: titled individually, listed collectively and increasingly explicated. His first published work, the *Voyage à l'île de France* (1773), contained—despite its author's penury—three full-page plates by the leading illustrator Jean-Michel Moreau le jeune. We know little about Bernardin's role in this, but the final two-page 'Sujet des planches' must be his, and the complementarity of Moreau's illustrations to major concerns in his travel account—natural history and slavery—has been persuasively argued.<sup>1</sup> The *Études de la nature* (3 vols; 1784), which would bring him fame and fortune, was illustrated by the same hand. The first separate edition of *Paul et Virginie* (1789), a still greater success, contained four plates by Moreau le jeune