

‘Lorsque je vais dans mon village’ (When I return to my village)

JOSEPH ZOBEL’S VISIONS OF HOME AND EXILE

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The work of Martinican novelist and poet Joseph Zobel was inspired by the island of his birth. A recurring theme in his literary output is his abiding love and deep longing for his homeland. However, in 1946 Zobel left Martinique to start a new life in France and Senegal and never returned to live in his beloved

mother country. How does one explain this contradiction? What were the reasons that kept Zobel away from home for sixty years?¹

Zobel was born in Martinique and, like many francophone Antilleans, he left his home as a young man in the hope of a better future in France. He travelled to Paris in 1946, the same year that the departmentalisation of the French Antillean colonies took place. Martinique and Guadeloupe became known as DOM or *Départements d’Outre-Mer* [overseas departments] as labour shortages in France started to generate large-scale migration. Over 100,000 Antilleans travelled to Paris during the first twenty-five years of departmentalisation, and Zobel was in one of the first waves of migrants to make the journey (Mehn 18).

Zobel made his living as a writer and school teacher in Paris and Fontainebleau for eleven years until he accepted a job offer to move to Senegal and work as a headmaster in a secondary school in 1957. His final move, seventeen years later, was to the Cévennes in the south of France, where he lived until his death in 2006. Zobel wrote four novels and five collections of short stories and poetry during his lifetime, his most famous being *La Rue Cases-Nègres* or *Black Shack Alley*, published in 1950 and which, despite winning literature

prizes in France, only gained international attention when it was made into a film by Euzhan Palcy in 1983.

After leaving Martinique, Zobel never returned to live on his island of birth. During his childhood and adolescence in Martinique, education was the main focus of his life. He was a firm believer in education as a path to success, an idea passed down to him from his grandmother. Zobel was a conscientious scholar and, a few years after gaining his Baccalaureate and working as a journalist, he felt equipped to move to Paris in search of success as a writer. He was a staunch critic of Martinican society, with its colour hierarchy, internalised racism and ambiguous love affair with France. His letters, poems and novels demonstrate, however, that his self-imposed exile in Paris caused him a great deal of suffering, and his writings are brimming with idealised images of Martinique and condemnations of a dishevelled, cold and indifferent Paris.

Zobel’s move to Africa was yet another attempt to fulfil a dream, this time of returning to his spiritual homeland, the land of his ancestors, which he believed would make him complete. Yet this journey would also leave him, initially, greatly disillusioned. His final years were spent in the rural idyll of the Cévenol countryside. There he fell in love with a house and, sheltering in the comfort of the home he loved, he finally left behind his fury at the damaging legacy of colonialism.

The themes of ‘home’ and belonging, as well as of exile and alienation, are central to Zobel’s work. This article will explore his visions of home and exile through three key stages in his life: his move away from Martinique, his life in Africa and his retirement to the south of France. It was at the first stage of this journey, during his early years in Paris, that Zobel was the most prolific as a writer. He was part of a generation of Caribbean migrant writers whose work buzzed with the mood



Joseph Zobel in Martinique, 1940s. © The Zobel Archive

of the era — capturing the excitement of being immersed in a radically different culture as well as a strong sense of disappointment and despair. As Haitian author Edwidge Danticat states, these writings embody ‘the immediate meeting of two worlds’; they are full of the grief at the loss of a homeland intermingled with anger and laughter, ‘[...] emotions are still very very raw, very strong’ (Danticat 13).

Zobel’s novel *La Fête à Paris*, the semi-autobiographical sequel to his first book, *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, describes his early years in Paris. The rawness Danticat describes is there in his descriptions of the city, his sense of humour and his memories of Martinique. However, unlike his Martinican contemporaries Édouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire, Zobel was not an experimental writer and is best described as a social realist. Accused of having a ‘staid prose style’, his early work, which focuses on highlighting the difficulties faced by Martinicans both at home and in the French metropolis, ‘lets the facts speak for themselves’ (Wylie 62). His writing has more in common with British and French nineteenth-century novelists than the often surreal narratives of Glissant and Césaire. In true Dickensian style, Zobel’s work meticulously presents the daily toils of a plethora of downtrodden characters. He creates a social microcosm where the politics of the village or street are depicted in painstaking detail in order to show the disruptive and oppressive influence of outside forces.

Zobel’s writings lay bare his profound love of Martinique and its people. He pays particular attention to the island’s

poor and magnifies elements of their lives which might escape the casual onlooker. In doing so, he focuses the reader’s gaze onto the beauty of a people generally overlooked due to their lack of wealth, status or conventional attractiveness. What is perceived as insignificant becomes magnificent; in his first novel, *Diab’là*, he describes a market seller thus:

When Fidéline had carefully arranged on the grass her basket of *gombos* [ladies’ fingers], her trays of radishes and lettuce, her bowl of tomatoes, her sacks of maize and peas, her piles of root vegetables and cucumbers, all of this under the shade of the almond tree, she planted herself in the middle. And it was then, among these bright, fresh splashes of colours, more fascinating than any expensive jewellery, standing tall in her madras dress hooked up and draped in the front, her head tied firmly with a scarf to be ready for action, it was then that Fidéline was beautiful. (*Diab’là* 49)²

In Zobel’s work, Martinique is always his point of reference; when he is away from the island, it haunts him, peoples his dreams and informs his writing. In a poem ‘Ode’, one of three from the collection, *Incantation Pour un Retour au Pays Natal* [Incantation for a Return to my Native Land], a title which echoes Césaire’s famous *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Zobel expresses this love with an almost religious fervour:

My country
More faithfully mine
Than woman or fortune
I only have to tread
Its ground to feel
More powerful
Than the master of an empire
Whose boundaries
Defy the sunsets
And at the same time weaker
But more protected
Than a newly born royal child
Because you always become once again
A divine child
When you return to your country. (‘Ode’ in
Incantation 4)

Zobel portrays a homeland seeped in Creole folk culture, and Martinican music and dance pervade his texts. Along with snippets of Creole songs, riddles and jokes we find Creole words, expressions and turns of phrase in *La Rue Cases-Nègres* and in his collections of short stories, *Laghia de la mort* and *Les Jours immobiles*. Here the narrative voice is firmly located within the Creole community and there are no glossaries included as a medium of explanation for an outsider audience. In *La Rue Cases-Nègres* José revels in the folktales and riddles told to him by old plantation worker, mentor and griot Monsieur Médouze, who also raises José’s awareness of the injustices of the colonial regime. ‘*Hé crick!*’



Diab'là Book Launch, Paris, 1950s. © The Zobel Archive

he shouts as he begins his story, to make sure José is paying attention, 'Hé crack!' José responds. He tells José the story of his father, a former slave, during the time of abolition:

I [...] danced with joy and went running all over Martinique, but when the intoxication of my freedom was spent, I was forced to remark that nothing had changed for me, nor for my comrades in chains. I remained like all the blacks in this damned country, the *békés* kept the land, all the land in the country, and we continued working for them. The law forbade them from whipping us, but did not force them to pay us our due. (*La Rue Cases-Nègres* 32)

Although Zobel was influenced by the French negritude movement (he was encouraged to write by Césaire, who described him as the most important novelist of Martinique³), his work does not fit neatly alongside other writers of the movement and his ambitions were less obvious. However, while his politics may not have been expounded with great zeal, his early work consistently emphasises the inequality, hypocrisy and absurdity at the heart of Martinican and French social hierarchy (*Diab'là* upset the French Vichy government so much that they initially forbade its publication in 1942) (Scarboro 24). This more radical aspect of his writing has been curiously overlooked by the handful of critics who have analysed his work, which may have been a result of Zobel never clearly aligning himself with the aims of negritude; in an interview Zobel declared: '*Je n'ai pas le sentiment que ma négritude est un uniforme ou une fonction auxquels je dois sacrifier mon individualité ...*' [I do not feel that my negritude is a uniform or a function to which I must sacrifice my individuality ...] (Hardwick 10).

In *La Fête à Paris*, however, there is a focus on race right from the start. Zobel's protagonist, José Hassam, on the ship bound for France, meets a Frenchman who is shocked to hear that he is Martinican, because 'one is rarely as dark as

you in Martinique, isn't it so?' Once in Paris, Hassam is surprised to meet someone who is: 'Aussi noir que moi' [as black as myself] and whom he describes as: 'The type of black man against whom Martinican society would bear a grudge because he had not been touched by the grace of *métissage* [racial mixing]' (*La Fête à Paris* 121).

In *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, Zobel persistently draws the reader's attention to skin colour. As he writes 'Rafaël was of a lighter complexion than I' (64), 'Mam'zelle Gracieuse is a beautiful octoroon with an amber-colored complexion' (88) or '... Mlle Adréa, a pretty brown-skinned woman with whom it was easy to exchange jokes ...' (169). For, as Zobel explains: '... the dark nuances of the skin [...] in all milieus, determined sentiments and reflexes in the West Indies' (*La Rue Cases-Nègres* 169). While Zobel's Martinique is exalted for its beauty and Creole culture, it is also depicted as the site of painful realities. Because of his dark skin, as a child Zobel felt unwelcome and rejected by Martinican society. In a culture where the lighter your skin, the more you are favoured, Zobel always stood out. He writes in his unpublished essay, 'Petit-Bourg' (2002):

I avoided having dealings with grown-ups and that was quite easy, because every time I met one, it was to be told: 'How ugly you are! You've got drooping lips, eyes that stay open without blinking. And you're black. Black like an African!' ('Petit-Bourg' np)

Caribbean scholar Randolph Hezekiah describes Zobel as pleading for the black man's case in 'subtle and quiet tones', yet it is clear that Zobel is unafraid to make bold political statements (Hezekiah 44). In *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, which depicts the young José Hassam escaping a life in the canefields thanks to his grandmother's determination to provide him with an education, José soon learns that the wretched poverty to which Martinican blacks are subjected is a direct result of French colonialism and white rule: 'I already knew by intuition that the devil, misery and death were more



Les Cévennes, south of France, 1950s. © The Zobel Archive

or less the same individual [the white man] who persecuted the blacks [everywhere]' (Zobel, *La Rue Cases-Nègres* 37) (see Bernard 64). The novel ends, much like Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*, with José's pledge to tell his story and give voice to the silent sufferings of his people. He states; '*C'est aux aveugles et à ceux qui se bouchent les oreilles qu'il me faudrait ... crier cette histoire*' [It is to those who are blind and to those who block their ears that I must ... cry out this story] (*La Rue Cases-Nègres* 311) (see Scarboro 17).

Zobel's attitude towards his supposed 'mother country', France, is just as ambiguous as his feelings towards Martinique. His letters home in the 1940s show him oscillating between a longing homesickness and a sense of overwhelming enthusiasm for a new country, full of potential, which would make him famous. In both his personal letters and in *La Fête à Paris*, a hostile rant at the indifference, ugliness and cultural void that is Paris can often lead onto a contradictory eulogy of its beauty and merits. 'Now the weather is fine, [...] Paris is splendid', Zobel writes to his wife in April 1947 (Letter to Enny Zobel 15 Apr. 1947 np), while in *La Fête à Paris* he complains of the French 'impotence to be gay, that is, to be snatched out of the daily routine, thrown out of reality' (*La Fête à Paris* 9). José himself is ground down by this insipidness and has lost the 'amplitude and brilliance of his laughter' (*La Fête à Paris* 35–36).

Zobel has José Hassam explain his move to Paris in much the same way as he explains his own reasons for leaving

Martinique in a letter to his wife. José tells his friends he has come to France to become 'a real somebody!' and, echoing his mother's sentiments, he exclaims: 'When you have diplomas from France, no one can say that there isn't a place here for you!' (*La Fête à Paris* 31, 32). In a letter dated December 1946, a month after his arrival, Zobel writes to his wife:

Regarding my career, there are still lots of uncertainties, but one thing is sure: I will acquire much more prestige and authority when I return. I will have more confidence in the exercise of my profession of writer and our children will have a name with a social value which counts in the Antilles ... (Letter to Enny Zobel 27 Dec. 1946 np)

In many ways, Zobel felt his move would push back the boundaries which had enclosed him in a restrictive Martinican society and that he would be able to freely transform into the individual he wished to be. In *La Fête à Paris*, after a few months in Paris, José Hassam tells his friend Alex 'I hope above all to be learning outside of the university. To tell the truth, that is why I've come ... To liberate myself from the taboos and prejudices of home ...' (33).

Paris also provided the right creative atmosphere for Zobel's writing. Although in 1946 the capital was still reeling from the Second World War, with wood, coal and basic foods such as bread still being rationed, it was an intellectual hub. While Zobel's Paris is often cold and unfriendly, it also promises deliverance from a narrow worldview. When Zobel's literary efforts were at last crowned with success, public recognition made his self-imposed exile easier to bear. On 1 April 1947 he writes to his wife of a recent book launch:

[...] I so much regretted that you were not all here to hear the praise and to see the enthusiasm in my favour from great personalities of French literature who declare that they have never seen a writer with such a rich style. (Letter to Enny Zobel 1 Apr. 1947 np)

Yet it seems that Zobel could not totally give himself over to the enjoyment of fame as his homesickness returned; on 1 June he writes home:

It's when you are here, when we are together again that I will know if my stay in France will be for long or not. Because, all by myself, everything is dark, I find nothing beautiful, I almost never have a light heart and I'm always thinking: 'If Enny was here, if my little boy was here ...' (Letter to Enny Zobel 1 June 1947 np)

The feeling persisted and in the autumn of the same year he writes:

I have to clench my teeth sometimes to stop myself from breaking down and making you sad. [But] my stay in France has already been so beneficial for me that it

makes up for the suffering I endure from being separated from my family. (Letter to Enny Zobel 2 Sept 1947 np)

When Zobel left Martinique for the first time, his wife Enny was expecting their third child. He was not present at Jenny's birth in Fort de France in January 1947. In a letter written soon after he had received the news he had anxiously been awaiting, he confessed that he could not bring himself to look at the photo Enny had sent him: 'I wasn't keen at all to get the photos. I was afraid. I knew that they would make my sadness worse and my homesickness more painful' (Letter to Enny Zobel 8 Mar. 1947 np). It is rather pertinent that while José in *La Fête à Paris*, like Zobel himself, misses his home, Zobel describes him as a single man, unattached. One wonders if Hassam is not in some way a projection of the young man Zobel would have liked to have been when he came to France, unshackled by family responsibilities and free from the sense of guilt and remorse Zobel evidently felt in leaving his young family behind. There seems to be, in Zobel's life, a constant pull between his love of writing and the necessity to provide for his family. He can at the same time be desperately homesick *and* yet put his writing first. He writes to Enny:

It's quite possible that I could be offered the post of Press Attaché for the Prefect in Martinique, but it's not a position I would fancy and it will not leave me enough time to write. And as you know, every time I find myself in conditions that don't allow me to write, I am the most unhappy of men. (Letter to Enny Zobel 5 July 1947 np)

From 1947 to 1957, as well as working as a teacher, Zobel gave poetry recitals in Paris and other European cities, performing mainly the works of African writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Sembène Ousmane, Birago Diop, Jacques Rabémananjara, Camara Laye and Ferdinand Oyono. His daughter Jenny vividly remembers listening to him rehearsing, mesmerised by his evocation of a fascinating continent:

In my father's imagination, Africa was the place where he would be healed and become complete; a land of reconciliation with the self, where life would flow with greater ease and things would fall into place. Africa was a dream waiting to be realised and he had us all, my mother, my brothers and me, seduced by his dream. (Jenny Zobel np)

It seems that in Zobel's mind there was a strong connection between his idealised vision of Africa and the mother figure he never really knew. In *La Fête à Paris*, Zobel writes that 'Hassam loved Africa with the tenderness and nostalgia of the one who only knows about his mother through photographs or personal objects left behind' (44). Zobel did not see much of his own mother until he was a young man; Man Célia had had to leave him in the care of his grandmother to work as a wet nurse for a white family in Fort de France. This led to a sense of rejection which stayed with him all his

life. He told his daughter Jenny that when he was eight years old, he felt the little white boy his mother had breastfed 'stole my milk' (Jenny Zobel np).

Zobel grew up in a culture ashamed of its African connections. For most Martinicans of that time, Africa conjured up images of slavery and a past best forgotten. However, Zobel offered a different image of Africa, positive and dignified, through the influence of Monsieur Médouze as depicted in *La Rue Cases-Nègres*.

In *La Fête à Paris*, Zobel describes José Hassam's first encounter with Ousmane Koné, a Senegalese student renting the room next door. The 1950s critic Coulthard, who seems to have missed Zobel's ambivalent sentiments towards France, writes:

As opposed to his loathing for the French and their whole culture, we find Hassam falling into a sort of ecstasy of enthusiasm when he meets the first African he has known in his life. His style, which is completely unelevated on the whole, on this occasion becomes poetic. (36)

Zobel's description does indeed stand out: 'Ousmane Koné was a man of Africa, Ousmane Koné, standing in his scarlet bath-robe, had the hieratic beauty of a totem standing in the centre of a village!' (*La Fête à Paris* 44).

In 1957 the family moved to Senegal, but the move proved a harsh lesson for Zobel and he learned a few truths; Senegalese people did not immediately welcome him as a long-lost brother. For them, everything about him was European: his way of speaking, his body language, his habits, his clothes, his values. His dark skin and African features were not enough to get him accepted as a member of the community. People in Senegal did not need him; they had not been waiting for him. They would be friends with him if, and when, they decided to. They were self-contained; they did not have the hang-ups that Martinicans had as they had not been as directly affected by the trauma of slavery. Zobel was clearly disappointed. In 'Voyage de Noces', a short story set in Dakar, he has his protagonist Maurice, a Martinican, reflect:

Impossible to pretend that he had made a success of his stay in Africa. He had often been surprised, pitying, indignant and disillusioned by what he had seen and heard, but nothing had satisfied this thirst he would have liked to exalt or quench through a mystical reunion. ('Voyage de Noces' 143)

Above all, though, it seems that Zobel never intended to live so long away from Martinique and he held on to his dream of returning. In his first year in Paris, he writes to Enny, telling her he will soon be back and that, in doing so,

I will no longer be haunted by my future, I will only have to follow my path. I will be content to be a humble civil servant if I have to, but [I will also be] a great writer. I will then devote myself to realise *your* own ideal, a quiet and cheerful life, patiently

educating our children, living together with very few friends. (Letter to Enny Zobel 27 Dec. 1946 np)

This vision was never realised but, twenty years after his departure, he was still planning his return. In a letter of 1967, he writes from Senegal to his childhood friend Valbrun Appat in Martinique, asking him to help him buy a plot of land so that he can build a house in Petit Bourg, his birthplace:

I tell you frankly that for twenty years, I have been living like a foreigner here and there and I would not like to live in my own country in a village where I would be a foreigner. I want to end my days on the land of Petit Bourg, not even Grand Bourg, otherwise I'll die as a foreigner in Africa, Europe or Asia. (Letter to Valbrun Appat 12 Nov. 1967 np)

Zobel was being pulled in two different directions. On the one hand Zobel, the man of action, was becoming increasingly involved in life away from Martinique, enjoying new opportunities and expanding his horizons; and on the other Zobel, the thinker, was looking inwards and recognising what he was missing by staying away from Martinique. That was the Zobel who secretly prayed for a miracle to create the right conditions to allow him to go home. In *Incantation Pour un Retour au Pays Natal* he writes

I don't want to be that frozen old black man who, betrayed by fortune, drags around St Germain des Prés, winter after winter, the curse that prevents him from returning to his country ... (6)

To combat this persistent sense of dislocation, it is as if Zobel were compelled to recreate an image of 'home', not only through language, but also by using the objects around him. He had an uncanny ability to make his space 'homely' wherever he went. As a student in Paris, he was constantly in search of a better room because the accommodation was so poor and, with each change of address, he rearranged his new dwellings to reflect his past, his interests and his personality. Hassam in *La Fête à Paris* also has this gift and his room, which becomes a favourite meeting place for his friends, is described thus:

Boxes of books, earthenware pots, old bottles, and on the walls photographs, African masks, engravings. All these things had accumulated over three years and for three years, Hassam had arranged and rearranged them, to have more room, more clarity and, in his eurhythmy, he had composed a kind of self-portrait. (135)

The objects within a home were for Zobel deeply connected to the inner being. Hassam's self-portrait is made up of items which each hold a special significance and help to ground him in each new home. Zobel suggests that home, therefore, can be something *portable* — it can travel with a person and be recreated on foreign soil. Hassam's books are a signifier of his intellectual abilities; his earthenware pots, a reminder of village life in Martinique; his old bottles infuse a

new space with history; and his African masks and engravings link him to his heritage and perceived spiritual home. This portable home is a defence against the loss of identity and history suffered by migrants who become engulfed in the culture of the French metropolis.

During his time in Senegal, Zobel and his family would travel every summer to the tiny village of Gènerargues in the Cévennes mountains of the south of France. In a journal entry of 1954, he declares his love for the Cévennes as being rooted in its similarity to Martinique:

It's the light which attracted us first; it reminds me of the south of Martinique — without the sea. And the people too, with their way of engaging in conversation — like in Martinique — anyone who seems in danger of being contaminated by indifference. (*Gertal* 90)

Zobel bought a small, dilapidated house perched on a hillside and the family worked hard at making it habitable. He writes in his journal: 'We have a lot to do to adapt it to our needs but in any case, it's *our* house, to us who have never had a house' (*Gertal* 90). He named it 'Moun Oustaou' — 'My house' in Provençal. From then on, Moun Oustaou was to represent for him stability and continuity; it remained his anchor throughout his life. In the poem 'La Maison du Bon Dieu' [The Good Lord's House], Zobel describes it as 'My dearest house/ provider of dreams/ expert in truths/ my most secure retreat ...' (in *Poèmes D'Amour et de Silence* 168).

Zobel would return to Moun Oustaou from Senegal each summer and when the autumn mists came, he would be reluctant to leave. He writes in his diary:

I don't even rejoice at the thought of going to a sunny country before winter arrives; I am sad to have to leave my house. I love this weather that inspires me to stay at home to meditate, read or write ... (*Gertal* 160)

Zobel eventually retired to Moun Oustaou in 1974. Visitors were often struck by a fascinating inconsistency. While the house, which had been renovated and extended, was grand in proportion, the interior décor was strongly reminiscent of a Martinican village home and gave the impression that perhaps Zobel was trying to recreate aspects of the shack in *La Rue Cases-Nègres*. In the small, dark kitchen, he placed a large wooden pole going up to the beams on the ceiling and, to his wife Enny's exasperation, he drove long nails in it from which he hung an array of aluminium pots and pans. A young academic visiting from Martinique remarked that, on entering, she found herself transported to his grandmother's kitchen in Black Shack Alley (Laval np).

Like José Hassam's portable home in *La Fête à Paris*, to shorten the distance between his present as an elderly writer in a grand country home and his past as a peasant boy on the plantation, Zobel brought a part of Black Shack Alley home to the Cévennes. Just like Hassam's cramped Parisian lodgings, Moun Oustaou was full of books, earthenware pots,

a vast collection of old bottles and photographs. On every wall hung African masks and engravings.

In this space Zobel could recreate his past and, in doing so, he finally found himself *at home*. In his imagination Moun Oustaou became both a mother figure and a lover. This home replenished his need for motherly love and, in his later years, as his relationship with Enny broke down and he found himself living there alone, it even seemed to replace his need for a partner. Moun Oustaou was, for Zobel, not simply a place to live but a living, breathing entity; he writes in his poem 'Recueillement' of its 'forgiveness after my attempts to flee or break away from it' (in *Poèmes D'amour et de Silence* 118) and his thirty-year love affair with his home is epitomised in the same poem:

My house is beautiful
like women
who are not rich or young
and who have a sweetness in their voices,
a tenderness in their eyes ...
I love it ...
It's I who made it, repaired it
and made it beautiful [...].
It loves it when I call it my house,
because it is like a woman ... (118)

For Zobel, ultimately, it was not Martinique, his homeland, or Africa, the land of his ancestors, or Paris, his intellectual home, but Moun Oustaou that provided him with the sense of peace and belonging he craved. Zobel lived there until his death in 2006. He had told his close family that he wished to be buried in the small cemetery of Generargues, close to his house, and they followed his request. However, his burial on French soil immediately became a contentious issue in Martinique. Posthumously Zobel, who had shied away from open political debate and was never asked to defend his decision not to return to the roots which had made him famous, became the centre of a fraught politicised dispute. The Martinique cultural blog 'Bondamajack' was the site of heated discussion with contributors asking why Zobel had chosen to be buried in France and 'why had he fled from Martinique, never to return?' Some defended his choices, pointing out that Martinicans' racist attitudes had caused him great suffering. Others retorted angrily that he lacked the courage to stay and confront Martinican reality. The most pertinent comment came from a blogger who asserted that Zobel was free, and with that freedom he could live wherever he wished. The blogger observed:

His life was a quest for beauty. He was able to say in words all the beauty that his native land has brought him. It was his freedom and his choice. (Bondamanjak website)

The following poem, 'Ballade', from *Incantation Pour Un Retour Au Pays Natal*, perhaps best summarises Zobel's vision of his 'home' Martinique, as well as his concept of 'home' in a broader sense, as a space which is not geographically located,

but within which one can feel a sense of belonging. For it seems that Zobel's true vision of 'home' is not an inanimate object, a country or a house, but a place that lives — that leaps up and greets the returnee with open arms. It is created in the mind and, for Zobel, whose life was fuelled by the imaginary, it was both portable and indestructible, malleable enough to be transported from country to country and strong enough to withstand the assaults of racism and oppression.

Ballade

Lorsque je vais dans mon village
Les gars me regardent comme si j'étais de l'or le plus fin
Et m'embrassent comme si j'étais leur bien
Et me parlent avec des mots qui ont
La saveur affectueuse et touchante
De pots de douceurs ou de flacons de liqueurs
Qu'on a gardés depuis longtemps
Pour l'ami le plus cher
Et qui m'emplissent le cœur d'une telle richesse
Que j'en redeviens tout humble et tout-puissant

Lorsque je vais dans mon village
Les maisons qui étaient déjà penchées quand j'étais enfant
Me reconnaissent aussitôt et se disent en souriant
Sur leur seuil usé: Voilà Zobel, il n'a pas changé
Et j'embrasse les vieux, et j'embrasse les vieilles
Et je danse avec les jeunes
Tous les sentiers viennent à moi et m'entraînent
De case en case, au bord de l'eau, au fond des bois.
C'est comme une fête champêtre
Où l'amitié chante comme l'alcool

Lorsque je vais dans mon village
J'ai parfois de la peine en apprenant que Jo est mort
Que j'aimais tant, et la pauvre Léa, qui m'aimait bien.
Mais ceux qui s'en vont reviennent un jour,
Et nos morts ne nous quittent pas, disent les gars
Car nous on s'aime sans tralala,
Mais c'est pour la vie et par-delà!

Ballad

When I return to my village
The boys look at me
As if I was made of the finest gold

And they kiss me as if I was one of their possessions
 And they talk to me with words
 that have the touching taste of jars of sweetmeats or liquor
 that one has kept for a long time for the dearest friend,
 words that fill my heart with such richness
 that I become all humble
 and all powerful

When I return to my village,
 the houses that were already leaning when I was a child
 recognise me straight away and tell themselves with a smile,
 here is Zobel, he has not changed . . .
 And I embrace the old men and I embrace the old women
 and I dance with the young people
 All the paths come to me
 and carry me
 from house to house, to the water's edge,
 to the middle of the woods.
 It's like a country fête
 where friendship sings like alcohol

When I return to my village
 I am often pained to hear
 That Jo is dead, whom I loved so, and poor Lea who loved me so
 But those who have gone return one day
 And our dead do not leave us, as people say
 For although our love is uncomplicated
 It is for life — and beyond!

Notes

- 1 Dr Emily Zobel Marshall, Joseph Zobel's granddaughter, and his daughter Jenny Zobel have had access to unique primary sources such as Zobel's unpublished journals and family letters for this article.
- 2 All translations have been done by the authors.
- 3 'Joseph ZOBEL, c'est LE romancier martiniquais' stated Césaire at a video conference at Salon du Livre in Paris in 2002.

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