Memorializing and Decolonizing Practices in the Francophone Caribbean and Other Spaces

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Edited by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A saying in my native Guadeloupe goes “sé on lanmen ka lavé lót,” meaning “one hand washes the other.” For me, this is a very poetic way of evoking the sense of solidarity that can characterize my people and humanity in its largest version. This collection of chapters is an ensemble of testimonies that echo each other by highlighting some contemporary sociopolitical issues – some local or glocal, always global, from gender to self-determination – of our present societies in the Frenchized Caribbean, of our folks abroad – in L’Hexagone, also known as Metropolitan France – and of the French people and those scrutinizing us.

I want to acknowledge all the contributors who offered their expertise, arts, knowledges, practices, artistries, and lives to this volume to shed new light and cast a new revolutionary gaze on the Francophone geopolitics through the prism of intimacy, from whatever the place they look from: the Caribbean, France, or the US.

> Chantaléa Commin, Minia Biabiany, Aminat Lawal-Agoro and Alinta Sara, Frédérique Menant and Nathalie Menant, Yaima Santana Galindo, Jessica Oublié, kimura byol-nathalie lemoine, Kathleen E. Nelson and Députée Laurence Vanceunebrock, who are unquestionably part of my sisterhood now, however close we are. Also, a brotherhood of pioneers and guardians of our memories, each in their own ways: Daniel Dabriou, Jean-François Boclé, Geordy Zodidat Alexis, Stéphane Madkaud, and Luc Saint-Eloy.

I would like to thank the artists – and specifically the women – who have been committed to Cri de Femmes Festival for many years, and partook in this work. Their commitment honours me. It honours us all.

And finally, also the contributors, but the dearest to my heart: my father Pierre Reinette and my uncles Luc Reinette and Michel Reinette, for whom I have always had infinite admiration, and who entrusted me with a part of their lives and work.

Thank you for your trust, upon contributing to this book.
Thank you for your confidence in your selves, work, and struggles.
Thank you for the self-confidence and faith in our humanity
'cause this is about (self-)love …

FOREWORD

Which marks are we landmarks of?

> To move from the oral to the written is to immobilise the body, to take control (to possess it).
>
> —Édouard Glissant (Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays)

MARKS
Trauma(s),
Scar(s),
Inheritance(s),
Gene(s),
Race(s),
Ethnicity(ies),
Gender(s),
Memory(ies)
Epigenetics
Pathology(ies)

What great historical facts are we imprinted with?

What parts of history are we imprinted with?

These are questions which could appear somewhat superfluous for many nationals whose millennial civilizations have instilled in them over the centuries a knowledge, a know-how; whose civilizations have enabled the construction of a collective consciousness for their peoples. These civilizations were built through the political philosophies of the leaders chosen (or who imposed themselves) through the achievements of heroes and heroines (although the former are more invariably valued by history) who stood out by serving the seat of the former.

Through the founding myths, peoples' personalities were created which, far from being translated into immutable essences, manifest themselves in national – humanistic, religious, political, economic, or even spiritual – values considered as the beacons of the territories enunciating them, proclaiming them as guidance and perpetuating them. From the United

States to Bhutan via South Africa, France or China or Japan, the types of governance determine the cardinal values which the people must be imbibed with. The "In God We Trust" of the US democracy or "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" of the French Republic are examples of values-sealing patriotisms which are deemed inalienable, and which condition the rise of citizens.

What great historical facts are we imprinted with?

What parts of history are ingrained or intrinsically marked inside of us?

These are questions that seem illegitimate when observing that those taking pride in them have formerly colonized others. And the rise of their brands, leaving their marks on the world, is the raison d'être and vocation of these nations with imperialist foundations. For the colonized, it is a whole different story. Historical unconsciousness and collective amnesia are invariably the ontological wounds left and commonly shared. The effects of colonization and assimilation are devastating as they weave themselves into the bones and disembodiments of pre-existing cultures. Even when assimilating forces induce unexpected mutations and creolizations through their actions, their marks remain internalized and embodied.

> *Subversive*. Adj. From Latin *subversio*, "reversal." Which is apt to overturn the established social or political order, the established values.

Between two visions of the world – the colonizer's and the colonized, the dominant versus the dominated – there is subversiveness. Between two opposite ways of existing, there are therefore subversive bodies: the black body, paradigmatic of systemic xenophobia, has been *being* the prey of both interpersonal and institutional attacks. In its wake are all the other bodies that do not respond to normative patterns: lovingly, sexually, identically, ethnically different, rebellious, seditious, evil-minded, dissidents, iconoclasts bodies, and so on. To counteract their potential effects, measures and policies are established, ghettoizing, ostracizing, or annihilating them.

Always repel the *aliens* – those who belong to the outside, who are struck by foreignness, strangeness, freakness, or queerness, as opposed to a given group – within a disfigured margin, made monstrous by stereotypical stiffening and phagocytic portraiture. Factually and generally, the alien is a stranger, a second-class citizen or an individual who has been assigned a civil facsimile, a potential danger for the nation addressing their seemingly offensive terrorist identity, a refugee tolerated through the prism of

generosity and messianic national protection, an asymmetrical comrade in a humanitarian struggle which only concerns the victim (the sympathizer being out of reach), or even a homosexual who must love in secret and accept that their lineage be silenced. In short, the alien is the Other, physically, symbolically, and ideologically thought of and rejected in a cross-border relationship. Even at the heart of the nation, and naturalized or second-generation, the aliens remain at the border. A border they never cross. With a few nuances.

Marks. Born Only Subversive explores the question of the alienability of the being from the being itself. Indeed, the notion of "mark" brings an exploration of individual and/or collective, singular, and holistic strategies of identity and historical (self)reconquest.

The question of national identity – for several decades now the plague of a society which is losing its wealth every day by dint of fundamentalisms and eugenics – encompasses origin issues. Ethnicity, obviously, and the origin of colourism as well, but also the origin of being. Butler writes:

> A repressive or subjugating law almost always anchors its own legitimacy in a story that tells how it was before the law and how the law came to be in its present and necessary form. The fabrication of origins proceeds from a linear narrative that tends to describe the pre-law state as if it were following a course necessary to culminate in – and thereby justify – the constitution of the law"[1] (2006, 114–15)

What was there before heteronormativity or (gender) law, before feminism and the patriarchy, before colonization and ethnico-social hierarchy in France, Africa, the Caribbean – or the "Antilles" (these geopolitical terminologies not carrying the same seeds and meanings in this postcolonial era)?

Against these national identities which become supranational are symbolic national identities, dreamed of, fantasized, and repressed by states, but always put into action – in revolutionary acts, in acts of rebellion, in performance acts, in visual acts, in memorial acts. Like so many anamnestic prophecies or prophetic anamnesis.

Initially launched as part of the Cri de Femmes Festival, this reflection on the mark opened a discussion between feminist and queer issues, being currently almost consubstantial. bell hooks writes in *Am I Not a Woman?*:

> Unlike us, black women in the United States of the nineteenth century were aware that true freedom did not imply only the liberation of a sexist social order which systematically prevented the access of all women to full human rights. These black women have participated in both the struggle

> for racial equality and the movement for women's rights. (bell hooks 2015, 30)

The Afro-feminist movements in France and Europe have changed the situation and presented themselves from the outset as intersectional beings: black, racisé [racialized], and queer – combating and questioning discrimination and facial and bodily offences, all in one piece (Melyon-Reinette 2018). As part of Cri de Femmes, we held the panel "Empreintes. Naître que suvbersif.ve.s?" at the National Assembly (Paris, March 2019), under the patronage of Deputies Olivier Serva and Laurence Vanceunebrock. Some of the presentations appear in the book (Frédérique and Nathalie Menant, and Kathleen E. Nelson). This phenomenology of the mark is enriched with the addition of artists and other speakers of the festival in Guadeloupe, including themes that deploy the mark on issues of self-determination and thwarted inheritance, and it is also with questions of national identity that we begin this prologue.

It is worth noting the great place given to art in this work. There are several reasons for this: first, the Cri de Femmes France Festival being the root of the project, an artistic essence has emerged in a way that is, if not reflexive, then completely logical. Secondly, art is one of the avenues of apprehension, expression, and understanding of the world that we cherish and favour. And thirdly, the very nature of the theme urges us to let materiality emerge and appear as the ephemeral aspect of the mark – the relief of the painting, the physically evanescent installation, the film or silver photography, the posterity of a cliche, etc.

This being established, we must highlight the intrinsic characteristics of art that make it an essential demonstrative and presentative tool. Some of the dimensions that we recognize in art, relevant here, will be borrowed from Immanuel Kant's poiesis theory – its fabricating, non-mercantile, and creative dimensions. According to the philosopher, the vocation of art is to manufacture new things with the aim of making (art)works, by essence deprived of functional criteria (as opposed to craftsmanship) as well as a commercial aim. Notwithstanding the partial adequacy of this thought with the contemporary world of the twenty-first century, we will retain these three dimensions as true to demonstrate that art makes traces. However, here we will move away from this European-centred definition to embrace the definition given by Amiri Baraka which highlights the great utility of art, since it must be the tool of revolt, revolution, and the struggle for freedom. African art was initially functional and otherwise ritualistic. But in the African diaspora – of which the French-speaking Caribbean is a part – art is first and foremost a weapon of massive protest

(if the artist succeeds in disseminating his art as widely as possible). The following is a quote from Amiri Baraka's punchy poem "Black Art":

Fuck poems
and they are useful, would they shoot
come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after pissing. We want live
words of the hip world live flesh and
coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire. We want poems
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks.

There is violence in the words of the revolutionary poet, though they are but the rhythmic translation of a major anger that consumes several generations of Afro-descendants and Africans. Anger is the driving force of struggles. In front of it, there is also self-determination and the self-esteem that it implies.

Marks. Born Only Subversive is a substrate of existences that confront their emergences and creativities to deconstruct the impact of the powerful on the subalternized (racialized, queerized, alienated) peoples and communities. This work intersects views from visual artists, film directors, performers, choreographers, and writers which relate to and explore the margins to refocus them within a debate already multisecular, through intercultural, intergenerational, intra-European, outermost, transversal – intersectional – approaches.

This collection of chapters is an invitation extended to reading oneself, to decipher the genetic, ethnic, and family codes of the Francized peoples who are the Franco-Caribbeans, for a discussion of the subversiveness of birth of the French-speaking Caribbean. But it is also an opportunity to read contemporary France with the sex and gender struggles still playing out in the streets, identity issues, and police violence that echo an exacerbation of corporatisms (the George Floyd case has highlighted a globalized repressive police brutality praxis, from which can be revealed a historicity). The axes of this volume cover the following themes: sexualities and gender; Caribbeanity, margins, Outremers; Pacific, Caribbean, Indian Ocean; heritage and memories; postcolonial and decolonial; queerness, freakness, outcast, LGBTQI; performativity, performance.

Each part opens with the self-portrait of a visual artist – the individual is a manifestation of their own historical truth. Through the nineteen

chapters that make up this book, a hot story – a subjectively objective story – unfolds, allowing readers to discover at the same time a postcolonial history of the French-speaking Caribbean through the pores of some of its protagonists, between two shores, between two acculturations; and the roars of freedom emitted by the oppressed, the racialized, and the discriminated against.

The first part, "Cham and Shame Damnation, Identities, and the Arts: Decolonizing Otherness," demonstrates that decolonizing the other or the stereotypical constructions projected onto their identities in the gaze of the dominated results in a decolonization of the self – these stereotypes which, once deprived of flesh, are nothing but empty shifts of these definitions. The "Mues" of the Menants brings the body back to a more universal and poetic meaning. The visual artists in this section reveal their efforts to de-impregnate colonial traces – sexist, classist, racist – to deconstruct these toxic imaginaries, such as Jean-François Boclé and his racial-consumerist fresco, Minia Biabiany and her Caribbean-tooled experiment with women. In short, to decolonize is ultimately also to decolonize the other. Art serves as an operative medium through semiotic rehabilitation.

The second part, "The Memorial Geopolitics of Subversive Bodies," questions the impact of the displacement of subversive bodies from one territory to another. Understanding the existence of the individual who crosses, transgresses, or lives in a place where they are likely unexpected: for instance, Stéphane Madkaud, an Afro-descendant transgressing the phenotypico-social frontier of the Franco-Caribbean rum market by becoming a new face of the industry, invariably the property of European or European-descendant masters, or a lesbian woman in a state body originally mostly phallocentric and phallocratic (Laurence Vanceunbrock). Although the French-speaking Caribbean is an infinitesimal fragment of the world, this collection also aims at revisiting the silenced history by bringing it to the fore, and satisfying the utmost necessity to catch the world's attention with the libertarian struggles wilfully counteracting the liberticidal, repressive, and oppressive policies implemented and applied to slay their subversiveness.

I was eager – I will specifically use the first singular person abusively here – to include a part of my family that has stood at the core of many libertarian and sociopolitical struggles, yesterday and today, in Guadeloupe – my father Pierre Reinette and my uncle Luc, who opened part of their lives to the intersection of the private and the political, social struggles and union struggles, regularly in opposing positions with regards to their functions at the time, but heartily concurring for the autonomisation of Guadeloupe. The veil is finally lifted. My uncle Michel,

a man of the news, archives some of our society's landmarks and civilizational developments for posterity, for example sickle cell disease, the BUMIDOM history, and Indianity in Guadeloupe. He evokes an extraordinary meeting with Cheikh Anta Diop and BUMIDOM – genocide by substitution. The geopolitics of subversive bodies seeks to grasp the issues of interindividual power on a microsocial scale in order to better transpose them to the mesosocial and macrosocial levels. Crossing the political relationships between the former colonizer and Guadeloupe with the corporeity also results in chapters about the deciphering of the remaining marks of Africa in dancistical expressions – Yaima Santana Galindo offers a thorough observation of Cuban and Guadeloupean corporeity with regards to their Congo-marked traditional dances, or another approach of the choreographed and bodily semantics developed in Guadeloupe to write their counternarratives.

Finally, the third part, "Memories and Reels: Filmmakers Archiving," brings together manifestos – protests in the public space and what these subversive bodies shout at the people. In a world where everything tends to be dematerialized, dissolving into the intangible, analogue productions take on a very strong meaning in the tangible imprint they constitute upon making bodies appear on the films in new materialities. Isn't archiving more real on reels? We measure the price of this memory more. The cliché, the reels, reminds us of how selective memory is, and how crucial it is to remember those moments that have been so important in history and that will stand out. The preservation through film is also the vital necessity of preserving and transmitting. Passing over to the next generations is in the DNA of any emerging society or nation-to-be.

The documentary form is in the spotlight – either through an ethno-aesthetic expression by Frédérique Menant and kimura byol-nathalie lemoine, as both (apparently) female directors tackle gendered and sex-connected issues through their films, which mingle both aesthetic and memory concerns. Other directors, such as Michel Reinette or Luc Saint-Eloy, participate in the writing of the national/ist narratives. We go through redundant and insoluble themes of our corporeality: the BUMIDOM, the condition of women, and Cheikh Anta Diop. An identitarily transverse body steps in unison, hope and determination, memorialization at its apex. Only Kathleen Nelson is figuratively an outcast in the panel as an American researcher in Francophone studies and cinema. Thus, she is a perfect match, adding another kind of transatlantic approach upon viewing the domestic gender issues from a US perspective and through an European archive.

This book is at the intersection of the private and the political. It brings together varied, variable, and invariable experiences through gender and race, ethnicity and nationality issues, from the margins outwards. It echoes apparently distinct stories which, through the reflection of a weaver spirit, come together in an eloquent patchwork elucidating the turmoil of a society in the midst of its embryogenesis, the stage of an exponential partition of identities (ethnic, sexual, etc.) which, impacted by a galloping neo-colonization – generated by globalization – struggles to recover its memories, amplified by gender matters, always there at the forefront or behind the scenes.

Shifting the centre, to relate the world through eyes blinded by the conditioning of assimilation for too long and that recover their sight, or admit to having always seen. Our internal struggles are complex turf wars that deserve being addressed. We are aiming for a "de-minorization" and "de-sulbalternization" of our viewpoints.

It is essential to make the French-speaking Caribbean known and to tell the world that there, too, suffering and anger are the ferments that still shake their world. We hope, finally, that these extremely rich contributions will constitute a set of primary resources of knowledge on the French Caribbean that has been concealed and silenced for too long.

Stéphanie Melyon-Reinette, PhD

PART I

BEYOND CHAM AND SHAME DAMNATION: IDENTITIES AND THE ARTS DECOLONIALIZING OTHERNESS

CHAPTER ONE

"PAQUETAGES": SELF-PORTRAIT

CHANTALEA COMMIN

My art is all about marks, I think. I work from origins, from the past – near or more distant, intimate or collective. I introduce a lot of objects from real life in my plastic and visual proposals. I create because we have lived together. I create because I was one among them. I was a shadow in the midst of their shadows. A body next to their bodies. I create because they left their indelible marks on me, and the mark is my expression. Who knows what I would have done if I hadn't had these neuroses, these blockages, these joys too. What if I had not been born in this country, and had not had these parents of mine, these grandparents of mine …?

In our habits and customs, in our Caribbean way of living, the elders remain in their offspring's home when they lose autonomy. In other words, they are not put in nursing homes – this is what is most common. The elders live with the extended family until the end of their lives, so there is a whole experience that we share, and once they are gone, they leave strong imprints that remain with us. Thus, we live with impregnated objects around us. Either we will choose to part with it or not. As for me, I chose to keep everything. I live in my grandmother's house surrounded by items that belonged to her, although obviously I removed a few to make room for me and my little family. But I am still in the heart of a very "haunted" place. My grandma's imprints are everywhere, on the hook of the door, the walls, in the cupboards. These are objects, elements, that I will use in my installations.

Memory traces are omnipresent in my work.

These worn, weathered objects offered to the viewer's gaze are a proposal to experience the relentless and continual flow of time. These objects are placed, suddenly, out of time. As if the souls and *mes-é-labitid* of the deceased have escaped the subject's mortality.

My work is essentially figurative. It's not all about installations. I also practice drawing, and in my drawings are references to Caribbean and Guadeloupean landscapes, with marks, traces, and signs of our colonial past. So we find mills, crosses, crossroads, and landmarks in the space where we live – statues, for example, which are not necessarily valued. There is a whole materiality of the past that is too often neglected. On the other hand, there will at the same time be the emergence of "museums" that shed particular light on the colonial past (e.g. the Memorial ACTe).

I also explore the traces as domination: the yoke, the iron, the misery – all this screed supported by a rural, enslaved agricultural population; and therefore its counterparts: dignity, resistance, and resilience.

Fig. 1.1. *Doudouland is Dead* (2020) (Mixed technique. Drawing on canvas. 1 m x 1 m)

There is also the willingness to wash, to remove, to wipe, to erase the negative and painful imprint of the other on ourselves. In the series *Doudouland is Dead*, I evoke the aftermath of the colonial conquest that wanted to impose the colonial order in its own country – images that depict the colonial dream. An ideal colony. The iconography is beautiful. The exotic is tantalizing, like all those old advertisements of topless women with flower necklaces around their necks, or Josephine Baker with

her belt of bananas. Africa is presented as luminous, erotic, mysterious, or powerful, terrifying through cannibalistic imagery – from Club Dorothée, and songs by Annie Cordy like "Banana Chocolat" or the Collaro Show.[2] This visual series wants to erase these traces which are not so distant, and which are still present in the popular (collective) unconscious. And everyone still has in mind this insidiously distilled imagery of the cannibal with his cooking pot ready to devour the white explorer. This imagery created one of the worst stereotypes that stick to the black skin. *Doudouland is Dead* is about overturning the stereotypical image to which our region is confined, perceived above all as a tourist, exotic, leisure, and pleasure destination[3] where "BATP" will always be discussed, which I ironically underline as "Boudin Accra Ti-Punch."[4]

Speaking about personal imprints or marks upon ourselves, the chlordecone scandal cannot be ignored. As Jean-François Boclé says in his 2016 performance *Political Jam*: "your mark closed on my prostate." This sentence could apply to my artwork *Chlordeconia*, a painting depicting a skull and its smile or the yellow laughter made from a bunch of bananas. Below are written the words "Prostate" and "Cancer." In addition, at the technical and formal levels, there are physical imprints with a transfer method, with a stamp pad. This is the mark of capitalism on our bodies. It evokes how corporeality is the immediate target of money-linked power – economy before health and profit at the risk of poisoning. The stigmatizing and the violating of the body are the structural and historical conditions of capitalism.

As for the notion of subversiveness, it is expressed in my work by proposing representational alternatives to go against stereotypes and the alienation that results from them. The issue of identity building for black and mixed-race children – as for my breeding, I am Indian-African-Amerindian (Taino) – is a concern relating to the issue of inheritance. My artwork is largely inspired by memories and autobiographical elements, and certainly stems from a discomfort in childhood linked to my too dark skin colour, my too wide nose. It is the very internalization of the bullying that pushes me to operate this insight to create.

This cannot be concealed or disguised. It is too overwhelming.

Perhaps it is even this discomfort that pushed me to withdraw into myself and initiate this work of drawing, art, reflection, re-creation … it nourishes me.

Me – I am *the* bastard.

I am talking about the bullying and identification problems encountered in childhood, in Guadeloupe, among people "of colour." Coming from a predominantly Indian family, my nose is flat, which is of concern. This is

not a direct problem with the white gaze, the white normative society opposed to the different black child. It is about discrimination between ourselves, between "black" people, or rather dark-skinned people – Indians or Africans.

Fig. 1.2. *Chlordeconia* (2019) (Drawing and collage on canvas. 60 x 84 cm. Achatines frames)

The "outcast" body was that of my frizzy-haired father's, from whom I also got my too-flat nose, in an Indian family where everyone has a straight and pinched nose. As a child, I internalized this self-hatred, a disgust born of my not being accepted by those who belong to the so-called standard group, that is the one hundred percent Indian children.

I became alienated from myself. A stranger to myself.

I had a kind of initiatory journey throughout adolescence to adulthood during which my racial identity was built up towards self-acceptance. At first it was very confrontational, given all that childhood and adolescence confront us with. We experience a virtual denial of identity, self-hatred, melancholy, and the physical violence of self-punishment (I scratched my skin with a gex sponge, or pinched my nose to refine it, etc.). There is a