

Anti-nation: Performance and politics in Martinique, 1981 – 1993

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I, Jordan Marie Elizabeth Phillips, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with performance and politics in Martinique, a French overseas territory in the eastern Caribbean. It is primarily a study of this island community as a strange variant of nation. Drawing on the early work of Édouard Glissant, the concept I develop to describe it is *anti-nation*. This refers to a neo-colonial, racialized predicament whose strictures, be they material or psychological, circumscribe the efforts made by Martinicans to exist on their own terms. I focus on the period 1981-1993, a decade marked by the decentralizing reforms of the Mitterrand presidency, and a concerted attempt to configure Martinique as a cultural nation in the absence of political sovereignty. Choosing to view performance as a polyvalent phenomenon, this thesis looks comparatively across two modes, carnival and theatre. Using four case studies, it attends to social, aesthetic and political values as they manifest across both forms. I argue that the culture of public performance here is shaped and limited by the anti-nation in which it is generated, but also that it manages to suggest radical alternative visions of Martinique.

Part One outlines the historical, political and intellectual foundations of the anti-nation, as well as the evolution of carnival and theatre in Martinique, and the state of the arts sector on the island during the 1980s. Part Two focuses on language, examining how a range of plays and carnival music envisage a Creole nation which, rather than locking itself into a logic of purity and authenticity, is multi-lingual and pluralistic. Part Three engages with memory, as a set of theatrical and masquerade performances recall buried racial trauma through an aesthetic akin to dreams or hallucination. This is a black nation remembering deliriously, an act as political as it is dramatic.

Impact statement

Although currently in scholarly form, this thesis could potentially have as much impact outside academia as inside it.

It is intended to be of use to those interested in a number of academic fields, ranging from nationalism to race to performance. The thesis proposes a new model of conceptualizing Martinique as a nation, one which could be applied in other contexts both within and beyond the Caribbean. It also contains what I believe to be the first scholarly treatment of two Martinican plays, namely *1902* and *La Nef*. Analysing these alongside better-known examples and the island's carnival culture, the project uses performance as a lens for understanding Martinique in a way that invites much further research.

Given that my background is in Modern Languages, the project was primarily developed with the aim of adding to French and Francophone Studies as a discipline, as well as addressing some of its blind spots. When I first learned about the French-speaking Caribbean as an undergraduate, the curriculum focussed almost entirely on the region's narrative fiction. This thesis was thus partly envisaged as a potential teaching resource, one that introduces students to this area through its popular performance culture and politics. While it was submitted within a French department, it spends a lot of time engaged in analysis of Creole-language cultural production. Such multi-lingual projects are increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception in French Studies, moving the discipline towards a more complete vision of its object of study as a global, imperial phenomenon. It therefore makes a critical intervention at a moment when we are reconsidering whether it is desirable, or even possible, to predicate study on one language alone.

This research was also conducted with public engagement in mind, and in relation to two specific endeavours.

The United Kingdom has what can be loosely termed a carnival community, consisting of practitioners, designers, musicians, organizers and academics. It is vibrant, but very monolingual: at an international conference run by and for this community in 2017, the participants I spoke to lamented their lack of knowledge of carnival from the French-speaking Caribbean. This thesis could be adapted into a resource that would help these creatives and citizen scholars access information about Martinican carnival, its history, contexts, forms and processes, thus enhancing their own research and artistic practice.

The other main potential beneficiaries of this type of research are museums and galleries, which are increasingly interested in collecting objects related to performance,

including costumes, set designs, photographic stills, paper programmes and video recordings. Alongside my doctorate, I undertook an internship on the ‘Out of Many, One – Caribbean’ project at the Victoria and Albert Museum which involved locating and cataloguing all the Caribbean items in the collection. Given that one of our findings was that the V&A currently lacks objects from outside the English-speaking Caribbean, this thesis could be turned into a kind of ‘map’ for curators and acquisitions staff, guiding them towards Martinican performance in its various forms, and the visual and material culture it generates.

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I would not have been able to embark on this project without the funding I received from the LAHP, under the auspices of the Arts & Humanities Research Council. Besides providing financial support, the LAHP also facilitated my work placement with the Victoria and Albert Museum, where I joined the ‘Out of Many, One – Caribbean’ project, researching the institution’s Caribbean collection. Working with images, objects and visual culture more generally was a new challenge for me, and influenced my approach to the subject matter of this thesis in ways I could not have foreseen. For me, the project represents collaborative public engagement at its best, and I extend my sincere thanks to Janet Browne and Dr Elaine Tierney for welcoming me into an environment where I was able to learn and thrive.

The LAHP also funded a bloc of Creole lessons: learning this language was integral to the success of this project and, more generally, an essential part of getting to know Martinique and the people who live there. I am grateful for my fantastic teacher, Anne McConnell-Wisskirchen, and for Andy Leak for putting me in touch with her, *mèsi anpil*.

The George Padmore Institute in Finsbury Park was my first port of call for archival research, and serendipitously held some of the most important sources used in this thesis. Small archives such as the GPI have been under immense economic pressure for years: with this in mind (and having also benefitted from the excellent events it regularly puts on for the public) I am particularly thankful for this resource and its wonderful archivist, Sarah Garrod.

This project also involved a three-month research trip to Martinique, undertaken in 2019. Much of the work was undertaken at the Archives Territoriales de Martinique, with the vital and enthusiastic assistance of Athanase Meslien and Jòj. Alain at the Bibliothèque Schœlcher was also instrumental in pointing me towards resources that had escaped my attention. My fellow archive users William Cécile, Jean-Jacques Etilé and Christelle Lozère generously shared local knowledge and snacks, as appropriate. My encounters with several of those involved in the theatre culture of the 1980s, including José Alpha, René Louise, Mariann Mathéus and Annick Justin-Joseph, were entirely unexpected and immensely valuable. Thanks are also due to Xavier Gouait, for his friendship and for our many shared adventures in every corner of the island. I could not have asked for better hosts in Bernadette

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Note on the text

All quotations in French are provided in the original language only.

Quotations in Creole are provided in the original language, accompanied by a translation into either French or English. Some of these quotations have been taken from bilingual Creole/French source texts, often produced by Martinican writers in order to make their work accessible to a broad French-speaking readership. Where available, then, I have used the French translations they provide, as they represent the most accurate version of what the writer or speaker originally wanted to express in Creole. In the case of quotations taken from monolingual Creole source texts, I have provided my own translations into English.

The provenance of each translation, either “French translation provided by the author” or “English translation mine”, is indicated in the first reference to each new Creole-language (or bilingual) source text.

Introduction

Carnival in custody...?

On the morning of Tuesday, 26 February 2019, around twenty nationalist and pro-independence activists marched to the police station in Le Lorrain, a small town on the north-eastern coast of Martinique, in protest against the arrest of a young man during carnival festivities two nights previously. Accounts of the incident differ. The crowd maintained that he had been detained arbitrarily for flying a red, green and black flag associated with their movement. Meanwhile, the police insisted that the young man had not actually been taken into custody, but merely kept in the station to sober up. The accused was subsequently due to appear for questioning at the station that Tuesday morning as part of an investigation into drunk and disorderly behaviour. While this related in part to a physical altercation in which officers were allegedly hit with a flagpole being brandished by the revellers, the police argued that the charge had nothing to do with the nature of the flag itself or what it represented.¹

What may appear to be no more than a *fait divers* is in fact indicative of multiple interrelated tensions seen in Martinican society. The most immediately obvious pits a small but vocal radical grouping against a colonial police state which they believe to be illegitimate. However, this skirmish was not only, or even primarily, a political one: support for full and unqualified independence is, after all, a minority view in Martinique. What is also at stake here is culture, or, more precisely, the clash between two understandings of how public life should proceed under certain circumstances. One, that of the security forces, sees drunkenness as an aggressive form of incivility, an infraction to be stopped and sanctioned. From another perspective, that of at least some sections of the community they are tasked to police, pugnacious excess has always been part and parcel of carnival. Nothing has gone awry here: this kind of behaviour is exactly what is expected in the context of carnival, that unpredictable fusion of performance and party that forms one of the Caribbean's most vital modes of cultural expression. In the fracas of Le Lorrain, we see a concise example of how cultural values (in this case, the anti-authoritarian and anarchic spirit of carnival) and political values (that is, the nationalism and anti-colonialism in the DNA of the island's contemporary political life) combine to make something very potent that runs under the surface of everyday life in Martinique, and flares up at moments such as these. As such, the incident captures

¹ 'Carnaval, drapeau rouge vert noir et remous', *France-Antilles Martinique*, 26 February 2019, <<https://www.martinique.franceantilles.fr/actualite/social/carnaval-drapeau-rouge-vert-noir-et-remous-419446.php>> [accessed 24 April 2023]

something of what this thesis aims to probe in its analysis of Martinique as a community, one that expresses (and indeed constructs) itself through public performance.

This project explores how Martinican people represented themselves as a nation through two modes of performance, carnival and theatre, over the course of roughly one decade of the late twentieth century (1981-1993). This was an imaginative endeavour, in that the playwrights and practitioners involved had their own ideas regarding who Martinicans were, collectively, and how best to present those ideas to their compatriots (and, indeed, to audiences beyond the island itself). At the same time, they engaged with many of the tensions, debates and silences that marked their community, one that was (and remains) as fractious, divided and inhibited as it is culturally, politically and intellectually vibrant.

More broadly, the thesis analyses how nation and culture are constituted through each other, to the point that they are often inseparable. For the purposes of this Introduction, however, I will treat each on its own terms in the first instance, in order to clearly address what is at stake in this fusion of mutually dependent concepts. It is particularly important to gain a fuller understanding of the kind of community we are dealing with, exactly. The following few sections will therefore think through the idea of nation as it relates, albeit problematically, to Martinique.

A history of Martinique in four flags

The showdown outside the police station in Le Lorrain ought to be interpreted as one episode in a longer story several hundred years in the making, featuring conflict, plot twists and skulduggery worthy of a soap opera. In fact, several flags have been used and discarded over the course of the island's history. The first, which dates back to the early modern colonial period, took the form of a white cross on a blue background, flanked by four white snakes. Originally the insignia of the French royal military expedition to the island, in 1766 it was made mandatory for all maritime traffic operating out of Martinique and Saint Lucia, including that which transported enslaved Africans to these Caribbean colonies. This emblem was worn by the local police force on their uniforms until it was definitively revoked by President Emmanuel Macron in 2018, after coming under pressure from anti-racist activist groups who objected to its association with slavery and colonialism. The second flag to come to prominence in Martinique is the one at the centre of the dispute in Le Lorrain. It features a red triangle with two adjoining horizontal strips, one green and one black, thus foregrounding the colours of the pan-Africanist movement founded by Marcus Garvey in the early twentieth

century, which aimed to foster solidarity amongst all black people of African descent. It has been used by various nationalist and pro-independence organizations on the island since the 1960s and continues to be widely mobilized and recognized in public space.

The third, entitled *Ipséité*, was chosen from the finalists of a competition launched by the local assembly in 2018 to find a new national anthem and flag for Martinique. The winning design centred on a conch shell indigenous to the Caribbean and commonly known in the French Antilles as a *lambi*, which can be blown into and used as a wind instrument. Thirty-four stars form a ring around the shell, one for each of the island's *communes*, the smallest administrative unit in France and its overseas territories. Eight blue and green segments fan out from the centre, representing each of the languages spoken in Martinique (to a greater or lesser degree) from the colonial period onwards: French, Creole, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Chinese and Arabic. *Ipséité* was personally selected in May 2019 by Alfred Marie-Jeanne, the then president of the assembly's executive committee and leader of the Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais (MIM). Of all the island's pro-independence parties, the MIM has enjoyed the most electoral success (albeit on a local level) and is the only one not to support the red, green and black flag. However, his decision was annulled by an administrative tribunal in November 2021, on the grounds that the choice was not his alone to make, and that any ruling on this matter had to go through the assembly with majority consent. A second consultation was initiated, at the end of which a fourth flag won seventy-three percent of an online public vote on 16 January 2023. This creation, proposed by the former Miss World contestant Anaïs Delwaulle, consisted of a hummingbird (another iconic native species) on a red, green and black background. Its legitimacy was hotly contested given the low overall participation in the poll, not to mention the fact that the hummingbird figure had been lifted from an image bank before being altered in colour, putting the flag's creator in breach of copyright. Moreover, partisans of the original red, green and black flag from the 1960s (which had been entered into the competition only to place second) criticized her appropriation of these colours whilst emptying them of their political significance.² One week later, Delwaulle withdrew from the competition after receiving online abuse. The path was thus left clear for the runner-up to claim the title by default, and the *drapeau rouge, vert, noir* (as it is commonly known) was duly ratified by the assembly on 6 February 2023.

² Corentin Wahu, 'Pourquoi le nouveau drapeau martiniquais crée la polémique?', *Midi Libre*, 20 January 2023, <<https://www.midilibre.fr/2023/01/20/pourquoi-le-nouveau-drapeau-martiniquais-cree-la-polemique-10939731.php>> [accessed 24 April 2023]

This saga is telling of Martinique in many ways. Both the content of each flag, and the fraught way in which successive designs have been developed and disavowed, sketch out the contours of the island's troubled history and present. We see European imperial expansion and control; the institutionalization of the transatlantic slave trade; attempts at decolonizing public space within an ongoing colonial situation; expressions of racial and national consciousness; the French order that feels as normal and natural for the Martinican population as it does for the people of Savoie or Finistère; the waves of human migration that have forged the island's society and culture; the factionalism and polarization that divides Martinique; and the dysfunctional operation of its local government. The never-ending flag fiasco demonstrates the strength of a community's desire to express its identity in visual form by committing itself to a flag, that is, the simplest graphic means by which humans understand, recognize and distinguish between nations. Nevertheless, it also illustrates the lack of consensus over what, exactly, that identity is, and who should be able to define it. What is also evident are the limits to how far it is possible for Martinicans to go with regard to even the most minor acts of self-determination. Nowhere is this clearer than in the episode of the *drapeau à quatre serpents*, where having the emblem removed from public space involved petitioning the president of France on one of his brief and infrequent visits to the Caribbean, as this ultimately required his consent.

In order to understand a process that may initially appear absurd, some further context is needed. Martinique was administered as a French colony until the implementation of the departmentalization law in 1946. This distinguishes Martinique and nearby French-speaking Guadeloupe from the majority of the other Caribbean islands, which gained independence in the 1960s and 70s. Departmentalization endowed Martinique and Guadeloupe³ with legal status equivalent to that of any other mainland French department, with a limited amount of freedom to adapt constitutional law to their own context. They elect representatives to the National Assembly and the Senate in Paris, have the same institutions with regards Justice, Health and Education as exist in mainland France, and have EU membership (although as "ultrapерipheral" regions under special measures). The ambiguity of this arrangement is evident: theoretically, a Martinican is as much a French citizen as a Parisian but profound ethnic, geographical, linguistic and cultural dissimilarities will always mark her as Other, in the real world. There is also a profound ambivalence regarding the social and economic benefits extended to Martinique and Guadeloupe. While they undoubtedly enjoy a higher

³ Two other former French colonies, French Guiana and Réunion, were also granted this status in 1946.

standard of living compared to most other islands in the region, a neo-colonial arrangement of this nature severely circumscribes the extent to which Martinican elected representatives can initiate and design endeavours that would benefit their constituents first and foremost.

Modern Martinique is thus a political oddity, an American outpost of a supposedly defunct European empire, its people having apparently given their consent not to exist as a distinct community. It is a place of paradox: for all the energy and emotion expended on choosing a flag, the *drapeau rouge, vert, noir* does not represent a sovereign nation-state, and will therefore only be officially recognized during some inter-island sporting events limited to the Caribbean region. Conceptualizing Martinique as a nation, it would seem, is something of a stretch. Ironically, that is what I propose to do in this thesis. More precisely, I interpret Martinique as a type of community that is systematically frustrated in its political, economic and social aspirations, yet for whom the idea of Martinique remains just about conceivable.

Nation ... or not?

Martinique lurks awkwardly in the overlap between two formidable realities. Firstly, it ought to be viewed as one colony within a global French empire, itself one variant of a vast European enterprise encompassing much of the world's land and peoples, and linking numerous histories of brutality, dispossession and disenfranchisement. This endeavour was not to be eternal and unchanging, however. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second World War (and the concomitant rise of new East-West spheres of influence), international power dynamics were irrevocably reconfigured, and it became clear that the centuries-old European empires would no longer continue in their formal political form. As efforts to envisage life "after" colonialism gained momentum, the bulk of the world's colonized people (or, more accurately, the Western-educated native elites who assumed power upon the official end to imperial control) adopted the European model of the sovereign nation-state. This both was, and was not, a foregone conclusion. On one hand, the belief that it represented the most viable option is actually far from self-evident. Whether the raising of postcolonial national consciousnesses originated in bourgeois ambition or popular initiative is almost beside the point when we acknowledge that the borders inherited from colonization were absurd, cutting through pre-existing communities. Moreover, the assumption that making the nation *the* site of anti-colonial resistance would automatically bring about liberation from colonial structures was just that: a (hefty) assumption. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how emancipatory

movements at this moment could have dedicated themselves to anything else and how, practically, they could have existed outside of the prevailing world politico-economic order. For the architects of this post-imperial construction project, decolonization was incontrovertibly national, even if only as a necessary anti-assimilatory step (one that is capable of mobilizing political action) in the path towards an alternative future. It is important to acknowledge Martinique's position within this broad trend, compelled to negotiate what was supposed to be the end of the imperial world as we knew it. Its leaders could not but be affected by this dynamic of decolonization, with the emerging nation-state as its "obvious" *modus operandi*.

Secondly, however, Martinique must be located within the French Republic and its principles, especially those that regulate what is and is not admissible in terms of national identification and self-rule. Prevailing interpretations of the country's constitution do not tolerate expressions of alternative nationalisms or countenance any form of regional devolution comparable to those in operation in the United Kingdom, Spain or Germany. William Miles attributes this stance to the successive upheavals (and subsequent stabilizations) which characterize France's political history from the end of the eighteenth century:

One cannot overemphasize the extent to which *la nation* became the secular equivalent of dogma. Jacobin ideology and Napoleonic imperialism conjoined to elevate the idea of nation as the linchpin of Frenchness. Consolidation of numerous cultural groups into the idea of France required a fierce attachment to the necessity of an exclusive national identity [...] It goes without saying that the notion of discrete nations within the French nation swings between the nonsensical and the subversive.⁴

The fundamental unity and indivisibility of the French nation, perceived (and enforced) as such from the metropolitan centre, leaves Corsicans, Bretons and Martinicans alike with limited room for manoeuvre as regards generating and realizing distinct political ambitions.

For Martinicans, departmentalization in 1946 represented a means, if not of reconciling, then of living between these two realities. From their perspective, it was both a route out of empire and an assertion of Frenchness that offered dignity, opportunity and security. The first chapter of this thesis explores in greater detail how and why this came about and, in so doing, tries to account for how contemporary Martinique was made. It also illustrates how this was only partially a question of "compromise" between two paradigms. In

⁴ William Miles, 'When Is a Nation "a Nation"? Identity-Formation within a French West Indian People (Martinique)', *Nations and Nationalism*, 12.4 (2006), 631–52 (p. 636-7).

many ways, Martinique falls outside the boundaries of normative nationhood altogether. As much as its proponents tried to frame departmentalization as an act of postcolonial nation-building (of sorts), the island has become a *nation without a state*, one that has been denied (or, rather, has itself opted out of) sovereignty in the post-war world order. In so doing, it has joined an expansive category of similar cases (many of which, as we will see in Chapter One, are to be found in the Caribbean) that exist in the twilight zone of modern international relations. Indeed, so vast and varied is this group, encompassing examples as disparate as Scotland, the Basque country, Kurdistan and the Zulu, that it actually incorporates a sizeable portion of the world's population. The paradox is clear: while the sovereign nation-state is certainly normative, in that it still represents the "gold standard" of political organization of land and people, (even in an age of trading blocs, supranational unions and spheres of influence), it also cannot be considered simply as "normal", given that it actually excludes (or at least marginalizes) many of those it claims to represent by dint of its supposedly universal applicability. Moreover, however much departmentalization was articulated as a means of enshrining equality for Martinicans with regards access to the same rights accorded to their Republican co-citizens, it will become clear at numerous points throughout this thesis that Martinique exists as a *state of exception* within that same Republic. The island's inhabitants are routinely denied the basic resources and services to which they are entitled, excluded from prevailing understandings of the history and culture of the French nation and, on occasion, placed outside the protection of its laws.

The people and performances analysed in this thesis exist within this multi-faceted quandary of (non-)nationhood. Nevertheless, we cannot leave our engagement with the concept of the nation at the level of a self-evident goal pursued by Martinicans in impossible circumstances. We as citizens of the twentieth century take nations utterly for granted, when in reality there is nothing natural or straightforward about them. As political entities, they are historically contingent, the modern nation-state being a relatively recent invention dating back barely a few centuries. As ideas, they are abstractions, or, in Benedict Anderson's celebrated formulation, imagined communities, maintained virtually as opposed to through concrete, real-life relations.⁵ They do not develop organically: no nation exists without constant active reinforcement via the repetition of traditions, invented and formally instituted

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London: Verso, 2016).

in order to ensure a nation's sense of continuity with its past.⁶ Even the use of the word 'its' here is problematic, belying a profound conceptual indeterminacy with regards what can be said to belong to any one nation, or, to put it another way, what is *of* one nation and not of another. Indeed, the philosophical incoherence of the nation as a concept has been widely noted. The type of community presupposed is hazy, variously described as both civic (and therefore constituted voluntarily by its members) and ethno-cultural, that is, accessible by accident of birth alone. Moreover, the notion of shared origins on which the latter description is founded is already mythical, ethnic groups having been mixing for thousands of years.

If no nation exists as a coherent whole, then, from what perspective do we judge Martinique and its predicament as outlined earlier? It is important to recognize and avoid some of the pitfalls found in discourse on the development of emerging postcolonial nations and their transition to capitalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty's work in *Provincializing Europe* is helpful in this respect, as he focusses on flawed conceptions of history and time that ultimately lead to problematic attitudes. He identifies a prevailing historicist approach within scholarship and commentary on the development of new nations after empire. Historicism is rooted in old (but durable) ideologies of progress and "development", and understands modernity as something that 'became global *over time*⁷', originating in one place (Europe) before spreading elsewhere (Empire). A putative global historical time is thus engendered, which becomes 'a measure of cultural distance [...] assumed to exist between the West and the non-West' (p. 7). Such stagist theories of history, which claim to be able to delimit the "episode" of political modernity, encourage the use of that definition as 'a measuring rod for social progress' (p. 9). Embedded in the way that even the most strident anti-colonialists think through the post-imperial trajectories of the Global South, then, is the implicit privileging of Europe as a template for how to grow into modernity via the medium of the nation-state. Beyond highlighting the eurocentrism of this tendency (as Chakrabarty does), on a more fundamental level we need to be sceptical about notions that imply that there is such a thing as a "successful", "complete", "mature" or "advanced" nation.

Perhaps the biggest challenge faced in writing this thesis is finding a way to talk about Martinique's significant practical and existential malaise without falling into the trap of thinking in terms of its "success" or "failure" as a nation. The idea that there are objective

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 1–14.

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History, New ed. (Princeton: University Press, 2007), p. 7.

criteria that can be used to make this judgement is specious: it should not escape us that only non-Western countries receive the appellation of “failed state”. This type of normative ruling is made from a perspective that claims to be neutral but is (in all honesty) Western. Here, a white gaze views the world through a lens informed by the supposed universal applicability of its values (“these states have failed because they have not behaved as we have done”) and the presumption of their superiority (“Western states do not fail”). In this thesis, I aim to cultivate a more critical outlook on life on this island, one which tries to make sense of its blend of precarity, dysfunction and ambition without judging it on Western terms that are, by necessity, weighted against the people it colonizes. Noone has probed this situation with more determination and perspicacity than Édouard Glissant, and his work has been instrumental in guiding my own understanding of Martinique. Glissant had first-hand experience of its predicament, and was unfailingly direct, precise and exacting in his discussion of its problems. At the same time, he knew better than to imply that there is “a nation gone right” out there, somewhere. Through his critique of Martinique, of the Caribbean and, indeed, of the wider world, he offered his own deconstruction and reformulation of the very concept of nation.

Thinking with Glissant

[...] Cette résistance, sous toutes sortes de formes et d’expressions plus ou moins ‘différées’, continue. C’est-à-dire que les pulsions collectives n’ont pas encore été usées par la non-production ni détournées par la consommation passive, même si elles ne sont élucidées en conscience claire. L’idée-Martinique est dans toutes les têtes, ou disons dans tous les inconscients. Obstinations populaires, sursauts incontrôlables, dévouements militants, grèves tenaces, morts anonymes ou trop vite oubliés prouvent cette résistance.⁸

The body of thought attributed to the Martinican writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant has attracted widespread interest in recent years. Indeed, his interconnected notions of Relation, archipelago and insularity are used as tools for critical analysis across a range of geographical and disciplinary contexts. Yet it is his commitment to probing Martinique, or, more precisely, the *idée-Martinique* evoked in the quotation provided above (with all the possibilities and contention that this idea entails) that has been most influential in catalysing this thesis. The *idée-Martinique* can be interpreted as both a process to be worked through (an active,

⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 306. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

difficult search for identity) as well as an objective to aspire to, that is, some kind of community, however diverse and divided.

Glissant's political engagement in debates regarding Martinican nationhood has received less recognition than his philosophical and literary work. Although it was short-lived (and ill-fated), it is worth paying attention to this period of his life, as this is where some of the foundations of his approach to Martinique were laid, not to mention the hesitations that gave his thought its tensions and nuance. Glissant's early adulthood (1946 – 1965) was spent in a Paris that was politically charged by the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence in 1954. However, the trigger for his most intense stretch of political activism came in December 1959, when an anti-French uprising in Fort-de-France was brutally suppressed by riot police. Three young Martinican protestors were killed, provoking outrage amongst Glissant's circle and many other expatriates in France. Two things were now clear for Glissant, as well as for the French Antillean student associations (who were, from this point on, decisively radicalized) and intellectuals with whom he met in the days following the unrest. The first was that, despite how departmentalization had been heralded as an end to empire, Martinique was still essentially a colonial police state. Secondly, the island needed to decolonize, and urgently. These truths were to become the mainstays of his philosophical and pedagogical practice for decades to come, as we shall see.

For Glissant and his co-activists of that particular moment, decolonization also needed to be nationalist in its orientation. The question of how to ground and articulate that nationalism proved complex, and some aspects of Glissant's approach to the matter lasted into his later work while others have not. What did prove durable was his critique (and refusal) of assimilation in all its guises, be it imperial or departmental. As he saw it, autonomy was a prerequisite for decolonization: if an oppressed people do not have meaningful freedom of self-determination, then they are essentially still colonized. The concrete political strategy Glissant helped initiate during this period, however, was more fragile. January 1960 saw the genesis of what was to become the Front Antillo-Guyanais pour l'Autonomie (FAGA), whose manifesto directly challenged the constitutional status of the overseas departments, and recommended consulting the local populations on combining Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana into a federation with its own assembly and executive. It represented an unusually open form of nationalism, indeed, much more so than the island-specific variants that would come to prominence in the region in later decades. The "united front" approach certainly reflected the hybrid composition of the founding committee, which included the Guadeloupean poet Paul Nègre and the Martinican lawyer

Marcel Manville. It also owed much to the internationalist outlook of its instigators, who conceived of their movement in solidarity with all peoples struggling for independence. Indeed, when the inaugural congress in April 1961 coincided with the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Glissant explicitly referred to the event during proceedings, encouraging support for the Cuban people.⁹

Whether these principles and strategies would have gained traction in the French Antilles themselves, we will never know. The FAGA was already under police surveillance by the time of the congress, their activities having been deemed subversive by the French authorities. On 22 July 1961, the organisation was dissolved by presidential decree. Furthermore, Glissant was barred from entering Martinique for four years under the terms of the *Ordonnance Debré*, a piece of legislation passed the previous year which allowed public sector employees from the overseas departments accused of being a threat to public order to be forcibly exiled in metropolitan France. This marked the end of his organized politics (in the purest sense of the term), but it was only the beginning of his life-long probing of Martinique, of the kind of nation it was or could be, and of the limits of that ideal as a way of being in the world.

Le Discours antillais (from which the opening citation of this section is taken) was Glissant's first major philosophical work, published in 1981. It is an eclectic blend of political economy, sociological inquiry and literary criticism comprising essays, notes and conference proceedings generated after his return to Martinique in 1965. The work is not so much a coherent treatise or theory as an exercise in thinking about Martinique as a nation, albeit one which is, as Glissant sees it, a paradigm of alienation at the time of writing. The island has arrived at this point via a twofold process. It is partly a matter of socio-economic failure. Indeed, Glissant maintains that Martinique does not have an economic base to speak of, at least not one in which it has any meaningful stake. The French colonial endeavour was as much an economic phenomenon as it was political, each facet guided by the principle of assimilation: 'Ce qui signifie que l'économie martiniquaise (production et consommation) dans son système global est globalement intégrée à l'économie française, sans alternative' (p. 97). Martinique has been dispossessed economically, either in order to directly benefit France through the extraction of resources and exploitation of labour, or as a result of the imperial power's indifference, as evidenced in how it neglected to find a viable substitute for the sugar

⁹ Hirota Satoshi, 'Front Antillo-Guyanais', 28 January 2018, <<https://edouardglissant.world/lieux/front-antillo-guyanais/>> [accessed 18 March 2024]

cane industry (that is, the island's main source of revenue) after it ceased to be profitable in the mid-twentieth century (p. 102). From the start, then, the local economy was based on opportunistic plunder rather than concerted, sustainable production: 'Que lui reste-t-il [au colon Martiniquais]? La rapine. Aucune possibilité d'accumulation, de prévision, de technicisation. Il profite au jour le jour' (p. 96). Despite the abolition of slavery and the administrative shift from colony to department, not much has changed, in this respect. Glissant links the absence of any form of collective productivity by which Martinicans could support themselves to the lack of autonomous, responsible action across all aspects of life on the island. As such, the economic implosion and psychic disintegration of Martinique go hand in hand: 'La francisation artificielle (elle ne déclenche pas une participation créatrice) entraîne la mutité névrotique de l'être et son irresponsabilité' (p. 87).

He describes a situation in which a community's dispossession and evisceration is structural, to the extent that the issue of sovereignty almost becomes a red herring: independence alone, after all, will not deal with the dysfunction and death baked into the Martinican economy, society and psyche. Here, we hear an oblique echo of Glissant's earlier political activism. In the writings and speeches produced over the course of his involvement with the FAGA, he appears to avoid advocating for "hard" independence.¹⁰ Against the indignation felt in response to the events of December 1959, and in the wider political context of multiple nations winning post-imperial independence across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, this stance probably seemed like weak prevarication to some. However, it may well have been the case that, even at that moment, Glissant was questioning the value placed on territorial sovereignty as a prime objective or, more precisely, relativizing it against the enormity of what would outlast any change in status or settlement.

If Martinique was currently locked into a dead-end state of affairs, then it also harboured a state of mind homologous to that reality. Insofar as Martinique can be said to have a collective unconscious (and Glissant still has just about enough optimism to believe that it does, as expressed in his remarks on the *idée-Martinique* quoted earlier), it is riddled with insecurity. This is primarily seen in the preclusion of autonomy that is rooted in the community's economic subjugation: 'En même temps que se développait les rapports de domination économique entre la métropole et sa colonie, une double croyance se raffermissait dans les Antilles de langue française: d'abord que ses pays ne peuvent pas se subsister par eux-mêmes, ensuite que leurs habitants sont français de fait [...] (p. 22). It is a

¹⁰ Satoshi, 'Front Antillo-Guyanais'.

denial rooted in fear, one of a multitude of anxieties plaguing Martinican lives and minds, which stem from the contradictions that lurk unresolved in a fragile collective unconscious. A lot of the neuroses discussed in *Le Discours antillais* revolve around attitudes to language and history, which will be dealt with in depth across the various chapters of this thesis. At one point, however, Glissant lingers over the topic of the Martinican family, which for him constitutes another manifestation of a community at variance with itself on a profound level. He begins with an appreciation of the complex and violent history of the family as it evolved in the context of transatlantic slavery. This was a situation in which reproduction, forced or otherwise, was ultimately for the profit of the plantation owner who enslaved those concerned. Abortion and infanticide were a mode of refusing that exploitation of the body (p. 166). With abolition came gradual social change, namely the expectation for Martinican people to marry, thus officialising sexual unions and the children that resulted from them. Now, they are forced to negotiate two irreconcilable phenomena: on one hand, the institutional stability of the nuclear family (both as a social and legal fact, and an ideal to aspire to) and on the other the formidable emotional instability suffusing Martinican families as they are lived and remembered (p. 168). This psycho-social impasse leads to a pervasive detachment and abdication of responsibility:

Ici encore le Martiniquais essaie de fuir les contradictions insupportables en s'installant dans un "non-être" confortable, encouragé par la consommation passive, c'est-à-dire non accompagné d'une activité autonome de production. Mais il est évident que ces solutions d'engourdissement ne comportent aucune "dynamique" de dépassement. C'est là encore une des "voies" par lesquelles la communauté risque de disparaître (p. 170).

Economic, social, cultural and psychological frustrations thus mutually reinforce each other, combining to result in the slow loss of a collective identity that was barely there to start with. Throughout *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant is effectively diagnosing Martinique and its troubled sense of nationhood, past and present. In doing so, he manages to name the island's predicament (without portraying Martinique as a type of "failed state") by emphasizing the phenomenon of planned obsolescence. Glissant argues that Martinique's current situation is not caused by its own moral failings, or by the departmentalization process not working well enough. Instead, the island's political economy was hard-wired in the interests of another power, and made to be defunct outside of the exploitative purpose for which it was created. Rather than viewing Martinique as "lagging behind" or "faltering" in its entry into the modern world order of nations, Glissant's perspective suggests that the slave plantation

societies of the Caribbean were as much an original site of modernity as the commercial cities of Europe. It then becomes clearer that modernity and its capitalism presupposed the exploitation of some for the benefit of others, and that therefore these were inherently unequal things from the outset, not ones that “developed” problematically in non-Western contexts. The idea of planned obsolescence contains a critique of the very ideology of “development”, refuting its supposed neutrality and highlighting the white and Western interests behind its criteria for success and failure.

As a conceptual tool, it helps us side-step the dubious logic that plagues much discussion of places like Martinique, and their frustrations and aspirations with regard to nationhood. However, it is vital to appreciate the breadth and evolution of Glissant’s œuvre, in which he certainly probes the problem of the nation, but also looks beyond it. Ultimately, he is not really interested in the dead-end question of how to be a “good” nation (as if one actually exists) but rather in more productive ones, such as how to live together as Caribbeans, and how to decolonize. Indeed, Glissant’s focus on Martinique represents only the beginning of his body of thought, which ultimately extends much further than this into the Poetics of Relation. is first sketched out in *Le Discours antillais* before being developed more fully in later publications. He starts from the process of creolization that he, along with many others, has lived and observed in the Caribbean. This is a term that refers to the syncretization *in situ* of African, European, Asian, Middle Eastern and Amerindian peoples and their cultures, brought together by force, necessity or choice in these island colonies over successive centuries. While some choose to focus on creole culture as the end product (something that can be identified, defended and potentially marketed in each of its island-specific variants), Glissant is more interested in creolization as a process, which he sees as the paradigmatic mode of being and belonging in the modern world. Martinique, Glissant maintains, has displacement and adaptation as its *modus operandi*. This ought to be understood as both a violent severance influencing its insecurity as a community, and the basis of a novel way of conceptualizing cultures in general:

[...] notre situation dans le monde en tant que collectivité ait été abâtardie de nos irrésolutions, de notre errance. Mais que l’abâtardissement découle de ces convergences historiques, [...] c’est ce que nous tâcherons aussi de montrer en nous faisant les défenseurs, et peut-être les illustrateurs, d’une conception précisément métissée des cultures. (p. 29)

This shift in Glissant's thought presents this thesis with a problem, namely, how to square our focus on Martinique with his vision of a ceaseless creolization, one that seemingly does not prioritize thinking in terms of national communities at all, "failed" or otherwise.

It is important to highlight how, even as his theory of Relation begins to take shape, the nation never disappears from view entirely. This is especially evident in a chapter of *Le Discours antillais* entitled 'Le Même et le Divers', in which he elaborates on a pair of concepts that underpin his philosophy. Here, the *Même* refers to the supposedly universal humanism, imposed by the West on the rest of the world, which claims to transcend the particularities of nations. Anything vaguely national encountered by the West is apprehended as an obstacle to be overcome. Indeed, the *Même*'s claim to universality requires this kind of vanquishment in order to fuel and perpetuate itself: non-Western peoples are seen as 'the flesh of the world', or raw material to be sublimated. (p. 326-7) The *Divers* is the dissenting effort made by these peoples in opposition to the *Même*. This involves seeing themselves in an altogether different light, not as 'stuff' to be transcended, but as communities with potential in the world: 'Le Divers a besoin de la présence des peuples, non plus comme objet à sublimer, mais comme projet à mettre en relation.' (p. 327) Nations, specifically those emerging from empire, are thus a vital component of the 'différence consentie' represented by the *Divers* (a combative alternative to the *Même* and its 'différence sublimée' (p. 328)).

That said, they also lose prominence as Glissant advances his theory of Relation. More precisely, a poetics is being developed which stretches conventional conceptions of the nation almost beyond recognition. As Glissant considers the Caribbean archipelago, he inverts the typical understanding of insularity, from one synonymous with isolation, to one that invites crossings and connection across space: 'On prononce ordinairement l'insularité comme un mode d'isolement, comme une névrose d'espace. Dans la Caraïbe pourtant, chaque Île est une ouverture.' (p. 427) This reorientation forms the basis of his idea of *antillanité*, which privileges the multi-relational dimension of the Caribbean, which is both a reality and an ideal. The island nations therein are no longer conceptualized as discrete entities, but as open to each other in quite a radical way: Glissant writes about Antilleans 'having the sea inside them', with all the potential for contact and exchange that image now suggests. As such, Caribbean nations have the hard (restrictive, perhaps totalitarian) edges taken off them, without their community being denied outright: 'L'antillanité, rêvée par les intellectuels, en même temps que nos peuples la vivaient de manière souterraine, nous arrache de l'intolérable propre aux nationalismes nécessaires et nous introduit à la Relation qui aujourd'hui les tempère sans les aliéner.' (p. 426)

This is the point at which Glissant's thought pivots towards the Antilles as the privileged site of Relation. It gains a lot from doing so, as we have seen. Nevertheless, something inevitably gets lost in this transition, namely, the incisiveness of its critique of Martinique. Glissant often seems to stop just before getting to the bottom of the insecurities he identifies in this troubled nation. He rightly identifies the insidious belief instilled in the French Antilles that they cannot survive on their own, but he does not pinpoint what it is that they are afraid of, exactly. There is more at stake here than a fear of material poverty, or of not being French: something more fundamental sits at the root of these anxieties.

In his discussion of the Martinican family and the unresolvable contradictions that plague it, Glissant does not make it clear that these are a manifestation of the racial trauma of black people in the Americas. This is rooted in the fact of black bodies, specifically, being exploited for their reproductive potential. He appreciates the issue in its historical, social, economic and psychological dimensions, but its intrinsic racial aspect is left unsaid. Moreover, if we press further on the anxiety of imperial abandonment ('ces pays ne peuvent pas subsister par eux-mêmes, [...] leurs habitants sont français de fait, au contraire des autres colonisés qui restent africains ou indochinois' (p. 22)), we can begin to see an implicit hierarchy, with Caribbeans positioning themselves closer to Europe and further from the rest of the colonized peoples and their colour, which is to be feared. Glissant tends to gloss over it somewhat, but racial violence, racial thinking and the facticity of race more generally are what so often prove to be at the root of the neuroses itemized in *Le Discours antillais*.

It is perhaps not altogether surprising that he tends not to engage with these issues directly, given how passionately he advocates for *métissage* as a radical destabilization of 'race' and its putative certainties: 'Le métissage comme proposition souligne qu'il est désormais inopérant de glorifier une origine "unique" dont la race serait gardienne et continuatrice.' (p. 428) And yet, in making that case without first truly reckoning with the history and reality of race in Martinique, Glissant risks drifting away from relevance to a context which is anything but post-racial. With that in mind, I want to bring in some contemporary scholarship on race and nation from the wider American/Caribbean region. This will form a counterpoint with Glissant, drawing attention to the racial consciousness that lies semi-articulated in his thought

France, race and the New World black nation

Part of the problem with Glissant's (limited) engagement with race is his understanding of what race actually is, which is somewhat confused. He certainly does not ground it in any biological or anthropological basis, but tends to treat it as a manifestation or corollary of something he considers more salient. Thus, race often becomes conflated with ethnicity (where *black* is used almost as a byword for *African*, or *of African descent*) or class (where the exploited proletariat of the Caribbean is portrayed as being incidentally black). In order to gain some clarity in this domain, I use insights drawn from a group of overlapping contemporary critical theories. These all see race not only as a social construct, but as a formidable organizing principle of social relations in its own right, irreducible to any other factor. Racial formation theory, developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in the late 1980s, was the first to interpret race as being in a state of flux regarding its meanings, thus eschewing both essentialist tendencies (which stray close to biological and anthropological theories) and those who would dismiss race as a complete illusion.¹¹ Building on this basis, Omi and Winant use the term *racialization* to describe the process by which racial meanings are extended to relationships, social practices or groups.¹² The concept is of considerable relevance to my own inquiry, as it is not possible to understand the constitution of Martinique as an entity without paying attention to how these meanings have been allocated, redefined and reshaped over time. This thesis is, at least in part, an exercise charting how Martinique was *made black*, and how Martinicans responded to that process.

More recently, it has been noted that such poststructurally-inflected theories (with their emphasis on the decentring of meanings) have a tendency to portray race as being primarily ideological in nature, whilst overlooking the reality of institutional structures, material inequality, and the racial order to which these both adhere.¹³ We will see examples of these time and time again throughout this thesis as it engages with Martinique and its cultural infrastructure, both official and unofficial. Social theories succeeding that of racial formation are clearer with regard to identifying which racial groups have the power to actually create and enforce these structures, as well as who stands to benefit from them.

¹¹ Eileen O'Brien, 'Racial Formation', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology: Specialty and Interdisciplinary Studies*, ed. by Kathleen Odell Korgen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), II, pp. 5–11 (p. 6).

¹² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 111.

¹³ Kimberley Ducey and Joe R. Feagin, 'Systemic Racism', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology: Specialty and Interdisciplinary Studies*, ed. by Kathleen Odell Korgen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), II, 12–20 (p. 17).

Indeed, my understanding of race owes a lot to theories of systemic racism, which maintain it impossible to conceive of race outside of the phenomena of racism, inherently white in terms of whose interests it works in.

These American-authored theories have gained significant traction (and numerous detractors) in the US. In France and in the French Antilles, however, they are overwhelmingly viewed with a mixture of incomprehension and indifference. Discussing race is something of a social taboo in France, where to raise issues around the unfair treatment of people of colour (other than the most egregious behaviours and incidents) is to expose oneself to accusations of *communautarisme* (excessively favouring one community's interests over all others, to the detriment of national unity) and thus anti-Republicanism.¹⁴ The particularly Gallic myth of colour-blindness, built on the belief that neither France's constitution nor its public institutions show bias towards any of its citizens according to their ethnicity, is pervasive both in the metropole and in the overseas departments.¹⁵ Thanks to this illusion of equality under the Republic, in addition to the favourable position of people of African descent within the local demographic, Martinicans largely consider themselves shielded from racial bigotry, often maintaining that it was only when they went to Europe that they experienced it for themselves. Racism, from this perspective, is a *bavure*, that is, an error, a blunder or a veering away from how social interactions should normally proceed. *Bavures* are committed by bigoted white people, who are more numerous in Europe, hence the aggravated experience of racism there.

Despite these claims to equality, race is a constant reality for French people of colour who suffer discrimination, prejudice and disadvantage, and an increasing number of scholars, journalists and activists are drawing attention to these issues. To my mind, the experiences of Martinicans living in the Caribbean and those of Antillean origin making their lives in France are qualitatively different, but fundamentally the same: in both contexts, black people are having to negotiate a white world. This argument rests on the conviction that the issue of racism cannot be reduced to one of *bavures*, or the conspicuous outrages (almost) universally recognized as such. Rather, it must engage with how racialized identities and inequalities are internalized and institutionalized in ways that benefit white people (and which they are consequently less likely to acknowledge).

¹⁴ See *La Politique républicaine de l'identité*, ed. by Patrick Simon and Sylvia Zappi (= Mouvements, 38 (2005)).

¹⁵ See Christophe Bertossi, 'The Performativity of Colour Blindness: Race Politics and Immigrant Integration in France, 1980–2012', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46.5 (2012), 427–44 and Tony S. Juge and Michael P. Perez, 'The Modern Colonial Politics of Citizenship and Whiteness in France', *Social Identities*, 12.2 (2006), 187–212.

In this climate, it is difficult to initiate discussion of how the Martinican nation was formed through its black population's ongoing experience of being racialized. This is especially true given the negative connotations surrounding 'black nationalism', a term inevitably associated either with Marcus Garvey's deeply problematic black separatist views, or the much maligned Black Panther Party, synonymous with violence and criminality as a result of systematic vilification in the American media. Black nationalism is consequently assumed to be a misguided, exclusionary quest for racial purity and superiority, the mirror image of white supremacy. It may indeed have been so, at times. Nevertheless, our understanding of the term ought not to be reduced to this. Robert Carr's formulation of New World black nationalism as something with a serious, mature political rationale is a useful antidote to this confusion. Situating it within the triangular power dynamics linking black America, the Caribbean and Anglo-America, it "emerges from and circulates in direct opposition to the racism of existing states."¹⁶ This point of origin and mode of development is what distinguishes the black nationalism of the New World from older Western variants. Carr stresses that state violence and exclusion in the Americas have always been intensely racialized:

[...] it is because the states and federal government of the United States in the cases of African-Americans and West Indians, as well as England in the case of the latter, make it clear that they have reserved a special pocket of brutality and dehumanization for peoples of colour in the New World, that they cannot be of the people/nation represented (p. 14).

The foundations for nationalism in these contexts, having been laid under these conditions, are those of a racially conscious community: 'This alienation by and from states is constitutive of the shared history of black citizenship, of blackness as a socio-political category (p. 14).'

This is what becomes somewhat obscured in Glissant's thought. It is partly a matter of personal inclination, in that while his philosophical approach originates in the black experience in the Caribbean, he is not especially interested in blackness as an explicit category in the same way as Carr is. Ultimately, however, this is due to the environment in which Glissant and his compatriots lived, read, thought and wrote, that is, a France that

¹⁶ Robert Carr, *Black Nationalism in the New World: Reading the African-American and West Indian Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

cannot countenance that category, and in which the concept of black citizenship is at best nonsensical, and at worst a threat to the integrity of the Republic. Blackness generally gets muted in political and public discourse in Martinique, as will be observed at several points throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, it is my contention that it is never completely neutralized, because Martinican people *know* that pocket of brutality, however obliquely and partially. Several of the performances discussed in the following chapters explore and interrogate it with a directness that is absent from local political life. The creators thus push back against what this French Caribbean climate allows with regard to identifying and discussing the racism inflicted on its citizens, and how this continues to shape the Martinique of today. If it is a nation, then it is at least semi-aware that it is black, not in an outdated biological or anthropological sense, but by dint of its historic and ongoing racialization. Rather than dismiss Martinique as “the land that racial consciousness forgot”, it is possible to see its mode of community as one variant of New World black nationalism and therefore connected, however loosely, to the experiences and perspectives of people of colour across the Americas. In doing so, it hails a group sensibility that Glissant does not quite manage to articulate, even as he enumerates the kind of issues faced by black nations across that context.

Such is the complexity of the knot of issues characterizing modern Martinique that it is often difficult to find the appropriate language to describe it. So far, I have referred to it variously as a nation, a collectivity, a community, a place and a people, and I have discussed it in terms of its “non-nationhood”. This awkward lexicon has arisen in my attempt to accommodate the fundamental tension in both Glissant’s thought and my own, between, on one hand, wanting to think about Martinique specifically without jettisoning the national form completely and, on the other hand, aiming to think otherwise, outside the flawed framework of the nation. The term I have devised for use in this thesis, in order to represent the context in which the performances I study are generated, is *anti-nation*. It is partly a political descriptor depicting the uneasy fusion between *stateless nation* (one that did not follow the template of postcolonial independence) and *state of exception* within the French republic, one that does not exist on the same terms as the nation from which it is supposedly indivisible. The word anti-nation is not, as I have made clear throughout this Introduction, a means of defining Martinique negatively as a nation that has “missed the mark”, as if there is one that can be said to have “hit the target”. Rather, it is a way of accounting for the predicament in which Martinicans live, work and create.

The anti-nation is a *dead-end state of affairs*, where there is no means of economic productivity over which local people have meaningful control. This is effectively “planned

obsolescence” at a national level, the result of a community being brought into being to aid a European power’s colonial plantation endeavour, with no provision for a future independent of that original purpose. Following Glissant’s lead, it is also possible to identify a psychic corollary to this economic and social abyss. The anti-nation is thus a *state of mind*, whereby Martinicans are caught between powerful standardizing ideas and institutions (marriage, for example, and the nuclear family) and the reality of their history and present (that is, the exploitation and atomization of the population, and the prevalence of women raising children alone). Without any means of addressing these kinds of contradictions, let alone reconciling them, the Martinican collective unconscious is condemned to neurosis.

It is vital, as I see it, to acknowledge the role of race in shaping all of this, a fact often sidelined in the public conversation about Martinique, both on the island itself and in the metropole. It is a racialized nation, a *black anti-nation*, if you will. It is borne, specifically, of the black American experience and predicament, however vaguely that fact is articulated. After all, Martinique is not just the tropical version of Corsica, in that its struggle is not only that of a small nation attempting to exist within a larger, “indivisible” one. This anti-nation faces another, more formidable conundrum, namely, how to square its knowledge of itself as black with its integration into a French nation that is supposedly raceless.

Glissant’s writings on his native island, on decolonization and community in the Caribbean, and on the necessity and futility of adopting the nation as a paradigm of living together, all guide my engagement with Martinique throughout this thesis. However, one of the ironies of its indebtedness to Glissant is how poorly he writes about the performing arts, that is, one of the principal subjects of this project. He wrote specifically on theatre and nationhood in his essay ‘Le théâtre, conscience du peuple’, included in *Le Discours antillais*. Here, he draws closer to the subject matter and questions with which this thesis is chiefly concerned. I find this piece flawed and uninspiring, and it is not one that I have chosen to use as a theoretical text.

Glissant singles out theatre as a privileged genre, with regard to its essential role in nation-building. For the pre-modern European peoples, Glissant’s argument goes, theatre-making was the decisive means by which they achieved a collective consciousness: “Le théâtre est l’acte par lequel la conscience collective se voit, et par conséquent se dépasse. En son commencement, il n’y a pas de nation sans théâtre.” (p. 685) In doing so, it allowed the lived experience of the people to be transfigured into something rational that could have an orientation: “Le théâtre suppose le dépassement du vécu (le temps théâtral nous sort de l’ordinaire pour mieux faire comprendre l’ordinaire, le quotidien.) Ce dépassement ne peut

être pratiqué que par la conscience collective." (p. 685) In Martinique, however, this 'harmonious' transition from lived experience to collective consciousness has not taken place. In the absence of a vital and dynamic theatre, the expression of shared beliefs and practices has remained static: "la communauté se présente, mais ne se pense (ne se représente) pas: le folklore ne se dépasse pas. Il y a, au mauvais sens du terme, folklorisation." (p.699) The latter term refers to the fate that has fallen many of the popular forms of expression in Martinique, including carnival. In the absence of a functioning, autonomous community that is able to relate to the world in a meaningful way, this proto-cultural production fails to develop into anything of substance. This is symptomatic of Martinique's broader predicament as outlined throughout *Le Discours antillais*, that of a people alienated and immobilized. Essentially, Martinique does not have a national culture: it only has folklore, revived artificially when local elites see fit to defend it.

Glissant's concerns about the commodification and recuperation of popular culture are valuable, and I engage with these issues at various points throughout this project. However, I find schematic 'success/failure' theories such as that put forward in 'Le théâtre, conscience du peuple' much less productive as a means of interpreting cultures of performance. His assertion that Ancient Greek theatre uniformly and definitively "succeeded" is suspect, and the postulate that all other nations and their theatres should be measured against that standard even more so. I have other ambitions for my investigation of Martinique's various interlocking cultures of performance than making sweeping judgements as to whether it has "succeeded" or "failed". Through close engagement with the people and practices therein, I aim to do justice to the historical development, complexity and diversity of this slice of cultural life, and suggest how they work both within and against the anti-nation that is Martinique. With that in mind, the following section sets out the rationale for engaging with performance as a cross-genre object of inquiry, and for homing in on theatre and carnival in particular.

Performance: a way of thinking, creating, knowing

One essential element of approaching a culture that is not one's own is acknowledging how your prior knowledge of it has been formed. Many students of France and the Francophone world, myself included, know Martinique through its literary and philosophical tradition: indeed, Martinican writers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau are read widely by scholars interested in anti-colonial thought, aesthetic theory,

novelistic practice and creole cultures. However, in focussing so keenly on literary development, we inadvertently reinforce the notion that it is the ultimate means by which Martinicans think and create critically. This deeply flawed assumption works to marginalize other vectors of signification and distorts and diminishes what we can know. It is as a means of redressing this imbalance that I choose to concentrate on performance, not as a polemical disavowal of literature, but as a reorientation in how we approach Martinique as a place and people.

This encounter takes place in a human context which is both French and Caribbean, where geography, history, politics, culture, language and ethnicity make conflicting demands on Martinicans' perceptions of themselves and of their destiny. The complexity of this situation is both reflected in and influenced by all kinds of public performance, and I believe that this, as an object of inquiry in its own right, merits further sustained attention. There is much to be gained by purposefully focussing on "presence, liveness, agency, embodiment and event"¹⁷, attributes shared by all art forms but on which performance depends and thrives. As such, performance constitutes a distinct mode of expression and way of knowing, one which is ephemeral (and consequently difficult to study) but nonetheless compelling. It is my contention that focussing on the concept of performance, what is represented in it and how it impacts the world will add to our knowledge of Martinique, especially in terms of how identities, be they French, Caribbean or specifically Martinican, are constructed there. More importantly, it can potentially change *how we know* about Martinique, by forcing us to integrate our appreciation of texts with visual and aural/oral cultures, the human body and the wider social, political and cultural contexts in which these exist.

On one level, the concept of performance can unite all actions which are framed for and oriented towards a relatively open, communal audience. However, what we understand by public performance and how it is experienced by people separates out according to who is performing, who is watching, the historical origins and development of the performance in question, and how it is organized, funded, marketed, policed, studied and talked about. This project explores two different types of performance which take place in Martinique: carnival and theatre. Each is enmeshed in a web of historical, social and cultural associations which determines its perceived 'Caribbean-ness' or 'French-ness', and the discourses and infrastructures surrounding them lead to their classification as 'popular entertainment' or

¹⁷ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Performance Studies Is More than a Sum of Its Inclusions' in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

‘performing art’. One of the objectives of this project is to gauge how similar or dissimilar they are as embodied practices and events, performed by people whose experiences and perspectives may or may not correlate with the prevalent discourses. Basically, I put the concept of performance at the centre of my inquiry into carnival and theatre in Martinique as a potential unifying element.

Carnival and its associated music, costumes, dance and party atmosphere have almost become synonymous with Caribbean creole culture. While the festival is a source of great pride and enjoyment for many Caribbeans and is an important element of their cultural identity, reinforcing this broad association risks allowing harmful stereotypes to take root and reducing perceptions of Caribbean culture to one event. Rather than avoid the connection altogether, however, it is vital to take carnival seriously, by doing justice to its historical, sociological, economic and aesthetic significance. The festival traces its origins to the pre-Lent celebrations brought to the Caribbean plantations by European colonial settlers, which were initially the exclusive privilege of the white elite. The abolition of slavery and the (albeit limited) freedom of movement and association it granted the black majority allowed them to appropriate carnival: as a regional cultural expression it has become creolized, with the exact nature of the blending of European, African, Asian and American influences being unique to each island. In modern times, carnival remains the same blow-out of street parades, competitions, music production and parties it always has been, but also needs to be considered as a dynamic and evolving cultural form in terms of the aesthetics and socio-political meanings associated with it. Carnival is also the scene of various conflicts and negotiations, regionally-inflected but with global relevance, including the balance between individual and collective artistic expression, the (circumscribed) mass takeover of urban public space and the conjunction of grassroots community organization and state support (and policing). Furthermore, it is a crucible for issues around representation and power dynamics, such as the public presence of women, LGBT people and ethnic minorities. Politicized or depoliticized, carnival functions as a means of commemorating certain aspects of Martinican history, attracting tourists and their money, fostering community cohesion and asserting cultural identity. All of these concerns are complex and contested, and as such we can say that carnival is a mirror of Martinican society and its internal contradictions.

These issues – of commemoration, commodification, community and cultural identity – are as much at stake in theatre as they are in any kind of performance. However, the specificities of the dramatic form in terms of how it is generated, organized, circulated and perceived mean that they are often being worked through and debated by different people,

and therefore are often not posed in the same terms. ‘Official’ theatre activity in the Caribbean was historically an elite pursuit dominated by touring troupes from Europe: on Martinique and Guadeloupe in particular, it operated within a wider French imperial process of linguistic and cultural assimilation in the colonies. Nevertheless, low-key recreational drama has always been performed in a variety of informal settings by Martinican people, and in recent decades the increased professionalization of companies and individuals, accompanied by the publication of numerous locally-authored plays, has resulted in a certain amount of recognition of their work both within the French Antilles and beyond. While the state-sponsored infrastructure developed since the late 1970s has been an asset to these developments, it also imposes its own (often implicit) constraints on the content and form of the productions it facilitates. Moreover, theatre practitioners from the island still face considerable challenges in terms of a lack of local training and employment opportunities, as well as marginalization in Caribbean, French and global circuits.

This thesis acknowledges the corrals into which performances and the people who create them inevitably get herded, but also tries to see past them. I work from the principle that those concerned are living together on the same island, facing the same pressing issues of that time and place. As well as being a meditation on the anti-nation, then, this thesis is also a cross-genre comparative exercise, analyzing how Martinicans grapple with matters related to their existence as a troubled community across two cultural forms.

Twelve years, one thesis, three (complementary) research questions

This investigation focuses on a selection of creations produced over the course of twelve years, beginning in 1981 and ending in 1993. The election of a Socialist government in France at the start of this period altered the political and cultural landscape in Martinique. Aimé Césaire’s Parti Progressiste Martiniquais (which advocated autonomy for Martinique, that is, a degree of devolved governance within a continuing relationship with France) was effectively the local homologue of the French Socialist Party, and was thus elevated to a position of power in terms of decision-making and resource allocation. Decentralization reforms were also passed in 1982, giving regional bodies more control over budgets, including those relating to the arts. One of the objectives of this project is to assess what impact (if any) this politico-administrative change had on cultural production in Martinique up until 1992, when the establishment of the European Union brought in a new layer of governance, further complicating the cultural climate in the French Antilles.

While several scholars have already linked Socialist-led decentralization to more confident affirmations of local and regional culture in the French American departments,¹⁸ this has been evoked in quite a cursory manner. I probe this connection more critically, using a range of historical sources to produce a more detailed and critical examination of how culture was produced, managed and received in Martinique during this period. The thesis will also interrogate the brand of cultural nationalism championed by Aimé Césaire and his associates: a certain variant of Creole was being privileged, either explicitly or implicitly, which in turn affected what kind of performances came to fruition. The political climate of a given society cannot be said to determine the choices made by its performers, but at the same time they are compelled to negotiate it and work within its structures. By identifying and analysing the political, social and aesthetic values reinforced (and rejected) in carnival and theatre productions, it is possible to elucidate the cultural nation being constructed in Martinique at that time.

This thesis homes in on two key themes that preoccupied Martinicans of the period, both within and outside artistic circles, namely, language and memory. Indeed, these proved to be central to discussions surrounding nation-building, as Martinicans debated how their community should speak, write and sing, and how and what it should remember. Each theme is explored here through four case studies, two of which are theatrical productions, with two more taken from the sphere of carnival. This thesis asks a cluster of interrelated questions of this cross-section of performance culture: what vision of Martinique do these creations offer? To what extent do they illustrate the inherent paradoxes of the anti-nation, as outlined in this Introduction? Alternatively, do they manage to escape its impasses and propose alternatives?

The research carried out is original in several respects. To my knowledge, this is the first time that the theatre and carnival cultures of the French Caribbean have been analysed together this closely and purposefully. The concept of the anti-nation is my own, although it draws heavily on the work of others, as we have seen. The project also includes what I believe to be the first extended critical studies of a number of Martinican theatre and carnival performances. Nevertheless, it has been developed in relation to a range of existing scholarship, as the following literature review will attest.

¹⁸ See William F.S. Miles, 'Fifty Years of "Assimilation": Assessing France's Experience of Caribbean Decolonisation through Administrative Reform' in *Islands at the Crossroads: Politics in the Non-Independent Caribbean*, ed. by Aarón Gamaliel Ramos and Ángel Israel Rivera Ortiz (Kingston: Ian Randle; London: Lynne Rienner, 2001), pp. 45-50.

Literature review

In this section, I will situate my project within existing research on performance culture and nationalisms (both in Martinique and in the wider Caribbean), as well as elaborate on the contributions made by this thesis to a range of fields and disciplines. Scholarship to date tends to configure carnival and theatre quite differently: I will therefore examine the relevant bodies of academic literature separately in the first instance, before moving on to discuss research into the Caribbean ‘nation’, in its various guises.

Francophone Caribbean theatre has received considerably less scholarly attention than literature and philosophy written from the same context, but it is gradually being established as a viable field in its own right. Important work to this end has been undertaken in a 2010 issue of *Africultures* entitled ‘Émergence(s) Caraïbes: une création théâtrale archipélique’¹⁹. It mostly consists of interviews with theatre practitioners in Martinique and Guadeloupe, in which they speak about their personal artistic endeavours and the challenges facing them as they work in small, geographically disparate French overseas departments. The volume represents an invaluable source of creative perspectives and critical insights, and ought to be considered alongside the more academic overviews published in recent years. John Conteh-Morgan’s 2010 publication *New Francophone African and Caribbean Theatres*²⁰ can be put in dialogue with the slightly older collection of essays edited and introduced by Alvina Ruprecht, *Les Théâtres francophones et créolophones de la Caraïbe: Haïti, Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique, Sainte-Lucie* (2003)²¹. The different positions they take in the politics of categorization, and especially regarding the problem of ‘la francophonie’ as a viable political, cultural and linguistic framework, raise important questions in terms of the kinds of artistic community we can envisage when surveying the field. Conteh-Morgan grounds his transatlantic francophone theatre in the shared African ancestry and African-descended culture of those who made and enjoyed it, the common imperial language in which they communicated, and the numerous points of contact between artists, intellectuals and political activists on both sides of the ocean. Ruprecht prefers the appellations ‘théâtre de la Caraïbe’ and ‘théâtre des Amériques’, in that the former posits an ethnocultural and historical community in a precise geographical space, while the latter calls into question the

¹⁹ *Émergence(s) Caraïbes: une création théâtrale archipélique*, ed. by Stéphanie Bérard and Sylvie Chalaye (=Africultures, 80/81 (2010)).

²⁰ John Conteh-Morgan, *New Francophone African and Caribbean Theatres*, African Expressive Cultures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

²¹ *Les Théâtres francophones et créolophones de la Caraïbe: Haïti, Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique, Sainte-Lucie*, ed. by Alvina Roberta Ruprecht, Collection Univers théâtral (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

preponderance of East-West relations between the old European powers and their ex-colonies. I will engage with the insights given by both overviews in terms of shared imperial histories, diasporic links and multi-lingual, multi-cultural regionalism, but with a critical eye as to how much they affect performers' lives and work in a specific time and place, conceptually and practically. My project investigates performance in Martinique in a way that has not been developed before, paying attention to structures, issues and pressures that may be global or regional, but which are always locally-inflected.

This is not to say that I am working in an academic vacuum. A range of articles and monographs have been written about theatre from the Francophone Caribbean: these include reviews of French Antillean productions at the Avignon Festival²², analyses of multilingualism and French-creole translation in theatre²³, work on intercultural adaptations of Ancient Greek and French Classics²⁴ and critiques of women's playwriting²⁵. Most consist of studies of individual plays, or of one playwright's oeuvre, a considerable number of which focus on the dramatic output of Aimé Césaire²⁶ (and to a lesser extent Maryse Condé²⁷), reflecting their status as internationally renowned and widely published writers. My approach is less author-centred and will examine performances of well-documented plays alongside understudied ones, with the aim of researching performance culture as it existed in Martinique at a critical juncture in the second half of the twentieth century.

Some scholars do examine the links between French Antillean theatre and local traditions²⁸, even if the results, as I see it, ask for much further development. Stéphanie

²² See Sylvie Chalaye's annual contributions to *Africultures* between 1998 and 2008, for example, 'Théâtres d'Outre-mer en Avignon 98' in *Africultures* 10 (1998), 60-80.

²³ See Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, 'De la traduction des nominaux français en créole des Petites Antilles: à propos de *Don Jan* de Georges Mauvois', *Etudes créoles*, 20.2 (1997), 70-81 and 'Un regard sur le théâtre en créole de 1994 à 1998 (Guadeloupe, Martinique and Guyane)' *Notre librairie*, 135 (1998), 118-23.

²⁴ See Stéphanie Bérard, 'From the Greek Stage to the Martinican Shores: A Caribbean Antigone', *Theatre Research International*, 33.1 (2008), 40-51.

²⁵ See Christiane Makward 'Filles du soleil noir: sur deux pièces d'Ina Césaire et de Michèle Césaire' in *Elles écrivent des Antilles (Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique)*, eds. Susanne Rinne and Joëlle Vitiello (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp. 335-47, Judith Miller, 'Caribbean Women Playwrights: Madness, Memory but Not Melancholia', *Theatre Research International*, 23.3 (1998), 225-32 and Carole Edwards, *Les Dramaturges antillaises: cruauté, créolité, conscience féminine*, Études transnationales, francophones et comparées (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

²⁶ See Roger Toumson, 'Aimé Césaire dramaturge : le théâtre comme nécessité', *Cahiers de l'Association internationale des études françaises*, 46 (1994), 213-29 and Lilian Pestre de Almeida, 'Le Comique et le Tragique dans le théâtre d'Aimé Césaire', *Présence Africaine*, 121-2 (1982), 180-192.

²⁷ See Melissa McKay, *Maryse Condé et le théâtre antillais* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

²⁸ See Lucie Pradel, 'Du *ka* au langage scénique: fondement esthétique' in *Les Théâtres francophones et créolophones de la Caraïbe*, ed. by Ruprecht, and Stéphanie Bérard, 'Patrick Chamoiseau, héritier du conteur? Respect ou trahison de la tradition orale dans *Manman Dlo contre la fée Carabosse*' in *Langue et identité narrative dans les littératures de l'ailleurs: Antilles, Réunion, Québec*, ed. by Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux and Michel Bertrand (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2005), pp. 91-105.

Bérard's critical overview, *Théâtre des Antilles: traditions et scènes contemporaines*²⁹, is a case in point: in the section entitled 'Rituels et poétiques scéniques', she identifies a certain dramatic aesthetic drawn from the rituals of Caribbean popular culture. She goes on to describe how various playwrights have incorporated a carnival aesthetic into their work, in terms of costumes, familiar stock characters and overall eclectic structure. My objective is to draw on Bérard's analysis and deepen it. Her aim in writing the overview was to introduce and survey the field of francophone Antillean theatre as comprehensively as possible, not to interrogate our understanding of popular culture. Consequently, theatre is treated as 'art' and carnival is fixed as a folkloric source to be drawn from, rather than a dynamic, evolving performance form. At the heart of my research is a desire to go beyond the issue of one-way aesthetic transfer and, by asking the same questions of the two performance forms, to take carnival as seriously as we take theatre. By privileging the concept of performance, I hope to propose ways of eschewing strict taxonomies, with the objective of investigating what Martinicans achieve by performing publicly in their chosen mode.

This 'categorical' approach tends to be repeated in scholarship about theatre from the wider Caribbean, which is often compelled to focus on the phenomenon of syncretism between Afro-Creole performance traditions and Western dramatic forms. It follows from this that studies which either include or focus exclusively on contemporary Caribbean theatre usually configure the region as post-imperial, and its art as responding to European colonialism. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins work from quite a rigorous definition of 'the post-colonial', making critical demands of it well beyond 'what happened after colonialism': they do not base their interpretation of the term on a strict before/after temporality, insist on its political agenda and view it as both a textual effect and a reading strategy³⁰. Brian Crow and Chris Banfield do more to stress the cultural functions of theatre, or what it can achieve under contemporary pressures in neo-colonial contexts³¹. Building on this conviction, Richard Boon and Jane Plastow privilege the study of 'committed theatre' in the Global South where, as they see it, the practice matters most³². Giving special attention to the Caribbean and its specific colonial history of uprooted and transplanted communities,

²⁹ Stéphanie Bérard, *Théâtres des Antilles: traditions et scènes contemporaines*, Images plurielles (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

³⁰ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³¹ Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre*, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³² *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, ed. by Richard Boon and Jane Plastow, Cambridge Studies in Modern Theatre (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

they emphasize the role of theatre in creating identities and a sense of self-worth. They also succeed in incorporating the French overseas departments into their evaluation, whilst highlighting the differences in imperial thought and practice and how they impinged on theatrical production. However, they base this interpretation upon Carol-Anne Upton's contribution to their book, which focusses exclusively on the dramatic works of the Martinican writer Daniel Boukman³³. I aim to test this integrated way of thinking by considering a more representative range of Martinican theatrical performances, which can be viewed as part of a wider Caribbean theatre still negotiating the legacies of imperialism.

The same need to strike a balance between local specificity and regional generality is central to how carnival is recorded and studied. In recent years a research community has grown up around Caribbean and diasporic carnival, often with strong links to festival practice, administration and design. Much of the output is disseminated through informal channels, such as blog posts, cultural magazines and documentation produced in conjunction with community arts projects. However, work has been published on the subject, mainly in terms of performing gender³⁴, radical political potential³⁵ and associated music³⁶. Some of the scholarship produced is suggestive of the festival being part of a holistic culture of popular performance. Philip Scher's edited volume *Perspectives on the Caribbean: A Reader in History, Culture and Representation*³⁷ devotes a section to 'Culture and Performance' as a subject of analytical focus, indicating links between an array of performative cultural expressions, including *talking broad*³⁸, the *rara* festival³⁹, cricket matches and carnival. A more focussed argument for a totalizing Trinidadian popular culture in which inhabitants recognize each other through sharing conceptions and actions is made by Denis-Constant

³³ Carol-Anne Upton, 'The French-speaking Caribbean: Journeying from the Native Land', in *Theatre Matters*, ed. by Boon and Plastow, pp. 97-125.

³⁴ Valeria Sterzi, *Deconstructing Gender in Carnival: A Cross Cultural Investigation of a Social Ritual*, Postcolonial Studies (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010).

³⁵ Emily Zobel Marshall, Max Farrar, and Guy Farrar, 'Popular Political Cultures and the Caribbean Carnival: Carnival Is a Rich Resource for Cultural Resistance as Well as Pleasure', *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 67 (2018), 34-49.

³⁶ Jocelyne Guilbault, *Governing Sounds: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

³⁷ *Perspectives on the Caribbean: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, ed. by Philip W. Scher, Global Perspectives, 3 (Malden; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

³⁸ "[*Talking broad*] emphasizes bringing the vernacular creole into stylized use, in the form of wit, repartee and directed slander." See Roger D. Abrahams, 'Joking: The Training of the Man-of-Words in *Talking Broad*', in *Perspectives on the Caribbean*, ed. by Scher, pp. 115-128 (p. 117). Abrahams also stresses the public, competitive and performative aspects of *talking broad*.

³⁹ A series of street processions taking place during Lent in Haiti, made up of marching groups accompanied by music.

Martin⁴⁰. For his part, Richard D.E. Burton puts forward the idea of a ‘Carnival complex’, one where various strands of normal Trinidadian social and cultural life knit together to form a nexus of particular intensity during carnival time⁴¹. Such studies are invaluable in that they trouble the categories into which we tend to sort performances: to them, I add a specific critical angle by trying to fit theatre into this complex of practices and behaviours.

These can be arranged on a broad spectrum of inter-related performance, on which I compare two expressive modes in terms of their ideological aspect. A few scholarly articles on carnival in the French Antilles are very useful in this respect. Stéphanie Mulot stresses the importance of masquerades as public stagings of creole history and identity, where what it means to be specifically and authentically Guadeloupean is subject to different ideological pressures exerted by competing interest groups⁴². As part of his wider research on (homo)sexuality in Martinique, David Murray explores how public interpretations of male-female carnival cross-dressing are influenced by dominant gender ideologies prevalent in Martinican daily life⁴³. Many of these issues are relevant to theatre production as well, in terms of which plays are being performed in Martinique, what is being represented in them and in what manner, and what values are being reinforced and rejected as a result. This thesis will demonstrate how these relate to wider ideas about identity, community and nation being developed in public and artistic discourse in Martinique during the 1980s.

However, much of the research specifically pertaining to French Antillean carnival exists in the form of locally-published books and journals, PhD theses and recordings of research seminars. Some of these items have circulated more widely. Marie-Thérèse Julien-Lung Fou’s *Le Carnaval aux Antilles*⁴⁴ traces the history of carnival customs from their roots in Ancient European civilizations to the modern Caribbean, paying attention to the particularities of the Martinican and Guadeloupean versions of the festival. This work belongs to a genre of texts which are rigorously researched but written for a general audience, and which constitutes a significant part of literature on Caribbean carnival more broadly⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ Denis-Constant Martin, ‘Popular Culture, Identity and Politics in the Context of the Trinidad Carnival: “I Is Another, All of We Is One”’, *Studies in History*, 12.2 (1996), 153–70.

⁴¹ Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*, Cornell Paperbacks (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴² Stéphanie Mulot, ‘La Trace des masques. Identité guadeloupéenne entre pratiques et discours’, *Ethnologie française*, 33.1 (2003), 111–22.

⁴³ David Murray, ‘Re-Mapping Carnival: Gender, Sexuality and Power in a Martinican Festival’, *Social Analysis*, 44, 2000, 103–12.

⁴⁴ Marie-Thérèse Julien-Lung Fou, *Le Carnaval aux Antilles*, Connaître _ aux Antilles (Fort-de-France: Désormeaux, 1979).

⁴⁵ See Peter Mason, *Bacchanal!: The Carnival Culture of Trinidad* (London: Latin America Bureau; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

Such examples of ‘citizen scholarship’ are symptomatic of how, historically, Caribbean carnival has not been taken seriously by professional academia, whilst the people to whom the festival mattered understood its key place in Caribbean society and took it upon themselves to produce these documents. My research builds on the information and insights offered by them in two ways. Where they tend to be infused with overt authorial subjectivity (Julien-Lung Fou’s attitude towards some aspects of contemporary carnival can be very reactionary, for example), I can offer a more objective critical angle, whereby I situate the values implicit in such judgements within a range of viewpoints held at any one historical moment. More fundamentally, though, the project is motivated by the belief that Martinican carnival is more than a local heritage matter. Studying it helps shift our understanding of French popular culture out of a limited, eurocentric and ‘white’ vision, and into something more complex, plural and ultimately transatlantic.

As we have seen, scholarly literature to date has tended to treat these two modes very distinctly, with theatre being generally viewed as an object of literary or linguistic study (at best, a ‘performing art’), while carnival is routinely described and analysed as a ritual or an example of popular entertainment. By deliberately disturbing these conventional approaches (seeing carnival performances as artistry, for example) my intervention aspires towards a more integrated vision of performance cultures in modern and contemporary Martinique.

The project also aims to interrogate that same Martinique, in terms of how it has been imagined as a political and cultural community even in the absence of sovereignty. As such, it exists within a body of scholarship pertaining to the non-independent Caribbean. Edited volumes such as *Governance in the Non-Independent Caribbean*⁴⁶ and *Islands at the Crossroads*⁴⁷ are already suggestive of a comparative framework, whilst also doing justice to the specific context of each island’s jurisdiction. These essays are largely written from a political science perspective and deal with political and economic issues: my thesis draws on the insights offered here, exploring how recurrent tensions and contradictions are represented in Martinican performance culture, and how cultural actors in carnival and theatre were compelled to negotiate them.

This is not to say that other dimensions of the non-sovereign problematic have been neglected, as demonstrated by a number of works exploring the links between cultural expression and national identity, particularly in Puerto Rico. The stakes are somewhat

⁴⁶ *Governance in the Non-Independent Caribbean: Challenges and Opportunities in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Peter Clegg and Emilio Pantojas-García (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2009).

⁴⁷ *Islands at the Crossroads*, ed. by Ramos and Rivera Ortiz.

different in the Francophone context, however, given the longer colonial history of islands such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, the French imperial policy of assimilation and its legacies, and the prevailing political ideology of Jacobin Republicanism. Having acknowledged these particularities, William Miles makes the case for attending to politically and culturally specific conceptions of ‘the nation’.⁴⁸ I work with this key principle, paying particular attention to what Miles notes as an “affective attachment” to departmental status in the French Antilles, and considering how it may have been fortified, questioned and even satirized in Martinican performance culture. Other scholars have commented on the difficult development of political nationalism in this context, given the long-standing and deep-seated demand for integration into the French Republic and its institutions.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, they also acknowledge a tenacious call for cultural emancipation emanating from Martinique and Guadeloupe, one which asserts French Antillean distinctiveness and configures a range of possible communities, based on differing conceptions of common heritage and worldview. Dominique Cyrille, for example, suggests how the music of Eugène Mona helped Martinican listeners imagine their own nation within an Afro-Creole region.⁵⁰ Building on such studies, I aim to analyse in detail the kind of Creole nation consolidated through performance culture during the 1980s. David A.B. Murray has produced excellent work in this respect, demonstrating how the Martinique constructed in local theatre of the same period was (often aggressively) heterosexual.⁵¹ This is the kind of critical evaluation to which I aspire and endeavour to add, by exploring the practice of nation-building across two comparable performance modes, and evaluating how both established and emerging ideologies of race, class and gender struggled for dominance therein.

While it is important to attend to the specificities of Martinique, the French overseas departments and the non-independent Caribbean more broadly, these should not blind us to the wealth of scholarship on nationalisms in general. It is impossible to account for all of that literature here, therefore I will focus on two sub-fields which are of great relevance, and to which this thesis makes a distinct contribution. The first is related to the idea of the ‘transnation’, that is, a community imagined in diasporic consciousness across several

⁴⁸ Miles, ‘When Is a Nation “a Nation”?’.

⁴⁹ See Jacky Dahomay, ‘Cultural Identity versus Political Identity in the French West Indies’ in *Modern Political Culture in the Caribbean*, ed. by Holger Henke and Fred Réno (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2003), pp. 90-108.

⁵⁰ Dominique Cyrille, ‘Imagining an Afro-Creole Nation: Eugène Mona’s Music in Martinique of the 1980s’, *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, 27.2 (2006), 148–70.

⁵¹ David A.B. Murray, ‘Homosexuality, Society and the State: An Ethnography of Sublime Resistance in Martinique’, in Scher, *Perspectives on the Caribbean*, pp. 77-90.

geographical locations, in relation to a ‘homeland’. Many of the essays collected in *Globalisation, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*⁵² discuss how this kind of collectivity is constructed through expressive forms. Philip Scher’s transnational perspective on carnival⁵³ has proved particularly useful in highlighting the role played by an objectified version of the festival in the politics of recognition, both ‘at home’ and in the diasporic community of New York. While a detailed examination of how Martinican performance culture has circulated outside of the island is beyond the scope of this thesis, I still have to consider it as a place, and a people, modelled by migration. Indeed, the carnival and theatre cultures of Martinique both reflect and participate in this reality.

The links between that performance culture and postcolonial Caribbean nationhood have already been probed.⁵⁴ Beyond this immediate context, Loren Kruger has written on how the development of the national theatre as an institution in three related yet distinct metropolises (England, France and the US) acted as an arena for debate regarding the politics of national citizenship and the nature of a national audience.⁵⁵ I aim to engage with her ideas on the association between national stage and public space, and the processes through which representations of ‘the people’ are legitimized. These issues mutate somewhat when transferred to Martinique and its various ‘national’ theatres: here, it becomes necessary to examine the peculiar cultural construction of non-sovereign nationhood within French institutional frameworks. Despite incorporation into a Republic which does not allow for multiple nations within its one and indivisible body politic, an *idée-Martinique* was still being forged (and contested) in low-key, informal and apolitical ways across various forms of popular culture. By exploring this complex, paradoxical and understudied process, this thesis aims to enhance and expand existing scholarship on nationalisms, as well as point towards further research which could be undertaken in comparable contexts.

⁵² *Globalisation, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture*, ed. by Christine G. T. Ho and Keith Nurse (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2005).

⁵³ Philip W. Scher, *Carnival and the Formation of a Caribbean Transnation*, New World Diasporas (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).

⁵⁴ See Daniel A. Segal, ‘Nationalism in a Colonial State: A Study of Trinidad and Tobago’ (unpublished Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 1989) and Ruth Minott Egglestone, ‘Beanstalk to Macca Tree: The Development of the National Pantomime by the Little Theatre Movement of Jamaica, 1941-2003’ (unpublished Ph.D, University of Hull, 2006).

⁵⁵ Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Methodology

The fundamental ephemerality of performance presents significant difficulties for the researcher which must be acknowledged: to what extent can we access and comment on something that was ‘live’ thirty years ago? From the outset, I should clarify that I do not claim to be able to ‘reconstruct’ performance events, in terms of their precise aesthetics and staging and the personal experiences of those involved. This is not an achievable objective. However, it is still possible to investigate the performance culture of a historical period, by identifying patterns (and anomalies) in what was being represented, analysing how these representations and practices relate to dominant and emerging ideologies of the time and suggesting how all this might contribute towards nation-building. The evidence on which I will base my arguments comes from three main sources: playtexts, archival material and recorded music. I will now elaborate on how I intend to engage with each of these, whilst also highlighting their limitations in terms of what they can tell us about the performance culture of the period.

Playtexts constitute a literary trace unique to theatre and are usually intended by the playwright to be a blueprint for performance. The relationship between the two is complex, though, as the actual performance is determined by the choices of the production team in each instance, as well as the material conditions in which they work at a given moment: dialogue, action, scenery, props, costumes, lighting and sound effects will be omitted, altered, added and improvised as part of the creative process. Therefore, we cannot treat the published playtext as the literal transcript of the performance event to which it (partially) corresponds. Rather than engage in detailed literary analysis, then, I plan to use playtexts as tools which indicate which people, places, moments, languages, practices, customs and ideas were being represented (or *not* represented) in theatre productions, and in what manner.

The material limitations to my use of playtexts are not insignificant. In the first instance, my corpus has largely been determined by what plays have been published, and which of these I can subsequently access in European research libraries or obtain at an affordable price. It is vital for me to acknowledge that the texts I have selected may not necessarily correspond to those performances which were seen or enjoyed by the most Martinicans. There is nothing natural, organic or neutral about the publishing industry: it is essentially a profit-making enterprise. Having a production of their play toured in metropolitan France is a great asset to Martinican playwrights seeking to have their work published with a Parisian imprint, but this opportunity is only available to a small minority.

Besides this, a small fraction of playwrights might have enough resources to fund their own publication, or be sufficiently well-connected to come to the attention of one of the few small publishing houses in operation in Martinique at the time. All of these factors may well direct my research away from those performances which had the greatest impact on Martinican audiences.

The problem of identifying those productions which had particular resonance in their socio-historical context can be alleviated by surveying contemporary cultural coverage in local media. Indeed, archival work is integral to the success of this project. Besides supplying evidence as to which performances attracted attention, Martinican newspapers and magazines such as *France-Antilles* and *Antilla* feature advertisements, reports, reviews and interviews which indicate how they were generated, produced and received. It is also vital to read around those items which deal directly with theatre and carnival, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural context in which they took place. This archival work has been undertaken with an analytical mindset, firstly in terms of the documents to be consulted. It is vital to ascertain why each one was made and for what readership, as well as consider which issues they cover and, conversely, which topics are overlooked. Furthermore, the departmental archives themselves must be approached critically, as an institution which is an extension and function of the French state. This affects what the archive holds, how the items are classified and organized and the conditions under which they can be accessed.

Images stored in the archive can also be used as primary sources, but they must be employed in a judicious manner: just as a playtext is not an accurate transcript of any one theatrical production, photographs and drawings cannot simply be treated as a 'true-to-life' visual record of 'what a performance looked like'. The approaches developed by proponents of 'theatre iconography', which seeks to formulate critical methodologies for engaging with pictorial representations of performances in the elaboration of theatre history, prove useful in this respect. Building off his experience of researching illustrations and paintings of historical theatrical performances, Robert L. Erenstein emphasizes the subjective and artistic work being undertaken in the production of such images: "... the visual artist [...] attempt[s] to preserve a lost object for the future, albeit from his own perspective and filtered through his own emotions, views and taste."⁵⁶ He also notes that attending to these factors helps us see

⁵⁶ Robert L. Erenstein, 'Theatre Iconography: An Introduction', *Theatre Research International*, 22.3 (1997), 185–89 (p. 186).

the interplay between a theatrical performance and its socio-cultural context: “To the researcher, the visual artist and the actor share a cultural system [...] The signs an artist uses to refer to a performance provide us with a great deal of information about prevailing norms in the theatre system in a particular period” (p. 186). I would add to Erenstein’s insights that while photographs do have an instantaneous ‘image-capture’ dimension that distinguishes them from paintings (p.185), they are still compositions, however amateur and casual. This principle informs how I analyse the photographic record of Martinican carnival and theatre performances from the 1980s. Beyond paying attention to how and why an image was produced, I also consider the contemporary cultural and political values it bolstered, how the image might compare with other sources in this ideological aspect, and what kind of narratives about Martinique are being constructed as a result.

While I will be open and alert to records of both performance modes during my work in archives and libraries, it is clear that carnival does not engender a textual, narrative blueprint in the same way that theatre often does. It has, however, left a substantial and accessible sonic vestige in the form of recorded music associated with carnival. In a Martinican context, this ranges from *bèlè* drumming which historically accompanied the processions to *zouk*, a genre of popular music that electronically samples both traditional and modern styles to a fast tempo. We might go as far as to say that it is impossible to research the festival without attending to this dimension: from a participant’s perspective, there can be no carnival without music. Indeed, some genres of Caribbean music are generated through and for carnival, marketed accordingly and actively reference the festivities lyrically and rhythmically, even if they are enjoyed throughout the year. Building on similar observations, Jocelyne Guilbault posits the term “soundscape” to describe “the sounds that are part of the environment through mass media, migration patterns and folk traditions.”⁵⁷ This model foregrounds the close relations between commercial music production and popular festivals such as carnival. Furthermore, Guilbault notes how these factors combine to reinforce certain aesthetic qualities which have come to be valued across the various genres of French Antillean popular music, notably dance-ability, loudness and intensity.⁵⁸

By bringing relevant strands of local musical culture into consideration, it may seem as if the thesis risks drifting away from the singularity and uniqueness of carnival events as

⁵⁷ Jocelyne Guilbault, ‘On Interpreting Popular Music: Zouk in the West Indies’ in *Caribbean Popular Culture*, ed. by John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), pp. 79-97 (p. 81).

⁵⁸ Guilbault, in *Caribbean Popular Culture*, ed. by Lent, pp. 79-97 (p. 85).

they occurred. However, I have already acknowledged that there are significant limits to how much I can ever know about an event without having attended it myself. I do not claim to be able to ‘reconstruct’ specific episodes and experiences through exploring music: trying to ascertain which carnival tracks are most likely to have been played and danced to during a particular procession is futile. A more realistic and worthwhile objective is to elaborate a more general history of carnival culture as it existed during the period on which I have chosen to focus. Recorded music is an important and accessible resource in this regard, yet it needs to be used selectively and judiciously, so that the project does not lose focus. There will therefore be limits to how far I will engage with music in this thesis: it will refrain, for example, from digressions into biographical details pertaining to musicians and groups, or the conditions in which music was produced and distributed. Rather, I will endeavour to concentrate on the lyrics and sonic content of music which was employed during carnival festivities of the period, in terms of the values and ideologies they shored up or undermined.

That said, recorded music cannot simply be treated as a transparent window onto past iterations of Martinican performance culture: similarly to published playtexts, audio sources ought to be engaged with critically. A key matter to consider is how this recorded music reaches the researcher of today. The advent of the internet and online video sharing platforms such as Youtube has changed the working methods of all scholars, but especially those researching music. Millions of singles, EPs, albums and live performances have been uploaded, including many originally released in Martinique during the 1980s and early 1990s. Having unlimited access to these sources anywhere with an internet connection removes the necessity of travelling to the Caribbean to consult whatever may have been collected and preserved in local archives. Despite the practical benefits brought about by these technological advances, however, such platforms ought not to be treated as comprehensive records of the popular music of any historical moment. After all, listeners’ perspectives and priorities have evolved in the roughly thirty years that have elapsed since the period with which this thesis is concerned. This has a particularly marked effect on the digital afterlife of carnival music. What often occurs is that, given the topical nature of carnival songs (which are composed annually for the occasion), they often refer to local personalities or incidents that were only fleetingly in the public eye. A case in point is Raymond Armand’s 1994 hit ‘Jurassic Matinik’, presumably inspired by the release of the film *Jurassic Park* the previous year. While undoubtedly hugely popular at the time, there have been numerous other blockbusters since and, as such, it did not leave an indelible mark on the collective memory of Martinican people. Despite winning the island’s carnival song-writing contest that year,

‘Jurassic Matinik’ fell into oblivion and has never been uploaded to any online media platform or streaming service. The internet is ultimately shaped by the habits and inclinations of its users, and this is a situation where timeless classics with the most nostalgic value are going to be prioritized over music whose popularity was intense but momentary. Bearing all this in mind, it is important for me to acknowledge that my corpus will inevitably be skewed, in that it is determined as much by practical concerns regarding access as by my personal preferences. It cannot include tracks like ‘Jurassic Matinik’, which I have no guarantee of ever hearing for myself.

To conclude this section, I should stress that these methods of engaging with sources do not allow us to reconstruct specific events. Rather, the approaches outlined above are more appropriate for gaining insights into the kind of performances generated at particular historical moments and, by extension, into Martinican performance culture more generally.

Chapter Outline

This thesis develops and tests out the concept of anti-nation as a means of understanding modern Martinique. As suggested in this Introduction, it is a multifaceted phenomenon that manifests in the island’s political, economic, social and intellectual life. This will be detailed further in Chapter One. The majority of this thesis, however, is concerned with the culture of the anti-nation. More specifically, it analyses how its anxieties, tensions and contradictions are represented, observed and critiqued in its performance culture, but also how they can be deeply embedded in that same culture to the point that they go unacknowledged. Initially, the thesis takes a broad perspective on the general development and functioning of popular performance in Martinique (Chapter Two). It then homes in on one cross-section of that culture, made up of eight case studies (Chapters Three to Six). At every stage, it looks comparatively across examples drawn from theatre and carnival, locating the social, political and aesthetic values being promoted, rejected or debated in these performances, and ultimately clarifying the vision of Martinique they construct. Part of what this thesis demonstrates, then, is that performance culture is an arena in which the anti-nation makes itself felt and known, and where Martinicans attempt their own nation-building endeavours. Commenting critically and creatively on the state (and the future) of the nation is not only the privilege of politicians, novelists and essayists: playwrights, singers and carnival revellers all engage in this as well.

This thesis is divided into three parts, each comprising two chapters. The first part provides the reference points needed in order to ground the performance activity of this period in its historical, political and cultural context. Chapter One, entitled ‘Black and French, Black and Free’, expands on the concept of the anti-nation outlined in this Introduction. It examines Martinique’s centuries-old struggle to assert itself as a distinct nation, and the material and mental barriers hindering that endeavour. Firstly, it takes a long view of how this predicament was constituted historically. The particularities of the island’s past as a French colony, the Martinican experience of Revolution and World War, and its ultimate transformation into an overseas department in 1946 all weigh heavily. The chapter not only looks backwards, but also laterally, seeing Martinique in its geo-political context as one member of a family of non-independent anti-nations in the Caribbean region. The next sub-section homes in on the post-war political history of Martinique, up to and including the decade 1981-1993. It accounts for the frustrations and disappointments of departmentalisation, many of which compounded the problems experienced by this anti-nation. The local political landscape is then surveyed, in terms of the dawn of the Mitterrand era and its decentralizing reforms, the concomitant rise of the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais and its autonomist stance, and the staying power of the pro-independence far Left. The chapter will examine how each of these envisaged Martinique as a nation, a matter further complicated by the prospect of increased European integration in 1992. The final sub-section charts the efforts to construct Martinique as a cultural nation, led by the PPM in the 1980s. It sets out the intellectual genealogy of this endeavour, analysing their brand of nationalism as both a type of neo-Négritude and a corollary of the newer *créolité* school. A brief comparative detour is also made here, linking the Martinican neo-nationalists of the period with their Puerto Rican counterparts. Throughout all this contextual detail, ‘Black and French, Black and Free’ probes the relationship between nation and race, arguing that the anti-nation is constructed both through the racialization of Martinican people, and their willingness to deny that reality. The chapter demonstrates how, even as their designation as black routinely relegates them to a separate tier of Frenchness, those attempting to articulate Martinican nationhood avoid doing so in explicitly racially conscious terms.

Chapter Two, ‘How to build a culture’, charts the development of both carnival and theatre in Martinique over several centuries, up to and including the decade studied. After locating the origins of both modes in the early colonial period, when the dynamics of racial privilege and exclusion were at their most extreme, this chapter frames performance culture in Martinique as a story of its black citizens claiming their place in public life. This narrative

is not straightforward, however. At times, it is marked by defiance, resourcefulness, working-class solidarity, anti-colonial politics, national consciousness, and the joy of emancipation. At others, we see an immense pressure to assimilate into the aesthetic and social norms of metropolitan France, and a need to cultivate performances in such a way as to appeal to Western tourists. The chapter accounts for the differing trajectories of each mode, especially with regard to state support and formal infrastructure. It considers both within the logic of development being promoted during the 1980s, a notion that grew up alongside the political neo-nationalism of the period. Ultimately, I argue that in building a performance culture, Martinicans saw themselves as constructing a nation. The evolution of carnival and theatre on the island did not just result in sets of traditions and practices: it helped give rise to a proto-national community, one that survives and thrives creatively even while it is plagued with alienation and insecurity.

Part Two probes the ties that bind language and nation in Martinique. More specifically, it scrutinizes how an anti-nation's troubled bilingualism has become emblematic of its programmed decline as a community. It also investigates the initiatives taken by Martinican artists to not only critique this state of affairs, but propose alternatives. Chapter Three, 'Creole on Stage', opens with a sub-section describing a linguistic landscape where two languages, French and Creole, are spoken by the population. The concept of diglossia is also introduced at this point, as a means of explaining the social values attached to each one. This sub-section also outlines how Martinicans have responded critically to their linguistic environment, paying particular attention to the Groupe d'Études et de Recherches en Espace Créolophone, whose work in researching, standardizing and promoting Creole gained momentum during the 1980s. Chapter Three then provides two case studies drawn from the Martinican theatre repertoire of that period: Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'isles* and *Misyé Molina*, written by Georges Mauvois. Each drama takes the reality of diglossia in Martinique as a structuring principle, before going on to diverge significantly as regards style, tone, target audience and performance history. The unique way in which each writer crafts the language of their play reflects different perspectives on how a nation can speak. The linguistic fingerprint of *Mémoires d'isles* testifies to the reality of people, ideas and identities moving across the Atlantic, whereas that of *Misyé Molina* reflects the politics of a language (and a community) under threat of annihilation.

Chapter Four, 'Party with a Purpose', follows these issues into the sphere of carnival music via a further two case studies: Djo Dézormo's carnival hit 'Voici les loups', and a selection of upbeat tracks produced by the supergroup Kassav'. Placing them in the tradition

of carnival song-writing, and within the emergent home-grown genre known as *zouk*, the chapter teases out the tensions and compromises embodied in this music. The work of these artists was certainly politically engaged, but it often avoided direct involvement in the linguistic politics of the time, choosing to evade many of the norms and certainties being promulgated by its activists. Composing Creole-language pop music was, for Dézormo and Kassav', a type of unofficial nation-building endeavour, but also a commercial one, which required them to adapt their songcraft in order to be appreciated across a range of cultural contexts. Chapter Four ends by considering all four case studies examined across Part Two in the light of Glissant's thought on nations and multi-lingualism. Here, I argue that even as Martinican performance culture engaged with the Creole language activism of the period, it also looked beyond its obduracies and prescriptions towards an imagined Martinique whose future is not predicated on one language alone.

Part Three focuses on the problem of memory in the Martinican anti-nation. This is a context where, as described in the opening sub-section to Chapter Five, the education provided by a colonial power has created a type of ideological blockade that serves to strike out that community's collective historical consciousness. The four performances that feature in Part Three are all exercises in which a nation remembers, at a time when Martinicans were increasingly trying to dismantle that blockade. Chapter Five, 'The volcano and the ship', explores two plays: José Alpha's *1902* and Michèle Césaire's *La Nef*. The former centres on the devastating eruption of Mont Pelée at the turn of the twentieth century, which destroyed the city of Saint-Pierre. *1902* deconstructs (and, indeed, decolonizes) this national *lieu de mémoire*, engaging with imperial nostalgia, the multiple forms of racist violence that continue to structure Martinique and the possibility of an intersectional racial and class consciousness. *La Nef* uses a drifting ship as the setting for its investigation of the silences and amnesia that prevent this anti-nation from knowing its own racial trauma.

Such issues weigh heavily throughout Part Three, as Chapter Six, 'Mas, Memory, Carnival', traces them through two perennial carnival masquerade performances known as *maryann lapofig* and *nèg gwo siwo*, both of which enjoyed something of a renaissance during the 1980s. Treating these *mas* as performances that can embody a community's cultural memory in material and kinetic spectacle, Chapter Six examines how *maryann lapofig* manifests Martinique's problematic reckoning with its African heritage, as well as how the *nèg gwo siwo* self-consciously exhibit blackness, both as a formidable social and historical signifier, and as an imperial invention. The chapter ends by calling attention to the hallucinatory, surreal aesthetic that links all four performances, viewing this in the light of

Glissant's notion of delirium. I argue that, in the context of an anti-nation that has cultivated its own historical amnesia to the point where it is considered natural and rational, the delirium inherent in these performances has a kind of political potential. In a situation whose norms are in fact thoroughly abnormal, breaking from reality represents a mode of escape from the psychic and existential repression of the anti-nation and, as such, offers an alternative (albeit extreme) model of communal memory.

Viewed together, the plays, music and masquerades explored in this thesis do not offer a coherent, joined-up vision of Martinique. In many ways, this slice of the island's performance culture is as varied, even contradictory, as Martinique itself. Ultimately, however, I argue that the predicament of the anti-nation can be a catalyst to creativity. The Martinican performers and playwrights of the 1980s were conscious of the limitations it placed on their lives and minds. Moreover, it motivated them to imagine new versions of Martinique, through the language they craft and the memory they mobilize. At the same time, it is also clear that the strictures and neuroses of the anti-nation continue to shape the contours of performance culture in Martinique. I also demonstrate that those involved work under a number of pressures connected to that predicament, namely, to participate in the island's increasingly tourist-oriented economic development, and to be sufficiently universal in their cultural offering. By interrogating the significance of notions such as "development" and "universality" in the context of the anti-nation, I argue that, even as the people and performances featured in this thesis aspire towards them as a means of bettering their situation, these ideals lock Martinicans into new versions of the same colonial dynamics and attitudes that have circumscribed their lives for centuries.

Chapter One – Black and French, Black and Free: Contextualizing the anti-nation

This purpose of this thesis is to make a conceptual convergence, that is, to align the practice of public performance with the process of nation-building, in the context of Martinique in the 1980s. However, in order to understand what was at stake in this cross-section of cultural, social and political history, I have decided to treat the two problems separately in the two opening chapters, with a view to detailing the background to each one as clearly as possible. It will become evident at several points, however, that nation-building and performance have always been closely linked, even co-dependent.

This first chapter historicizes and contextualizes what I call the anti-nation in Martinique, a term which tries to account for the ambivalence that the island's inhabitants have always expressed regarding the possibility that they themselves might constitute some kind of nation. Rejecting a pro-independence political project at the polls, as these people have often done, does not erase the ideas informing that project from public consciousness. While the possibility of political sovereignty has been repeatedly denied, the seemingly perpetual act of negating it suggests that the question of community, of who Martinicans are or could be collectively, is always being reckoned with. Rather than provide a comprehensive history of Martinique, this initial chapter identifies several periods of rapid political and social change which forced that question to the forefront of Martinican lives and minds. The issue, as several observers have argued, has been rearticulated and managed without ever being resolved. Martinican history is thus interpreted here as an endless deferral of the old problem of collective identity, with each provisional solution posing new complications in the context of a changing world. The first sub-section places Martinique within a long history of French assimilatory imperialism, and a wider archipelago of Caribbean nations (independent or otherwise) working within the legacies of European rule. This is followed by a closer examination of the political developments leading up to the dominance of the autonomist Parti Progressiste Martiniquais during the 1980s, and more precisely, of the emergent and evolving strains of nationalism influencing the various political currents. Finally, the ways in which Martinique was being envisaged as a nation by local intellectuals will be accounted for, as well as how Martinican people (and their elected representatives) engaged with those bodies of thought.

1.1 - 'the long, wide view': historical and geo-political context

The systematic colonization of Martinique and Guadeloupe began in 1635, during the first wave of French imperial expansion outside of Europe. From the end of that century onwards both were run as slave societies, enabled by a complex of interlocking forms of violence. Territorial conquest and the extermination of the indigenous Amerindian population, the forced removal of African people from their families and heritages, the mixing of ethnic and linguistic groups during trade and transportation and the brutality of the conditions of enslavement were all designed to preclude the formation of any kind of functional community, other than what was in France's best interests. This is the bleak, obvious yet necessary starting point for the exploration of Caribbean nationalisms, in all their iterations. Rather than being an unfortunate after-effect of colonization, or an "accident of history", the atomization of black life was programmed into the European imperial project from the beginning.⁵⁹ Any attempt to interpret contemporary Martinique as an anti-nation seems almost tautological when we acknowledge that this is exactly how the place was conceived, that is, as a source of financial and diplomatic gain for a pre-existing nation-state elsewhere.

While this was the case throughout societies built on slavery in the Americas, French imperialists had their own vision of the kind of colonial society that was most appropriate and how to go about forging it. All empires (and, indeed, all nation-states) are formed through processes of assimilation, in the broadest sense of the term, whereby geographically and culturally disparate people are brought together by force in order to shore up the power of a dominant group. In the French sphere of influence, however, assimilation was codified in colonial discourse and policy to an extent that distinguished it from other contexts.

The logic was as follows: if colonial subjects embraced French culture and, crucially, mastered the language of that imperial centre, then France and all it offered in terms of citizenship, opportunity and prosperity would be available to them. Ostensibly blind to race and geographical distance, this version of Frenchness could be extended to diverse territories, with particular efficacy in islands where the black population had been violently severed from their cultural heritage. In Martinique, scholars and citizens alike now recognize the formidable role played by assimilationism in moulding all aspects of French Caribbean life.

Assimilation was systematically enforced, from the imperial centre outwards, through educational policy and the European cultural offering provided in the colonies. However, it

⁵⁹ Dahomay, p. 91.

was also willingly endorsed by Martinicans themselves as part of their strategy for emancipation. For free people of colour in the decades following the first abolition of slavery in 1794, French revolutionary ideology (and, more specifically, its promise of egalitarian citizenship) afforded them with the necessary political and intellectual framework for furthering their cause and securing the rights denied them by the local white *béké* caste of European descent, in whom political and economic power was hitherto concentrated.⁶⁰ While this conflict did not escalate into full-scale war, as was the case in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (now known as Haiti), the black insurrection was determined and, on occasion, violent. Securing French citizenship (or at least, as full a version thereof as they could realistically attain) met a number of their demands: the emancipation of enslaved people was one of these, although it was not initially a priority for the already free *mulâtre* caste. Despite the repeated frustrations of these ambitions (slavery was reinstated by the pre-Napoleonic Consulate of 1802 before being abolished definitively in 1848, while voting rights for colonial subjects were revoked by right wing regimes in the later nineteenth century), the belief that being French represented the best guarantee of eventually fulfilling them was never called into question. This early impulse towards as full an integration as possible into the French body politic set a precedent for the future development of Martinique, in every aspect:

[...] The instinct of brown (and to a lesser, but growing, extent) of black Martinicans to look to Republican France, rather than to themselves, to defend and advance their interests against the rigidly anti-assimilationist *békés* had already taken root. The extroversion, or heteronomy, of almost all subsequent political-intellectual activity in Martinique has its origins in the widespread valorization of the Other (Republican France) and the corresponding, if only implicit, devalorization of the Self [...]⁶¹

Assimilation as a historically contingent political and cultural phenomenon, inextricable from local racial and class dynamics, has thus been a crucial determining factor in the attenuation of national consciousness in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

These interrelated but distinct problems of assimilation (how to be French) and community (how to live together) were present in every aspect of Martinican life in the

⁶⁰ For the first historical study of this phenomenon, in a Haitian context, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed., rev (New York: Vintage, 1989).

⁶¹ Richard D.E. Burton, 'Between the Particular and the Universal: Dilemmas of the Martinican Intellectual', in *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean / Vol.2, Unity in Variety: The Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean*, ed. by Alistair Hennessy, Warwick University Caribbean Studies (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1992), pp. 186-210 (p. 193).

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶² Indeed, Nelly Schmidt highlights how mounting social discontent (often regarding poor pay and working conditions on the white-owned plantations) culminated in political incidents ranging from riot to all-out revolt, ultimately contributing to a climate of ambient tension ignited at regular intervals⁶³, notably in 1870 on the occasion of the *révolte du Sud*.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to highlight Martinique's experience of the Second World War as a period in which the implications of assimilation into a European power came into sharp relief. Between 1940 and 1943, the island was occupied by Admiral Georges Robert, a French naval commander representing the collaborationist Vichy government. Very limited food and fuel supplies entered Martinique through the British blockade, the majority of which were reserved for Robert's sailors and the white Martinicans whom he placed in key local administrative positions. The majority of the population thus lived under conditions of near starvation and overtly racist repression. As Kristen Stromberg Childers indicates, this historical moment produced a unique set of concerns: 'The Second World War confronted Antilleans with stark questions of how to survive physically under maritime blockade, how to resist against an authoritarian racist regime, and how to position oneself in a dramatically changing neo-colonial world order.'⁶⁵ Developing this last point, Stromberg Childers draws attention to the role of US interventionism during the period, when the prospect of Martinique voluntarily ceding itself to American control complicated the picture of what the island's future might resemble. The crisis facing Martinicans during *an tan robè* (as it was subsequently referred to in Creole, and vividly remembered) was thus both practical and existential: in the clash between the lived experience of occupation and the long-held ideals of a stable, benevolent, enlightened European fatherland, they bore first-hand witness to the fragility of France as a liberal democracy.

As soon as the war ended, the elected representatives of the Martinican people formulated a demand for full integration into the French state as a *département*. This move was undoubtedly pragmatic, in that it was envisaged as a means of countering Martinique's

⁶² For an overview of how the concept of assimilation was mobilized in local political discourse during this period, see Liliane Chauleau, *La Vie quotidienne aux Antilles françaises au temps de Victor Schœlcher, XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1979).

⁶³ Nelly Schmidt, 'Formes de révoltes dans les colonies françaises des Caraïbes, 1848-années 1870. Repérages' in *Révolte et société: actes du IV^e colloque d'Histoire au présent : Paris, mai 1988*, 2 vols (Paris: Histoire au présent, 1989), II, pp. 149-156.

⁶⁴ This refers to a year-long popular insurrection beginning in September 1870 in Rivière-Pilote, sparked by a violent altercation between a French colonial officer and a local black trader.

⁶⁵ Kristen Stromberg Childers, 'The Second World War as a Watershed in the French Caribbean', *Atlantic Studies*, 9.4 (2012), 409-430 (p. 410).

vulnerability as an island colony in a contested region. However, it also needs to be positioned within a longer history of holistic conditioning as imperial subjects. While similar dialectics of repression of black people and legitimisation of the dominant power operated across all slave societies in the Americas, Alain-Philippe Blérald argues that the French strain thereof was able to slowly transmute colonial violence into more or less willing consent to neo-colonial rule, by dint of the systematic instilment of French values:

[...] il se trouve que l'évolution séculaire de la société politique antillaise, de la colonisation à nos jours, tout en étant demeurée rivée à la souveraineté française, se caractérise par le passage d'un système à prédominance coercitive à un système à prévalence idéologique.⁶⁶

Nothing less than a monumental feat of systematic indoctrination was necessary in order to obscure the fact that the France for which Martinicans had fought during *an tan robè* was not, and never had been, liberal and democratic in its treatment of them.

The progression described by Blérald occurred as a result of local developments as well as external pressure from the metropole. The definitive legislation for departmentalization, successfully passed in the National Assembly in Paris on 14 March 1946, had been proposed by Aimé Césaire, the poet, playwright and communist member of parliament for Martinique. Billed at this point as a means of securing for Martinicans the same social welfare provision and workplace rights recently accorded to their metropolitan counterparts⁶⁷, departmentalization was promoted more broadly as an original form of decolonization. This case was built on the same egalitarian socialist principles that had previously galvanized the political ambitions of the *gens de couleur libres*:

The decolonization to which they had long aspired, rather than being conceived of as a break with the colonizer's order, was seen rather as a demand for total, unqualified French citizenship, the precondition of a social, cultural and economic revolution that would suppress the socio-economic structures inherited from colonization.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Alain-Philippe Blérald, *La Question nationale en Guadeloupe et en Martinique: essai sur l'histoire politique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988), p.13.

⁶⁷ See Aimé Césaire's address to the National Assembly on 12 March 1946, reprinted in Robert Deville and Nicolas Georges, *Les Départements d'Outre-mer: l'autre décolonisation*, Découvertes Gallimard. Histoire 296 (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p.100-101.

⁶⁸ Jean-Paul Éluther, 'Guadeloupean Consensus' in *French and West Indian: Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana Today*, ed. by Richard D. E. Burton and Fred Réno, Warwick University Caribbean Studies (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 1995), pp. 48-55 (p.50).

Configured thus, the push for departmentalization from Martinique can be interpreted as a form of French Antillean nationalism, one that proved popular and durable (both locally and in the metropole) on account of its subtlety and promethean nature. It could be articulated in passionate anti-colonial terms whilst simultaneously asserting a colonized people's place within the destiny of the imperial power, as well as their entitlement to its resources. Establishing and maintaining this double discourse constitutes a successful defence of French Antilleans' interests, in the eyes of the majority of local people.

It is vital to acknowledge the primacy of these factors in determining Martinican lives and worldviews, as much of daily life is (and always has been) lived within the parameters of French law, public institutions and private enterprise. *Assimilation, République, département*: this is the political vocabulary necessarily employed by all Martinicans, regardless of their political orientation, their personal interpretation of the island's past or their hopes for its future. And yet, while local discourse, self-perceptions and self-definitions undoubtedly inform any approach to Martinique, critical analysis cannot be limited to those reference points. To do so would be to treat the Caribbean area as merely a shared space incidental to the France-Antilles dyad, rather than a family of related histories, cultures and economies. This thesis does not seek to systematically compare Martinican performance culture with that of another island. However, it does reference certain aspects of those Caribbean 'relatives' which may offer insights into Martinican life, thus exposing broader phenomena which are often obscured by the island-specific terms under which Caribbeans live.

It is particularly useful to contextualize Martinique within the non-independent Caribbean, that is, those islands which are legally the possession of one of four European or American powers: France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States of America. While a range of different arrangements have been put in place to link Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Aruba and the US Virgin Islands with their respective metropolises, these frameworks are essentially variations on a theme of Caribbean non-sovereignty. Identifying the fundamental concerns shared by these populations allows us to read between the lines of the prevailing discourse on Martinique as a polity. While *République, département* and *droits acquis* undoubtedly constitute a potent trinity, they cannot account for, let alone resolve, all the issues affecting the Caribbean anti-nation. Writing on Puerto Rico as non-incorporated American territory, Ángel Israel Rivera highlights structural poverty (and subsequent dependence on social welfare), a highly partisan and polarized local political arena, and

disinterest in Washington as contributing to a state of political stagnation.⁶⁹ This is, one might contend, the flipside of the coin of ‘political stability’ minted by such arrangements, and the latino mirror image of the situation in Martinique. Moreover, these transatlantic partnerships always depend, however implicitly, on the changing attitudes of European peoples towards their imperial histories and, more broadly, how they conceive of themselves as nations.⁷⁰ Regardless of how securely the island’s status is inscribed within the metropolitan constitution, the practicalities of the partnership are influenced by public opinion in Europe at any particular moment. Geographical factors also weigh heavily, as it is not uncommon for the region to suffer devastating natural disasters incurring millions of pounds of damage. Legislation has been rewritten in the wake of such incidents with a view to limiting metropolitan liability, as was the case in the volcanic eruption in Montserrat in 1995.⁷¹ Far from being a francophone phenomenon, then, the anti-nation exists in various iterations across the archipelago. Departmentalization is just one version of Caribbean vulnerability in a postcolonial context, partly mitigated and partly exacerbated by institutionalizing modified forms of colonial relations.

It would also be totally disingenuous to conceptualize Caribbean independences as a ‘clean break’ with the colonial past, from which Martinique and its homologues have messily deviated. The axiomatic fact that sovereign states in the region still struggle with the political, economic, social and cultural legacies of European imperialism has long been established by scholars and activists alike. Moreover, the entire archipelago is exposed to more recent, intensified globalized flows of people, capital and culture that intersect with those older colonial linkages and continually modify each island in terms of how it operates and perceives itself as a community, often generating new forms of subjugation and dependence. While this thesis theorizes Martinique as an anti-nation in the light of the specific history and lived experience of its inhabitants, it could be argued that all Caribbean polities, independent or otherwise, are to some extent intrinsically stymied in the exercise of control over their destiny. This is not to suggest that there is a ‘normal’ mode of national progress to which they have failed to adhere: self-determination (for any nation, anywhere) is only ever partial and contingent. But while these are valuable general principles to bear in mind, they do not

⁶⁹ Ángel Israel Rivera, ‘US Non-Incorporated Territories in the Caribbean: Factors Contributing to Stalemate and Potential Political Change in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands’ in *Governance in the Non-Independent Caribbean*, ed. by Clegg and Pantojas-García, pp. 45–60.

⁷⁰ Lammert de Jong, ‘The Implosion of the Netherlands Antilles’ in Clegg and Pantojas-García, pp. 24–44.

⁷¹ Peter Clegg, ‘Governing the UK Caribbean Overseas Territories: A Two-Way Perspective’ in Clegg and Pantojas-García, pp. 3–23.

account for what I consider to be the crucial factor in the troubled development of Caribbean nations.

The Introduction to this thesis placed race, that latent yet inescapable facticity, at the centre of the Martinican anti-nation. With this in mind, it is possible (and indeed constructive) to interpret Martinican history as a long process of actively working out how to be *black and French*. The post-Revolutionary *mulâtres* struggled to claim a citizenship that had not been designed to include them. During the Vichy occupation, Martinicans encountered a hostile and oppressive version of France, perceived by most as a lengthy *bavure* to be avoided at all costs in the future. Attaining departmental status for Martinique was an appropriate insurance against this possibility, and an irrevocable assertion of its inhabitants' Frenchness. As previously argued, this context is specific, but not exceptional. Taking 'race' and racism seriously (even in a French context that denies and obscures these realities) allows us to see Martinique as one variant in a wider Caribbean history of nations trying to be *black and free*. The social and economic structures inherited from colonial rule, overlaid with the power dynamics of a wider world order, still work to exploit and marginalize people of colour. Emerging Caribbean nations cannot extract themselves from these conditions: whatever strategies they adopt for survival as a community must be enacted within the constraints of this context.

While it is important to interpret the Martinican anti-nation as a peculiarly French historical development, and a Caribbean geo-political problem, the cross-section of performance culture analysed in this thesis also needs to be considered in the light of the political history immediately preceding it, and contemporaneous with it. This chapter will now focus more sharply on the years following the departmentalization ruling of 1946, setting out key political developments in Martinique up until 1993.

1.2 - 'the sharper focus': more contemporaneous political history

In March 1946, Martinique is tired, hungry and socially fractious, but also relieved and hopeful. While departmentalization certainly had the symbolic value suggested above, it was also a concrete promise of improved material conditions, including better alignment between salaries and living costs, old-age pensions and benefits to cover sickness, injury and disability. However, the application of the reforms was far from smooth. Food rationing continued for several years after the end of the war, lasting much longer than in Europe. Social security provision was introduced very slowly and with great disparity between socio-

professional categories.⁷² The much-anticipated minimum wage regulation was delayed by the Ministry of Work in Paris. Overall, the reforms eventually represented a clear improvement on the previous situation, but did not elevate standards of living to those enjoyed by Europeans within the expected time-frame.

In contrast to this ‘social stasis’, the Martinican economic model underwent massive, rapid change in the three decades following departmentalization. The steep decline of the local sugar industry (to be partially and precariously replaced by the cultivation of bananas for export, as we shall see) gave way to a service economy reliant on imported goods and capital. The results of this transformation were mixed: the economy was modernized, in a sense, but Martinicans were left with little control over the external produce on which it is largely dependent. New employment opportunities arose (especially in the public sector), but given continuing problems surrounding working-class access to education, these were by no means available to all sections of the population. The significant increase in GDP per capita in the new overseas departments, cited by successive French governments as a marker of success, is no more evenly distributed than it is in any other developed country.⁷³ This underwhelming state of affairs, combined with frustration over slow progress in social welfare reform, led to a pervasive (and justifiable) belief that Martinicans were not reaping the anticipated benefits of departmentalization.

Moreover, significant (and from a Martinican perspective, unexpected) social change accompanied the modification in constitutional status. Progressive alignment of public institutions permitted an influx of metropolitan civil servants, police officers, teachers and soldiers seeking to experience a warmer version of French life, whilst also taking up newly created posts largely beyond the reach of underqualified Martinican workers. Consistently high unemployment in the French Antilles was matched by a labour shortage in post-war Europe: mass emigration from Martinique and Guadeloupe to France ensued, encouraged and facilitated by a special government agency known as the Bureau pour le Développement des Migrations des Départements d’Outre-Mer, or BUMIDOM. As discussed previously, there has always been a ‘White Martinique’ with its own vested interests, and in whom economic power is still largely concentrated. Likewise, black Caribbeans have travelled to Europe for work, study (and, less frequently, pleasure) since the beginning of the imperial enterprise. It is

⁷² Jean-Paul Éluther, ‘L’Évolution des prestations familiales dans les départements d’outre-mer’, *Revue Juridique et Politique: Indépendance et Coopération*, 35.3 (1981), 783–95.

⁷³ See Jean Crusol, *Changer la Martinique: initiation à l’économie des Antilles* (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1986), p. 14–16.

also evident, however, that the intensity of these social transformations under departmentalization was unprecedented. In this rapidly changing social climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that racial tensions were the catalyst for that episode of intense unrest in Fort-de-France in December 1959 (referred to in the Introduction), in which three Martinican men and one police officer were killed, several more were injured and state and private property was destroyed. This kind of event is symptomatic of a wider malaise festering in the decades following 1946, in which Martinicans felt let down, side-lined and disenfranchised.

The local political arena was reconfigured in response to this dissatisfaction, as new parties and movements were established with the aim of providing routes out of the departmental impasse in which the Antilles were now trapped. To a certain extent, this reboot was precipitated by the administrative reforms of 1946: the dissolution of the old island-specific gubernatorial offices withdrew political power from the *béké* caste, as the centralized Ministries in Paris and the new Prefects proved more difficult to influence. While this cannot be interpreted as a political *tabula rasa* (the local black elite, who had begun to occupy positions in local government prior to the war, remained key players in the new order), the arena was opened up and dynamized.

More precisely, Alain-Philippe Blérald identifies a crisis in the assimilationist hegemony as being at the root of this process.⁷⁴ Given the decidedly sub-optimal situation outlined previously, Martinicans were beginning to question the value of prioritizing total integration into French structures and systems: this approach had certainly not met all their immediate needs and aspirations, and had aggravated some problems in ways not foreseen by either the French authorities or the Antillean electorate. Consequently, several political currents advocating self-determination emerged in the wake of departmentalization, each with its own more or less vaguely defined vision of what a 'self-determining Martinique' would be.

The most radical of these was the somewhat dysfunctional family of pro-independence organizations in the French Antilles. These ought to be positioned within the global phenomenon of new left-wing youth movements arising in the 1960s, who attempted to balance an internationalist outlook with the task of raising national consciousness in those swathes of Africa, Asia and the Americas in which imperial control was drawing (or had already drawn) to a close. Originally taking inspiration and members from Antillean student organizations based in French universities, the Organisation de la Jeunesse Anticolonialiste

⁷⁴ Blérald, *La Question nationale en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*, p 123.

Martiniquaise (OJAM) vocally identified departmental Martinique as a neo-colony, and articulated its inhabitants' economic, political, social and cultural oppression as that of a colonized people. Moreover, they rejected departmental status entirely in favour of an as yet unspecified arrangement that would give Martinicans real control over their own affairs, and published a manifesto to that effect. Their activities were deemed seditious by the authorities, and in 1963 eighteen OJAM members were arrested, imprisoned and charged with threatening national security. The organization was banned, but the idea of independence was henceforth implanted in Martinican public discourse. There was significant difference of opinion, however, as regards how immediate and total that break with France ought to be, resulting in a pro-independence front that is perpetually fractured along doctrinal and methodological lines. Those who adhered to maoist doctrine forged links with the increasingly urban working class: the resultant association, Asé Pléré Annou Lité, became the island's premier creole-language media outlet, while a resolutely pro-independence trade union remains a key player in the local labour movement. Other militants of a more nationalist bent entered the political arena proper, founding the Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais (MIM) in 1973 with the aim of putting a referendum on independence to the Martinican people. Local trotskysts committed to revolutionary communism integrated their Groupe Révolutionnaire Socialiste (GRS) into the Fourth International, aiming towards an Antillean sovereignty that was not explicitly Guadeloupean or Martinican. Pro-independence has always been a minority position, and the aforementioned parties have never polled highly in elections: factionalism has certainly split the voting base, while the movement as a whole has been criticized for its inability to provide a credible vision of how an independent Martinique would function economically. And yet, as Blérald points out, it has acted as a catalyst in the island's political and cultural life, putting (and keeping) national consciousness on the agenda in a context of seemingly permanent non-sovereignty.⁷⁵ Indeed, the second chapter of this thesis will explore the indelible mark left by pro-independence militant groups on the Martinican theatre scene.

Nevertheless, not everyone believed that the appropriate response to the island's problems was *less* assimilation. The Martinican Right underwent significant changes during the twentieth century: historically white and separationist (as we have seen, the *béké* caste sought to maintain the old colonial social order which ensured their dominance), its demographic diversified to include many more Martinicans of colour. Fervent gratitude and

⁷⁵ Blérald, *La Question nationale en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*, p. 135.

respect for General Charles de Gaulle in the aftermath of the Second World War proved durable in the French Antilles, where successive incarnations of Gaullism polled consistently well and local party leaders held considerable influence in the public sphere. These developments provoked a quiet volte-face as regards the Antillean Right's view on their relationship with the metropole, whereby it became the most enthusiastic defender of departmental status. Moreover, they argued that the answer to the problem of economic stagnation in Martinique lay in ever fuller integration into French structures.

And yet, the largest and most successful political party to materialize in this era proved to be the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais. The PPM was formed by Aimé Césaire following his split from the French Communist Party in 1958, a move symptomatic of his dissatisfaction with the substantial shortcomings of the departmentalization process. Continued alignment with French political structures, he contended, would only perpetuate the marginalization of Martinican concerns. The PPM's challenge to assimilation did not countenance independence, but rather autonomy, that is, self-governance within the limits of a redefined (but permanent) relationship with France. This position continues to have widespread popular support, partly due to the leadership of Aimé Césaire. More importantly, the prospect of a 'third way' between independence and hard-line departmentalism appealed to many people's ambitions and anxieties, even though what an autonomous Martinique would look like, exactly, has never been clarified.

The PPM's promise is potent, but its vagueness is also indicative of a wider confusion as regards the kind (or kinds) of nationalism that have been evoked politically on the island. Martinican nationalism does not constitute one identifiable, coherent movement: rather, the idea of 'the nation' is appealed to by all the political channels outlined above, resulting in a variety of strains of nationalism on offer to the local electorate.

Traditional conservative thought held that Martinicans did not form a political, cultural or ethnic national community in their own right. The island, from this perspective, is framed as being essentially French in every respect, in such a way that precludes any assertion of distinctiveness or separateness. This attitude is certainly rooted in the racist colonial enterprise that has shaped the history of the Americas and the development of all Caribbean nations. However, it also needs to be understood in its more specific French context. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, France has particular difficulty reckoning with the existence of multiple national identities within its midst. This has profound implications for the entire spectrum of political activity in Martinique: although it was the local Right that adhered most closely to the principle of *une nation, indivisible*, the

French version of Republicanism is the status quo with which politicians of all persuasions are compelled to negotiate, lest they relegate themselves to the margins of civic life.

The island's far left *indépendantistes* claimed to mount the most forthright challenge to this vision of Martinique's fundamental Frenchness. Their nationalism replaced it with international socialism: the essence of Martinique was its workers, who belonged to a world proletariat. The fact that Caribbean social and economic hierarchies continue to be stratified according to skin colour, with darker-skinned people of African and Asian origin most likely to be exploited for their labour, was incidental. For parties such as the GRS, race was a distraction from the "real" class struggle and as such, Martinican national consciousness had to be based on anti-capitalist principles above all else.⁷⁶ In a move that was strangely similar to that of the local conservatives, then, this classical Marxist stance effectively erased elements of Martinican lived experience in a bid to insert the island into a more general frame of reference.

Richard D.E. Burton goes as far as to explicitly link these political polar opposites by virtue of the fundamentally assimilationist sensibility they share, suggesting that '[...] many Martinican radicals are no less 'decentred' from their immediate circumstances by the sophistication of their Marxism than their predecessors were by the universalism of the French republican tradition.'⁷⁷ At the root of this tenaciously Eurocentric trend, I contend, is an insistent and persistent denial of issues surrounding race and racism in the French Antilles: there seems to be a deeply-ingrained belief that by submerging the fact of one's racial difference within a larger collective identity (be it France, or socialism), racial inequality will automatically be eliminated. As such, race remained 'the elephant in the room' in Martinican political culture, especially prior to the period with which this thesis is concerned. The PPM were the first movement to begin to take it seriously and, during the 1980s, they consolidated their own brand of vernacular black nationalism, albeit in a muted form, politically speaking. The party certainly made a much more concentrated effort to celebrate and promote local Creole history and culture, in comparison with previous administrations. However, explicit racial consciousness, the articulation of blackness as a distinct experience of the world and political agitation on behalf of black people, specifically, were still severely circumscribed. It is important to expand on the culture/politics dialectic at work here, especially given the

⁷⁶ Richard D.E. Burton, 'Nationalist Ideologies in Contemporary Martinique' in *Collected Seminar Papers No 29: Caribbean Societies Volume 1* (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1982), pp. 78-92 (p. 87).

⁷⁷ Burton, 'Nationalist Ideologies in Contemporary Martinique', p. 84.

extent of the PPM's influence on the development of the arts in Martinique, including theatre and carnival. Consequently, I will explore and analyse the ideology behind their nationalism in more depth later, in the third section of this chapter.

The PPM owe a lot of their political success to François Mitterrand's victory in the 1981 French presidential elections, when they quite suddenly found favour as the regional homologue of the ruling French Socialist Party. Moreover, the Mitterrand administration were committed to accelerating political and administrative decentralization, whereby certain powers would be transferred from national ministries in Paris to regional councils throughout France. The overseas departments, as they saw it, fitted seamlessly into this wider scheme of regionalisation.⁷⁸ The official governmental line pertaining to these territories tends to shape-shift, most likely in an attempt to satisfy everyone with an interest in them. On a visit to Guadeloupe in December 1985, Mitterrand framed his new legislation as a second phase in the decolonization of the French Antilles which would allow them to fully realise their potential, after the departmentalization of 1946 proved to be not as transformative as hoped.⁷⁹ He shifts focus when addressing metropolitan France, trying to square the specificity of these overseas departments with the 'higher calling' of national belonging, thus appealing to Republican sensibilities regarding the universality of Frenchness:

Pourquoi voulez-vous qu'on ne cherche pas à accroître leur confiance et la solidité de nos liens en comptant sur leur envie d'être plus Français encore, parce qu'ils se sentent plus Martiniquais, plus Guadeloupéens, plus Guyanais ou plus Réunionnais? Ces deux choses ne sont pas seulement compatibles, elles sont liées dans mon esprit.⁸⁰

In this line of reasoning, the question of France's relationship with its former colonies is no longer a decolonial issue in particular, but one of the irreducibility of all peoples, and the need for the French Republic to better acknowledge this.⁸¹ This is the essence of *droit à la différence*, a concept developed and championed by Mitterrand both before and during his presidency. Indeed, this is the intellectual lens through which his administration saw Martinique and, arguably, remains the paradigm in terms of how the overseas departments are conceptualized and managed from a metropolitan viewpoint.

⁷⁸ Ernest Moutoussamy, *L'Outre-mer sous la présidence de François Mitterrand* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), p. 20.

⁷⁹ Moutoussamy, *L'Outre-mer sous la présidence de François Mitterrand*, p. 83.

⁸⁰ Moutoussamy, *L'Outre-mer sous la présidence de François Mitterrand*, p. 33.

⁸¹ Moutoussamy, *L'Outre-mer sous la présidence de François Mitterrand*, p. 79.

These reforms had the potential to bring about significant change in the overseas departments, who had been suffering from the imposition of policies and practices ill-adapted to the particularities of their non-European contexts: from the PPM's perspective, decentralization represented a means of attaining the autonomy they wanted for Martinique. The prospect of modification in how the island was governed was initially met with scepticism by the Martinican electorate, who had in fact voted massively for Mitterrand's opponent out of fear that changes to the island's status would lead to all-out independence.⁸² As we have seen, it is also true that Martinicans were far from happy with every aspect of the status quo. The promised boost in regional decision-making, which could redirect resources towards the localized social and economic issues that had been systematically ignored by Paris, gave grounds for hope.

Whether the realities of decentralization met these expectations, however, is open to debate. A case in point is that of the new public institutions and authorities created during the 1980s in the spirit of administrative reform. From 1986 onwards, the members of the regional council in Martinique were elected directly by the people, via a system of proportional representation that brought new players into a more open and diverse political arena. The PPM, who had previously been somewhat marginalized in a political process geared largely towards representation in Paris, were able to capitalize on their long-standing regionalist approach and quickly came to dominate the council. They took advantage of new powers enabling them to establish *agences*, or managing bodies for public projects or services at regional level, some of which are of particular relevance to the administration of the arts in Martinique. Further detail as to the developments they afforded in the sphere of local performance culture will be provided in Chapter Two.

In spite of these revitalized democratic processes and new initiatives, aggravating factors have limited the overall impact of decentralization in Martinique. In 1982, the French Constitutional Council rejected a bill that proposed to merge the existing departmental authority with the newly amplified regional one (both of which corresponded to Martinique alone) to make one *assemblée unique* responsible for managing territorial affairs. One small island thus became subject to multiple layers of administration, resulting in excess structures, procedures, staff, expenditure and, ultimately, inefficient governance. The two authorities co-existed throughout the 1980s in confusion and, as Dominique Custos scathingly highlights,

⁸² Miles, 'Fifty Years of Assimilation' in *Islands at the Crossroads*, ed. by Ramos and Rivera Ortiz, pp. 45-60 (p. 50).

pernicious competition: '[La superposition territoriale] fourmille ainsi d'initiatives symboliques qui évoquent plus le souci de marquer d'une présence dans le cadre de la communication politique que de la préoccupation de gestionnaires de l'intérêt public.'⁸³

The implication here is that, by dint of structural obduracy and political showboating, many of the changes brought about by decentralization proved to be superficial rather than substantial.

Such were the conditions under which Martinicans lived, worked, played and created in the 1980s. The political discourse and processes of the time emphasized the validity of Martinique as a distinct community in a way that had not been seen before, fostering new opportunities for locally planned development. And yet, these were systematically hindered by the extra bureaucracy that came with this administrative change. Decentralisation ought not to be framed as a salutary period in Martinican history in the way that its main advocates, the PPM, would have us believe.

Moreover, to place Martinique solely within the narrative of a regionalising France would be misguided, as the question of the island's place within the broader bloc of Europe was becoming increasingly urgent. As the 1980s progressed, the consolidation of the EU as a project for supra-national integration triggered concerns about the island's political and economic future. The 1986 Single European Act compelled constituent nations to work towards the creation of a single market, effectively commencing a countdown to full formal integration in 1992. Relations with Europe were thus pushed to the top of the political agenda both in continental member states and in peripheral territories such as Martinique, where public unease was particularly acute. While the prospect of European integration had implications for all areas of Antillean life, anxieties converged on the fate of one crucial fruit: the banana. Due to relatively high production costs compared with their Latin American competitors, the French overseas departments require a certain degree of protection for their tropical fruits within the European market. However, none of Martinique's small range of exports (fruit, rum, tropical flowers) were initially included in the Common Agricultural Policy's protection scheme for European farming, an oversight that threatened to leave Antillean bananas adrift in the free market, unable to compete with cheaper alternatives. This instance of Martinique falling through the gaps of the CAP is emblematic of the unintentional (but nonetheless significant) clash between European ambitions and Caribbean development.

⁸³ Dominique Custos, 'La Décentralisation dans les DOM: entre continuité et renouvellement', in *Revue française d'administration publique*, 101.1 (2002), 15–24, pp.16.

Antillean agricultural lobbies were eventually able to secure guarantees for their bananas, thus averting the collapse of the local industry. Nevertheless, the seeds of fear and mistrust had already been sown, resulting in an enduring perception of a Europe that punishes rather than protects, and which eclipsed the (albeit mitigated) benefits that the DOMs draw from EU membership, notably as regards access to structural funds.⁸⁴

Overall, the matter of European integration pushed the island's economic fragility and political marginalization to the forefront of public consciousness. Local politicians such as Ernest Moutoussamy, Communist member of parliament for Guadeloupe, described the architects of Europe as another avatar of Western neoliberal imperialism, abusive and rapacious in their attitude towards the overseas departments.⁸⁵ He emphasized the threat posed to French Caribbean culture, in particular:

En privilégiant l'apport européen par la domination des instruments culturels occidentaux, la CEE [European Economic Community] cherche à bâtir l'Europe tropicale en effaçant les composantes africaines et asiatiques de nos sociétés. Pour elle, l'heure est venue d'arrimer nos pays à un pôle unique, le pôle blanc, de briser nos spécificités et de les perdre dans un métissage abolissant les aires culturelles particulières. Celles-ci, sous le couvert d'un dialogue des cultures, seront alors remplacées par une ceinture culturelle européenne où nos pays transformés en sentinelles avancées auront comme mission spéciale d'ouvrir leur environnement à l'Europe.⁸⁶

Moutoussamy is under no illusion that European integration represents an opportunity for free and fair cultural exchange, at least not from a French Antillean perspective. He, along with most ordinary Guadelopeans, is aware that they do not enter this arena on equal footing. At a time when race was conspicuously absent from French political and academic discourse, Moutoussamy is perhaps unusual in his willingness to articulate the vulnerability of his society as being black and brown in colour. He recognizes that these islands are not only sidelined by their smallness, or their distance from Europe, but that the ethnic "difference" of their populations disadvantages them in relation to a Europe that is white, in terms of where power is concentrated and whose needs and desires are noticed and prioritized. If the idea that whiteness is gearing up to "break" black culture seems caricatural and hyperbolic, then an

⁸⁴ Jean Crusol, 'Bilan et perspectives de l'intégration des DOM à la Communauté Economique Européenne (1957-1992)' in Jean-Claude Fortier, *Questions sur l'administration des DOM: décentraliser outre-mer?*, Collectivités territoriales (Paris: Economica, 1989), pp. 483-518.

⁸⁵ Ernest Moutoussamy, *Un danger pour les DOM: l'intégration au marché unique européen de 1992* (Paris: L'L'Harmattan, 1988), p.11.

⁸⁶ Moutoussamy, *Un danger pour les DOM*, p.11.

elementary understanding of Caribbean history reminds us that this has been done before. Nevertheless, Moutoussamy limits himself to mentioning the racial dimension to the problem, without making racial justice a political objective or project. For the only way in which the overseas departments can survive this threat, he contends, is to assert their national identity ever more strongly: ‘Entre l’eupéanisation des Antilles et l’américanisation de la Caraïbe, la Guadeloupe doit chercher à se guadeloupéaniser dans un juste cheminement et une bonne compréhension de la conjuncture.’⁸⁷ This is the notion underpinning much of neo-nationalist political activity in Martinique at the time.

Having elaborated on the historical developments contemporaneous with my chosen period of performance culture, it remains for me to suggest how they might have impinged on the problem of the Martinican anti-nation. There is a certain amount of truth to Helen Hintjens’ assertion that the regional reforms of the 1980s displaced the eternal centre-periphery conflict endemic to the overseas departments⁸⁸: the increased measure of autonomy granted by a “benevolent” France effectively attenuated the antagonistic political nationalism of previous decades, epitomized in Aimé Césaire’s self-declared and well publicized moratorium on the issue of Martinican independence in 1981. The fact that the island was implicated in an increasingly federalized Europe was also central to this geopolitical reconfiguration, in that it undercut the relevance of powers granted by member states and forced local authorities to look beyond national level in defending their interests.⁸⁹

At the same time, to suggest that all this constituted fundamental change for Martinique would be something of an exaggeration. That old conflict may have been displaced, but it was in no way resolved. Administrations can be reshuffled, new powers accorded and resources redistributed, but the island remained (and indeed, remains to this day) dependant on a European power for its comfortable yet inhibiting survival. The structures that forged and sustained the colony politically, socially, economically, culturally and even psychologically may have evolved, but they were not removed or revolutionized.⁹⁰ As such, it is more appropriate to consider the regionalization and Europeanization of the island in the 1980s as one further flashpoint in a long series of identity crises, whereby crucial questions - what kind of community Martinique was, how it should function, what kind of self-determination (if any) it should claim for itself and what wider networks it should

⁸⁷ Moutoussamy, *Un danger pour les DOM*, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Helen Hintjens, ‘Regional Reform in the French Periphery: The Overseas Departments of Reunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe’, *Regional Politics and Policy*, 1.1 (1991), 51–73, pp. 69.

⁸⁹ Custos, p. 22.

⁹⁰ Moutoussamy, *L’Outre-mer sous la présidence de François Mitterrand*, p. 9.

insert itself into – were deliberated by local stakeholders with a certain degree of agency. Ultimately, though, these discussions were managed by more powerful players, who dictated the terms of the debate according to their own interests.

Moreover, the island's political status is not the only factor influencing the problem of the anti-nation in Martinique. As anti-colonial and pro-independence sentiments were pacified, the 1980s saw a flurry of conscious attempts to delineate this entity in other terms. The next sub-section of this chapter surveys the key politico-intellectual thought channels, both well-established and emergent, that tried to construct Martinique as a *cultural nation* during this period.

1.3 - “C’est par la culture que nous arriverons à rendre ce Peuple à lui-même”: thinking the Martinican nation with the PPM

On 1 July 1983, Dr Pierre Alier gave a speech to mark the opening of the 12th Fort-de-France Festival, in his capacity as co-founder of the PPM. It highlights his party's commitment to championing Martinican culture in the face of French colonial domination and, in so doing, reads as something of a manifesto outlining their brand of cultural nationalism. At one point, Alier even elucidates a formula to this effect:

Un peuple, c’est quoi? C’est un ensemble d’humains lié par une mémoire commune qui est son histoire, une manière commune de vivre qui est sa culture et un moyen de communication naturelle qui est sa langue. Histoire, culture, langue, c’est ce trépied qui porte un Peuple.⁹¹

On one level, this does tell us everything there is to know about the PPM's nation-building strategy. Know your history, celebrate your culture and speak your language: the simplicity of these truths is potent, and goes some way towards explaining the party's success in Martinique. Nevertheless, the vague manner in which they are articulated is equally significant, in that it allows everyone to interpret them as they wish. The formula also eschews the thornier questions of who gets to curate that history and what memories they ought to privilege, how to reconcile divergent ways of life and what means of communication should be deemed ‘natural’. It is therefore necessary to analyse Alier's tripod more critically, by interrogating what the PPM really meant when they spoke about the Martinican People,

⁹¹ ‘Festival culturel: le discours du Dr Pierre Alier’, *Antilla*, 14-21 July 1983, p. 20.

and by showing how their way of defining their nation intersected with (and differed from) that of other thinkers, both locally and in the wider Caribbean region.

The PPM's nationalism has been described as a kind of 'neo-Négritude'⁹², a 'same but different' extension of that well-established current of thought and art elaborated by Aimé Césaire (along with the future president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the French Guyanese poet-politician Léon Damas). Indeed, the choice of theme for the 1983 edition of the Fort-de-France Festival, 'Retour au Pays Natal', is a clear homage to Césaire's 1939 surrealist poem, often considered to be the seminal creative expression of the tenets of Négritude. The festival's iconography also forthrightly depicts Martinique as an Afro-Creole and non-Western nation, with its logo consisting of a still-life of traditional goatskin drums and lush tropical vegetation resting on a map of the island.⁹³ When it comes to the sentiments expressed in this opening speech, these do echo those expressed by Césaire and his counterparts, up to a point. Alier begins by recognizing the physical violence of the colonial endeavour, then explains how this came to be largely superseded by an enforced acculturation of the colonized people, that is, stripping them of their own language, customs and beliefs so that they might better assimilate into the French civilization.⁹⁴ However gently and 'benevolently' the latter was enacted, it was brutality in another guise, and ultimately left the colonized people doubly alienated, both from the culture of their ancestors and that of the Europeans who still see them as a racial Other. The only solution is to decolonize the mind, which, for the PPM, entailed a quest for history, language and culture.

This certainly reaches back to the spirit and logic of resistance to colonialism that inspired Négritude, widely identified as the intellectual pre-cursor (and dysfunctional father figure) to much, if not all, of the subsequent autochthonous thinking in the French Antilles⁹⁵. Through a range of artistic and scholarly modes of expression, Césaire exposed and denounced the racism that underpinned the colonial endeavour, in its explicit and implicit forms. Speaking from a francophone perspective, he also mounted a strong critique of the pressure exerted on colonial subjects to assimilate into France culturally and linguistically. This demand, he contended, is ultimately based on the premise that African, Caribbean and Asian civilizations were inferior or, even more cynically, not civilizations at all. The mass

⁹² Burton, 'Nationalist Ideologies in Contemporary Martinique', p. 90.

⁹³ *Antilla*, 21-28 July 1983, p. 11.

⁹⁴ 'Festival Culturel: le discours du Dr Pierre Alier', *Antilla*, 14-21 July 1983, p. 18.

⁹⁵ Mireille Rosello, 'Introduction' in Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land / Cahier d'un retour Au pays natal*, trans. by Mireille Rosello and Annie Pritchard, Bloodaxe Contemporary French Poets, 4 (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), pp. 9-68 (p. 9).

inculcation of this assumption, and more specifically its corrupting effect on their sense of themselves and of their heritage, could only lead to the spiritual annihilation of colonized people of colour: this existential *black death*, one might say, is the grim starting point of *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. The images of disease, decay, aimlessness and paralysis in the opening verses depict a Martinique that is already extinguished, not only in terms of its material poverty, but also its inability to imagine a future for itself beyond the subjugation to which it has been “logically” assigned. The poem’s destination, however (and that of the movement more broadly), is the valorization of black life. Rather than try to attain the White Standard of respectability (which they will never be allowed to equal, in any case), colonized people of colour can, and should, do the complete opposite. If black life is unreasonable, chaotic and dark, then this does not have to be perceived as an affliction. On the contrary, it can be a source of power and innovation: Césaire’s surrealist poetry in and of itself is an embodiment of this idea.

He and his contemporaries treated black history (and in particular that of pre-colonial Africa) as something worthy of serious study, partly because of the political potential this epistemological shift represented. *Knowing* that history, even stating that Africa had civilizations that can be known, is a kind of power, in that it reframes European dominance in the Atlantic as having originated from a specific moment, that is, the capitalist expansion of its Early Modern period. This undermines what is perhaps the ultimate self-legitimizing strategy of colonialism, which is to present itself to those whom it dominates as a natural, eternal and normal system of governance, one that is entirely rational because it was preceded by nothing of value.⁹⁶ For the proponents of Négritude, rediscovering the black world was both an anti-colonial offensive, and a positive revelation of their true cultural heritage, upon which their identity as black people could be founded. Indeed, it was through a celebration of what they were and knowledge of what had subsequently happened to them that they developed their politics. If white-dominated cultures and institutions diminish and alienate the people of African descent who live within them, then this is what defines their subjectivity and determines them as politically black. This racial consciousness recognizes black people as having essential qualities, thoughts and attitudes borne out of those socio-historical conditions, and it is only by affirming this irreducible specificity that they will emancipate themselves.⁹⁷ It follows that the Martinique portrayed by Césaire in the *Cahier*

⁹⁶ Alain-Philippe Blérald, *Négritude et politique aux Antilles*, Collection Parti-pris (Paris: Éditions Caribéennes, 1981), p. 42.

⁹⁷ Blérald, *Négritude et politique aux Antilles*, pp. 36–38.

needed to see itself within this global Black framework if it was to have any kind of future, be it political, cultural or spiritual.

These ideas have been received equivocally by subsequent generations of Martinicans. Despite the great esteem with which Césaire is held on the island, and widespread support for the general gist of his philosophy, they have never bought into blackness as a political construct. This is evident in the concerns voiced by many French Antillean thinkers in later decades, regarding how Negritude was articulated and the implications this might have for emerging nationalism in a context of post-war decolonisation. Essentially, they were profoundly uneasy with defining themselves in collective racial terms. For many, the ‘black soul’ as formulated by the architects of Negritude was a totalizing abstraction to which it was impossible to identify: ‘Le nègre de Senghor est le Nègre Absolu, le Nègre de nulle part, le Nègre en dehors des rapports sociaux, en dehors du monde réel et du contexte national. Il est ‘l’essence noire’.’⁹⁸ Others regretted what they saw as an over-emphasis on the black African elements of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural island, which risked excluding Indian, Chinese and Middle Eastern communities from the vision of Martinique. Valid though these reservations may be, they are underpinned by something deeper and more fundamental than just objective critical judgment.

This reluctance to countenance the need to identify as black (in order to name a shared experience of oppression and marginalization) stems from a particular intellectual heritage, that of French Republicanism. From this perspective, the national constitution does not discriminate on grounds of race, and it is consequently impossible for the institutions founded on it to do so either. A nation founded on egalitarian principles, the logic goes, cannot be racist. To question these assumptions is to question modern France itself. It is a perspective which, as we have seen, has moulded Martinican mentalities for centuries, to the extent that it almost precludes racial consciousness: why consider identifying as black when to do so is at best unnecessary and at worst divisive and unpatriotic? This is what Martinicans are confronted with, both in their own minds and in their social lives, when they try to articulate what it is to be both black and French. It is unsurprising, then, that the black unity conceptualized and championed through Negritude did not gain much traction in terms of nation-building in the French Antilles.

⁹⁸ René Ménénil, *Tracées: identité, négritude, esthétique Aux Antilles*, Chemins d’identité (Paris: Laffont, 1981), p. 66.

The PPM developed their politics within this Republican tradition – it was not something they could simply extract themselves from. At the same time, their party was formed on the basis of their conviction that their island's reality had been forcibly denied and assimilated into another for too long, and that they needed to offer Martinicans a different means of asserting their existence. Their solution, as described by Dr Alier in his speech, was to stress their singularity and irreducibility to any other people. By affirming this identity, they would rediscover who they really were and unalienate themselves.¹⁰⁰ This approach appeals by providing a more geographically, historically and culturally specific construct, and moving away from the term *nègre*. It does not hide the foundational black experience of suffering and resistance that created Martinican identity, but neither does it fully acknowledge how that experience (and its continuing effects) was racialized. This was how the PPM chose to articulate blackness, and in doing so they set the tone for how race has been discussed in Martinique ever since. The irony of Aimé Césaire, who had helped devise one of the most influential channels of black Atlantic thought of the twentieth century, eventually founding a political party that eschewed explicit racial consciousness, could only have arisen in Martinique.

Also emerging in local public discourse at that time was the Créolité movement, which can be seen as an intellectual and cultural corollary of this neo-Négritude (if not of the PPM's politics per se). Their manifesto *Éloge de la créolité* (penned in 1989 by the Martinican writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant) is in large part a defence of the creole language as a vector of the collective Antillean unconscious¹⁰¹, central to the islands' identity. Moreover, championing the public and artistic use of this language in a context where it was systematically denigrated (and indeed prohibited) in favour of French is, in itself, a decolonial act. This represents the clearest area of progression in relation to Négritude, which did not really engage with the crucial linguistic dimension of colonialism, and certainly had nothing to say specifically about the status of Creole. Indeed, Bernabé, Confiant and Chamoiseau considered their predecessors' anti-colonialism to be based on Western terms (*nègre*, for them, was no more than a sterile inversion of *blanc*) that were fundamentally external to their reality.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ 'Festival culturel: le discours du Dr Pierre Alier', *Antilla*, 14-21 July 1983, p.19.

¹⁰¹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité; édition bilingue français/anglais*, trans. by M.B. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 43.

¹⁰² Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, pp. 17–21.

Créolité, for its part, chose not to conceptualize Martinique primarily as a distinct political and cultural entity. They instead articulated it as one Creole nation among many in the Caribbean region, each an ‘agrégat interactionnel’ of different cultures¹⁰³ generated through European-led slavery and imperialism in the Atlantic. The creole complex was decidedly post-racial. Similarly to the architects of newly independent nations across Latin America in the early twentieth century, these thinkers truly believed in the potential of *métissage*, or racial mixing, to create a new diverse, dynamic humanity. For them, this necessitated a forgoing of racial consciousness.¹⁰⁴ Créolité arguably missed an opportunity when it framed this as an either/or question: after all, creole culture is to a large extent shaped by the reality of race for Caribbean people. By acknowledging that link, it might have been possible to develop a discourse that valorized Martinicans’ distinct cultural environment and heritage, whilst also identifying and naming their version of a shared black experience. As it stands, they prioritized the concept of cultural hybridity in their bid to demonstrate what Martinicans were, whilst also highlighting certain products of the creolization process (such as the Creole language and story-telling tradition) as being emblematic of French Antillean identity.

When we consider Créolité alongside the politics of the PPM, and as a descendant of the philosophy of Négritude, it becomes apparent that the dominant strain of nationalism to have evolved in Martinique by the 1980s is markedly cultural as opposed to political. Cultural activism, as Dr Alier pleaded when opening the 1983 Fort-de-France Festival, was the only way for Martinicans to save themselves as a people: ‘[...] parce que c’est par la culture que nous arriverons à rendre ce Peuple à lui-même.’¹⁰⁵ This phenomenon is replicated across the Caribbean, and in particular in Puerto Rico. At this point, it is worth side-stepping out of the immediate context of the French Antilles and looking at the issue from a related place, in order to shed light on some issues that were relevant, but perhaps not being articulated as clearly in Martinique as they were elsewhere.

Puerto Rico was colonized by the Spanish during the Early Modern period, before being taken as war booty by the United States in 1898. The island is now an unincorporated territory, a status which guarantees American citizenship and freedom of movement to Puerto Rican nationals but disenfranchises them at presidential and Congressional level. An elected governor presides over a local assembly that can pass a limited measure of legislation. The

¹⁰³ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, p. 28.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Festival culturel: le discours du Dr Pierre Alier’, *Antilla*, 14-21 July 1983, p. 20.

island's political status has always been hotly contested, with some of the population advocating for full US statehood, others for total independence and yet more in favour of the current commonwealth. It was the latter who held executive and legislative power during the 1980s, with an administration focussing on development in a context of continuing autonomy. Puerto Rico also enjoyed its own neo-nationalist intellectual trend in the late 1980s, in tandem with a similar *élan* in the local cultural sphere. The activities of the PPM and the Créolité movement in Martinique can thus be seen as a contemporary regional correlative. Indeed, upon further analysis of what Puerto Rican thinkers were saying at the time, numerous commonalities emerge. José Luis Méndez described the political deadlock on the island, where the factions supporting each of the options for change in status mutually block each other.¹⁰⁶ The political nationalist project is thus held in abeyance, while the status quo, however unsatisfactory, endures because it allows a range of identifications to coexist.¹⁰⁷ In response to this situation, Méndez advocates a search for a 'national consensus', one which is based on a shared feeling of nationhood¹⁰⁸ and a higher, more harmonious understanding of each other, and is therefore post-partisan. For his part, Juan Manuel Carrión combined nationalist affirmation with a socialist vision, resulting in an offer that was both anti-colonial and anti-capitalist.¹⁰⁹ These Puerto Ricans were describing, quite succinctly, what the PPM were attempting to deliver in Martinique: a positive view of nationhood that was celebratory and empowering in the face of colonial domination. Méndez shows the appeal of national consensus which they wanted to harness, while Carrión indicates the winning formula they sought to employ, or at least present to Martinican people.

A number of more general critical principles that recur throughout Puerto Rican thought on nationalism can also be applied productively to the Martinican context. The first is that the concept of 'nation' and the polity of 'state' are not interchangeable: indeed, nationalisms such as those found in Puerto Rico and Martinique often identify with something other than a nation-state.¹¹⁰ The politics of ethnicity always influences how people perceive themselves in national terms, but how central this proves to be is dependent on context. On the island itself, where Puerto Ricans are mainly interacting with each other, and

¹⁰⁶ See César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 317.

¹⁰⁷ Frances Negrón-Muntaner, 'Introduction' in *None of the above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, ed. by Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *New Directions in Latino American Cultures* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1–17 (p. 10).

¹⁰⁸ Ayala and Bernabe, p. 317.

¹⁰⁹ Ayala and Bernabe, p. 317.

¹¹⁰ Arlene M. Dávila, *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico*, *Puerto Rican Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), p. 9.

where they hold visible positions of authority, ethnicity is not a defining factor in their identification. Puerto Rico tends not to perceive itself as black or even latino in the same way that its diaspora in the US does: ‘nation’ thus becomes dissociated from ‘ethnic group’. This is where the phenomenon of the *cultural nation* often arises, borne out of the quest for a collective ‘soul’ via the recovery of some particular cultural itinerary. What elements to include in that itinerary, how to reconstruct it and who should be in charge of doing so constitutes a rich and often antagonistic field of debate, as demonstrated throughout the body of scholarship on Puerto Rican nationalism past and present. As Raquel Z. Rivera points out, the ‘defence’ of Puerto Rican ‘culture’, differentially defined, can serve a multiplicity of interests and institutions.¹¹¹ The same has proved to be true in Martinique. In his study of the role of ‘identity discourse’ in the French Antillean political sphere, Justin Daniel argues that the politicization of identities constitutes a strategic element and an important ideological resource for groups engaged in the struggle for power.¹¹² They do so by accentuating local difference:

[...] une mise en scene permanente des *spécificités* érigées en véritables emblèmes d’une identité ainsi recomposée. Nul doute, en effet, que le terme *spécificité* n’a jamais connu pareille fortune, tant il est fréquemment mobilisé par le personnel politique local, toutes tendances politiques confondues [...]¹¹³

If *droit à la différence* has already been sanctified by the ruling administration in France, then it is no longer contentious and can be mobilized as a means of appealing to a broad section of the Martinican population. While nationalist claims were initially synonymous with pro-independence, then, over the 1980s they came to be recuperated by figures and groups across the political spectrum in Martinique, including conservative ones with no anti-colonial agenda whatsoever.

The examples of Martinican performance culture analysed throughout this thesis took place against this backdrop, where nationalist discourses were beginning to be mainstreamed and instrumentalized by intellectuals and political figures alike. A lot of cultural activity in 1980s Martinique was indeed programmed to consolidate the kind of *spécificité* that local elites wanted to promote. The performances I examine were undoubtedly influenced and

¹¹¹ Raquel Z. Rivera, ‘Will the ‘Real’ Puerto Rican Culture Please Stand Up?’ in *None of the Above*, ed. by Negrón-Muntaner, pp. 217–31 (p. 218).

¹¹² Justin Daniel, ‘L’Espace politique aux Antilles Françaises’, *Ethnologie française*, 32.4 (2002), 589–600 (p. 595).

¹¹³ Daniel, p. 594.

circumscribed by these political interests and philosophical trends. At the same time, they also pushed back against them, illustrating and interrogating what this nation actually was, and each offering its own vision.

Chapter Two – How to build a culture: Carnival and Theatre in Martinique

If the problem of Martinique as an anti-nation can be visualized as a knot of many entangled threads (including, as we have seen, imperial history, the political and administrative structures of the overseas department, and Négritude and its afterlives), then culture represents another of these strands. This thesis aims to unpick the knot and analyse Martinican performance culture as something that is inevitably tied up in the anti-nation, reflecting (and sometimes consolidating) its anxieties, but which also has the potential to escape it, demonstrating other visions of Martinique and new ways of thinking, living and creating together. More specifically, it focuses on the evolution of carnival and theatre as two modes of that culture, both in terms of how differently these forms were organized, funded, and talked about, and their fundamental sameness in how they allow a complex community to express itself.

This second chapter provides the background information necessary in order to contextualize the eight case studies examined over the course of the project. These performances may have been original creative endeavours, but they were not generated in a vacuum. They ought to be understood both within the long history of black performance in Martinique, and as works that came to fruition within the local cultural landscape as it developed within one decade. The chapter will initially track the historical development of carnival and theatre up until the 1980s, and more specifically, how they intersected with broader social, cultural, political and economic phenomena. The chapter will close with an overview of how these two modes operated in Martinique during the period 1981-1993, regarding infrastructure, position in public life and degree of state involvement.

2.1 - Historical developments from the colonial period until 1981

Both carnival and theatre in modern Martinique began as exclusively European endeavours. They may have been precipitated by a blend of motivations, but these were led by the white population, in their interests and for their benefit. While on one level they simply sought to enjoy themselves, this was also entertainment with a purpose, in that it fitted into the wider French colonial project. Theatre was seen as a means of civic development, especially in terms of enhancing the island's urban architecture, culminating in the completion of the

theatre in Saint-Pierre (formerly the social and cultural centre of the island) in 1786. The colony also periodically subsidized the salaries of actors and musicians, both those based locally and touring troupes from mainland France, in an attempt to imitate the professionalism of European cultural life. Over time, theatre in Martinique thus solidified into an institution:

[...] le théâtre aux Antilles comme en Métropole resta longtemps une sorte de lieu mondain, réservé à l'élite blanche d'abord, bourgeoise ensuite, qui affectait de venir y goûter la quintessence de l'art français. Ce n'était évidemment pas un lieu ouvert. Ce n'était pas davantage un lieu de création. Cette conception de l'activité théâtrale, identifiée à un rite à la fois social et mystique, fut longtemps dominante.¹¹⁴

Carnival also initially existed as a white colonial institution, albeit one whose values deviated somewhat from the sophistication and respectability described above. The display of wealth was central to this celebration, as is evident from the accounts of sumptuously dressed and masked guests at parties held within private houses.¹¹⁵ This mode of performance has always been seen as festive as opposed to artistic, and thus did not benefit from a concerted effort to develop it. It was no less of a vital social occasion in the life of the colony, however. The imperial project was as much concerned with the exposition of economic riches as it was cultural ones.

These performances also contributed to the affirmation of French identity across the empire, but it is already apparent that the 'France' they were attempting to replicate was made up of multiple facets, not all of which were complementary. Martinican theatre aspired to an elitist classical ideal, to the extent that more popular forms such as vaudeville, mime and pantomime were rejected in favour of opera and ballet.¹¹⁶ It is as if the colonial authorities were compelled towards a kind of hyper-Frenchness, or a cultural purity that could not risk being contaminated. On the other hand, the sources of carnival are indeterminate, pan-European, pagan, and licentious, however far the festival has subsequently evolved within the context of Catholicism.¹¹⁷ It is, and always has been, a festival of drinking, dancing, feasting, loud music, costume and sex. The resulting aesthetic conventions are therefore much more eclectic and discordant than those being adhered to in the theatre. Frenchness in the

¹¹⁴ *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Désormeaux*, ed. by Jack Corzani, (Fort-de-France: Désormeaux, 1992), p. 2229.

¹¹⁵ Julien-Lung Fou, p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Stéphanie Bérard, 'Petite histoire du théâtre francophone et créolophone: de la scène coloniale aux dramaturgies antillaises contemporaines' in *Émergences Caraïbe(s)*, ed. by Bérard and Chalaye, 24-29, (p. 24).

¹¹⁷ Julien-Lung Fou, p. 11.

Caribbean colonies may have been programmed and cultivated as part of the project of imperial expansion, but not all of it could be carefully controlled. Carnival's potential for chaos does not sit well within the conception of culture as a normative force, and political and religious authorities have always been ambivalent towards it, both in mainland France and its colonies.

Regardless of how coherently it furthered France's civilizing mission in the Caribbean, performance culture formed part of the social control of the black population. They were included on white people's terms only, be it as accompanying spectators at the invitation of the person to whom they were enslaved, as extra unpaid labour for productions as and when they were required¹¹⁸, or in their designated living quarters, to which they were relegated during carnival festivities to imitate them as best they could¹¹⁹. While neither performance form is mentioned explicitly in the *Code Noir* of 1685 (the definitive body of legislation designed to regulate slavery as an institution in the French colonies), Articles 16 and 17 prohibit black people enslaved to different masters from gathering together anywhere, at any time and under any pretext.¹²⁰ These are the grim conditions under which black performance began in Martinique. The situation has obviously evolved since the 17th and 18th centuries to give a field which is much more diverse with regard to who is creating and from what perspective. Nevertheless, Martinicans are still wrestling with the foundational problems of development (how do we build and maintain a cultural life on the furthest periphery of Europe?) and identity (how can we be French, and what aspects of France should we identify with?) that were laid down on colonial terms during the early modern period.

Both modes of performance gradually became creolized, but to different degrees, and thus followed somewhat divergent trajectories. As carnival became less of a vital popular and fashionable occasion in Europe over the course of the nineteenth century, there was less pressure to assimilate into the French model than was experienced in other areas of colonial life, leaving the Caribbean freer to set the parameters of the festival. Moreover, this thesis has knowingly erred in choosing to begin the narrative of Martinican carnival in the colonial period, because it arguably started earlier. Many west African societies have vibrant traditions

¹¹⁸ Bérard, 'Petite histoire du théâtre francophone et créolophone', in *Émergences Caraïbe(s)*, ed. by Bérard and Chalaye, 24-29 (p. 24).

¹¹⁹ Julien-Lung Fou, p. 20.

¹²⁰ Léo Elisabeth, 'Associations et carnaval du 17^{ème} au 19^{ème} siècle' in *Le Carnaval: sources, tradition, modernité*, ed. by Thierry L'Etang and André Lucrèce (= Les Cahiers du Patrimoine: Conseil Régional de Martinique, 23-24, (2007)), 17-23 (p. 17).

of masquerade dating back centuries, which combine elaborate, colourful costumes with dance and percussive music to produce ritual performances, often with a mocking or satirical bent. The enslaved people whose ancestors were taken from these regions were not allowed to take that culture with them intact. Nevertheless, African oral, sonic, aesthetic and kinetic memory is continually drawn on, and merged with other elements, in the formation of Caribbean culture.

These factors contributed to the evolution of carnival in Martinique into a black, working-class festival. This is, in part, a position from which people can articulate their experience affirmatively. The drumming and call-and-response singing integral to the Martinican carnival tradition was drawn from *lasotè*, the practice of large groups of agricultural workers gathering to break topsoil in preparation for sowing crops, accompanied by music whose rhythms helped keep their movements in time.¹²¹ Fraternities known as *convois*, which normally functioned as labour cooperatives and guaranteed mutual financial aid to members in need, also convened to play music, dance and feast together, thus laying the foundations for the associative structure of subsequent carnival activity.¹²² Several essential elements of the festival thus grew out of working-class social life over the course of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the substance of that class experience has always been overlaid with that of race within a colonial society. Consider the series of bans on wearing masks and costumes during the carnival period that were issued between 1828 and 1850.¹²³ This coincided with the prelude to the definitive abolition of slavery in 1848, during which a growing number of free people of colour were able to circulate in the streets. There was thus a racialized dimension both to the perception of carnival as a threat to public order and, consequently, to the extent to which it was policed. Indeed, carnival participants across the Caribbean and its diaspora are still confronted with this judgement.

Race and class continued to structure the carnival held in St Pierre in the late nineteenth century, which was renowned for being the most vibrant in Martinique and attracted visitors from across the Caribbean and beyond. A white-led carnival displayed its wealth in the same way it always had done, with elaborate, expensive costumes, horse-drawn floats celebrating the history of their sugar plantations and promotion for their commercial products.¹²⁴ The *carnaval des riches* operated as a parallel but separate performance to the

¹²¹ Isambert Duriveau, 'Gragé moyôk, lasotè et sôsieté' in *Le Carnaval*, ed by L'Etang and Lucrèce, 37-41.

¹²² Thierry L'Etang, 'Royaumes de notre monde', in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 24-33.

¹²³ Henry Delinde, 'Sources et traces carnavalesques' in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 10-16 (p. 11).

¹²⁴ Marie Chomereau-Lamotte, 'La Cavalcade, clou du carnaval de Saint-Pierre', in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 51-53.

popular festivities. It is remembered as a spectacular interruption, one which took place on horseback and which was therefore at a degree of physical removal from the street and the ordinary people.¹²⁵ While black people were thus excluded from one kind of carnival, they cultivated another one that was poorer but more creative and resourceful. These revellers usually had to make their own costumes rather than buy them, using whatever spare materials were available. Indeed, all the modes of expression contributing to carnival rely on the principle of recycling. Some performers constructed mime acts mocking the gait and mannerisms of public figures. Others drew on movements developed during weekly dance parties held from 6 January onwards. Songwriters were inspired by funny or scandalous incidents arising in the social and political life of St Pierre throughout the previous year. The small bands of musicians who accompanied revellers in the streets employed various techniques to create a style of music tailored to the occasion, reprocessing the opera music heard in the town's theatre (now more accessible to a small but growing black bourgeoisie) whilst also improvising rhythms to make them more danceable.¹²⁶ In the absence of any recognition or subsidy from the local authorities (despite the revenue generated from tourism), the people's carnival was left with very limited financial means but great creative freedom, and a means of organization independent of official administration. It is notable that black women are remembered for forming sororities that structured the street parades and were historically at the centre of the creole songwriting tradition¹²⁷, in a colonial society that doubly marginalized them on account of their gender and their 'race'.

The story of the St Pierre carnival of the late 1800s, and of Caribbean carnival ever since, is thus one of black creativity and sociability. More fundamentally, however, in a historical context where both slavery and its abolition (however delayed and inconclusive) were still within living memory, carnival became an expression of black emancipation. Contemporary accounts do not reference this explicitly and the local writer Virgile Salavina, for example, struggled to interpret the energy powering the festival: 'A le voir s'amuser avec cette fougue quasiment insensée, on aurait pensé que tout ce peuple sentait proche sa fin! – qu'il sentait ses jours comptés ...'¹²⁸ Both white chroniclers and the local middle class alike were only vaguely conscious of these people's history and their present situation. They did

¹²⁵ Léo Ursulet, 'Le carnaval de Saint-Pierre' in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 43-50 (p.44).

¹²⁶ Ursulet, 'Le carnaval de Saint-Pierre' in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 43-50, pp. 45-49.

¹²⁷ Lyne-Rose Beuze, 'Le carnaval de Saint-Pierre: la rivalité des bals et des sociétés carnavalesques', in L'Etang and Lucrèce, 54-58, pp. 55-56.

¹²⁸ Virgile Salavina, *Saint-Pierre, la Venise tropicale (1870-1902)*, (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street, 2007), p. 220. ProQuest One Literature.

not acknowledge the centuries of slavery, or the poverty and racism that continued to stunt their lives. Observers puzzled over Martinicans taking pleasure in every moment of dancing in the street because they did not know (or, at least, they did not know from experience) how precarious that freedom is for black people. Slavery can be reinstated, and carnival can effectively be banned. And yet, it is only through knowledge and understanding of that racial trauma that one can begin to see carnival as an expression of black joy.

Theatre as a performance mode in the French Antilles did not come to embody the same meaning during this historical period. In fact, it is perhaps more appropriate to talk about *theatres*, in the plural, when accounting for the development of this art form into the first half of the twentieth century. There were amateur theatre associations in small towns and villages across Martinique which regularly staged devised or improvised sketches for a broad general audience. It is difficult to comment with any precision on the nature of these performances, as the organizations disbanded over time and did not leave archival material. Nevertheless, Max Jeanne's description of it as a popular sub-culture is useful in mapping out the contours of the genre in Martinique: 'Mais déjà à l'époque on pouvait constater une sorte de hiatus entre le théâtre de rue (expression naturelle et spontanée) et le théâtre de salle (inauthentique, usant quasi exclusivement du français comme langue).'¹²⁹ The *théâtre de salle*, or theatre as an officially recognized institution and documented tradition, was white, meaning that it was not a creolized form, but one which embodied and reflected the white experience of a European colony in the Caribbean. A vernacular opera and ballet took shape, and was indeed circulated back to Parisian audiences, that was fashioned from a colonial vantage point. These were *ballets exotiques*, which integrated elements of afro-creole music that appealed because of their Otherness. A small repertory of *béké*-authored plays had accumulated sporadically by the early twentieth century, offering dramatic worlds that seem to be only incidentally Caribbean. In his account of Gilbert de Chambertrand's suite of Guadeloupean comedies, Jeanne critiques their rigid adherence to the conventions of a French comedy of manners, to the extent that they simply do not engage with Caribbean life at all, bar the bilingual French/Creole backdrop to the characters' mistakes and misunderstandings.¹³⁰ It is as if French Antillean culture is merely a decorative feature of the *théâtre de salle*, as opposed to the environment within which it exists and from which it can draw inspiration.

¹²⁹ Max Jeanne, 'Sociologie du théâtre antillais' in *Regards sur le théâtre*, ed. by Max Jeanne (= Centre Antillais de Recherches et d'Etudes, 6 (1980)), 7-42 (p. 9).

¹³⁰ Jeanne, p. 11.

The values of that institution were drawn from mainland France, a process which can be situated within the broader assimilation of colonial subjects into metropolitan French culture. Nowhere is this seen clearer than in the regular stopovers of French professional theatre companies on tour in the colonies. One such troupe, La Comédie de Paris, issued the following message to their prospective Martinican audiences in advance of their arrival in early 1954:

Avec le livre, la musique et les arts plastiques, le théâtre est un des modes d'expression les plus valables et les plus nobles. Et il est souhaitable que, dans les circonstances actuelles, il puisse étendre sa mission. [...] Nous créerons et affirmerons le grand Théâtre légendaire en dehors et au-dessus de la mode où tout est Poésie, afin que par son essence et sa hauteur, il apporte à tous un message d'amitié et de fraternité.¹³¹

As far as this company was concerned, it was their moral duty to demonstrate the virtues of their chosen art form, thereby aiding the dissemination of cultural values that were humanist and universal. This, it seems, was theatre with a higher purpose. The Antillean magazine which printed this missive later goes on to praise them for their success in a competition for new companies held in Paris: 'Ce brillant succès remporté par la Comédie de Paris en plein cœur prouve qu'en accueillant cette jeune troupe comme nous l'avons fait depuis plusieurs années, nous ne nous sommes pas trompés sur sa qualité.'¹³² For these local viewers as well, artistic value is arbitrated by critics in the metropole, the ultimate guarantor of quality.

Another of these touring companies, and one which remains prominent in the memory of Martinican theatre-goers and theatre-makers, was that lead by Jean Gosselin from the 1950s until 1989. They offered a broad (but invariably French-language) repertory, ranging from the classics of Molière and Racine to avant-garde plays by Ionesco, via Feydeau farces. The performances given by the company were billed as a major event in the islands' cultural calendar, all of which was modulated by class. This theatre was resolutely urban in location and upper middle-class in audience, and was identified by some local scholar-critics as serving those aspirations alone:

Théâtre d'importation réussissant tout au plus à entretenir le bovarysme des fonctionnaires des îles, les gosselinades n'en ont pas moins entraîné le déclin puis la

¹³¹ *Horizons Caraïbes*, No. 4, December 1953, p. 29.

¹³² *Horizons Caraïbes*, No. 21, May 1955, p. 30.

disparition d'une certaine forme de théâtre à la campagne, expression maladroite certes mais dont personne ne peut dire comment elle aurait évolué.¹³³

It was exclusionary in that it was only accessible to those with the necessary financial and social capital, and it took up what little resources and official media coverage were available for theatre at the time. This made perfect sense to the Martinican bourgeoisie who consumed it, because this was the channel through which they received culture. The local press of the 1950s, 60s and 70s (which voiced the interests and concerns of that social class) articulates this dependency: 'Nous lirons encore longtemps et avec nostalgie les compte-rendus de Paris, Londres ou New-York, révélant pièces et auteurs que nous ne verrons jamais.'¹³⁴ The presence of local black theatre, or what resources it might need, is not part of the discussion. Evidently, there were two theatres in operation in Martinique in the decades leading up to the 1980s, with the institutional one occupying the dominant place. It operated as an extension of the cultural good that came from elsewhere and remained completely ignorant of the black performance culture living around it.

Nevertheless, the history of theatre in Martinique leading up to 1981 ought not to be viewed as one of wholesale alienation. A case in point is the use of agitprop theatre by radical left-wing political activists during the 1960s and 70s. The link between the spheres of art and politics varied in strength and directness. Initially, poetic montages based on the writings of Aimé Césaire and other black Atlantic thinkers were staged by associations representing French Antillean students in Paris (such as the Association Générale des Etudiants Martiniquais, or AGEM), and were performed across the islands and in diasporic communities in the metropole. These groups, as noted in Chapter One, held socialist and anti-imperialist convictions and campaigned for the independence of Martinique and Guadeloupe. The subsequent body of French Antillean political theatre that shared these values, and the objective of consciousness-raising, represents a distinct dramatic sub-genre: while many of the key playwrights were politically engaged, the performances that they generated were not always deeply embedded in activist networks.

Broadly speaking, their work was concerned with the neo-colonial situation in the French overseas departments, engaging with labour conflicts (in plays such as *Somambil*, by Sonny Rupaire), landmark political events (the civil uprising in Martinique in 1959, commemorated in *Eïa! Man-maille là!* by Auguste Macouba) and migration (such as Daniel

¹³³ Jeanne, p. 12.

¹³⁴ *Parallèles*, No.31, 2nd quarter 1969, p 50.

Boukman's *Les Négriers* and *Kimafoutiésa*, devised under the direction of Joby Bernabé, both of which lambast the French government's policy of encouraging mass immigration from the Caribbean departments to the metropole). It is possible in retrospect to identify a repertory of Martinican-authored plays originating in the 1960s and 70s, by writers such as Boukman, Aimé Césaire, Georges Mauvois and Vincent Placol, among others. However, to claim that this revolutionized theatre as an institution in Martinique, or that it constituted an emergent national theatre, would be an exaggeration. This was an alternative fringe circuit, which the authorities treated with what was, at best, indifference and at worst fear and hostility. Indeed, they employed repressive gestures ranging from bans on the performance of certain plays to the surveillance and restricted residence of individual playwrights.¹³⁵ The Martinican performance history of this body of plays is also quite uneven. Even dramatic work by Césaire was not staged on the island as often as one might expect, and was usually performed in Europe first, under the auspices of French directors such as Jean-Marie Serreau, who led the production of *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* at the Salzburg Festival in 1964. Boukman's plays were primarily staged by a Guadeloupean company, Poulbwa, although the group did give performances in Martinique on occasion.

Rather than a coherent movement, then, it is more accurate to view the political theatre of 1970s Martinique as a patchwork of visiting performers, geographically scattered activity and local talent with notable vision, but limited scope for development. This was the decade in which the most active and stable group consolidated itself under Henri Melon as the Théâtre Populaire Martiniquais (TPM), with the stated aims of combatting ignorance, alienation and the denigration of black people and their culture. They aspired to be a proto-national theatre that would further the cultural enrichment of the island community.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, like all the local actors at the time, they struggled with a lack of training opportunities, resources, premises and travel opportunities, not to mention the difficulties in retaining members and structures in a social context of heightened demographic mobility.¹³⁷ The quality of this genre of production was also variable. In its earliest days, especially, this kind of drama resembled little more than a mouthpiece for left-wing politics, with negligible care or attention given to aesthetic concerns: '[...] d'où toute une série de clichés, de mots d'ordre, de slogans, de leitmotifs, de lieux communs éculés, éjaculés sur la scène sans la

¹³⁵ Bridget Jones, 'Theatre & Resistance? An Introduction to Some French Caribbean Plays' in *An Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing: Guadeloupe and Martinique*, ed. by Sam Haigh (Oxford: Berg, 1999), pp. 83-97 (p. 86).

¹³⁶ Henri Melon, 'Le "Théâtre Populaire"', in *Regards sur le théâtre*, ed. by Jeanne, 61-69, p. 65.

¹³⁷ Jeanne, pp. 32-40.

moindre distanciation.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, this was a theatre that, at a time of growing dissatisfaction with departmentalization, put Martinican concerns and frustrations centre stage. The fact that many of these plays were performed in Creole also cannot be taken for granted, as using the language was then simply inconceivable in any sphere of official or polite public life, including the *théâtre de salle*. The issues therein may have been articulated in a socialist vocabulary that did not originate from Martinique and was thus arguably alienating in its own way. On balance, however, this period of theatre history remains politically, culturally and historically significant, influencing and indeed overlapping with the period with which this thesis is chiefly concerned.

The development of carnival throughout the second half of the twentieth century also proved to be complex and uneven. Indeed, the festival ought not to be conceptualized purely as a zone of affirmative popular expression and freedom, especially when charting its evolution during the decades following World War Two. Various archival sources testify to heightened conflict within organizational circles over the aesthetics, structure and ultimately the purpose and meaning of Martinican carnival. The musician Loulou Boislaville, who sat on the informal Comité du Carnaval Martiniquais in the early 1950s, later recalled his dismay at being confronted with some of the propositions:

[...] on a voulu copier sur le carnaval de Nice, on a même délégué des gens à Nice. Les gens venaient voir, il n'y avait pas de participation comme avant. J'étais opposé à l'orientation que prenait le carnaval, car chaque pays a ses mœurs et ses coutumes. [...] Avant cela l'Office de Tourisme organisait le concours de Miss. On a voulu introduire dans le Carnaval des présentations en Bikini, en maillot de bain, je trouvais que ça n'entrait pas [dans] le cadre du carnaval, et aussi les problèmes ont commencé.¹³⁹

While assimilation is not a new phenomenon in this context, the pressure to adhere to the norms set by a dominant external culture is felt keenly here by Boislaville. Euro-American tastes and values, fundamentally at odds with what Martinican carnival has always been and should continue to be, were being imposed on a vitally important cultural practice. What is more, the initiative for this greater assimilation was coming not from the powers elsewhere, but from Martinicans themselves. It is not surprising that much infighting ensued within organizational committees. Solange Londas, widely remembered for her successful management of the creole song contest in Fort-de-France, was forced out of her position in

¹³⁸ Jeanne, p. 13.

¹³⁹ 'Carnaval an tan lontan', *Fouyaya*, No.46, February 1986, p. 17.

Carnaval Foyal, perhaps the capital's largest and most powerful committee. This was partly owing to her belief in the primacy of the traditional *groupes à pied*, where groups of costumed revellers parade on foot, and her disinclination for the large, spectacular motorized floats favoured in other carnivals such as that in Nice.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, these were to become a permanent fixture in Martinique, and one which intersected with the influx of other new technologies. Many practitioners and commentators took issue with the trend of mounting loudspeakers on floats, whose recorded offering drowned out the 'acoustic' music played live by participants on the streets.¹⁴¹ Indeed, they tend to describe the problem as not merely one of noise pollution or incivility, but as a kind of existential threat to carnival as a people's festival.

Scholars have, in retrospect, been able to put these contentious developments in their specific historical context. Richard D.E. Burton cites the death of carnival as one example of the decreolization which occurred in the French Caribbean departments between the 1960s and the late 1970s, alongside the abandonment of local styles of dressing and cooking.¹⁴² This process refers to the corrosion of traditional cultural forms caused by the major economic, social and demographic changes brought about by departmentalization, as described in Chapter One. The new overseas departments represented a ready-made and enthusiastic market for European products and media, which flooded societies such as Martinique, rapidly displacing their island-specific practices. While Glissant might not have used the term decreolization himself, he had already gone some way towards diagnosing this phenomenon as part of his wider theorization of Martinique and its neo-colonial predicament in *Le Discours antillais*. Indeed, he thought, worked and wrote during its apotheosis: the collected observations and analyses that make up that seminal work were made during the decades immediately following departmentalization, when French Antillean society was being transformed with particular pace and intensity. The anti-nation, as I understand it, is a community in the throes of decreolization. To be clear, we are not talking about styles, habits and customs falling out of fashion the way they do in any other context. This is a situation in which a socio-economic system is designed by an external colonial power for its own financial gain, undermining the culture of the colony as a matter of course.

¹⁴⁰ 'Un historique du carnaval à travers Solange Londas', *Antilla*, 15 February 1990, p. 22.

¹⁴¹ See Charles-Henri Fargues, *Le Guide du carnavalier: Mas koulou pété po po ou Les Bons Vieux chantés malélevés du temps jadis* (Case-Pilote: Editions Lafontaine, 1998), p. 11.

¹⁴² Richard D.E. Burton, 'The French West Indies "à l'heure de l'Europe": An overview' in *French and West Indian*, ed. by Burton and Réno, pp. 1-18 (pp. 12-13).

Martinican people both in and outside of intellectual circles (including carnival practitioners) noticed and feared decreolization, or the loss of their culture. It is constantly referenced in public discourse from the late 1970s onwards, and this cultural consciousness has influenced Martinique and its performances ever since. Loulou Boislaville, for example, dedicated his life to preserving traditional French Antillean music, notably *biguine* (a creole genre dating from the nineteenth century which is specific to Martinique), but also many songs strongly associated with Carnival and Christmas. He ran the Ballets Martiniquais, a folk group that has showcased Martinican music and dance on stages all over the world, including the opening ceremony of the 1972 Munich Olympics. The group is remembered in particular for being the first to be contracted to play for cruise ship passengers disembarking on the island, at a time when this type of holiday was beginning to become fashionable and accessible to wealthy Western travellers. Boislaville's earlier determination to prevent carnival from becoming a spectacle designed to appeal to Western tastes does not sit entirely well with how his project panned out. To this day, the Ballets Martiniquais present Martinican music and dance as a staged show, directed towards foreign and domestic audiences alike. The history of the group and Boislaville's involvement in it represents one example of the uneasy symbiosis between activism and preservation on one hand, and the commodification and folklorization of culture on the other, in an economic context where tourism is rapidly being developed to replace decimated agricultural industries.

These issues continue to shape Martinican performance culture, in all its forms, right through to the present day. They will be examined in more depth throughout this thesis, and in the second section of this chapter, which focuses more closely on how carnival and theatre operated in the period 1981-1993.

2.2 - The state of affairs in the 1980s: structures, people, problems

By the 1980s, profound differences between carnival and theatre were already well entrenched in terms of how these modes operated, the nature of their relations with local authorities, and the social and cultural significance that Martinicans accorded to each performance form. Over the course of the next decade, this division deepened. At the same time, however, both existed in the same wider context of economic precarity and a need for 'development'. Indeed, these pressures began to bear on carnival and theatre in new ways during this decade.

As we have seen, theatre has been promoted as an art form central to the cultural flourishing of Martinique since the early colonial period. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century, however, that the institutions through which the genre officially functioned were opened to the local black population. This came about partly as a result of state intervention at a national level. Upon the recommendation of the Ministry of Culture, decentralization policy designated geographic regions as zones specialising in certain art forms. In the French Caribbean departments, Martinique was ‘zoned’ for theatre and the visual arts, while music and dance were to be privileged in Guadeloupe.¹⁴³ This arbitrary allocation of funding may have been made on the basis of demographic differences between the two islands. Guadeloupe had a less well-established *mulâtre* middle class compared to Martinique, and a stronger and more radical black political militant base. From a metropolitan perspective, Guadeloupe is thus perceived as the ‘more African’ and ‘less French’ of the departments¹⁴⁴ and, as the racial stereotype would dictate, better suited to expressive modes that showcase their innate affinity for rhythm. Whatever the rationale, the decision contributed to the consolidation of theatre as an institution in Martinique.

State involvement was also an official reaction to the revolutionary politics and theatre of the 1960s and 70s. The Centre Martiniquais d’Action Culturelle, or CMAC, was established in 1974 under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture and the Regional Council. The CMAC did not have its own premises at the time (it was granted the use of the Catholic parochial hall at Bellevue in Fort-de-France) and was conceived as an organizing body for cultural activity, notably in the form of annual or biannual flagship events. This included the *Rencontres théâtrales d’avril*, whose 1982 edition constituted the first festival dedicated to theatre on the island. The *Rencontres* hosted visiting companies from across the Caribbean and beyond, who gave performances and participated in round table discussions. The programming of this festival was in keeping with the CMAC’s policy of fostering intra-Caribbean and international exchange, in a Martinique where there was initially little awareness of what was happening culturally in the surrounding region. The CMAC was also suspected of having the ulterior motive of channelling energy into French-sanctioned cultural activity.¹⁴⁵ The long-time director Fanny Auguiac refutes this, insisting that she experienced

¹⁴³ Bridget Jones and Sita E. Dickson Littlewood, *Paradoxes of French Caribbean Theatre: An Annotated Checklist of Dramatic Works, Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique from 1900* ([London?]: Roehampton Institute, 1997), p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Burton, ‘The French West Indies “à l’heure de l’Europe”’, in *French and West Indian*, ed. by Burton and Réno, p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ Jones, ‘Theatre & Resistance?’ in *An Introduction to Caribbean Francophone Writing*, ed. by Haigh, p. 86.

no pressure from any of the governmental bodies funding her to adhere to any party line. She also points out that artists and community figures of all political persuasions and none willingly collaborated with her.¹⁴⁶ While interpersonal relations may have been good from Auguiac's perspective, however, wider structural issues were never acknowledged. An institution directed by a white French woman for thirty-three years, and which did not see the development of local theatre as its priority, is not one which is attentive to how Martinique's history, and its present, have been shaped by European imperialism.

By far the most enduring and influential impact on theatre infrastructure, and indeed on the island's political and cultural life in general, was that made by Aimé Césaire. In his role as mayor of Fort-de-France from 1945 to 2001, Césaire was keen to use funds and resources from the city council to support the arts in his constituency. As we have seen, the development of creole culture was central to his party's political project. The PPM promoted the Fort-de-France Festival, established by Césaire and his administration in 1970, as the acme of Martinican cultural life. Indeed, it was at the 1983 edition that Pierre Alier made the speech analysed in the previous chapter, during which he also cast the festival itself as part of a collective quest for a composite creole identity:

Mais remarquez que notre programme va de Sophocle aux danses traditionnelles, témoignage que nous refusons de nous enfermer sur nous-mêmes: l'abeille martiniquaise butine toutes les fleurs pour élaborer son propre miel. C'est ainsi que nous irons toujours de l'avant jusqu'à atteindre notre objectif final: nous retrouver nous-mêmes.¹⁴⁷

The festival's blended offering of Martinican, African and European performances reflects how at pains the local authorities and their intellectual counterparts were to emphasize that their cultural activism was not too narrow and, it is implied, not too black. The issue here is not really the curiosity and open-mindedness of the organizers and the Martinican people, which is not seriously in doubt (at least, no more so than in any other context). More precisely, this is the normalization of whiteness in action. Consider the Avignon Festival, held annually in the south of France. In 1983, its management were never under any pressure to justify the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in its programme. This is arguably still the case today. It is 'normal' for Avignon to be an overwhelmingly white festival, while a Fort-de-France festival that unapologetically programmed black performance is not deemed

¹⁴⁶ *150 grands témoins de la Martinique*, ed. by Rudy Rabathaly and Adams Kwateh (Fort-de-France: France-Antilles, 2018), pp. 38–39.

¹⁴⁷ 'Festival culturel: le discours du Dr Pierre Alier', *Antilla*, 14–21 July 1983, p. 20.

appropriate or desirable. Even as the organizers consistently championed Martinican, Guadeloupean, Haitian and Nigerian artists, they could not escape the racial double standard demanding that black culture be counter-balanced with a European offering.

In fairness to Césaire, his legacy in the domain of Martinican theatre is not limited to the Festival. His Service Municipal d'Action Culturelle (SERMAC) has offered subsidized workshops and courses in visual and performing arts since 1975, thus giving a broad demographic an introduction to a range of disciplines and an opportunity to develop basic techniques. In terms of physical spaces, the SERMAC is equipped with the Grand Carbet, a multi-purpose performance space in the city centre, and a network of smaller halls in residential neighbourhoods around Fort-de-France. This made programmes and events more accessible to poorer and more marginalized communities.

The new cultural infrastructure of the 1970s and 80s had its limits, however. None of it was designed specifically for theatre and, in keeping with the mid-twentieth century population exodus into the island's growing capital, it was mostly concentrated in Fort-de-France. There were efforts made by the CMAC and the Festival organizers to 'decentralize' certain productions to smaller towns (albeit in ever more approximative venues), but the resources necessary to create were the preserve of urban Martinique. Even these developing assets were a double-edged sword, especially in terms of the influence of Aimé Césaire. Indeed, the privileged place that Césaire continues to occupy in Martinican public life cannot be underestimated. His image is still reproduced everywhere, from murals in the city to billboards at the international airport which bears his name, to the extent that he forms as much a part of the island's iconography as the drums or the tropical vegetation cited earlier. The public's approbatory perception of him is partly motivated by pride. His political and cultural prominence as a black French man who worked for the betterment of Martinique was, and is, unprecedented, at least in the francophone world. Older local people whose adulthood coincided with Césaire's decades in office also express a profound sense of gratitude, crediting him with improving their living standards and coming to their aid in times of great need. A case in point is that of Marie-Thérèse Armède, the well-known nonagenarian carnival practitioner who, when recalling the help she received from the mayoral office, spoke about Césaire as if their relationship was personal:

A la suite du passage de trois cyclones, ma maison qui était en bois a été complètement détruite. Aimé Césaire l'a finalement reconstruite en dur. C'est comme

ça que la misère a pris fin pour moi. Si je récite du Césaire, c'est parce qu'il m'a fait du bien. Il m'a secourue [...] ¹⁴⁸

This kind of identification with Césaire as a figure symbolizing goodness and benevolence helped elevate him to mythological status ¹⁴⁹, whereby his personality came to be conflated with that of Martinique itself. There are difficulties involved in making theatre in such a context, despite (in fact, perhaps because of) the generosity bestowed by Césaire upon local creatives. A sense of indebtedness can easily tip over into one of obligation, which can compel people to honour a particular legacy or programme rather than create on their own terms. Moreover, to criticize the hand that provides here is not seen simply as a matter of course, or a healthy challenge to authority. What is at stake is a troubled and vulnerable community's sense of what is noble in themselves, crystallized in one persona. In contesting and upsetting that, theatre makers risked marginalizing themselves from the audiences they wanted and needed to engage.

There was no way of escaping these social pressures, and it seems that nearly all of the framework for theatrical activity in Martinique at the time was somehow connected to Césaire, his family or his party. The only purpose-built theatre in existence at the time was the Théâtre de la Ville, or the *petit théâtre municipal*, an Italianate annex built onto the back of the former town hall in 1912 (it was here that Césaire kept his office for the duration of his tenure, even after a more modern civic building was completed in 1970). As a result of the prevailing policy in France of decentralizing cultural production, it was designated as the Centre Dramatique Régional de la Martinique (CDRM) and intended to be a support base for local theatre. It first housed the Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle, founded in 1981 by Annick Justin-Joseph as the first professional theatre company in Martinique, with salaries subsidized by the French state. Its creation was motivated partly by a desire to legitimize the status of acting as a viable and valuable profession, in a context where artists working in this field were not accorded the same recognition as musicians. Beyond its importance for the careers of the individuals directly concerned, the Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle was perceived as being integral to the furtherance of Martinican society more broadly:

Le fait même que des expériences de professionnalisme dans ce domaine artistique soient renouvelées, montre combien notre conscience collective se cherche et manifeste sa volonté d'Autonomie, son besoin de s'affirmer à travers tous les modes

¹⁴⁸ *150 grands témoins de la Martinique*, ed. by Rabathaly and Kwateh, p. 34.

¹⁴⁹ Rosello, p. 9.

d'expression par lesquels une société, tout en agissant sur ses membres, contribue à l'évolution de la culture universelle.¹⁵⁰

This is coherent with the 'discourse of development' being formulated both by the local political caste in power in Martinique at the time, and by President Mitterrand. The idea that Martinique could and should better itself through boosting private enterprise and enhancing and extending public services is omnipresent during this period, both in political enunciations and in the media. It is often employed by the PPM and constitutes a key tenet of their brand of neo-nationalism. This functions partly as a vote-winning strategy, in the sense that 'development' is something of a buzz word which appeals to everyone in its apparent neutrality. Nevertheless, it is motivated by the genuine belief that what Martinique needed, above all else, were broad development endeavours that would supposedly benefit everyone, lifting people out of poverty and improving quality of life for all. The concept is not limited to the economic sphere. Rather, it is one which pervades all areas of Martinican life to this day. As we have just seen, it was manifested through efforts to make culture more professional, often by tying it into state funding and amenities.

This kind of project undeniably resulted in positive outcomes for many, including the theatre makers discussed in this thesis. It also has limitations that run deeper than those commonly associated with development in Western contexts. There is certainly potential damage to the social and environmental fabric of the area concerned, and inevitable unevenness in the distribution of returns or access to amenities, much the same as anywhere else. More fundamentally, however, buying into the concept uncritically and ahistorically ignores how the very concept of 'development' is constituted through colonialism. French imperialism was conceived of as a mode of development, especially after the adoption of the doctrine of assimilation in the early nineteenth century. A model for transforming Martinique that does not change colonial governance structures, economic systems or the entrenchment of white elites is colonial in basis, if not in appearance. If the CDRM inaugurated a new cultural institution at the beginning of the 1980s and at the crest of the PPM's success, then it ought to be viewed as an example of profoundly circumscribed neo-colonial development.

The company initially worked within a largely European classical and contemporary tradition and, indeed, questions were raised over Justin-Joseph's choice of plays. She justified her selection by maintaining that the company did not want to limit themselves to Martinican drama, and that it was necessary to stick to a standard repertory because of its proven

¹⁵⁰ M. Ponnamah, 'Le Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle: une troupe professionnelle', *Antilla*, 13 January 1983, p. 38.

pedagogical benefit to actors in training.¹⁵¹ Justin-Joseph did put on some Martinican plays, notably *L'Enfant des passages*, Ina Césaire's reimagining of the creole folk character Ti-Jean and the traditional stories that feature him. The company also came to be more involved in the production of locally-authored comedies such as those by Georges Mauvois (whose play *Misyé Molina* will be analysed in Chapter Three) under Justin-Joseph's successor Elie Pennont. While the choices made by these leaders do matter for those working under their direction, and for Martinican audiences, it is important not to focus too much on the actions of individuals and lose sight of wider problems. The same racial double standard that influenced the organization of the Fort-de-France festival is at work here, whereby to explicitly support local performance culture is seen as laudable in some contexts, but narrow-minded in others, such as Martinique. It is also evident that there were limits to how well the new cultural institutions of the 1980s reflected the population they were supposed to serve.

The key issues around development, institutionalization and political endorsement raised here appear, at least at first glance, not to apply to carnival culture of the same period. This is largely due to how carnival has never been perceived as an *art de la scène* in the same way as theatre, dance and live music are. Even today, the DAC Martinique (the Ministry of Culture's regional branch on the island) does not include carnival amongst the cultural forms it subsidizes.¹⁵² It is seen as a festive community celebration and not as a mode of concerted artistic expression, and however frequently and enthusiastically it is cited as being emblematic of creole cultural identity, this does not seem to have translated into significant or sustained financial support. Indeed, state and commercial sponsorship in the French Antilles has never gone further than ad hoc, partial alliances and pots of funding. This is in no way comparable to the formidable investment enjoyed by carnival elsewhere in the Americas, notably in Trinidad, Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans.

The organization and funding of carnival in the French Antillean context has always been primarily grassroots, with structures arising organically out of pre-existing social networks. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw several new groups come to prominence, often with distinct creative projects. Tanbou Bò Kannal was born out of a shared passion for local music, specifically drumming. Their performances incorporate afro-creole rhythms drawn from *bèlè*, a unique Martinican genre that originated during the time of slavery, and which

¹⁵¹ Ronald Laurencine, 'Le Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle', *Antilla*, 18 November 1983, p. 37.

¹⁵² There is no explicit mention of carnival anywhere on the DAC Martinique's web page dedicated to performing arts - 'Spectacle vivant / Aides déconcentrées' <<https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Regions/DAC-Martinique/Disciplines-et-secteurs/Spectacle-vivant-Aides-deconcentrees>> [accessed 5 April 2022].

blends drum-based music, group dance and call-and-response song. Plastic System Band were more interested in the visual dimension of their production, paying more attention to costume design and how their procession was structured. In a break from *bèlè* tradition, they began to use large, inverted plastic jars instead of goatskin drums, which proved to be a cheaper alternative resulting in a different sonority.¹⁵³ Both Tanbou Bò Kannal and Plastic System Band continue to perform to this day and have released albums and EPs. The recordings are a testament to the depth of talent and appreciation for music within these groups, and to the centrality of music to Caribbean carnival in general.

For both associations, playing live on the streets during carnival had an urgent social purpose beyond their own creative endeavours. The founders were motivated by the core belief in the need to develop *groupes à pied* as a bulwark against the fashion for loud sound systems mounted on floats. As has been noted earlier, this was perceived as a threat to the integrity and tradition of carnival as a participatory people's festival. It is also an action taken within a wider ambient anxiety surrounding new technologies more broadly, and the risk they pose to social life. Consider this statement made by Simone Coppet, the President of Carnaval Foyal, outlining her hopes for the festival during this period: 'Puisse que le Carnaval 1988 soit placé sous le signe de la gaité, de la spontanéité et aussi de la participation, car il ne saurait y avoir de bon carnaval si chacun reste chez soi devant son poste de télévision.'¹⁵⁴ At a time when television was the media technology of choice for accessing entertainment at home, Coppet fears that it could drastically reduce carnival attendance, regardless of what mode of music is on offer during the processions.

This is one example of how the make-up of Martinican carnival is contested by those for whom the festival matters, and one which demonstrates their ambivalence towards its modernization. The changes wrought by technological advancements and material prosperity may have been sources of anxiety for some, but others were not satisfied with how carnival was left to remain perennially at the same level of amateur practice. Communication and travel within the Caribbean region had become more accessible to Martinicans from the 1960s onwards, allowing them to see how carnival was run in other related contexts. A case in point is that of Sophie and Henry Bibas, who ran the Comité Bibas from 1975 as an association that provided costumes based on a selected annual theme for a large group of revellers. They had previously visited Trinidad, and were impressed by the capital's 'mas

¹⁵³ 'Antilla dossier: l'énergie carnaval', *Antilla*, 15 February 1990, pp. 19-26 (p. 24).

¹⁵⁴ Association Carnaval Foyal, *Livre d'or des 20 ans de carnaval en Martinique* (Fort-de-France: L'Editeur, 1988), p. 3.

camps', the backstreet workshops manufacturing elaborate carnival costumes on a semi-industrial scale for a paying clientele. The couple sought to emulate this more systematic and efficient mode of organization through the Comité Bibas. They see themselves and their group as artisans who should be able to make a living from their passion and their craft and wanted to see the professionalization of carnival in Martinique, where it would be recognized as a viable career path for local young people.¹⁵⁵ In the absence of any such acknowledgement of their work, the Bibas know that the burden of financial investment will always rest on them:

Nous avons été confrontés [...] à une réalité, à savoir que, pour réussir un carnaval qui tient compte de la tradition autour de la créativité, il faut des moyens. Nous avons été obligés de sortir de l'argent de notre poche. [...] nous laissons des plumes d'année en année, car nous n'entrons jamais dans nos frais.¹⁵⁶

Indeed, economic precarity permeates performance culture of all genres in Martinique at the time, and theatre and carnival-makers alike comment frequently on the issue. The evolution of these two forms during the 1980s is not as divergent as it may appear at first, especially when it comes to the financial security of the creatives themselves. It is an exaggeration to say that there was a 'professional' theatre industry in Martinique. There may have been more money and institutional support on offer than in previous decades, and in relation to carnival, but it was still impossible for individuals in Martinique to live off their theatre practice, especially if they had a family. All of the actors and directors working in Martinique at the time relied on other employment to support themselves, regardless of how much time and energy they invested in their creative endeavours.

At the same time, it is erroneous to conceive of Martinican carnival as somehow operating outside of the state's influence. While the festival was not included in the structures for supporting the arts put in place by the Ministry of Culture and the local authorities, it was seen as a vector of economic development, and specifically as a potential asset in the shift towards tourism. The idea that carnival should play a role in attracting Western visitors to Martinique is not new to the 1980s. In fact, it had been growing in influence over the previous two decades, motivated by the belief that the island was lagging behind its Caribbean neighbours in terms of the development of its tourism industry, and that in failing to promote its festivals it was missing a golden opportunity. In a 1969 article outlining his

¹⁵⁵ Rabathaly and Kwateh, p. 53.

¹⁵⁶ Rabathaly and Kwateh, p. 52.

plans to remedy this situation, Clovis Beauregard, the Secretary General of the Martinican Chamber of Commerce re-frames the most important Martinican celebrations as phenomena that meet tourists' needs for fun, entertainment and escapism:

Les beaux paysages, les belles plages au soleil, une bonne table et un bon gîte ne suffisent pas. Il faut distraire le touriste et pour cela lui préparer un programme varié et original.

De là l'importance pour le développement du tourisme, des festivals annuels comportant des manifestations aussi variées qu'originales, organisés par la plupart des pays touristiques, souvent même à l'échelon de la région ou de la ville. Des calendriers attractifs, largement diffusés à l'étranger, bien avant l'évènement, par l'entremise notamment des agences de voyage et par une publicité intelligente, font accourir des foules de visiteurs.¹⁵⁷

Consequently, those involved in Martinican carnival should make a concerted effort to include and welcome foreign tourists and, more precisely, allow them to relax and let off steam.

In order to do so, a raft of measures are suggested with a view to improving the overall organization of the festival and the coordination of its multiple facets and stakeholders. This included the creation of a *Bureau de Promotion* tasked with developing the infrastructure of carnival, that is, for example, choosing and furnishing a series of set venues where festivities would take place, with the spectator in mind. The implication here is that Martinican festivals should be planned to satisfy Western expectations and tastes. To this end, the pilot season run by the Chamber of Commerce for Christmas 1968 went as far as to feature all the standard Euro-American trappings of electric light displays and decorated trees. Similarly, carnival ought to be visually appealing and spectacular, a belief encapsulated in their enthusiasm for marketing the annual Carnival Queen competition as a kind of American-style beauty pageant with local colour. Many Martinicans willingly bought into this vision of how their carnival should be developed. Beauregard may not have secured the *Bureau de Promotion* he desired, but Carnaval Foyal, the most prominent volunteer-led carnival association in Fort-de-France, effectively took on some of its proposed responsibilities in their desire to tie the festival into the island's emerging tourist industry. With the endorsement of the departmental council and tourist board, they ran the annual competitions to elect the carnival queen of Fort-de-France, and subsequently that of the entire island. Keen to ensure that the contests were accessible to foreign visitors, and to transfigure

¹⁵⁷ C. de Beauregard, 'Tourisme et développement: pour un calendrier annuel de festivals à la Martinique', *Parallèles*, No 31, 2nd quarter 1969, p. 42.

the Queens into tourist attractions in their own right, the association offered to take the winners directly to the large beach-side resorts for the guests' convenience.

While this competition had already been initiated in the post-war years (albeit in a more modest format), other initiatives with the same objectives were new to the 1980s. At this point, more money and opportunities became available for marching bands to travel to festivals abroad, so long as their performance could promote Martinique as an attractive destination. Plastic System Band obliged on several occasions, performing at the Paris Carnival in 1987 and 1988 and winning the *groupes à pied* category. In their application to represent their island at a 'Champion of Champions'-style event in 1989, they proposed sending a blend of musicians (playing, amongst other instruments, the band's signature plastic tub drum), spectacular costumes inspired by Brazilian and Trinidadian mega-festivities and some more familiar perennial characters specific to the Martinican tradition. These proposals are indicative of how the group saw themselves, as architects of their own original, composite, dynamic identity. In a register that no doubt appealed to the Chamber of Commerce, they pitched their performance as one which promotes Martinique to potential European tourists: 'Elle est la vitrine des Antilles: Le carnaval permet à de nombreux métropolitains de découvrir un aspect du patrimoine socio-culturel des Antilles dans ce qu'il y a de plus spectaculaire et de plus original.'¹⁵⁸ Beyond these mercantile concerns, however, Plastic System Band were motivated by a deeper and more personal vocation. What really compelled them to represent their island was the conviction that Martinican people's sense of identity as a nation, even their dignity as human beings, was predicated on being recognized by others:

Plastic System Band entend par cette manifestation porter la réplique aux grands carnivals sans baigner dans le copiage, et montrer aux étrangers que notre carnaval existe. Il entend par la même occasion inciter les Martiniquais à défendre leur carnaval en le faisant évoluer et les rendre fiers de nous donc d'eux-mêmes.¹⁵⁹

This is not the same patriotism that can be found in any given European nation. Reading between the lines of these stated aims, there is an anxiety about not being seen, of being confined to the margins of the world and to obscurity. This is the particular neurosis of the colony, which is conditioned to conceive of itself as peripheral to everything that is of consequence. The way in which groups such as Carnaval Foyal and Plastic System Band

¹⁵⁸ *Plastic System Band – Festival des Carnavals – Paris, août 1989*, AdM, 4°H11171

¹⁵⁹ *Plastic System Band*, AdM, 4°H11171

fashioned themselves as cultural ambassadors thus satisfied both an economic and a societal imperative. Indeed, the two are mutually dependant: the success of tourism in Martinique relies on the local population's buy-in, and, for as long as the festival is not included in cultural policy, carnival practitioners can only achieve the reach and visibility they desire within the structures and funding of the tourist industry. The role that these groups cultivated for themselves was a means of negotiating the economic context with as much agency intact as possible.

And yet, all these collaborators are acutely aware that there is a tension embedded in their efforts to reorient the festival. Beauregard warns of the pitfall of *dirigisme*, which he describes as 'un système qui ne laisse rien au hasard, ni à des initiatives autres que celles du dirigeant [...] En un mot quand on dirige on impose.'¹⁶⁰ Partisans of what we might call the 'development model' of carnival are thus compelled to maintain a double discourse, one which cites the need to retain its essential character as a people's festival, whilst simultaneously advocating for its quality control. This went beyond maintaining the desired tourist-friendly organization and aesthetic, and into ensuring that carnival was kept 'propre et décent'¹⁶¹. This is a veiled reference to any content, be it song lyrics, costumes or dances, that is sexually suggestive or explicit, and behaviour that is deemed anti-social, disruptive or aggressive. All of this has been part and parcel of Caribbean carnival since its inception, but it is only upon the attempt to repackage the festival as a tourist magnet that it begins to be widely perceived as a threat to its success. Indeed, anxieties about vulgarity and obscenity are omnipresent in public discourse on carnival during this historical period, arising partly in response to this economic exigency. However, they are also locked into a deeper and wider phenomenon, that of the racialized politics of respectability. This refers to a moralistic discourse maintained by prominent local leaders that seeks to depict Martinican culture as aligning with the values upheld by white Europe (and which are assumed universally applicable). When carnival deviates from these norms, figures such as Beauregard and the Carnaval Foyal committee criticize and distance themselves from it. This issue is vital to any understanding of the place of carnival in Martinican society.

This chapter has demonstrated how theatre and carnival creators in Martinique work under what are, in many ways, very different conditions. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the divergent expectations regarding what each mode was supposed to deliver. As a result,

¹⁶⁰ De Beauregard, 'Tourisme et développement', *Parallèles*, No 31, 2nd quarter 1969, p. 45-46.

¹⁶¹ De Beauregard, 'Tourisme et développement', *Parallèles*, No 31, 2nd quarter 1969, p. 48.

they tend to be funnelled into separate channels in social life and in public consciousness, each with its own structures and discourse. They each contribute to parallel nation-building projects instigated by the local authorities, which are being worked on contemporaneously but with little to no connection or communication between them. One aims to construct a Martinique that fulfils its tourists' (and its residents') desire for colour, spectacle and celebration, and therefore generate revenue and employment. The other's objective is to nurture its citizens' artistic talents, allowing them to feel confident in their own culture and have a theatre tradition equal to that of any other nation. Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate the impact of these efforts to institutionalize and develop performance, as fundamental overarching problems persisted. Both projects promised a lot in terms of economic and cultural returns, but the extent to which *all* Martinicans reaped the benefits is questionable. Not all creators were included in the various development schemes on offer, and some may have chosen not to engage. Inevitably, capital of whatever kind gets reconcentrated in the hands of the few, be they hotel magnates or educated arts professionals. Moreover, that these endeavours continue to be undertaken in a colonial context cannot be ignored. The local people who committed to them do not have any real control over directives and funding allocations that are ultimately issued from Ministries and corporate boardrooms in Paris. Like so many other aspects of life on this island, then, the efforts made to develop performance culture (and, in doing so, develop Martinique itself) are as circumscribed as they are tenacious. They are, in this respect, a constitutive element of the anti-nation.

Chapter Three – Creole on Stage: Language, Nation, Theatre

In accordance with its status as an overseas department, French is the official language in Martinique and is spoken by the vast majority of Martinicans. Most also speak Martinican Creole, one variety of a group of languages generated in the French colonies under the conditions of slavery. While its vocabulary is largely French-based, its grammar and syntax are derived from West African languages. French is the language of administration on the island and is used at all levels of governance, as well as in the public health and education sectors, although in recent years Creole language teaching has been offered to a limited number of schoolchildren as part of the standard curriculum. Essentially, any interactions with the State (and thus a large proportion of Martinicans' professional lives) are conducted in French. Creole is generally spoken at home and amongst friends in social situations, as well as by some artists, politicians and media outlets, depending on their target audience.

Writing in *Le Discours antillais*, Edouard Glissant takes stock of the state of the Creole language in the post-departmental era. His assessment of the situation is grim: 'Langue façonnée par l'acte de colonisation, maintenue dans un statut inférieur, contrainte à la stagnation, contaminée par la pratique valorisante de la langue française, et en fin de compte menacée de disparition.' (p. 541) For Glissant, this was evidently symptomatic of the wider existential malaise suffered by Martinique. The plight of Creole is a manifestation of the anti-nation in linguistic form, a nation deliberately incapacitated producing a language in its own image. And yet, it persists. The performances explored in this chapter and the next can be interpreted as exercises in the survival of this language, with surprisingly confident and creative results given the circumstances.

This chapter will begin by providing a brief linguistic history of Martinique, accounting for several key twentieth century perspectives on the evolving status of both main languages in this context. It will then provide two case studies, each focussing on a play written by a Martinican author and performed on the island. These examples differ greatly in style, tone, production and performance history, not to mention the language in which they are primarily communicated. Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'isles*, created by the Parisian company Théâtre du Campagnol in April 1983 before transferring to Martinique that summer, is written largely in French. Nearly nine years later, in January 1992, the Fort-de-France-based Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle put on *Misyé Molina*, a Georges Mauvois comedy where most of the dialogue takes place in Creole. The analysis in this chapter aims to acknowledge this distinction, but also see beyond it. Both plays are in fact multi-lingual, in that they blend in

other languages spoken in Martinique, and it is this very dynamic that often propels the drama therein. Moreover, while there is a divergence in linguistic medium that reflects the writers' differing plans for these plays in particular, this chapter identifies a shared impulse influencing the Martinican theatre of that moment. It argues that they contribute towards the development of what I call a Creole theatre, one that not only valued and promoted the Creole language but also engaged in resourceful, creative multilingualism. The performance culture analysed here demonstrates both the affirmative, future-oriented quality of these ideas, as well as the racism and marginalization that constantly limits their scope.

3.1 – *Force jugulée*: A brief linguistic history of Martinique

All Creoles are contact languages, each arising out of the simplification and mixing of different languages into a new, stable one, having reached a point where native speakers are acquiring the language in early childhood. This process takes place over a relatively short time period in comparison to that of other languages. The word 'contact', however, belies the violence at the origin of Martinican Creole, which has shaped the history of the language, the island and its people ever since. There was nothing 'natural' about its inception: each Creole was generated to facilitate the joint enterprises of colonialism and slavery, and to make each French slave colony function as effectively as possible. It is common knowledge that they started as a means of communication between white French-speaking plantation staff and the African people they enslaved, who spoke a variety of languages. What is perhaps less often appreciated is the fact that all of this happened, fundamentally, in order to ensure white economic gain and political dominance, and without the consent of the black population. In other words, the Creole language constituted one column of the racial structure that was colonial Martinique.

While slavery as an institution may have ended, the racism that justified and perpetuated it has not. Creole may be spoken locally by black Martinicans and the white *béké* minority alike, but when considered in a relation of inferiority to France and its language and culture (as was, and is, the case for all aspects of Martinican life), it becomes racialized, synonymous with Otherness and blackness. Frantz Fanon understood and expressed this phenomenon with clarity. He begins his 1952 essay *Peau noire, masques blancs* with a chapter entitled 'Le noir et le langage', in which he demonstrates how the French Antillean's language (that is, whether he speaks French or Creole, and in terms of the manner in which he speaks them, that is, his tone, accent and discourse) is indicative of his alienation as a

black man¹⁶². This linguistic problem is rooted in the essentially racist premise informing the French colonial policy of cultural assimilation : ‘le Noir Antillais sera d’autant plus blanc, c’est-à-dire se rapprochera d’autant plus du véritable homme, qu’il aura fait sienne la langue française.’¹⁶³ The logic worked on the basis that Caribbeans of African descent were ‘lesser men’: by extension “their” language, be it Martinican Creole proper or the regional French dialect spoken on the island, becomes marked by negrophobia. Fanon goes on to testify to the middle-ranking status of the Creole language (‘[le Martiniquais] sait que [le créole] n’est qu’un moyen terme entre le petit-nègre¹⁶⁴ et le français’ (p. 15)), which maps on to the hierarchy of geo-racial consideration within the French colonial empire, with Antilleans being positioned above Africans in terms of civilized comportment, but obviously below Europeans. Despite the fact of departmentalization and the full assimilation into French citizenship that it (theoretically) guaranteed, Fanon draws on the personal experiences of himself and other Martinican emigrants to metropolitan France in order to expose how this liminal status persists in their various confrontations with language. On one hand, the Martinican returning home from a period spent in France speaks only French in a manner which distinguishes him from his fellow Antilleans as someone more worldly and cultivated: ‘Et le fait pour le Noir récemment débarqué, d’adopter un langage différent de celui de la collectivité qui l’a vu naître, manifeste un décalage, un clivage.’ (p.19) Despite succeeding in separating himself from those ‘blacker’ than himself, he is also bound to encounter those white French people who continue to talk to him as if he were a child. His acquired mastery of the French language counts for nothing when he must conform to their expectations of him: ‘Le faire parler petit-nègre, c’est l’attacher à son image, l’engluer, l’emprisonner, victime éternelle d’une essence, d’un apparaître dont il n’est pas le responsable.’ (p.27) In either scenario, the Martinican manifests a hostility towards the Creole language as being emblematic of his blackness. Paradoxically, it is a blackness which he believed he had left behind in Martinique, but which continues to be the source of his humiliation and objectification in Europe. In Fanon’s assessment of this complex of social realities Creole is

¹⁶² Much of the psychoanalytical scholarship on which Fanon drew operated through a gender-based framework of subject formation. While I acknowledge the sexism implicit in the assumption that the normative French Antillean psyche is male, my own writing (at this point) must reflect the biases of Fanon’s text, including the use of masculine pronouns.

¹⁶³ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952), p.14. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶⁴ *Petit-nègre* or *français tirailleur* was a pidgin French employed during the early twentieth century, notably in French West Africa, in order to facilitate communication with and between indigenous peoples drafted into the French colonial army.

thus doubly maligned, that is, in the Caribbean and in France, and by the white Frenchman and the black Antillean himself.

In later decades, research would show this denigration to be more than theoretical. Up until the 1980s, the bulk of sociolinguistic scholarship focussing on the francophone Caribbean was committed to the model of diglossia, which in an Antillean context relates to the imposition of French, designated as the arbitrator of (neo-)colonial power. This logically confers an inferior status on Creole and thus controls the threat that it represents for the established order. The mechanisms behind this state of affairs are not always easy to define. Searching for official decrees or protocols relating to the Creole language in the French Antilles tends not to yield results, at least not until recent years¹⁶⁵. The French constitution, which enshrines French as the only official language with no allowance for any regional specificity, has been systematically applied in the French overseas departments since 1946. On a general and quite abstract level, then, diglossia in Martinique can be interpreted in the context of a long-standing Jacobin Republican tradition that circumscribes all regional languages within French territory.

However, there are more immediate, localized issues at stake, bound up in a colonial history and the racism which undergirded and outlasted it. To this end, Dany Bébel-Gisler's 1976 study *La Langue créole, force jugulée* remains relevant in that it was the first piece of scholarship to insist on the political dimension to the linguistic situation in the French Antilles. Moreover, she argued that the Creole language is both symbolically and structurally repressed in these societies, as demonstrated through discourse analysis, empirical research in Guadeloupean schools and (similarly to Fanon) personal observations of daily life. This suppression depends partly on the constant checking of Creole as a linguistic force, in terms of how it has been talked about in academic circles (as being inferior and infantile) and its status in public life as a vector of vulgarity, bad upbringing, irrationality and opacity. Inseparable from this is the dominance of French: a whole apparatus serves to normalize it as an instrument of social regulation, rendering the language consubstantial with writing, school, the education system and all that they symbolize in terms of self-discipline and respect for authority.

When Bébel-Gisler outlines how French has become synonymous with law and legitimacy, her observations complement Fanon's anecdotes regarding the hypothetical

¹⁶⁵ Only in February 2011 was a convention signed by the French Ministry for Education and the Regional Council of Martinique, officialising the teaching of Creole language and culture in primary and secondary schools.

Martinican emigré and his desire to decreolize himself: ‘Apprendre le français, c’est entrer dans l’ordre social du langage, pour s’y perdre afin de se faire admettre, désapprendre tout ce qui vient du monde natal.’¹⁶⁶ Robert Chaudenson’s work corroborates that of Bébel-Gisler in this respect, whilst also noting the specificity of the Martinican context. He likens the diglossic situation in Martinique to that of Guadeloupe, but with the clarification that the use of French is more widespread in the former, and especially noticeable in the capital city of Fort-de-France. Amongst all the overseas departments, Martinique also has the highest proportion of active diglots, that is, people who speak both French and Creole fluently. Chaudenson contends that these diglots have more complex, and unfavourable, opinions regarding the subjective status of Creole. They are more likely to view the language as either trivial or a threat to French culture, and as an impediment to social and professional advancement: ‘L’usage du créole est souvent associé à l’inculture, à la misère et la négritude (ou plus généralement la non-apparence au groupe blanc ou mulâtre).’¹⁶⁷ The resonance with Fanon’s essay, written decades earlier, is clear.

The status of Creole in French Antillean societies evolved greatly during the second half of the twentieth century. At around the same time Bébel-Gisler published *La Langue créole, force jugulée*, a loose but concerted movement of research and activism was beginning to take shape, which worked towards the recognition, promotion and protection of the Creole language. It is with particular attention to their conception of linguistic identity that we turn to what is now known as the Créolité school for the remainder of this subsection.

Founded in 1975, the Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches en Espace Créolophone (GEREC) brought together scholars working on Creole language, culture and society across what was then the Centre Universitaire des Antilles et de la Guyane. Much of the unit’s research has been oriented towards the applied linguistics of French-based Creoles, leading to the publication of dictionaries and grammar books for general use, as well as more conventional academic studies, notably in the journal *Espace Créole*. These efforts were motivated by the need to establish a coherent orthography for the Creole language, within the broader aim of providing resources for both professional scholars and the wider community.

These shared objectives masked a degree of debate as regards how the written form of Creole and its lexicon should be developed. A more radical wing of the group (headed by its

¹⁶⁶ Dany Bébel-Gisler, *La Langue créole, force jugulée: étude socio-linguistique des rapports de force entre le créole et le français aux Antilles* (Paris: L’Harmattan; Montreal: Nouvelle Optique, 1976), p.137.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Chaudenson, *Les Créoles français*, Collection Langues en Question, 2 (Paris: Nathan, 1979), p.137.

founder, Jean Bernabé) advocated maximum differentiation between French and Creole in morphological and lexical terms, in order to protect the latter's linguistic integrity. The writing system they devised is phonetic, in that it is based on the sounds heard within Creole words when spoken, rather than their etymological roots. The more moderate members, notably Lambert-Félix Prudent, placed more emphasis on the fact that nearly all of Creole vocabulary is derived from French, resulting in an orthography which resembles French to a greater degree. Richard D.E. Burton notes how this links to divergent ideological and political currents of the time:

Not surprisingly, these differences are coupled with, and are directly expressive of, sharply contrasted political positions. The desire of the radicals to 'autonomize' Creole vis-à-vis French and to counter where possible the growth of an interlectal '*français-banane*' is symptomatic of their *indépendantiste* political stance. By contrast the moderates' determination to preserve the orthographical links between French and Creole, and their openness towards interlectal exchanges between the two codes, is a translation into linguistic terms of their desire to preserve links with France and the French in other spheres of life and of their commitment to continuing economic, cultural and other exchanges between the metropole and its overseas departments.¹⁶⁸

While I am not of the opinion that language can be mapped onto politics quite so neatly without making assumptions about the users' beliefs and affiliations, these general ideological currents are important to bear in mind as we explore how they intersect with performance culture later in the chapter.

In spite of these internal divisions, the movement still gave rise to one of the influential autochthonous theories discussed in Chapter One, that of Créolité, as elaborated by Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau in the 1989 text *Éloge de la créolité*. The complex creole identity proposed in the *Éloge* is an aggregate of elements of various cultures (African, European, Amerindian, Asian) which interact, having been drawn together under specific historical conditions (namely, the transatlantic slave trade and ensuing plantation system) and in the specific geographical location of the Caribbean archipelago. What is more, Bernabé, Confiant and Chamoiseau ground the Creole language at the centre of this identity: 'Le créole, notre langue première à nous Antillais, Guyanais, Mascarins, est le véhicule original de notre moi profond, de notre inconscient collectif, de notre génie

¹⁶⁸ Richard D.E. Burton, 'The Idea of Difference in Contemporary French West Indian Thought: Négritude, Antillanité, Créolité', in *French and West Indian*, ed. by Burton and Réno, pp. 137-166 (p. 154).

populaire, cette langue demeure la rivière de notre créolité alluviale.’¹⁶⁹ While such statements unambivalently champion Creole, Bernabé, Confiant and Chamoiseau also attest to a particular Antillean imprint on the French language, once that of the oppressor, now indelibly marked by creole usage. The writers of the *Éloge* have been historically conditioned to inhabit French subversively, to deform and refashion it over time into a dialect, and a literary language, which is also uniquely Antillean.

As an artistic and political manifesto, the text has attracted a considerable amount of criticism. Some have taken issue with its self-contradictory cultivation of a creole aesthetic *within* French¹⁷⁰, others with its didacticism in explicitly stating how Antillean writers should craft their language¹⁷¹ and its claim that Créolité constitutes *the* authentic Caribbean identity¹⁷². More broadly, the work of the more radical members of the GEREK has been accused of creating an erudite written language which they have normalized among themselves.¹⁷³ This has been achieved by dint of generalizing a single transcreole written form which does not account for local or regional specificities and advocating maximum deviation from French in terms of its lexicon. The ideology behind affirming the (unified) Creole language as a means of resisting colonial oppression justifies what is in fact an artificial written form, which was not initially well received by wider Martinican society.

Despite these significant objections, the work of the Créolité school has influenced how the complex linguistic situation of the French Antilles is configured as a social phenomenon. The theory consolidated in Raphaël Confiant and Ernest Pépin’s essay ‘The Stakes of Créolité’ refutes Fanon’s psychopathology of blackness, for the simple reason that if one is creole, one is not simply black and thus enclosed in a “camp”: ‘Our multicultural heritage yields a polycentric approach in which the question of identity generates a mosaic identity affirmed by idioms, languages, places, systems of thought, histories fertilizing one another and untying the unpredictable. An identity of coexistence is necessary...’¹⁷⁴ This has

¹⁶⁹ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, p. 43.

¹⁷⁰ Maeve McCusker, ‘“This Creole Culture, Miraculously Forged”: The contradiction of Créolité’, in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 112-21.

¹⁷¹ Maryse Condé, ‘Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer’, *Yale French Studies*, 97 (2000), 151–165.

¹⁷² Maryse Condé, ‘Créolité without Creole Language ??’ in *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*, ed. by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau (Gainesville: University Press of Florida; Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 1998), pp. 101-09.

¹⁷³ Lambert Félix Prudent, ‘Ecrire le créole à la Martinique: norme et conflit sociolinguistique’ in *Les Créoles français entre l’oral et l’écrit* ed. Ralph Ludwig (Tübingen: Narr, 1989), pp. 65-80.

¹⁷⁴ Ernest Pépin and Raphaël Confiant, ‘The Stakes of Créolité’ in *Caribbean Creolization*, ed. by Balutansky and Souriau, pp. 96-100 (p. 97).

significant implications for the Antillean people's relationship to language, and coincides with a critical departure from the diglossic models adopted by sociolinguists in previous decades. In their 'requiem for diglossia', Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier strongly criticize a system of reference which is based more on ideology than on the reality of the Antillean situation: '[...] faisant obligation à la pensée scientifique de ramener, de réduire tous les rapports, toutes les relations humaines à une vision mécaniste, bi-polaire, manichéenne et schizoïde: Bien/Mal, Noir/Blanc, Dominant/Dominé etc.'¹⁷⁵ This 'requiem' reads more like a polemic, savaging the way in which Creole had previously been configured as a "langue jugulée" (almost certainly a pointed reference to Bébel-Gisler's earlier work). In doing so, however, Berrouët-Oriol and Fournier risk emptying the linguistic situation in the Antilles of its political tensions. Indeed, their concepts of 'convivialité' between linguistic systems and of a transcontinuum as 'mouvement du donner et du recevoir' do not account for the imbalances of power and influence particular to the region. Georges Daniel Véronique's evaluation is fairer in this respect, in that he notes how the idea of diglossia speaks to inhabitants of Creole-speaking territories, who see a patently obvious conflict between French and Creole in their daily lives, and the tangible benefits of proficiency in the dominant language.¹⁷⁶ He is thus able to argue against a rigid diglossic opposition and for the existence of linguistic practices that alternate between the two languages in contact, whilst continuing to do justice to the politics at stake in the debate.

While the ideas foregrounded in this period of Martinican intellectual history retain their relevance today, it must also be placed in the political context of the 1980s, in order to gain a more comprehensive appreciation of how it was received and facilitated. Having arrived at a position of dominance after the 1981 elections, the centre-Left PPM were able to adapt cultural policy in Martinique to a greater extent and chose to valorize and promote creole culture, which, Richard D.E. Burton argues, eventually came to be seen as part of the hegemonic status quo: 'The whole question of creole culture as a basis from which to contest the multiple processes of assimilation in Martinique has become considerably more problematic since 1981, now that that culture has itself been co-opted and 'officialized' by assimilationism in its new regionalist version.'¹⁷⁷ It is an important observation to bear in

¹⁷⁵ Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier, 'Créolophonie et francophonie nord-sud: transcontinuum', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes*, 17 (1992), 13-25 (p.15).

¹⁷⁶ Georges Daniel Véronique, 'Les Créoles français: déni, réalité et reconnaissance au sein de la République française', *Langue française*, 167 (2010), 127-140.

¹⁷⁷ Richard D.E. Burton, 'Towards 1992: Political-Cultural Assimilation and Opposition in Contemporary Martinique', *French Cultural Studies*, 3 (1992), 61-86 (p. 78).

mind, one which historicizes the linguistic situation further and checks any facile equations between the defence of the Creole language and resistance. Nevertheless, the anti-Creole psychopathology foregrounded by Fanon and the social structures and symbolism identified in Bébel-Gisler's thesis cannot be discounted, even if they have evolved over time. Our appreciation of the linguistic situation in Martinique must attend to these longer histories of denigration and struggle, as well as the social and political contingencies of specific periods.

While one could continue to chart these evolutions into the twenty-first century, the purpose of this contextual segment is to frame the small cross-section of 1980s Martinican performance culture I intend to explore presently. The carnival and theatre performances took place in this complex linguistic context which is, as I have argued, both multi-lingual and shaped by the experience of diglossia. Consequently, cultural actors must negotiate with what are often contradictory conditions: while communicating verbally as a Martinican offers freedom, flexibility and openness in some respects, it is also mediated by forms of repression and constraint. In the following case studies, I will examine how these pressures affected public performance within a specific historical period, and how playwrights and participants engaged with the linguistic resources available to them.

3.2 - *Mémoires d'isles*, Misyé Molina and diglossia in Martinique

Ina Césaire, daughter of the poet, playwright and politician Aimé Césaire, trained as an ethnologist before her academic career came to focus on documenting Martinican oral heritage, particularly traditional stories.¹⁷⁸ She eventually turned towards ethnodramaturgy as her preferred means of disseminating her research, and *Mémoires d'isles* constitutes an important example of her work in this emergent genre. The play was borne of a desire to stage the experiences of women in the French Antilles, exploring the diversity and unevenness of that history as well as identifying common threads that link women across class and ethnicity. In order to do so, the creative team drew on oral histories provided by Ina Césaire's two grandmothers as well as ones collected by the cast. The resulting play centres on two elderly Martinican women, half-sisters who have moved in very different social milieux, as they recall events from their lives while resting from festivities at a family wedding.

¹⁷⁸ See *Contes de mort et de vie aux Antilles* ed. and trans. by Joëlle Laurent and Ina Césaire (Paris: Nubia, 1976).

Ethnodrama, for Césaire, was more than a scholarly-artistic project, and in the programme insert to the Paris premiere of *Mémoires d'isles*, she explains the fundamental motivation behind its creation: 'J'étais et j'en suis toujours persuadée: l'ethnologie ne peut accéder à son rôle de révélateur que si elle sort du ghetto des spécialistes. Il s'agit [...] de restituer au peuple – notre peuple en la circonstance – qui demeure le sujet de la recherche, l'objet même de notre démarche : la prise en compte de nos valeurs, de nos contradictions, de notre passé, de notre devenir.'¹⁷⁹ While one cannot claim that the playwright's intentions inform every aspect of the performance, it is clear that this sense of social purpose motivated the original creative team behind the 1983 productions. To a large extent, Ina Césaire's plays were generated for Martinicans: they are the fruit of extensive research into French Antillean experiences and customs, which are subsequently rearticulated and reflected back at both Caribbean and diasporic communities. At the same time, *Mémoires d'isles* was devised in France by the Théâtre du Campagnol, under the creative direction of its French founder Jean-Claude Penchenat. Of the actors who shared the two female roles, only one (the Guadeloupean Mariann Mathéus) was herself from the French Antilles. Once the play had taken shape in dramatic form, it was initially performed in Bagneux, a working-class, multi-ethnic community in the *banlieue* to the south of Paris. As a cultural event, then, *Mémoires d'isles* played out at some distance from the Caribbean context that inspired it, at least for significant parts of its existence. Nevertheless, it also reflects the complexity of modern Martinican lives and identities, which are often stretched across the Atlantic, either as a consequence of their own migration or that of their parents or grandparents. Complex issues of representation and identification are thus in play, even on a linguistic level, as we shall see.

On the surface, *Misyé Molina* does not appear to have been inspired by the same lofty ideals. A Martinican reboot of the comedy of manners genre, its scenario could hardly be more improbable and farcical. Two female flower-sellers, Lwiz and Finot, discover that the eponymous Molina (a seemingly successful businessman who has befriended Lwiz's husband, Edwa, and who also has romantic designs on their daughter Sésil) is leading a double life as a pimp in Paris. Together they hatch a plot to expose Molina to an incredulous Edwa: using Lwiz as the 'bait', the pair will trick the charlatan into seducing her in the family's own lounge during one of his many visits, while Edwa listens in from the next room, out of sight but within earshot. Like similar successful comedies written and performed in the

¹⁷⁹ Ina Césaire, 'De l'enquête ethnologique à l'expression théâtrale' [unpublished], reprinted in Christiane P. Makward, 'De bouche à oreille à bouche : ethno-dramaturgie d'Ina Césaire', in *L'Héritage de Caliban*, ed. by Maryse Condé (Pointe-à-Pitre: Jasor, 1992), pp. 133-46 (p.135).

French Antilles during this period, *Misyé Molina* has been neglected by researchers until very recently. Despite the fact that they consistently lambast bourgeois ideals of accumulating personal wealth, social status and respectability (and the petit-bourgeoisie who try and inevitably fail to acquire them), the comic works of Mauvois and his contemporaries, such as the Guadeloupean José Jernidier, are typically not recognized as social satire by public commentators of an intellectual inclination, who have presumably dismissed them as light, bawdy entertainment not serious enough to warrant scholarly attention.¹⁸⁰ Axel Arthéron is an exception, describing Mauvois' work in terms of how it skilfully puts the realities of Martinican life at a distance in order to reflect on, critique and mock them.¹⁸¹ It is vital to consider *Misyé Molina* as a socially conscious piece as well as a ludicrous sexual caper, using humour to achieve the same general ambition that Ina Césaire had for her work, that is, to give Martinicans an artist's impression of who they were.

Language, and specifically the situation of diglossia outlined earlier in this chapter, is illustrative of the history of the Martinican people and their current condition. In both plays, language use is integral to the development of individual characters and the dynamics between them in a way that represents diglossia as a sociolinguistic reality. In *Mémoires d'isles*, it is embodied in the two contrasting women who share the theatrical space and moment. Aure has ascended to the middle class by virtue of her education, her professional status as a schoolteacher and the social value attached to her lighter skin, and generally speaks a much more metropolitan French. Having had limited formal education, dark-skinned Hermance has spent her life in a working class habitus: she speaks a Martinican French dialect, its grammar, syntax, vocabulary and imagery heavily informed by Creole structures, which is interspersed with some expressions in Creole proper.¹⁸²

Several of the character pairings and dialogues in *Misyé Molina* are also marked by linguistic contrast, which in turn indicates a disparity in social status. During their amicable chats in the family living room, Edwa speaks Creole in a manner which reflects his modest, rural background, while Molina's predominant use of French distinguishes him as more wealthy and cosmopolitan, as befits a frequent flyer to Paris. Similarly, one of Lwiz and Finot's customers in the market is Mme Folmak, whose marriage to a richer man has

¹⁸⁰ Françoise Naudillon, 'Le Théâtre de José Jernidier' in *Émergences Caraïbe(s)*, ed. by Bérard and Chalaye, 108-117, p. 108.

¹⁸¹ Axel Arthéron, 'Le Théâtre de Georges Mauvois : une aventure du théâtre populaire caribéen', *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revue canadienne des études latino-américaines et caraïbes*, 44.3 (2019), 303-21 (p. 303).

¹⁸² For a thorough analysis of language use in the play, see Stéphanie Bérard, 'Créole et/ou Français: le multilinguisme dans *Mémoires d'isles* d'Ina Césaire', *Glottopol*, 3 (2004), 121-29.

increased her social standing and who speaks largely French accordingly. The flower-sellers can only reply in Creole, save a few basic and heavily accented French phrases.

The diglossia on stage in *Misyé Molina* also exposes the generational and educational fault lines in 1980s Martinique. In the play's opening scene, Finot recounts the domestic ordeal she endured at the hands of her son Bèbèn earlier that morning before arriving at the marketplace. Having failed to carry the last basket of flowers down the hill to the roadside as his mother had asked him to, Finot proceeds to tell Lwiz what she encountered upon returning to the house, livid, to look for him:

FINOT Di mwen, Lwiz. Kisa man ka wè?

LWIZ Sa ki rive Bèbèn? I malad?

FINOT Malad? Misyé Bèbèn viré kouché, mafi. Man ka trouvè'y vant blan. An liv an lamèn'y. Lwiz, man di'w man sé pé mò. Man di Bondyé ba mwen lagras pou mwen pa tjwé ti bolonm-lan. Man gadé a dwat, gadé a goch. Man kriyé Bewnaw! Ou sav sa i di mwen?: 'Manman, je pa fini d'apwann mé leson.'¹⁸³

(FINOT Now, Lwiz. Guess what I saw?

LWIZ What was wrong with Bèbèn? Was he sick?

FINOT Sick? His lordship had gone back to bed. I found him lying stretchered with a book in his hand. Lwiz, I'm telling you, I near died. I said Good Lord give me strength not to kill that wee man. I looked all around me. I shouted Bewnaw! And do you know what he said to me?: 'Mother, I have not finished my homework yet.')

The way in which Bèbèn replies to his mother in French (and her retelling thereof, which can only be approximative given her limited command of the language) exemplifies the transformations undergone by Martinican society in the later decades of the twentieth century. Bèbèn's entire life has coincided with an ever-increasing ease of access to metropolitan French institutions, media and technology, which has shaped the language he has at his disposal. His mother, on the other hand, grew up in an environment where daily life as experienced by most Martinicans was much more distinct culturally, socially and indeed linguistically. Finot belongs the last generation of Martinicans to speak Creole as a first language, acquiring French in later life and therefore with more difficulty.

The dramatic tension embodied in all of these dialogues is articulated through the languages the various characters have and have not acquired, and the ones they avoid, however implicitly. This is an aural manifestation of the imbalances of cultural capital that

¹⁸³ Georges Mauvois, *Agénor Cacoul; Misyé Molina*, Machokay pawol/création littéraire, 2nd edn (Paris: L'L'Harmattan, 1988), p. 86. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. All English translations of quotations from this text are mine.

penetrate both public and private space in Martinique, from the hubbub of the marketplace to the intimacy of the home. These plays thus represent diglossia as a major, inescapable social fact in Martinique, one which structures social life and the relationships therein.

Nevertheless, the effect on Martinican lived experience is not absolute: diglossia is also something that can be negotiated with some degree of agency. Closer examination engagement with language in *Mémoires d'isles* and *Misyé Molina* reveals how the norms and constraints of their linguistic context can be challenged, undermined and reinterpreted, without ever bypassing them completely.

3.3 – Martinican but mobile: New treatments of language in *Mémoires d'isles*

This can be observed firstly in how the characters come up against diglossia as a social problem. Ina Césaire exploits this for dramatic or comic effect in several exchanges between her two heroines, such as when Hermance recalls the devotion of her pious mother-in-law:

HERMANCE [...] Elle organisait aussi les mariages et apprenait l'instruction aux enfants pour la renonce...

AURE (*la reprenant*) La communion solennelle...

HERMANCE (*glaciale*) Man ka di 'la renonce!' (Well, I say 'la renonce'!; English translation mine; emphasis mine)

(*Elle fredonne à bouche fermée l'air du Chez nous, soyez reine.*)¹⁸⁴

La renonce is a word used in the Martinican French dialect to designate first Holy Communion. In this dialogue, it is filtered out by Aure and replaced with *la communion solennelle*, a phrase belonging to a more 'standard' European French lexicon and, in an Antillean context, a register consubstantial with the values of sophistication and erudition. Aure attempts to act as a cultural gatekeeper, placing language deemed 'too Martinican' outside the boundaries of civility as determined by colonial France and, by extension, excluding co-citizens that employ it from that privileged space. Hermance then rejects this linguistic and social editing endeavour. She uses Creole to insist on the word of her choice, thus positioning herself yet more firmly in her Antillean identity. Leaning into her Martinican-ness in this manner (Hermance does not wait for tacit approval from anyone to

¹⁸⁴ Ina Césaire, *Mémoires d'isles (Maman N. et Maman F.)* in Ina Césaire, *Rosanie Soleil et autres textes dramatiques*, ed. by Christiane P. Makward, Lettres du sud (Paris: Karthala, 2011), pp. 199-228 (p. 209). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

use Creole in this setting) constitutes a refusal, however minor and fleeting, of the value system that denigrates it.

Diglossia is not always experienced or conceptualized as conflictual and the kind of intimate, semi-naturalistic tête-à-tête discussed thus far constitutes only part of the performance. The play has a prologue, which was devised by the cast during the workshop stage before being included in the published playtext.¹⁸⁵ During this overture, the two actors who will go on to play the roles of Aure and Hermance are dressed as black-and-white *diablasses*, well-known and popular personae featuring in Martinican carnival. They rise from their dressing tables to dance to an up-tempo *vidé* drumbeat, which traditionally accompanies processions during the festival. The two characters alternate between French and Creole, guided by a loose sense of what each language best conveys. Creole seems to be particularly appropriate (but not exclusively reserved) for spontaneous, exclamatory speech ('Sé ou ki sav, ma fi! An nou!' (Translated into French as 'Tu as raison, ma fille. Allons-y !' in Ina Césaire, p. 201)) as well as riddles drawn from traditional Martinican oral culture ('Ès ou pé di mwen si tan ni tan ?' (Translated into French as 'Peux-tu me dire si le temps a le temps ?' in Ina Césaire, p.201)). Nevertheless, French can also be used for playing with sound, seemingly for oral and aural pleasure rather than the communication of meaning:

(Elles dansent la ronde enfantine antillaise du « poteau bleu ».)

PREMIÈRE DIABLESSE Il est passé par ci-là...

DEUXIÈME DIABLESSE Le passé est dépassé...

PREMIÈRE DIABLESSE Le passé s'est surpassé...

DEUXIÈME DIABLESSE *(ton interrogatif et fausseté naïf)* Le passé a-t-il trépassé ?

Elles rient. (p. 202)

Despite each language being circumscribed to a certain extent, that is, associated with particular kinds of communal or self-expression, there is also a degree of flexibility which allows both to be mobilized outside of their normal contexts. Eschewing the labels and assumptions associated with speakers of French or Creole allows Martinicans to negotiate their linguistic situation with some looseness and playfulness.

Indeed, both this play and *Misyé Molina* share the same socio-linguistic universe, whose modus operandi is a stratified bilingualism in which Martinicans participate at

¹⁸⁵ See Bridget Jones, 'Two Plays by Ina Césaire: *Mémoires d'isles* and *L'Enfant des passages*', *Theatre Research International*, 15 (1990), 223–33 (p.226).

different levels, not only according to their command of each language, but also their mood, the subject they are talking about at a given moment and the manner in which they want to express themselves. For the characters in these plays, and for Martinicans in general, language use can be contextual as well as socially determined.

On one level, cultivating one's speech is always an active process that involves selecting, accepting and rejecting language. More importantly, however, these plays also stimulate their audiences to consider this phenomenon in a Martinican context, where that linguistic scrutiny continues to operate on the terms laid down by a centuries-old colonial power, reinforcing social hierarchies based on proximity to European standards and their implicit whiteness. Neither play can realistically hope to go as far as offering different terms altogether: their ambition is rather to stretch those norms, thus better reflecting how Martinicans live such constraints without being entirely determined by them. That said, *Mémoires d'isles* and *Misyé Molina* differ somewhat in how they go about this, in terms of what each playwright is trying to say about the possibilities of language in Martinique and what ventures they reflect or propose.

Ina Césaire's play, when considered in its entirety, exhibits a means of engagement with language that is hybrid, flexible and mutable, which is not so much a creative innovation on her part as a reflection of what Martinican people do already. This endeavour was also planned in keeping with the real-life transatlantic trajectory of the play, that is, the various locations in which it was performed and the different audiences who viewed it. Consider how even Aure's more European French is dotted with geographical, historical and cultural references specific to Martinique or the wider Caribbean region, so that even if it is morphologically 'standard', it will still sound qualitatively distinct to a French speaker. For example, words denoting distinct contemporary and historical ethnic groups in Martinique such as *béké*, *mulâtre*, *coolie* and *syrien* will have specific connotations for those whose everyday life is marked by them, or was marked by them, in the case of the members of the French Antillean community who came to watch the play in Paris:

The play held its audiences. They included many people of Caribbean origin living in the concrete of new high-rise estates, families fragmented by the heavy migration of the 1950s and 60s. The Campagnol, a state aided Centre dramatique situated in a suburb south of Paris, made a special effort to attract community groups. The play's authenticity aroused a strong response, sometimes painful – in the case of allusions to colour discrimination and slavery – often a delighted sense of recognizing familiar

people, renewing contact with a known world. More than one participant used the word ‘grace’ for the sense of communion achieved.¹⁸⁶

Césaire and the creative team succeeded in foregrounding reference points which Caribbean audience members could associate with their lived reality, present or past, and which often conveyed a strong affective charge. Ultimately, this process of identification through language troubles how French is conventionally perceived and privileged within the diglossic framework. Rather than representing it as enabling clear and pragmatic intercultural communication, *Mémoires d’isles* effectively stages the French language as something which is inhabited and experienced differently according to one’s familiarity with a place.

The degree to which this sense of belonging can be triggered is highly dependent on the location and demographic of the audience. Consequently, it is necessary to attend to the multi-sited performance history of *Mémoires d’isles*, as well as the broader issue of who the play was intended for. The creative team were acutely aware that their production needed to be able to circulate effectively between different contexts and consequently aimed for ‘[...] une authenticité recevable à la fois par le public antillais, pointilleux, on l’imagine, sur les plans politique, linguistique et cutané et le public français du Campagnol, à savoir un public libéral sans doute, mais modestes, mal informé des réalités antillaises et, éventuellement, à la fibre patriotique sensible.’¹⁸⁷ Rather than treating these differentiated degrees of recognition and estrangement as after-effects, we should acknowledge that they were, to some extent, anticipated and already hard-wired into the text and stagecraft. Stéphanie Bérard, for her part, notes how some of the Creole passages are ‘internally translated’ within the dialogue (that is, reformulated in French by one of the characters) so as to render them, if not comprehensible, then accessible for audience members who do not understand Creole.¹⁸⁸ We might describe the language of *Mémoires d’isles*, and indeed the play itself, as ‘Martinican but mobile’, in that it is informed by a specific history and social context, yet compelled to move and adapt. It is an example of how a performance can be Martinican, diasporic and inclusive of those with no personal connection to or prior knowledge of the island.

The kind of multi-lingualism performed in *Mémoires d’isles* was in keeping with Césaire’s approach to language across her whole œuvre and with broader developments in local theatre culture at the time, as observed by Bridget Jones: ‘Ina Césaire adopts a position which is increasingly current among French Caribbean writers, to aim for a ‘créolité’ of spirit

¹⁸⁶ Bridget Jones, ‘Two Plays by Ina Césaire’, p. 228.

¹⁸⁷ Makward, ‘De bouche à oreille à bouche’, p. 138.

¹⁸⁸ Bérard, ‘Créole et/Ou Français: le multilinguisme dans *Mémoires d’isles* d’Ina Césaire’, p.124.

while experimenting freely within the linguistic resources of French and Creole ... A language choice freed from ideological tensions, the ‘nécessaire névrose’ of the 1970s, refocuses attention on the quality of creative communication.’¹⁸⁹ Indeed, as regards the kind of acrolectal Creole used in both her research and dramaturgy, critics have noted that Césaire appears to be motivated by pragmatism as opposed to making any kind of statement: ‘Quant aux conventions de transcription du créole, Ina Césaire se tient résolument à l’écart des débats des linguistes. Sa position d’ethnologue et de dramaturge l’a amenée à élaborer un mode de transcription ou de translation dont le résultat sera accessible au plus grand nombre, pour ceux qui fonctionnent dans l’interlecte et en français [...]’¹⁹⁰ It is my contention that while language use in *Mémoires d’isles* is distanced from those rigid ideological defences of Creole which did have some critical currency locally at that time, the choices behind the development of this multilingual performance were still made with a social and cultural purpose in mind. Césaire and the creative team managed to create a series of performance events that had elements of both artistic expression and social ritual: they dramatized Martinique in a way that could foster different kinds of identification “at home”, in diaspora and for a white France, which had the effect of drawing specific audiences together through a sense of communion similar to that of a religious ceremony (note how the Paris spectators spoke of ‘grace’). It may be that foregrounding shared heritage and experiences allowed spectators to at least temporarily transcend those pressures, such as economic precarity and subsequent migration, which tend to fragment communities.

3.4 – Georges Mauvois, *Misyé Molina* and the challenge of the Creole play

Ina Césaire and Georges Mauvois share a broad aim of creating popular theatre that reflects, and in turn contributes to, the lives of ordinary Martinicans. Nevertheless, they differ in terms of their position on and attitude to the language question in the French Antilles. A key factor influencing this disparity is the playwrights’ contrasting personal trajectories. While Ina Césaire’s background is in academia, Mauvois’ adult life was forged in political and trade union activism. Indeed, his heavy involvement in the Martinican Communist Party during the early 1960s was to prove pivotal in terms of his professional and creative life. Like Glissant before him, in 1962 he fell foul of the *Ordonnance Debré*, the decree ruling that any public sector employee based in an overseas department whose behaviour was deemed to be a threat

¹⁸⁹ Jones, ‘Two Plays by Ina Césaire’, p.231.

¹⁹⁰ Makward, ‘De bouche à oreille à bouche’, p.144.

to public order could be immediately redeployed to another post anywhere in the French Empire. When Mauvois refused to leave Martinique, he lost his job in the national telecoms company. It was during this strange window of personal turmoil and inactivity that he first had time to write, and penned his first play, *Agénor Cacoul*. A satire centred on the actions of the eponymous corrupt mayor of a small Martinican town, it set the tone for the rest of his oeuvre. For Mauvois, writing was both a creative and a political endeavour: all of his original work critiques the structures and mentalities of the colonial society that is Martinique, and makes its audience conscious of the alienation these engender.

Ina Césaire was studying in France during the 1960s and early 1970s, when far-left, pro-independence agitation was at its height in Martinique. She was therefore at one remove from the political climate that catalysed Mauvois' career as a writer, as well as that of many of his contemporaries. Moreover, Césaire worked within French institutions from the outset, be they universities or government bodies charged with conserving Martinican cultural heritage, a passage no doubt smoothed by her family connections. Mauvois, on the other hand, was exposed to some harsher realities. The *Ordonnance Debré* was just one manifestation of the permanent state of exception under which French citizens in overseas departments lived. It was a statutory ruling that both targeted and punished Martinicans (no such legislation was ever put in place for public sector employees on the French mainland) and put them outside the protection of the law (there was no trial involved). The knowledge that he was not perceived or treated equally to his white French compatriots, and that this was unjust and had to change, always informed his worldview. This is not to say that his political affiliations were consistent throughout his life. After disagreeing with the party on a number of their positions (notably their policy of abstention in presidential elections), he left the Martinican Communists in 1982 and turned towards culture as his preferred mode of activism, much of which he produced in Creole.

His motivations for writing theatre in this language were initially pragmatic: Mauvois wanted to reach ordinary Martinican people via the medium of their everyday lives, through plays that dramatized the interactions between the different strata that constituted local society. However, whether writing in Creole is, in and of itself, the surest means of attracting and retaining Martinican audiences is open to debate. Choice of language, after all, is just one of many factors influencing the successful reception of a play. How to define 'success', and which criteria ought to be used to measure it, is also a thorny issue for theatre-makers and critics alike. Mauvois was sceptical about the tendency to rely on audience numbers as the ultimate indicator of a play's popularity, as ticket sales are often more dependent on the

degree of publicity it receives rather than on the quality of the play itself.¹⁹¹ In a context where theatre had only recently started to be incorporated into professional and state-supported structures, and where funding opportunities to cover venue hire and advertising were still very limited, securing a substantial audience for a play was a challenge in Martinique, regardless of the language in which it was communicated. Indeed, Mauvois' oeuvre as a whole has had a patchy performance history. While some of his work, including *Misyé Molina*, was taken on by the CDR (that is, the closest thing the island had to a national theatre company), others (such as the equally well-received 1989 production of *Man Chomil*, which satirized the dysfunctional bureaucracy of a post office in rural Martinique) gained a significant amount of local press coverage despite being staged by a less well-endowed company, Poutyi pa Teat. *Agénor Cacoul*, perhaps Mauvois' most skilful dramatization of French/Creole code-switching, has never been put on in Martinique, although it did circulate around a number of French Antillean student groups based in metropolitan France in the late 1960s as part of the consciousness-raising project outlined in Chapter Two. As an outsider in the 'professional' theatre scene in Martinique, the unpredictable buy-in to his work often seemed confusing and arbitrary. Mauvois thus preferred to focus on how audiences reacted to what they experienced, both during and after the performance. In his personal experience, they appear to respond more spontaneously and sincerely to performances in Creole.¹⁹² This was undoubtedly important to Mauvois, as both he and Ina Césaire wanted their audiences to enjoy their plays and recognize themselves and their society in them.

Nevertheless, he also had idealistic and political motivations for writing in Creole that Césaire does not prioritize. He is more closely aligned with the left-wing Martinican politics that, during the 1980s especially, coalesced with Creole language and cultural activism. While his affiliation was to Communism in its traditional, international socialist form, and did not evolve into a pro-independence or autonomist stance per se, he was deeply emotionally attached to Martinique and appreciated the Caribbean as a family of closely related entities. Creole, for Mauvois, was an integral part of Martinican culture and a link binding it to its neighbours. He participated in the language revival movement enthusiastically, but also with an awareness of the insurmountable task it faced. While he may have corresponded with Jean Bernabé on linguistic issues and used the orthography produced

¹⁹¹ Stéphanie Bérard, 'Entretien avec Daniel Boukman et Georges Mauvois, deux grands messieurs du théâtre martiniquais', in *Île en île* (first published 15 September 2004; updated 21 October 2020) <<http://ile-en-ile.org/entretien-avec-daniel-boukman-et-georges-mauvois-deux-grands-messieurs-du-theatre-martiniquais/>> [accessed 28 June 2022]

¹⁹² Bérard, 'Entretien avec Daniel Boukman et Georges Mauvois'.

by the GEREC, he was also sensitive to the contemporary phenomenon of decreolization in a new generation saturated by French-language media and institutions. Bèbèn's recourse to French in *Misyé Molina* is a dramatization of what he observed around him in Martinique:

[...] il y a des quartiers où l'on entend moins qu'avant les enfants entre eux parler le créole, surtout ceux des petites classes, à la sortie ou en récréation. Dans les quartiers disons 'aisés', les collégiens ou les lycéens parlent plutôt français. Comment tout cela se répartit-il, et évolue-t-il exactement, je ne sais pas. Mais de mon temps, il n'était pas imaginable que les écoliers sortent de la classe, après la sonnerie de la cloche, avec le français à la bouche. Il faudrait mesurer tout cela.¹⁹³

The sense of loss of culture and identity here is palpable. Mauvois knew that, in a context where the conditions of diglossia are determined by a colonial power, the progress made by Creole activists with regard to the valorisation of the language was at best fragile, and at worst futile.

This knowledge is what motivated him to raise Martinican consciousnesses through his theatre. It was vital to make his audiences aware that the language situation in Martinique, whereby French was associated with sophistication and success, and Creole with poverty and ignorance, was not simply 'the natural order of things'. Indeed, this is the crux of the satire in *Misyé Molina*. Bèbèn, Madame Folmak and Molina all speak French, but they are a teenage layabout, a scheming arriviste and an amoral pimp respectively. Their command of that language merely affords them a veneer of respectability, which ultimately only reinforces their role as objects of ridicule. Moreover, it is the poorer and less well-educated Creole-speaking characters, Lwiz and Finot, who use their courage and ingenuity to negotiate the crisis and unmask Molina as a sexual predator. The value system on which diglossia in the French Antilles is founded is thus undermined, and indeed reversed, for the duration of this play. Mauvois also highlights and lampoons clichés regarding where and when bilingual Martinicans normally use Creole. He flirts with stereotype in having Monsieur Molina and Madame Folmak code-switch only when the former talks lasciviously about Sésil and attempts to seduce her mother, or when the latter haggles over flowers in the market and discusses traditional Caribbean herbal remedies with the female traders. The implication here is those Martinicans who have the option only spontaneously adopt the language in contexts typically associated with the Caribbean, from a white perspective: sex, seduction, tropical marketplaces and bush tea. Ultimately, however, this unconscious corralling of Creole into

¹⁹³ Bérard, 'Entretien avec Daniel Boukman et Georges Mauvois'.

appropriate zones is part of what is being satirized in *Misyé Molina*, that is, the mores of an alienated Martinican bourgeoisie who have internalized the fantasies of the people who colonized them.

It is one thing to defend the use of Creole and lambast the systems and mentalities that prize French above all else, but it is another to engage with the questions of what the old order ought to be replaced with, and of how Creole should be used and in what form. Mauvois was a keen participant in this discussion and, when considered in its entirety, his oeuvre is an illustration of what can be written and said in the language. Besides his series of social satires, he also published short stories drawn from the Martinican oral tradition, pedagogical texts for schoolchildren and Creole translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Molière's *Dom Juan*. The range of his output, however, belies a disquiet shared by many Martinicans working in the island's cultural and educational spheres at the time. This is the work of someone passionate about and fascinated by Creole, but who also had to wrestle with contemporary anxieties regarding its perceived 'incompatibility' with literary writing.

Mauvois has spoken in interviews about having to negotiate the inherent 'brevity' of Creole. He says that he makes a conscious effort to be concise in his writing, because speaking (and, indeed, *being*) Creole requires a certain economical attitude towards words that is difficult to carry over into the task of producing an extended text. When he talks about trying to 'lighten' his dramatic texts so that they are not overlong, the implication is that this is particularly important when writing in Creole, rather than a concern of writers working in all languages. Mauvois even goes as far as to suggest that this language lends itself more to theatre rather than other genres, because the texts are shorter. At other times, however, he strikes a different tone when commenting on his creative practice. On the subject of translating *Antigone* and *Dom Juan*, Mauvois maintains that he did not encounter any major problems when trying to convey the thoughts and feelings of people living in a totally different time and place, and that the Creole lexicon contained everything he needed in order to do so.

His attitude towards writing in Creole is thus somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, he is convinced that the language has the necessary depth and breadth required to allow users to express whatever they desire. On the other hand, he believes that this must be done succinctly, above all else. In other words, there are, in fact, limits to what can be written in Creole. When accounting for this contradiction in Mauvois' discourse, it is important to remember that it was formed within a specific historical context. The 1980s coincided not only with the emergence of Creole-language literature as a tradition, but of writing in Creole

as a generalized and socially acceptable practice. It is possible that the historic lack of freedom and opportunity to write in Creole is being mistaken for a fundamental unsuitability for writing that is unique to this language. If Mauvois wrote within the energy and optimism of the decade's cultural activism, then he also worked within its blind spots.

The way in which he employs Creole in *Misyé Molina* embodies this tension, between a desire to explore and demonstrate the possibilities of playwriting in this language, and an awareness of the constraints which, real or perceived, set the parameters of that creative endeavour. Expressive imagery is, in many instances, used as a pithy means of avoiding explanations that could make the play's dialogue too verbose. Rather than elaborate on why she considers Finot's gladioli to be too expensive, Madame Folmak's bargaining strategy is to proceed with terse nonchalance: 'Sé potmonnen-an ki plat, chéri.' ('It's my purse that's flat, love.') (p. 92) By stating simply that her purse is flat, she saves herself the effort of having to argue the price of the flowers down. Neither does Molina need to waste words justifying his decision to stroke Lwiz's knee and why he is entitled to do so: 'Jounou'w pa'w, ma chérie.' ('Your knee's not *you*, darling.') (p. 158) Two words are all that he requires in order to contend that Lwiz's knee does not actually constitute Lwiz herself, and that therefore his current activity does not merit her outrage. These are skilful, pragmatic short cuts engineered by a writer who not only valued economy, but saw himself as working within a language that compelled him to be verbally prudent.

The dialogue is certainly all the funnier for its sharpness. Moreover, images, however briefly expressed, can prove to be very effective means of generating pathos. Consider Finot's comment on the competition market traders face from international corporations based in Europe:

FINOT Mézanmi! Moun-an pa ka mandé plis ki sa pou i kouri la Bel Jardinyew. Flè-a sòti an Fwans rivé pa avyon. Si ta'w la pa bel, ou an bililik, wi. Moun-lan ka pwan téléfòn li, i ka kriyé magazen-an: apowté mwa tan. Flè'y za rivé wi. Avan i cho i tjuít.

(FINOT Now, listen here! The punters don't need to be asked twice before they go running to La Belle Jardinière. *Their* flowers come from France by plane. So, if yours aren't nice, then you're in trouble. The customer just picks up the phone, calls the shop: bring me a bunch of this. Before you know it, the flowers have arrived...) (p. 84)

Her final remark that her business risks being 'cooked before it's even hot' ('avan i cho i tjuít') is witty yet poignant. It elicits laughter whilst also communicating the vulnerability of working-class Martinicans in a newly globalized version of an old colonial dynamic. A

Creole expression can convey all of that comedy, and the weight of that politics, in just five words.

If the play's main aim is to make its audience reconsider the value they placed on France and the language with which it continued to colonize their society, then, on a less obvious level, it also advocates for Creole as an alternative linguistic resource that they can use to articulate their reality in the context of their choice. Mauvois holds this conviction sincerely but uneasily, a paradox that comes to the fore when he references the language activism of the period in *Misyé Molina*. When Lwiz describes her daughter's new-found interest in Creole to Finot, she does so with bewilderment and scepticism:

LWIZ Dépi Sésil ka fwékanté sé moun-tala, i anni ranvèsé toubannman. [...] Ajtwelman sé kréyol i ka pale. Ou abo pale fwansé ba'y, i pa ka tann. I di'w kréyol sé lang manman-y.

FINOT Pa ou ki manman-y, an?

LWIZ Sé sa man ka di'y. Kouman ou ka di kréyol sé lang mwen? Also pis man pwi anba kréyol-la, fodré ou pwi anba'y tou? A kwa sanser man té voyé'w lékol alow? Péyé tousa lajan pou rad, pou liv, pou kayé, pou potplim. Sa sa vé di sa? (p. 113)

(LWIZ Since Sésil started hanging around with that lot, she's completely changed. [...] Now she'll only speak Creole. Try speaking French to her all you like, it's like she doesn't hear you. She'll tell you that Creole is her mother tongue.

FINOT Is it not *you* that's her mother?

LWIZ That's what I said to her. How can you say that Creole is my language? As if it wasn't bad enough that I'm stuck speaking Creole, now you have to get yourself stuck too? What do you think I sent you to school for? All that money for clothes, textbooks, exercise books, pens. What is this?)

The ambiguous sentiments lurking within this exchange could be exploited differentially in a performance setting. The director might choose to emphasize the older women's conservatism for comic effect, poking fun at their total disregard for contemporary changes in attitude towards Creole. Alternatively, he or she could put a more tongue-in-cheek spin on the conflict, portraying Sésil and her boyfriend as pretentious students with lofty ideals divorced from the reality of working-class people's struggle to access education and the opportunities it affords. This characterization of the younger generation as self-righteous political activists may be caricatural, but it does reference the dogmatism that stalked the pro-Creole ideological camp. It is an attitude that was memorably critiqued by Maryse Condé when she described *créolité* as a movement that presumes to impose law and order on French Antillean

culture by assuming it to be predicated on one linguistic medium.¹⁹⁴ *Being* Martinican or Guadeloupean and speaking Creole are essentially consubstantial, or so the proponents of *créolité* maintain. As an extension of this logic, the philosophy confers authenticity on this language, thereby excluding those who do not use it (or choose not to), relegating them to the margins of local cultural life.

The mixed signalling embedded in the play is emblematic of how Mauvois, like many Martinicans both then and now, was quite ambivalent in his engagement with the debates surrounding language on the island. Closer linguistic analysis of his play, along with further consideration of the social and intellectual context in which it was performed, bears witness both to sincerely held principles regarding how Creole should be written and spoken, and persistent doubts about how best to advance the cause.

It is true that the Creole employed in *Misyé Molina* is often quite basilectal, in that it usually aligns with the more distinct and less French-influenced variety spoken by older Martinicans as their first (or only) language. For example, the copula is not used when specifying an attribute or a profession, giving phrases such as ‘Misyé gwo fonksyonè, wi’ (‘He’s a high-ranking civil servant, so he is’) (p. 93) and ‘I pwofèsyonel’ (‘He’s a professional type’) (p. 94) where there is no form of the verb *be* linking the subject and its complement. Equally noteworthy is the frequent use of *kò* in order to express reflexivity, where ‘sé pa konsa pou ou mété kò’w, non’ (‘that’s not how to do it’) (p. 126) is preferred to a more acrolectal, French-styled phrase like ‘sé pa konsa pou ou mété ou’. Relative object clauses are generally avoided, thus rendering a calque of the French word *que* redundant. To this end, Mauvois’ Creole also employs the word *pasé* in comparative constructions, resulting in phrases such as ‘I té épi an gran ral fanm ankò pi nwè pasé’y.’ (‘He used to go with a big, tall woman even darker than he was.’) (p. 98)

Beyond his own writing practice, Mauvois expressed fairly committed views with regards to the state of Creole in wider society. When asked to comment more generally on the progress made thus far towards the rehabilitation of the language, he worries about the quality of what is currently being spoken, and particularly the encroachment of French words and structures. A case in point is the spread of the word *kè* in Martinique, an approximation of the French *que*, for which (as we have seen) there is no equivalent in Creole as the syntax of the language does not require one. It goes without saying that Mauvois does not include words such as *kè* in his texts and, given that he was often involved in directing his plays

¹⁹⁴ Maryse Condé, ‘Créolité without the Creole language?’ in Balutansky and Sourieau, pp. 101–9.

(indeed, the first act of the 1992 production of *Misyé Molina* was developed entirely under his direction), we can be certain that they were not uttered in performance. The strength of Mauvois' feeling on the issue is evident as he describes the gallicization of Creole as yet another vector of linguistic and cultural corruption in Martinique¹⁹⁵, a harbinger of the loss of language witnessed at the school gates.

These views align with those held by the GEREC. It is clear that Mauvois shared their vision of what was at stake in the rehabilitation of Creole in the French Antilles. Not only was speaking an impoverished version of the language not enough to save it, but the spread of the heavily gallicized pseudo-Creole in local media and political discourse was actively undermining its integrity as a distinct parlance, and ultimately only further contributing to the general decreolization of Martinique. Speaking the language poorly, it would seem, is potentially as much of an existential threat to its survival as not speaking it at all.

And yet, this is not merely a case of pedantic scholars lambasting ignorant radio DJs. The GEREC's approach to the state of Martinique was considered and holistic, and they saw the Creole crisis as one facet of a deeper and wider malaise. They diagnosed the language's lexical paucity as being symptomatic of the collapse of the local productive economy in the French Antilles, which had been structured on the now largely defunct sugar plantations. This incurred a significant loss of technical knowledge (along with the vocabulary that accompanied it) and spawned a service economy, or 'économie prétexte', which is predicated on the transfer of capital from metropolitan France and generates no lexicon that is specific to the Antillean context. Consequently, the Creole language 'rots from the inside', imbibing French lexemes and calques of syntactical structures without creolizing them.¹⁹⁶

Faced with so dire a situation, Raphaël Confiant of the GEREC maintains that Martinican writers and linguists have a responsibility to resist by reactivating mechanisms of creolization in their creative work and research. This means having a good understanding of Creole, its vocabulary, syntax and grammar, so that when it is necessary to express a word or concept that does not yet exist in the language, they can draw on that knowledge in order to create something that is consistent with what has come before, rather than simply relay a French word or phrase in a Caribbean accent. This linguistic work formed a key element in the organisation and development of what they saw as the national language of the French Antilles. They did emphasize, however, that it ought to be only part of a comprehensive

¹⁹⁵ Bérard, 'Entretien avec Daniel Boukman et Georges Mauvois'.

¹⁹⁶ 'Construire le créole écrit' in Raphaël Confiant, *Dictionnaire des néologismes créoles* (Petit-Bourg: Editions Orphie, 2000). ProQuest ebook.

project of language protection, in which political leaders would commit to a programme of institutional reform, notably concerning schools and the media.¹⁹⁷ Without this more general concerted effort, Creole would be obsolete within a few decades, and a cornerstone of Martinican identity would be lost.

Mauvois clearly sympathized with the anxieties that motivate activists to commit to what can be very entrenched positions. However, the language of his plays does not adhere to the conventions they defended, at least not systematically. Despite the general tendency towards more basilectal speech patterns in his work, it is also evident that he does not subscribe to the principle of maximum deviation espoused by the GEREC.

He did not embrace the Creole neologisms promoted by the group's members in their publications and broader public activism. This is evident in the frequent inclusion of more French-influenced lexical items, including *zafew etrangew* ("foreign affairs"), *lep* (an abbreviation of *lycée d'éducation professionnel*), *dezabiyé* ("undressed") and *seksi* ("sexy"), at the expense of their more basilectal counterparts *lézafè-andéwo*, *lékòl-jennbray*, *dechange* and *mafounè*. At times, Mauvois sought to distance himself from the single-minded fanaticism that existed within Creole activist circles (which, at least in the exchange between Lwiz and Finot, can potentially be portrayed as an object of satire in *Misyé Molina*), as well as the internal arguments that rage within them. When questioned about his choice of orthography, he emphasizes that he uses the phonetic system developed by the GEREC purely because he likes it. He is aware of the bitter divisions that oppose proponents of the two main writing schemes, and is at pains to present himself as not being ideologically wedded to any particular faction. Evidently, there were other values that mattered to Mauvois (and the audience he wanted to reach) than linguistic purity and preservation, however keenly he himself perceived the loss of culture in Martinique. Recognizability and accessibility were paramount to the success of the popular theatre he aimed to create, and achieving them necessarily meant forgoing the more radical of the GEREC's recommendations, namely those that often rendered Creole unfamiliar to the average Martinican and risked alienating them as a result.

This chapter's analysis of *Mémoires d'isles* and *Misyé Molina* has identified profound differences between the two plays that extend beyond each playwright's respective choice of language. By writing in Creole, Mauvois has oriented his work towards a Martinican

¹⁹⁷ 'Utilité d'un dictionnaire' in Raphaël Confiant, *Dictionnaire créole martiniquais-français*, Vol. 1 (Matoury: Editions Orphie, 2007). ProQuest ebook.

audience, whereas Ina Césaire's French-language performances can be understood by both Caribbean and metropolitan spectators, as well a diasporic population living in Europe who may be a generation removed from the Antilles and their linguistic reality. As we have seen, Mauvois was deeply engaged in contemporary debates surrounding the current state and future of the Creole language in Martinique, and *Misyé Molina* reflects this. Ina Césaire was not involved in this conversation, and *Mémoires d'isles* is more of an exploration of Martinican French as an overlooked transatlantic phenomenon.

Examined together, however, they demonstrate that the linguistic situation in Martinique is much more complex and nuanced than a question of choosing which 'camp' to support, or of claiming to transcend the problem of diglossia altogether. It is undeniable that Creole is still denigrated and undervalued in relation to French. The colonial relationship behind this power imbalance is not going to expire soon, but within that overarching dynamic Martinicans manage the situation through their small-scale personal and collective endeavours. The people behind *Mémoires d'isles* tried to craft a language that accounted for the transatlantic dimension of Martinique, one which could be easily inserted into the Metropole-Antilles circuit that continues to determine much of local cultural production. The creators of *Misyé Molina*, for their part, are part of a wider effort to develop a Creole that can be written, understood and taught throughout the island and beyond.

Both projects thus contribute to the construction of what we might call a Creole nation, one that is determined to capitalize on its linguistic resources, eclectic in its thinking and priorities, and severely circumscribed by the anti-nation in which it exists. In the following chapter, I will elaborate further on the nature of the Creole nation being formulated across the Martinican popular culture of the 1980s and early 1990s. While linguistic issues were being worked through intensely in the local theatre sector, it is fruitful to adopt a more holistic view of the push for autochthonous cultural production as an imperative that spanned many areas of Martinican life at the time. It is with this objective in mind that we now turn towards carnival and its music as a site of equally ardent linguistic activity.

Chapter Four – Party with a purpose: Language, Carnival, Creole nation

This chapter will explore the language of carnival music through two case studies drawn from the period 1981 – 1993. The first, ‘Voici les loups’, is a song recorded by the Martinican solo artist Djo Dézormo and released in time for carnival in 1990. This will be examined alongside a range of tracks by the pan-Antillean supergroup Kassav’ also dating from this decade. All of these are examples of the *zouk béton* that Kassav’ themselves pioneered, a genre that took traditional carnival rhythms and modified them for a global 1980s audience. Some were conceived specifically for the festival itself, such as ‘Zioum (I adan)’, released in 1985 and still sung during street processions to this day. However, not all of them, including some of those analyzed in this chapter, were written explicitly for carnival per se. While they have not all achieved the kind of mythological status accorded to hits that were popularized by Martinican *vidé* crowds during the climax of the festival, they are well-known and appreciated all year round and in all kinds of public and private spaces, precisely for their carnival aesthetic and spirit.

These songs have been selected partly for practical reasons, in that they are relatively popular, accessible and well-documented in the local press and world music journalism, if not in academic scholarship. Analysed together in this manner, they also illustrate the contours of carnival culture: while it is predicated on a singular event, it also bleeds out from a specific time and place into many areas of Martinican life. Despite the artists’ differing personal trajectories and political priorities, not to mention a significant disparity in the reach, renown and financial reward they achieved during their career, there is much that draws them together. Both these incarnations of carnival culture intersect with contemporary conversations surrounding language, identity and the future of Martinique. Moreover, and to a much greater extent than in the theatre sector, they are subject to the pressures of local and international music industries and compelled not only to negotiate the increasing commercialization of French Caribbean popular culture, but actively contribute to it.

Following the discussion of Djo Dézormo and Kassav’, the chapter will conclude by drawing together these two case studies, along with those explored in the previous chapter. This final sub-section will outline how all four participate in the endeavour of building a Creole nation, one which is related to the island’s political and intellectual language activism, but not entirely aligned with its principles. The Creole nation under construction across this

slice of Martinican performance culture eschews facile equations between a community and its one authentic language. Instead, it proposes a mode of national belonging that mobilizes the linguistic resources available to it creatively and critically.

4.1 – Djo Dézormo, ‘Voici les loups’ and the Creole consensus

The Martinican singer Djo Dézormo’s song ‘Voici les loups’ was released in 1989 before reaching peak popularity during Carnival season in early Spring of the following year. Its strong, uptempo beat, catchy melody and simple lyrics made it an attractive accompaniment to street processions and evening parties. However, the song also verbally references Martinique’s problematic assimilation within geographically disparate entities. It was composed during a period of intense debate regarding the construction of the European Union or, more precisely, in anticipation of the considerable political and economic integration promised by the signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1992. The first chapter of this thesis outlined the broad existential crisis provoked by these developments in overseas departments such as Martinique. ‘Voici les loups’ responds to these anxieties and managed to communicate them through constant and widespread public broadcast during a large-scale popular festival. This was also facilitated by the use of a simple extended metaphor: the *loup* referred to in the title corresponds to a rapacious Europe, while the Martinicans are portrayed as sheep trying to evade the beast as it advances.

Similarly to the plays analyzed in the previous chapter, ‘Voici les loups’ incorporates both of the main languages spoken in Martinique, and has been skilfully crafted in terms of how they complement and penetrate each other, of which more later. For the most part, however, it is written and performed in Creole, and in a very acrolectal version thereof. We might note, for example, how the chorus line is sung as ‘*Le lou ki lé dévoré nou*’ (translated into French as ‘le loup qui veut nous dévorer’ by Justin Daniel¹⁹⁸) as opposed to the more basilectal Creole structure of ‘*lou a ki lé dévoré nou*’. Even minor syntactical and grammatical variations such as these are indicative of a complex and uneasy engagement with contemporary debates surrounding language in the French Antilles.

On one hand, ‘Voici les loups’ was an enthusiastic contribution to Martinique’s long history of carnival song-writing. While music and singing have been integral to the festival for as long as it has been celebrated on the island (as outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis),

¹⁹⁸Daniel, p. 593.

this particular tradition reached its apogee in the town of St Pierre in the late nineteenth century. Crucially, it was during this period that its various sub-genres became more clearly defined. This included a substantial body of political songs, which usually lambasted local authority figures for their mediocrity, loose morals or racial prejudice. Léo Ursulet asserted the vitality of this genre in particular, describing it as an effective means of extra-electoral political expression that could be used by ordinary people. They also act as a reservoir of cultural memory, in that the most successful of these songs are still sung years after the individuals or events in question have faded from the forefront of public life.¹⁹⁹

Djo Dézormo thus wrote and performed within a historic form, but one which had undergone a recent reincarnation. In the years immediately following the extreme hardship of World War Two, several initiatives were undertaken with the aim of reviving Martinican carnival. Paulette Nardal, the local writer, activist and early proponent of the ideas now understood within the framework of Negritude, launched an annual Creole song-writing contest with a range of categories corresponding to the various musical genres associated with the festival. These included *mazurka* and *biguine*, performed by Creole swing bands in indoor venues to accompany dancing couples, as well as *biguine vidé*, the faster music that accompanied the more lively revellers processing in the streets. Winning any of these proved to be the launchpad for the careers of several of Martinique's best-loved and most successful musicians, from Faisal Vainduc in the 1950s, through Maurice Alcindor, Eugène Mona and Dézormo himself, whose first entry in 1973 was followed by victory the following year. He was thus involved in a national endeavour that was at once cultural, political and linguistic.

And yet, as we have noted, the type of Creole he used was not in line with the GEREK's recommendations and differs in quality from that employed in Mauvois' *Misyé Molina*. While these public figures did share the same general vision of a nation under any number of forms of existential threat, then, they looked to different methods of resistance, often based on divergent logic and values. The GEREK advocated the radical principle and practice of maximum deviation, whose reasoning followed that Creole needed to be as distinct and autonomous from French as it possibly could be in order to survive, let alone develop. In the context of a Martinican culture that was dying, their response was to emphasize purity and preservation. There was certainly a reactionary element to how the GEREK defined their praxis in opposition to the perceived decay of linguistic mixing. Where they saw the adoption of French lexemes and syntax as symptomatic of existential rot, the

¹⁹⁹ Ursulet, p. 46.

more pragmatic Dézormo saw opportunity. More specifically, writing in an acrolectal Creole was a strategy through which to appeal to a pan-Caribbean audience, who may not be familiar with a variant specific to Martinique. The disparity thus demonstrates that while some of those involved in Martinican performance culture shared the GEREC's thinking and drew on the resources they created, others did not, and may not even have been aware of the extent of their output. While the activist-academic group were undeniably an influential voice in French Antillean society during the period, then, it is clear that they did not have a monopoly on Creole cultural production.

'Voici les loups' was an instance of national consciousness-raising in Martinique, even if the GEREC might not have recognized it as such. Not only does his interlectal Creole evade the more radical ideological underpinnings of language activism on the island, but he consciously incorporates French lyrics into his political and cultural endeavour. One verse of 'Voici les loups' is written in French and restores language from the European fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood. More precisely, it samples the well-known oral refrain mimicking Red Riding Hood as she encounters the wolf disguised as her grandmother: 'Pourquoi t'as de grands yeux comme ça / Pourquoi de grands cheveux comme ça [...]' The shift from Creole to French at this point in the song complements the image of an increasingly close encounter with an external threat. Restoring linguistic behaviour in this manner seems deliberate, in that it reinforces the sheep/wolf, Creole/French, Caribbean/Europe and innocence/danger binaries on which this song relies in order to convey its basic "us against them" sentiment.

The message here is not subtle, but its oppositional attitude makes more sense when appreciated with some knowledge of the artist's personal and political background. Dézormo had previously been targeted by the French state via the media outlets operating within it, owing to one of his earlier musical interventions in another controversial social issue, namely the designation of a public holiday in Martinique to commemorate the end of slavery. Historically, 27 April had been privileged, as it corresponded to the date on which the French writer and politician Victor Schœlcher signed the decree in Paris that officially abolished slavery throughout the empire in 1848. During the 1970s, however, a movement led by local historians, Communists, trade unions and Aimé Césaire sought to emphasize 22 May, when enslaved Martinicans, who did not want to wait for the arrival and implementation of Schœlcher's order, forced the colonial governor to declare them legally free virtually overnight. The controversy is symptomatic of the whitewashing of the history of slavery and its endgame in the French colonies which, owing to the deep-rooted tendency to extol white French abolitionists as the emancipators of black people, has more recently been referred to

as *schœlcherisme*. Confronting this amnesia and ignorance by campaigning for a holiday on 22 May became a lightning rod for nationalist thinking and feeling in Martinique: beyond the gesture itself, the movement was committed to re-writing a people's history in a way that highlighted their agency and defiance, and thus empowered them. It was in this context that Djo Dézormo composed his 1975 *biguine-bèlè* hit '22 mé', celebrating it as the 'pli bel dat' ('the most beautiful date'). Despite its popularity, it was never played on Martinican radio, apparently under pressure from the state authorities who deemed such decolonial activity seditious. The artist thus occupied a paradoxical space where esteem within the Martinican community and marginalization within the French one mutually reinforced each other. From this perspective, he existed within two nations simultaneously, one to which he belonged and which accepted him, and one which could not tolerate he and his compatriots' expression of their opinions and desires.

While this attitude of defiance and opposition remained consistent throughout his life and work, the political objective of 'Voici les loups' is rather more diffuse. Dézormo's personal beliefs were certainly radical, in that he was an active member of the Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais (MIM) and adhered to their separatist principles of non-participation in legislative elections to the National Assembly in Paris, and refusal to endorse any candidates running for the main French parties. And yet, he was fully aware that these were marginal positions to hold in Martinique, and that even the MIM's growing electoral base did not necessarily signify an unequivocal desire for independence. He also knew that the musical culture of the French Antilles does not include a fully-fledged genre of socially committed *angagé* songs equivalent to that found in Haiti and that this, as Brenda F. Berrian has argued, is directly linked to their political structure as overseas departments.²⁰⁰ The idea that political and economic dependency seeps into the cultural domain would suggest that this was not a creative sphere, or a listening audience, that was willing or able to confront the power that sustained it in so many ways. Rather than calling for a break-away, then, Dézormo's aims in 'Voici les Loups' are to awaken Martinicans from their apathy, specifically with regard to the implications of EU expansion, but also in terms of the state of their island-nation more broadly.

In order to communicate these sentiments through his art, Dézormo managed to carve out various spaces for himself within the local cultural landscape.²⁰¹ One of these was

²⁰⁰ Brenda F. Berrian, *Awakening Spaces: French Caribbean Popular Song, Music, and Culture*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 109.

²⁰¹ Berrian, p. 145.

carnival music, whose atmosphere of festivity and permissiveness allows for types of social critique that would not be tolerated by the authorities or the population at large at another moment, as Dézormo knew from experience. The Creole language also represents a zone in which he could craft his desired lyrics. In the overlap between this space and that of carnival, catchiness and danceability were the surest means of getting his message across, and therefore mattered more than how basilectal or otherwise the lyrics are. Over and above the GEREK's rationale for their push for standardization was the shared belief in the potential of Creole as a national language of resistance. This is a reincarnation of the idea that powered the far-left, pro-independence activism of the 1960s and 70s. Dézormo sang 'Voici les Loups' for a different historical moment, one that was perhaps less volatile, and seemingly more confident, but in reality just as troubled by threats and impasses both new and old. By 1990, the foundations of what one might call a 'Creole consensus' had been laid, in the form of a set of ideas that could appeal to Martinicans regardless of their position on the constitutional question. Not only was Creole a legitimate language in which one could speak, sing and write well, but it was integral to their distinct identity as French Antilleans. As such, it was uniquely well-suited to articulate Martinicans' perspectives on matters that concerned them.

4.2 – Politics, innovation and concealment in the music of Kassav'

Misyé Molina and 'Voici les Loups' contributed to this burgeoning consensus. Kassav' did so too, albeit from a different vantage point and with their own aims. Unlike Dézormo, Mauvois and the Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle, who lived and worked exclusively on their island of origin during the period, Kassav' were a thoroughly pan-Antillean and transatlantic band. This is evident in the make-up of the group, which comprised both Martinican and Guadeloupean musicians who lived in multiple locations over the course of their lives. Furthermore, migration and mobility were integral to Kassav's modus operandi, as a band whose music was generated in Parisian recording studios and propagated through international touring and networks of diasporic communities. They have more in common in this respect with the nomadic life of *Mémoires d'isles* which, as we have seen, both was and was not a Martinican play in terms of its generation and performance history. At the same time, the band's founders were finely tuned in to the musical culture of the French Antilles, including its years of creative torpor. The years preceding the group's first release in 1979 were marked by the dominance of foreign genres such as Haitian compas, Dominican cadence-lypso and Cuban Latino rhythms. Local musicians felt compelled to imitate these in

their performance offerings or risk unpopularity, leaving little scope or appetite for cultivating music that was uniquely Martinican or Guadeloupean in character.²⁰² Kassav's invention of *zouk* was thus a response to this situation, and indeed a corrective. Here was an uptempo dance music that drew on traditional French Antillean percussive rhythms whilst also utilizing all that modern electronic technology had to offer at the time in terms of synthesizers and drum machines. It proved to be a highly successful innovation, partly in terms of the sheer number of records and concert tickets sold over the group's long career. Admittedly, the original, fast, drum and brass-led *zouk béton* reached peak popularity during the 1980s and 90s before giving way to the more languorous off-shoot known as *zouk love*. Nevertheless, Kassav' and the genre they created constitute a reference point in the history of black French music.

The relationship between Kassav' and carnival is complex. In many ways, the group were at one remove from the festival, and from Martinican cultural life in general. Not only were they based in Paris, but, as a studio band, their music was conceived and produced entirely in that type of indoor setting, making extensive use of electronic technology inaccessible to Martinican carnival songwriters. Moreover, Kassav's contract with CBS/Sony only permitted them to release two albums per year, one at Christmas and one during the Summer. This ruled out the kind of aggressive sales and marketing campaign in early Spring that would allow them to participate in the same carnival song circuits and promotion as local artists such as Djo Dézormo.

At the same time, it is clear that this festival and this group have always been imbricated in Martinican minds. Zouk music functions as a complex of interlocking rhythmic figures that complement each other. One of the standout elements is the straight-line, fast-tempo marching beat, buoyed by a forceful percussive sound, which is lifted out of French Antillean carnival music. Also drawn from this *mizik vidé* is the call-and-response formula that often features in Kassav's zouk lyrics. Crucially, these are more than just pleasant or interesting aesthetic choices. In the context of the Creole-speaking Caribbean, zouk artists and their listeners share the same symbolic sound code, which allows everyone to recognize a range of rhythms, which are in turn associated with established regional conventions. As Jocelyne Guilbault stresses, 'Even divorced from their contexts, the characteristic *chouval bwa*, biguine and Carnival marching rhythms suggest for Antilleans a particular body

²⁰² Berrian, p. 2.

movement, a Carnival atmosphere, and a dynamic and invigorating impulse.’²⁰³ In mobilizing sounds from this code, Kassav’ rearticulate carnival in their music to create mood and elicit participation, especially during their live performances, which closely resemble the festival in spirit. Such is the potency of this blend of rhythm, memory and feeling, that the group did not even have to enter the Creole song-writing contest or march in Fort-de-France as a *groupe à pied* in order for their music to be considered consubstantial with carnival. Indeed, Martinican journalists observed this phenomenon as early as 1987: ‘Dans les zouk, les boîtes et chez les particuliers, c’est la musique de KASSAV et la voix de Jocelyn [sic] Béroard qui ont été reines. Véritablement, ce carnaval a été le carnaval KASSAV.’²⁰⁴

Kassav’ made a conscious decision to sing in Creole.²⁰⁵ The question of what motivated them to do so inevitably arises in a French Antillean context where, for the reasons outlined throughout this chapter, cultural production in this language is necessarily a political act, even when it is not intended as such. Kassav’ were not activists and may have been uncomfortable with their music being labelled in this manner. This is exemplified in their annoyance at their hit ‘Zouk la sé sèl mèdikaman nou ni’ being coopted by French Antillean political nationalists, who interpreted the titular refrain (“Zouk is the only medicine we have”) as a reference to remedying the ‘sickness’ of departmentalization.²⁰⁶ In an ideal world, after all, releasing records in one’s native language would be just that and nothing more. But while this practice may have been uncomplicated enough when confined to the local sphere, Kassav’ also worked within French and international markets that viewed singing in a non-European language as at best exotic and at worst abnormal. There were consequences to being perceived in this manner: the group were largely ignored by French mass media²⁰⁷, and whenever the music industry and the journalists who covered it did take notice, they tended to categorize zouk as ‘world music’, as opposed to a genre that originated in France.²⁰⁸ In many ways, then, Kassav’s situation encapsulates the broader predicament of Martinicans as described in this thesis. Even as they exercise creative and professional agency, their success is constrained and shaped by structures and prevailing attitudes outside of their control.

²⁰³ Jocelyne Guilbault, *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 137.

²⁰⁴ ‘Kannaval-la té cho!’, *Antilla*, 5 March 1987, p. 9.

²⁰⁵ All English translations of Kassav’ song lyrics provided in this chapter are my own.

²⁰⁶ Berrian, p. 64.

²⁰⁷ ‘Kassav’, black music matters!’, *Blockbusters*, France Inter, 12 August 2020.

²⁰⁸ Paul Cohen, “‘Zouk Is the Only Medicine We Need’: Kassav and the Cultural Politics of Music in the French Caribbean”, *French Historical Studies*, 45.2 (2022), 319–53 (p. 342).

It is therefore more accurate to describe Kassav's attitude towards creating in Creole as committed but compromised. Creole speakers only constituted part of their target audience, a fact that becomes evident in some of the writing strategies the group were compelled to employ. Consider the efforts made by founding member Pierre-Edouard Décimus to privilege certain vowel sounds deemed to be universally pleasing (i, a, è and o) over others that, while perfectly unremarkable to a creolophone listener, may grate on someone not familiar with the language.²⁰⁹ Jocelyne Béroard, who still sings with the group, insisted that even songs that dealt with serious themes such as racial prejudice and disaffected youth had to be hopeful in tone, so that those with little or no understanding of the lyrics can still take away Kassav's ultimate message of joy.²¹⁰ Even while they continued to stand by their choice of language, then, they felt that the manner in which they actually crafted their songs had to accommodate the expectations, preferences and knowledge gaps of a broad international base. Increasing the visibility of Creole and French Antillean culture was just one of Kassav's objectives. They also wanted to succeed in financial terms, which, to their mind, involved finding a way of writing for both insiders and outsiders to that culture.

As we have seen, the issues surrounding language in Martinique are by no means limited to whether or not to speak in Creole. In addition to their musical ingenuity, Kassav' were linguistic innovators and, as such, opened up the question of *how* to express oneself in that language, for a generation of Martinicans that was perhaps under slightly less pressure to justify or defend the language itself. Indeed, it has been suggested that '[their] international success modified the very terms for Creole's use'²¹¹, a claim that can be substantiated through closer analysis of their *zouk béton* lyrics.

Kassav's work prompted a re-evaluation of what constituted language activism and who was permitted to lead it. Assumed to be the preserve of intellectuals and politicians, they demonstrated how it could be undertaken by less formal, non-academic means. This is evident in the subject matter of their lyrics, which tend to revolve around the themes of partying, love, sex and dance. Their preferred mode of communication, the intersection between carnival and pop music, is a cultural space crowded with differing practices and expectations in terms of politics. Indeed, it is here that we can identify a point of divergence with the work of Djo Dézormo. While he often stopped short of making explicit demands (as was the case in 'Voici les Loups'), he consistently engaged with contemporary social and

²⁰⁹ Berrian, p. 41.

²¹⁰ Berrian, p. 58.

²¹¹ Cohen, p. 335.

political issues, especially those specific to Martinique and its neo-colonial situation. This opened Kassav' up to criticism, at least in the early years, from some sectors of the local intelligentsia for the lack of political consciousness in their choice of lyrics.²¹² Nevertheless, this was certainly a fleeting, minority stance, and reflects a misunderstanding of the nature and function of pop music. Songs about the fun parts of life are not merely bonus dividends paid out after the 'real work' of dictionaries, policies and political activism has been completed. They are vital to obtaining buy-in from the Martinican population at large, through engaging them in songs about things they know and love. When Cohen quips that 'Kassav's songs fight language death by teaching a complete Creole grammar of seduction'²¹³, he is highlighting how the group sang about significant swathes of local life that more established activists tended to ignore on account of their perceived triviality.

Furthermore, Kassav' stretched the norms that the GEREK were beginning to advocate with regard to how Creole should be written and spoken. Similarly to D  zormo, they often opted for less basilectal words, expressions and structures. This included the *k  * that Mauvois abhorred, which is employed in the songs 'Ay  ' ('Adan limi   chandel ka kl  r   / An k   sa montr  'w k   s  'w an vl  ' ('In the candlelight / I'll you show you that it's you that I want')), and 'Mwen diw awa' ('Fo ban mwen an chans / P  t  t k   nou k   konprann nou' ('You've got to give me a chance / Maybe we'll be able to understand each other')). Owing in no small part to the heterogeneity of the group's personnel, Kassav' did not craft their lyrics within a nationalist framework that was explicitly Martinican or Guadeloupean, and deliberately mixed these two Creole dialects. This is evident in the uptempo 'Ba nou zouk-la', in which lines delivered by the Guadeloupean singer Patrick Saint-Eloi feature the preposition *an* before the possessive pronoun *nou* ('Si yo t   konn  t mizik *an* nou' ('If only you knew our music')), whereas those sung by his Martinican counterpart Jocelyne B  roard do not place *an* before the possessive pronoun *mwen* ('P  t  t mwen pou an ayen' ('And lose my head over nothing')). Kassav' also blended a variety of different languages into their lyrics, resulting in lines such as those featured in 'Mwen malad aw' where French segues into Lingala ('Tout le monde est maboko' ('Everybody clap your hands')). There was undeniably a strategic element to these approaches, that of appealing to diasporic audiences whose Creole may be more French-inflected, as well as Kassav's huge Congolese following. Nevertheless, it also appears that the group saw this looser attitude to verbal expression not

²¹² Guilbault, *Zouk*, p. 157.

²¹³ Cohen, p. 335.

within the framework of corruption or loss, as the GEREC did, but as a normal part of Creole's life as a language, that of contact, blending and ultimately change and development.

Thus far, we have examined how Dézormo and Kassav' approached the issue of linguistic standardization, keeping within the terms that the GEREC laid down and which Mauvois sought to reinforce. It is my contention, however, that Kassav' are also doing something else entirely. Their song lyrics, to a more emphatic and memorable extent than the Creole-language theatre of the period, engage with a more fundamental question of what language is for and what it can do.

The song 'Syé bwa' is a case in point. As the title would suggest, it is ostensibly about the mundane activity of sawing wood, which the female singer's refrain jovially implores her interlocutors to help with: 'Lévé vini pou zòt siyé bwa' ('Come on over here and saw some wood'). Meanwhile, in the verses, her male counterpart protests, shirking his duties in the pursuit of good times: 'E menm si nou pé / Sé vé nou vlé pa / Lésé nou chapé' ('And even if we could / It's true, we wouldn't / Let us go'). On the surface, then, 'Syé bwa' stages a lively, good-humoured domestic argument. However, it can also be interpreted as a meditation on work in general or, more accurately, a critique thereof. Consider the spirit of the song in a French Antillean context, in terms of its foundational history as a colony built on slave labour, and its troubled present, marked by high unemployment necessitating mass migration to France (often to undertake labour-intensive jobs for low pay) and a situation where most of the land in Martinique and its associated economy is concentrated in the hands of the small white population. The concept of work in this culture has connotations of pain, exploitation, dispossession and powerlessness, over and above what individual Martinicans might feel about their own professional life. 'Syé bwa' undermines the value that Western societies tend to unquestioningly place on work, by dint of the slacker singer's knowingly ironic mock contrition: 'Dèmen si ou lé / Nou sèten travay / Mié ki jòdi la' ('Tomorrow, if you want / We'll definitely work / Harder than we did today'). The singer clearly has no intention of compensating for his carefree behaviour and feels no need to atone for his joy. This is a song that celebrates having fun, thus encapsulating the essence of the *zouk* genre more broadly. Further possible meanings abound, beyond the politico-philosophical. The motion of sawing wood could imitate dancing, and thus participate in a brace of self-reflexive Kassav' tracks that appear to focus on one subject (be it a household task or, in the case of 'Mwen malad aw', a lover) but might also be singing about the joy of *zouk* music itself. Alternatively, that same sawing gesture could be a sexual innuendo. Veiled references to intercourse and/or genitalia do feature in Kassav' lyrics and, of course, have always been part and parcel of

carnival song, masquerade and dance. Overall, the lyrics of ‘Syé bwa’ allow for a host of possible meanings to co-exist, rendering it both fun and obscure, especially to listeners not familiar with the culture that gave rise to it.

While it is true that many languages can convey double entendre, and that all cultures allow for types of speech that are non-literal, such devices have particular salience in a French Antillean context. Indeed, the indispensability of masked meanings for communication between oppressed individuals in slave and post-slave societies has already been foregrounded by several Caribbean cultural theorists. Glissant argued that the Creole language (or, more precisely, the manner in which it was used by enslaved people in the French Antilles) evolved in a context where its speakers had to develop means of *not* being understood, so as not to arouse the suspicions of those surveying them. Creole as it is shared today has retained the markers of this communicative constraint: ‘Car on ne sait jamais si ce discours, en même temps qu’il livre un signifié, ne se développe pas précisément pour en cacher un autre. Du moins dans les situations particulières où le locuteur se sent mis en cause ou menacé par le rapport de locution. Autrement dit, il s’agit d’un discours-message ou, tout en même temps, d’un discours-écran.’²¹⁴ If for historical reasons Creole developed as a means of communication predicated (at least partly) on concealment, it seems necessary to account for this opacity when considering the language as a vector of social interaction.

Indeed, this ought to be considered as one variant of a wider colonial phenomenon of covert communication, a manifestation of oppressed and marginalised people’s need to conceal what they mean from those who control and exploit them. Dwight Conquergood, an ethnographer who has lived and worked in refugee camps in Thailand and the Gaza strip as well as impoverished immigrant neighbourhoods in Chicago, foregrounds this reality in his research into performance. Building on Foucault and de Certeau’s theories of subjugated knowledge, Conquergood insists that ‘subordinate people do not have the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication, free and open debate on a level playing field that the privileged classes take for granted.’²¹⁵ Communication in contexts of vulnerability and precarity is often, by necessity, purposefully designed *not* to be read.

The Martinique of today, and its Creole language, is not that of the plantations, and Martinicans do not live under the conditions described by Conquergood. Nevertheless, it is

²¹⁴ Glissant, p. 641.

²¹⁵ Dwight Conquergood, ‘Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research’ in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Bial, 2nd ed (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 369-80 (p. 370).

not essentialist or anachronistic to say that Creole is marked by that history, and that concealment and ruse have a particular charge here. Ironically, for all the impassioned contemporary discourse surrounding visibility and promotion, Creole was, is and will remain the language that Martinicans use when they do not want to be understood by French speakers. The other examples of performance culture analysed thus far have had clear ideas or messages that they aimed to communicate clearly, be it the marginalized women's experience of Martinique, or the island's moral degeneration and the alienation of its new bourgeoisie, or the danger of a European super-union that threatens to subsume it entirely. Kassav' are perhaps distinct in their will to not mean anything in particular or, more precisely, to mean several things simultaneously. They, more than any other cultural actor or group, became an icon of pan-French Antillean national identity, partly by building on their musical resources, sharing them with the wider world and giving their compatriots an optimistic view of what could be done, culturally speaking. Through their song-writing, Kassav' also tapped into a strategy of trickery that is as old as the Creole language itself, and made it new. It is indisputable that all of the artists examined in this chapter valued Creole, in a context that continued to denigrate or ignore it. However, they each highlighted different aspects of the nature of that language and how it related to the people that spoke it. This will prove important as we turn to consider the type, or types, of nationalism that are ultimately being fostered across this performance culture.

4.3 – Language, Performance and the anti-nation

Many anti-colonial movements and thinkers, from Ireland to Algeria, have made the defence of indigenous or non-Western languages an essential component of the nations they planned to build after imperial rule. Aimé Césaire, however, never showed much interest in Creole, and the language did not feature in his vision of a decolonized Martinique, taking its place within a larger coalition of black peoples of African origin. In doing so, he neglected a vital element of Martinican life, which partly explains his compatriots' ambivalence towards him placing the island within the framework of Negritude.

This chapter and the one preceding it have focussed on the cultural consciousness and linguistic experimentation that was generated in various quarters of Martinique during the 1980s, a phenomenon that we might describe as a 'Creole corrective' to the concept of Martinique as developed by Césaire in his earlier work. The governing PPM saw the Creole language as one foot of their tripod of cultural nationalism, as outlined in Chapter One. The *créolité* movement and the GEREC (who overlapped heavily in terms of personnel and ideas)

also participated with intensity and urgency. Chapters Three and Four have demonstrated that the performance culture of the time contributed to this endeavour. All of the case studies analyzed here, on a fundamental level, defend the Creole language as one that is valid and valuable, both as one of the multiple means of communication embedded in a performance and as an identity marker, integral to how a modern Martinican nation could define itself. There was definitely an anti-colonial foundation to this, that is, a conviction that Martinicans do not need France and its language in order to survive and thrive, that European culture is not the only vector of civilization, and that the things black people make are not only sufficient, but more representative of themselves, and do not alienate them. It is also based on a regional Caribbean perspective that tries to build connections laterally with its Creole-speaking neighbours, in which Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, St. Lucia and Haiti are seen as a potential linguistic and cultural bloc. The success of French Antillean *zouk* music in the latter three of the aforementioned islands, as well as an appreciation of how this genre built on the musical traditions of all five, contributed to a form of solidarity hitherto overlooked by nationalism of all persuasions in Martinique. Undergirding this is a desire to not predicate the Creole nation too much on its colonial past, and a belief that this was necessary in order to imagine and build something different “after colonialism”. At this historical moment, many Martinicans felt that this was within their reach.

The concept of *mouvans zouk* helps us understand their behaviour and attitude in this regard. While it was developed by Jocelyne Guilbault on the back of her research into that musical genre, it can be applied to French Antillean popular culture more broadly. The term does not refer to any organized, concrete movement, but rather to a shared set of cultural endeavours and strategies employed within a particular context. Even if these ventures are apolitical (indeed consciously so, as in the case of *zouk* music), they still seek to promote a particular attitude and creative working style. Guilbault argues that in a difficult social context of high unemployment and associated mass emigration, coupled with a stable yet fractious political situation, the efforts made by *zouk* musicians to ‘mobiliz[e] resources, set up skill-exchange networks [and] put artistic talents at the service of the public’ played an important role in raising cultural consciousness²¹⁶. When *zouk* performers ‘promote themselves as emancipated people who not only accept, but actually *reassert* their cultural

²¹⁶ Guilbault, ‘On Interpreting Popular Music’, p. 94.

identity, that is, their multi-ethnic and musical crossbreed, their Creole language and their beliefs and customs'²¹⁷, they encourage their Caribbean listeners to act similarly.

Mouvans zouk does not offer any fixed, exact idea of what Martinique is, or any criteria that cultural expressions ought to meet in order to be considered Martinican. Instead, it is more of a state of mind, and a way of being and doing. It therefore allows for distinct sub-processes of identity construction to operate across the sphere of local popular culture, according to the creators' intentions for their art. *Mémoires d'isles*, for example, was quite unique among the case studies explored here, not only in how it foregrounded the experiences of Martinican women, but also in how it consolidated inter-generational links by connecting 1980s audiences with the lives, thoughts and concerns of their forebears. By dint of its collaborative, cross-Atlantic production and performance history, though, it also participated in the more general *mouvans zouk* suggested by Guilbault. Crucially, this was a flexible nationalism which, while generated in and for the French Antilles, was not tied politically, culturally or socially to any one island in particular, or even to one side of the ocean. It is noteworthy that all of the pieces of performance culture examined here (with the exception of *Misyé Molina*) were designed to include the sizeable diasporic community in France, described by Alain Anselin as the 'third island.'²¹⁸

Creole language and culture, it seemed, was a currency that could circulate throughout this context. However, behind the veneer of the *mouvans zouk* lay persistent discontent and disenfranchisement. It is a paradox which in many ways (as we shall now see) is symptomatic of Martinique's predicament as an anti-nation.

The fault lines in the Creole consensus become apparent when one takes a wider survey of the status of the language in Martinique at the time. The fact that plays were being staged and lyrics written in Creole did not cause the general public any consternation. Indeed, as pointed out earlier, carnival songs and related popular music have always been performed in this language. There were huge misgivings, however, surrounding the place of Creole in schools in the French Antilles, either as an object of study in its own right or a medium of instruction for a variety of subjects. Activists had to spend a lot of energy trying to debunk the myth that Creole monolingualism was the root cause of illiteracy in older, rural and more deprived demographics in these islands.²¹⁹ The correlation is bogus: lower levels of educational attainment among poor black people in the Caribbean is caused by structural,

²¹⁷ Guilbault, 'On Interpreting Popular Music', p. 86.

²¹⁸ Alain Anselin, *L'Émigration antillaise en France: la troisième île* (Paris: Karthala, 1990).

²¹⁹ 'Notre Caraïbe: le créole à la Dominique', *Antilla*, 4 January 1983, p. 39-40.

racialized poverty and marginalization, not because they speak Creole, or indeed any language in particular. Such putative associations persisted, though, as the *créolistes* and the ruling PPM struggled to convince their co-citizens that embedding Creole in Martinican schools does not actively disadvantage pupils (by impeding their acquisition of French, for instance) and, in fact, brings them benefits. Evidently, an education system designed entirely in France for metropolitan French people and implemented verbatim in the Antilles is a major obstacle, not just to the development of the Creole language, but of Martinique as a nation more generally.

The spectre of globalized capitalism also hangs over the creative arts in this locality, where language choice and craft become imbricated in the need to make money. The issue of performance becoming a commercial product is more closely associated with carnival and the music it generates, which has to compete both in a domestic context, and in an international market geared towards French and English-speaking audiences. We have seen how this reality shaped the song-writing practices of both Djo Dézormo and Kassav', who wrote in a stylized, acrolectal Creole so as to be better understood and appreciated across the Creole-speaking islands and in France. Even after making these adjustments, producing music in Creole still came at a considerable cost to these artists. Indeed, the lack of recognition enjoyed by Kassav' in mainstream white France, and their failure to break into the American market, can be attributed to their principled stance. The theatre performances analyzed here did enjoy some protection from commercial pressures by virtue of being created within state-sponsored companies, with accompanying funding and support that was simply not on offer to carnival practitioners. Nevertheless, this represented an economic aid rather than a safeguard, and the survival of these theatre groups very much depended on ticket sales and performance circuits, which are affected by language issues. While Mauvois' *Misyé Molina* might have garnered an enthusiastic reception in Fort-de-France, partly on account of its social critique and humour being communicated in the language of the local people's interpersonal lives, this also effectively confined it to an Antillean audience. Ina Césaire adopted a different strategy in *Mémoires d'isles*, treating the Creole language as a theme that is embodied in the character of Hermance, rather than as a medium of delivery. This allowed the play to circulate between Martinique, Guadeloupe and Paris in a form that was accessible to a French-speaking consumer base. What stands out here in relation to the idea of Martinique as an anti-nation is the fact that creating in the language that you feel belongs to your community, and making enough money to live off, is a luxury that Martinican performers do not have. Consequently, the language that they craft is as much a reflection of

the economic compromises they have to make in order to exist within an international cultural marketplace as an expression of how they see themselves as a community.

Throughout these chapters, we have also seen how the Creole consensus belied profound disagreement on how Creole should be written and spoken. There was a clear link between the need for linguistic purity and preservation expressed in some quarters, and the perceived decreolization of the departmental era, characterized by the ubiquity of French (and, increasingly, English) and the corresponding loss of the Creole language, along with the broader Antillean culture in which it was conceived. A lot of energy was expended on advocating for the most basilectal word or phrasing, an endeavour which, from a more critical perspective, may seem like an exercise in labelling language as legitimately Martinican or not, depending on the degree of foreign influence it has suffered. This is a small-scale version of the larger problem of defining national culture in terms of what is deemed authentic, which becomes off-putting when the rationale behind those decisions is not communicated clearly or fails to persuade. The analysis in these chapters has exposed a certain disconnect between activists and artists in this regard, whereby a lot of performers were using Creole in a much more acrolectal manner, while others only produced work in the language some of the time, or not at all. Often, the social value attached to Creole in performance culture of this period is based on versatility, ingenuity, creativity and possibility, rather than authenticity or purity.

In some ways, then, the Martinican creatives of this period are actually more aligned with Glissantian thought on language and culture than with that of the GEREC. Indeed, reading them in the light of how he theorized multi-lingualism in Martinique illuminates how these performers wrote, spoke and sang in an anti-nation.

His evaluation of how Creole is employed on the island is fairly pessimistic, and emblematic of the dire state of Martinique overall. In the context of a collectivity denied control over its means of economic and cultural production, Glissant describes the Creole language as being on the verge of exhaustion²²⁰, despite having been exclusively and systematically affirmed by scholar-activists and artists in recent years. Focussing on superficial measures does not constitute the radical change required: ‘Le problème n’est pas tant de décider pour le créole un mode de transcription [...] que de libérer en Martinique la pratique du créole par une révolution des structures du fonctionnement du social.’ (p. 785) A viable *idée-Martinique* cannot be predicated on a defence of the Creole language alone, even though its rehabilitation is necessary in a place where it has been denigrated.

²²⁰ Glissant, p. 403.

The issue foregrounded in *Le Discours antillais* is that of how to express oneself in a multilingual framework. Glissant outlines several principles in this respect, one of which is the necessity of distinguishing between *langue* and *langage*: ‘J’appelle ici langage une série structurée et consciente d’attitudes face à (de relations ou de complicités avec, de réactions à l’encontre de) la langue qu’une collectivité pratique [...]’ (p. 551) Crucially, the development of these attitudes is dependent on the freedom of the speakers to oppose the pressures of hierarchization and repression, at least to some extent: ‘[P]our qu’une langue devienne langage, il importe qu’elle soit ressentie, vécue par la collectivité comme sa langue, non plus celle d’un autre, si fraternel puisse-t-il être. Pour qu’un multilinguisme ne soit pas dévastateur, il faut qu’il soit consenti et vécu, au-delà de son institutionnalité, par la conscience libre de la communauté.’ (p. 553) The emphasis here is on the relativization of languages, and it is my contention that the performances analysed here participate in that process. Consider, for example, how ‘Voici les loups’ extracts elements of a French-language fairy tale, reassembles them within a Creole carnival song and uses the whole piece to articulate a Martinican perspective on global events.

This has implications for how we might configure the nation in a way that accounts for historical and contemporary contact between peoples and cultures. Glissant rejects the notion of the nation being consubstantial to ‘its’ language, as this emphasis on monolingualism was an intrinsic component of imperialism, and of French colonial policy in particular. Instead, he foregrounds multilingualism as one approach within his broader philosophy of Relation, with its opposition to those purportedly universal values that generalize in the interests of select groups of people. Entrenched inequalities cannot simply be bypassed, though, and those involved in the cultural productions examined thus far are acutely aware of this. We have seen, for instance, how the structures and symbols of diglossia inform the Martinique represented in *Mémoires d’isles* and *Misyé Molina*. Glissant’s thought on language and nationhood, then, ought to be considered as future-oriented, in that it depends on an imagined economic and cultural freedom: ‘Une telle perspective multilingue ne saurait être imposée ni téléguidée, elle devrait par exemple résulter d’un libre exercice de la ‘socialité’ martiniquaise.’ (p. 616) The cross-section of performance culture studied in this thesis does not yet enjoy that freedom: it is too deeply imbricated in metropolitan French institutions, production circuits and commercial markets. Nevertheless, it does aim towards it, in terms of how the different artists conceptualize language(s). Even if they restore linguistic behaviour in quite versatile and idiosyncratic ways, a certain attitude is being promoted. Césaire, Mauvois, Dézormeau and Kassav’ all suggest that both Creole and French can be

closely linked to one's self-perception as Martinican, and to one's sense of Martinique as a nation, provided that one is able to articulate a situated perspective through that language.

Chapter Five – The volcano and the ship: Memory, theatre and nation in Martinique

In Chapter Three, Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'isles* was explored through the prism of language (and its discontents). However, the play also engaged with memory, specifically those recollections shared by women of life in early twentieth-century Martinique. This, together with her other historical plays (the 1992 production of *Rosanie Soleil*, for example, was set during the 1870 Insurrection du Sud, a black uprising that remains little-known even within Martinique) and the two performances to be examined in this chapter, form part of a wider effort to illustrate and interrogate aspects of Martinican history that had previously been neglected in local culture and society.

The chapter will begin by contextualising this trend, both in terms of the deleterious effects of the colonial education traditionally imparted to the schoolchildren of the French Antilles, and with regard to some defining moments in the local culture of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which artists made a point of engaging directly with dark aspects of the island's past. The following sub-sections explore two very different plays staged during this period, José Alpha's *1902* and Michèle Césaire's *La Nef*. These productions aimed to represent episodes or strands of Martinican historical memory, and spoke to bigger ideas related to the politics of memory, that is, the problem of what gets remembered and in what manner. It will also compare the two playwrights and their respective oeuvres with regard to their personal trajectories and the priorities they had for their dramatic work, as well as how well they fitted in (or did not fit in) to the emergent national theatre structures of the time. The chapter ends with a coda that locates *La Nef* within the 1993 Fort-de-France festival of which it was a part, and discusses the (often problematic) ways in which this event sought to connect Martinique to the black Atlantic world, and in particular to Africa.

5.1 – Changing attitudes to history in Martinique

In Martinique, the community's understanding of its own history is shaped by the context of colonialism and, more specifically, the education system that undergirded it. Whether in private religious establishments prior to 1946 or in the French public schools extended to the new overseas departments from that point onwards, colonial education was designed to mould young minds that would accept the premises on which that order was founded. History lessons were particularly important in this respect, and were characterized by total omerta on

the reality of how the empire was achieved and maintained, including the conditions of forced transportation and slavery. This ignorance allowed for a number of foundational myths to be easily inculcated into the colonized populations at school. Chief among them was the idea that Europe brought civilization, industry, prosperity, security and culture to its imperial subjects, whose ancestors had known only poverty and savagery. It followed from this that the history of France as an enlightened superpower was also theirs, because they had no other, or at least none that was worth acknowledging. These myths were monumentally absurd: nowadays, people laugh at the irony of black schoolchildren in Martinique having to learn about *nos ancêtres les gaulois* (itself a putative lineage developed in the nineteenth century with the aim of strengthening a single national identity amongst the various regional communities that co-existed on French territory) from the same textbook narratives as their European peers. At the same time, such outlandish postulates were necessary in order to legitimize the entire colonial endeavour in the eyes of everyone implicated in it. Even though teaching practices and policies may have evolved in recent decades, the underlying assimilatory logic endures. As recently as 2017, former president Nicolas Sarkozy proclaimed that ‘dès que vous devenez français, vos ancêtres sont gaulois’.²²¹ While his remarks were widely pilloried, this is also a prime example of how colonial mindsets (and the pedagogies that forged them) continue to shape contemporary discourse on integration in a multi-cultural France.

It would be erroneous to single out the 1980s as being the decade in which Martinicans quickly came to see all this as a whitewash, although the rise of the PPM and their brand of cultural nationalism might have encouraged mindsets to move in that direction. In fact, some individuals had begun to develop and spread alternative understandings of the island’s past well before this period. As early as 1967, Édouard Glissant had set up the Institut Martiniquais d’Etudes, a supplementary school that experimented with decolonial pedagogies as it offered cultural activities to the community. One memorable outcome of this endeavour was *Histoire de nègre*, a play devised by staff and students and performed in various locations around Martinique in 1971, which represented the island’s history from a black perspective. Emily Sahakian describes the play as ‘an embodied experimentation in Glissant’s writings on history’²²², referring to his argument that the colonial logic still presented to

²²¹ “‘Nos ancêtres les Gaulois’: Sarkozy crée la polémique”, *L’Obs*, 20 September 2016, <<https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/presidentielle-primaire-droite/20160920.OBS8356/nos-ancetres-les-gaulois-sarkozy-cree-la-polemique.html>> [accessed 13 December 2022]

²²² Emily Sahakian, ‘Édouard Glissant’s Decolonial Theatre Practice: *Histoire de nègre* (Tale of Black Histories)’, *L’Esprit Créateur*, 62.2 (2022), 15–31 (p. 20).

Martinicans as fact (including in schools, as outlined above) precludes them from forming any meaningful shared consciousness of their past or current reality. Indeed, this principle will prove important throughout this chapter, as both performances are considered against the backdrop of this alienation, and in terms of how they engage with it. *Histoire de nègre*, for its part, was intended as a form of redress, to be achieved ‘not by teaching a fixed narrative, but by privileging dialogue and embracing the disjointedness and unpredictability of grappling with an unjust past and its unfinished legacy for the sake of a shared national consciousness and a radical, co-created, justice-oriented future.’²²³ The project was not lacking in ambition, but while it certainly sparked conversation and reflection amongst those Martinicans it reached²²⁴, it was more of an isolated artistic and social experiment than the beginning of a new trend or movement.

The 1980s was perhaps when historical consciousness began to go mainstream in Martinique, helped along by a number of key developments across the various domains of local culture. The island’s literary landscape was shaped by a turn towards the past, which inspired much of the most notable work published during the 1980s and early 1990s. Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1992 novel *Texaco*, probably the most influential example of narrative fiction to have come out of Martinique (and certainly the most commercially successful), was an expansive, multi-generational family epic that journeyed through slavery and its aftermath up to the present. Despite not having attained the same global renown, Raphaël Confiant actually generated more controversy with *Le Nègre et l’amiral*, published in 1988 and set during the occupation of Martinique by Vichy forces during World War Two. A local *béké* family tried to have the book banned because it allegedly slandered their ancestor, one of several white landowners given mayoral posts arbitrarily by the collaborationist Admiral Robert.²²⁵ Although their attempt at censure was unsuccessful, the episode highlights the competing visions of Martinican history that struggled for dominance at the time, a reflection of the racial power dynamics that have always moulded the island’s society.

Euzhan Palcy’s 1983 film adaptation of *Rue Cases-Nègres*, a novel written by Joseph Zobel over 40 years previously, proved to be a vital contribution to this historical turn. It follows a young boy growing up in poverty in 1930s Martinique, depicting the harsh conditions endured by black labourers on sugarcane plantations still owned by the white landed elite. The film’s release was a watershed in local culture: not only did it win

²²³ Sahakian, p. 15.

²²⁴ Sahakian, p. 19.

²²⁵ *Antilla*, 6 February 1989, p. 29.

international acclaim at numerous festivals, but it was the first time that Martinicans had seen themselves and their history as the subject of a major screen production. Many local musicians and actors featured in the cast, including the spoken-word poet Joby Bernabé, who knew that the film's importance surpassed whatever he might have gained personally from participating in it: 'C'était pour moi, comme pour beaucoup, comme une plongée au cœur de notre arrière-pays culturel; un miroir; un repère; une forme de réappropriation des soubassements de notre identité.'²²⁶ *Rue Cases-Nègres*, along with many other examples of work being produced across the cultural sphere at the time, testifies to more than artistic curiosity about local history. Viewed collectively, this activity constitutes a form of nation-building. This was achieved partly by redressing the lacunae and myths established by a colonial education designed to keep its beneficiaries ignorant, but ultimately through constructing a shared identity, one articulated by foregrounding what black Martinicans have endured and overcome.

1902 and *La Nef* were thus generated at a time when many Martinican creatives were engaging with their island's history and, indeed, challenging long-held attitudes towards a dark past. Through its analysis of these very different case studies, this chapter will draw out the motivations behind this trend, and the values that were promoted and questioned in the resulting performances.

5.2 – Apocalypse how?: decolonizing a *lieu de mémoire* in *1902*

1902 ou la catastrophe de Saint Pierre was written and directed by José Alpha and staged by Théâtre Existence, the group he co-founded in his native Martinique in 1976. It was originally put on in 1981 in conjunction with the CMAC in the Foyer de Bellevue, a church hall in Fort-de-France. Although not a purpose-built theatre, it was frequently used by the CMAC during this period for the cultural productions it facilitated. This chapter, however, will focus on the second and more widely remembered iteration of *1902*. In May of the following year, Alpha and his company re-staged it in the stone ruins of the eighteenth-century neo-classical theatre in St Pierre, a small town thirty kilometres north of Fort-de-France on the island's Caribbean coast. Having enjoyed its status as the economic and cultural capital of Martinique for much of the colonial period, it was completely destroyed by the massive volcanic eruption of Mont Pelée on 8 May 1902. The play recounts the events

²²⁶ 'Joby Bernabé', *Fouyaya*, January 1986, p. 21.

leading up to this cataclysm, culminating with a reputedly impressive re-enactment of the eruption itself. Rather than offering a coherent narrative with sustained character and plot development, *1902* takes the form of a series of vignettes depicting the full panoply of urban life at the time. Black labourers, families and prisoners feature alongside colonial officials, industrialists and clergymen, all interpreting (or ignoring) the warning signs of an imminent eruption as they negotiate the tense political and social climate of the day.

1902 can be positioned within the wider oeuvre of José Alpha in several respects. Firstly, it is consistent with his interest in staging productions outside of standard built theatres, especially in spaces that have a strong connection to the subject matter of the play. Previous examples of Alpha's site-specific theatre include his 1979 staging of *Lazare et sa bien aimée* (a version of Kahlil Gibran's original play, itself based on the story of Jesus Christ raising Lazarus from the dead), performed in front of a series of churches. It was a practice that he continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s with productions such as *Tranches de la vie de Madame Marie Joséphe Rose Tascher de la Pagerie* (1987), based on the life of the Empress Joséphine, wife of Napoleon I, and staged in the Domaine de la Pagerie in Les Trois-Ilets, the former plantation where she was born and spent her formative years. Indeed, this aspect of Alpha's work, that is, his desire to probe of the knot of performance, place and communal memory, will prove central to this chapter's analysis of *1902*.

At the same time, the play does constitute something of a break from the aesthetic he had been developing previously. It is certainly at a remove from the popular public performance traditions that directly inspired his early work. *Teat Lari*, first devised and performed in various street locations across Martinique in 1978, was more of an immersive visual and physical spectacle than what one would expect from a conventional drama. Alpha clearly did not compartmentalize different modes of performance, choosing to draw heavily on carnival masquerade and puppetry as well as mime and story-telling. Indeed, the act of blending genres seems to have been the catalyst for what was his first original theatrical creation. *1902* marks a turn towards other influences and preoccupations, especially the history of Martinique. In addition to the aforementioned exploration of the Empress Joséphine and the ruling colonial caste of which she was a product, Alpha wrote a number of plays on the back of his own historical research. A sustained endeavour to consult archival material and collect oral testimonies resulted in *Robert l'Amiral* (1985), which illustrated the brutality and hardship of life in Martinique under Vichy occupation during World War Two. Later, as part of a long-running and fruitful partnership with the writer and political activist Vincent Placol, he devised a community play based on the recollections of members of a

senior citizens' club operating in Sainte-Luce and Le Diamant. *La véritable histoire de Médard Aribot*, staged in April 1990, centred on the eponymous Aribot, an itinerant pedlar and enigmatic local character during the early twentieth century, who had been the son of a Congolese indentured labourer.

Place, as suggested above, was often central to the development of Alpha's theatre, and not just as a gimmick or a decorative feature. The locations in which he produced his site-specific theatre were invested with memory that connected Martinicans to their past and shaped their understanding of who they were presently. Alpha knew that these processes were not straightforward, and that the ruined theatre at St Pierre is a space where multiple (and not always complementary) elements of memory co-exist rather than coalesce into something coherent. As such, his 1981 work participates in (and actually pre-empts) the turn towards situated memory as a privileged concept and tool within the study of French history, a shift most commonly associated with Pierre Nora and his seminal multi-volume *Les Lieux de mémoire*, published between 1984 and 1992. Dissatisfied with the vague generalities that tended to result from previous historical approaches to the Republic, which began from intellectual postulates that took a lot for granted in terms of its composition, Nora and his contributors chose to focus on sites, monuments and less tangible symbols that have gradually come to incarnate French national identity. Beyond the obligatory chapters on the tricolour flag, the *Marseillaise* and 14 July, other essays analysed war memorials and town halls in terms of how 'Frenchness' has sedimented there over time.

Les Lieux de mémoire remains a reference point in the historiography of the French Republic, but, more recently, it has been criticized on account of its near-total omission of the imperial dimension of that same Republic. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire see this as symptomatic of a wider French malaise, whereby this amnesia has become institutionalized, allowing its people to dissociate France's colonial history from its national narrative.²²⁷ This refusal to reckon with this aspect of its past, they argue, leaves France particularly ill-equipped to reckon with itself as a postcolonial and multi-cultural nation. More recently, Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno have framed their scholarship as an explicit corrective to Nora's compilation, proposing alternative *lieux*

²²⁷ Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, 'Introduction – La Fracture coloniale: une crise française' in *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, Cahiers libres (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), pp. 9–30.

that embody French colonial memory from the physical ('*Banlieues*', 'Slavery memorials', 'La Sorbonne') to the more abstract ('BUMIDOM', 'Les Tirailleurs Sénégalais', 'Sport')²²⁸.

The ruined city of Saint-Pierre can be interpreted as one of these hitherto underappreciated *lieux de mémoire*. As the former colonial capital of Martinique, and its erstwhile economic and cultural powerhouse, Saint-Pierre was seen as the symbolic flagship of all that imperial France had achieved in the New World before being dramatically and tragically swept away by a terrible act of God. Martinicans have largely shared this view of the city as a foundational site, but particularly in terms of its cultural significance. After all, Saint-Pierre is remembered as the birthplace of creole carnival in Martinique and, indeed, where it reached its zenith in the late nineteenth century, as outlined in Chapter Two. Its exclusion from the broader French national narrative seems to have left a vacuum in which a somewhat muddled memory has been cultivated locally. It is characterized by a paradoxical nostalgia, one which seems to mourn both the lost grandeur of the colony and the creativity of the black underclass it systematically oppressed. Indeed, this is a prime example of the fundamental contradictions that have always shaped how Martinicans interpret their past and, ultimately, their own identity. This is a population that knows the extreme poverty and exploitation it suffered under colonial administration, a period still well within living memory. And yet, faced with a lack of alternative knowledge and perspectives, it still looks to France and its empire as its point of origin, and the mainstay of its sense of self. The destruction of the nexus of the colony in 1902, then, is remembered as a moment of existential annihilation by the ruling elite and its black subjects alike.

This ambivalence is reflected in the heterogeneity of the commemorative events held to mark the eightieth anniversary of the eruption in early May 1982, of which José Alpha's play formed a part. The tone appears to have been quite inconsistent, varying between solemn remembrance (as exemplified in the educational school visits organized during this period) and celebratory performances of Martinican Creole culture (namely, Loulou Boislaville's Ballets Folkloriques, who put on one of their shows exhibiting traditional styles of dance and dress). Meanwhile, the entire endeavour had to struggle for media coverage and public attention at a moment when much of it was being directed towards the newly resurrected Victory in Europe day: 8 May 1982 was the first year in which there was to be a public holiday in France marking the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies, after President

²²⁸ *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, ed. by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno, Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures, 68 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

Mitterrand had reinstated it by law in September of the previous year. This situation illustrates the phenomenon of *concurrence des mémoires*, in which forms of local Martinican memory, and, indeed, colonial history more broadly, are forced into competition with those *lieux* deemed more important to the consolidation of French national identity. VE day, conventionally interpreted in this manner, encapsulates France's resilience and survival as a liberal democracy during Europe's darkest hour. It is a selective (and flattering) take on the nation's role during World War Two, but one that is potent and enduring. It has completely eclipsed the eruption of Mont Pelée in the wider nation's consciousness, despite it having been the deadliest disaster to have occurred on French territory outside of wartime in the twentieth century.

1902 was, and remains, a valuable intervention in this context. Not only did it shed light on Saint-Pierre as a *lieu de mémoire*, both for Martinique and for France more broadly, but it also foregrounds a hitherto unexpressed perspective on the catastrophe, one that highlights the violence of the entire colonial enterprise beyond that supposedly singular event. What is often obscured in recollections of this episode, official or otherwise, is the fact that the then colonial governor, Louis Mouttet, refused to allow the city to be evacuated, so that the second round of legislative elections could proceed as planned without disruption. The death toll (at least 30 000) would undoubtedly have been much lower had warnings been heeded and the citizens of Saint-Pierre been allowed to leave in a timely manner. Rather than continue to frame the event as a 'natural disaster' or an 'ineluctable tragedy', then, Alpha's play focuses on this political dimension. Indeed, this is what informs and structures *1902* as a piece of epic theatre. He was not the first Martinican playwright to engage with this genre. Aimé Césaire drew heavily on its theoretical and aesthetic principles in his drama, offering a critical view on colonial history in order to illuminate the present-day Caribbean, as did Daniel Boukman. Similarly, José Alpha looked to epic theatre to help him achieve his aim for this production, that is to 're-remember' the racial injustice and trauma that made the catastrophe what it was, and which continues to make Martinique what it is.

Throughout *1902*, Alpha employed a range of techniques developed by Brecht and characteristic of the genre he instigated. A key early scene in this respect depicts the first telephone call to be made in Martinique, a lavish public spectacle staged in the city's theatre, hosted by a lively compere and featuring three of the resident company's star singers, each taking their turn to participate in the historic call to Governor Mouttet in Fort-de-France. This metatheatrical endeavour, which casts the present-day spectators in the role of the past ones, is more than an entertaining flourish. It is an example of *verfremdungseffekt*, a device which

distances the audience from what is being presented to them and encourages them to be aware of the artifice of the performance, rather than emotionally involved in it. This is enhanced by the choice of the scene's central prop. Rather than source a replica antique telephone, the creative team fabricated a comically oversized, tinsel-edged receiver out of cardboard.²²⁹ Making such a self-consciously 'fake' object the focal point of the action contributes to the unreal nature of the set-up. Indeed, the scene plays out as something halfway between historical re-enactment and farce. The three local celebrities only add to the hilarity, trying to pass on greetings to every single person they know in the capital or reciting Claudel down the line in an attempt to add some cultural gravitas to the situation, before being interrupted by the exasperated emcee. Overall, the scene undermines the typical memorialization of Saint-Pierre as a place of lost glamour and sophistication. Rather than buy into the representation of 'the first use of a marvellous new piece of modern technology in Martinique', spectators are being encouraged to interrogate the dramatic event. There is an alternative point of view being presented here, that is, an exposé of the unequal colonial class system in place at the time.

Just as there is nothing 'natural' about the deliberately theatrical scene that has just taken place, it is not 'normal' that the local elite should enjoy luxury and progress while the majority of the citizens are in mortal danger. Moreover, throughout the play Alpha seeks to expand his audience's understanding of that danger, beyond that of the imminent eruption, to include the racism that not only blighted but threatened their lives. In *1902*, this is shown to be a multifarious peril. At times, racism is overtly aggressive, as seen in the scene depicting a black family with two children trying to flee the city. They are blocked by a group of *gendarmes*, who proceed to physically force them further and further back until the family merge into the standing audience. The implication here is obvious, but none the less dramatically poignant. The racial hierarchy that structured Martinique at the time of the eruption reduced its black citizens, that is, *you*, the spectators, to controllable commodities: they/you were held in place in order to achieve an electoral result that would benefit some members of the white elite. The following scene, set in the yard of the town's prison, is even more explicit in its depiction of racial violence. It depicts the torture of Ciparis (one of the real historical figures featured in the play), a black man sentenced to death for allegedly robbing and killing a white one, albeit without proof or trial. To add to the arbitrariness of this

²²⁹ For a photographic still of the prop in use in this scene, see José Alpha, *1902: la catastrophe de Saint-Pierre* (Fort-de-France: Hatier-Martinique, 1983), p. 14; further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text. All French translations of Creole dialogue cited here are taken from this edition.

‘legal’ predicament, three guards beat him, in full awareness of the impunity they enjoy, and are about to cut out his tongue for fun when they are interrupted by the blast of a ship’s horn.

The racism of 1902 regularly manifested itself in such episodes of physical ferocity. At the same time, it also took the form of a general predicament, one that was perhaps less visually shocking, but all the more insidious. The exploitation of the black working class for white financial gain is shown in the play to be not just economic and structural, but physically deadly. In one scene, labourers gather at the port to anxiously discuss the recent volcanic activity. Enter Julie Gabou, another historical figure and leader among the city’s *porteuses*, that is, the many female porters who carried goods, balanced on their head, between various industrial, commercial and domestic locations in the surrounding area.²³⁰ She encourages the *porteuses* to withdraw their labour in protest at their working conditions: not only is their right to rest on Sundays being routinely ignored, but two workers were killed by a hot lava flow on the Guérin plantation, where they had been working despite the obvious danger. Meanwhile, at the Guérin family home, the patriarch entreats his wife and son to escape to Fort-de-France with friends on their yacht, while he stays behind with his factory overseer to take care of business. The same race and class privilege that exempts the Guérin family from ever being exploited for their labour also gives them the option of fleeing and thus saving their lives, whereas the black masses simply do not have either of those means of escape.

All this serves to undermine the whitewashed memory of Saint-Pierre that has been cultivated in Martinique in the years following the eruption, that of a peaceful and prosperous city, tragically destroyed by fate alone. What Alpha is suggesting in his play is that its black population were *not* merely cosmically unfortunate: they died in huge numbers as a result of the brutal and racist material conditions under which they lived. This conceptual shift does more than re-frame Saint-Pierre as a *lieu de mémoire*, however. It also allows *1902* to articulate the latent ambiguity that, perhaps unconsciously, characterizes Martinican perspectives towards the events of that year. In his critical commentary, Joël Beuze offers an interpretive schema for reading the play that identifies two distinct and opposing orders: the social-impure (that is, colonial society and the racism that undergirded it) and the natural-pure (in this case, the volcano). The eruption, within this framework, becomes an instance of purification, cleansing the city of its corruption.²³¹ It is certainly an unorthodox lens through

²³⁰ For a contemporary, and extremely exoticized, description of Martinican *porteuses*, see Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies* (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2004).

²³¹ Joël Beuze, ‘1902: discours du tragique’ in Alpha, pp. 5–9 (p. 7-8).

which to view the catastrophe, but one which teases out an ambivalence that cannot be expressed openly. After all, this was a crisis that destroyed lives and livelihoods, but also the racist social order that oppressed the majority of the citizens.

Thus far, we have seen how the play interrogates one apocalyptic event. However, its relevance extends well beyond the episode, place and moment in question. Treating such occurrences and periods as generalizable, rather than singular, is central to the kind of historicization that Brecht employed in his epic theatre, and which Alpha sought to emulate here. For playwrights working within this genre, choosing a historical setting for one's drama was not simply motivated by their imaginative or intellectual curiosity: it was a strategic method of engineering comparisons between past and present circumstances. In this instance, the racialized class system being staged is not meant to be interpreted as specific to 1902, but as *the* historical determinant of contemporary Martinican life. The play thus spoke to a local audience still confronted daily with racist treatment from seemingly unaccountable and untouchable national security forces.²³² On a deeper and wider level, however, it also offered them a means of understanding the major structural issues outlined in Chapter One, which at best ignored, and at worst actively disadvantaged, the poorest black Martinicans. The twentieth century has undeniably seen a shift in their place in the local economy, from the physical labour done by the *porteuses* and on the plantations, to an uneasy blend of unemployment, social welfare, emigration to France and jobs in a tertiary service sector where they have no control over the flow of capital. Rather than seeing their situation as 'the state of the world' or 'the way things are', *1902* encouraged them to see it as a continuation of an older colonial order, designed to severely limit their stakes in their socio-economic environment.

Moreover, the play was not only an illustration of oppression, but a blueprint for opposition. This is set out most explicitly in the character of Julie Gabou, her interactions with the other labourers and with her employer, Monsieur Guérin. The slogans she encourages the *porteuses* (and the audience) to chant as they leave the port are exemplary in their direct and unapologetic articulation of gender, racial and class solidarity:

J. GABOU Respé pou lé fanm nouè
 Respé pou lé travaye

²³² For a letter addressed to President Mitterrand from a MIM party member regarding the racist treatment they received at the hands of police and customs officers at the international airport near Fort-de-France, see *Antilla*, 6 February 1989, p. 38. For a report on Jojo, a black *gendarme* transferred to Guadeloupe for speaking out against institutional racism in the police force, see *Fouyaya*, February 1986, p. 8.

Respé pou le repos du dimanche
 Respé pour tout' travayè Matinica !!!

(JULIE GABOU Nous demandons le respect des travailleurs, respect pour les femmes noires de la Martinique.) (p. 33)

She also manages to convince hesitant strikers with a searing dismissal of the expectations of propriety and moderation that have only served to disenfranchise them thus far:

LES FEMMES Attention Julie! Depuis le début des élections, il y a beaucoup de gardes mobiles à Saint-Pierre. Nous devons manœuvrer avec souplesse.
 -Ah oui, Odette a raison, il faut faire attention.

J. GABOU Sé tro souplesse nou ni ba sé nonm' la! Souplesse an cabann', souplesse pou pale, souplesse pou iche !!! Fouté moin la pé épi souplesse zot' la !

(JULIE GABOU Souplesse attention... Vous ne pensez qu'à ça... Des travailleurs sont morts à cause de Guérin et il faut être souple avec ces gens-là!) (p. 31-33)

In the following scene, during a heated exchange with Dr. Guérin and Joseph Duquesne (the factory overseer), she succinctly dismantles the capitalist worldview they try to pass off as self-evident and indisputable. Julie Gabou goes on to articulate an alternative economic vision from the position of the workers, illustrating the potential of labour union movements and industrial action in the process:

DR. GUERIN Mais tout le monde travaille le samedi, le port est en activité et les bateaux qui attendent !!!

J. DUQUESNE Le docteur a raison, vous ne pouvez pas arrêter le samedi, puisque tout le monde travaille !!!

J. GABOU Monsieur, tout le monde, c'est nous! Et si nous, lé portèzes ka rété travaye, pa ni travaye... Pô a blotché ek pièce bato pa bougé ici a !! Aloss zot' ni intérêt ba nou samedi épi Dimanche, épi payé jounin a !!!

(J. GABOU ... Le port est bloqué et aucun bateau ne bougera ici. Alors, vous avez intérêt à nous donner le Samedi et Dimanche et payer la journée !) (p. 36)

Moreover, dramatic dialogue is only one of the means by which this model of resistance is developed in the play. Alpha also frequently engages with the concept of *Gestus*, another theatrical technique pioneered by Brecht. A clear example of how this influenced acting style can be identified in another photographic still taken from the 1982 production of *1902*, this time showing Julie Gabou standing centre stage, flanked by two other *porteuses* (p. 32). She stands at an angle to the audience with one foot forward, as if in mid-motion. Her shoulders

are opened wide and her head tilted slightly upward, with her clenched fists planted firmly on her hips. This posture is not merely decorative, nor is it meant to be indicative of Julie Gabou's emotional state. Physical action, within the framework of *Gestus*, is more geared towards communicating social meaning. In this case, body positioning signals the defiance of black working-class Martinican women in the context of their oppression and exploitation, and the potential for this predicament to change. All of what has been discussed thus far - speech, action and historical setting – combines to show what organized resistance was, and what it can be now.

1902 presents a counter-narrative to imperial nostalgia, and does so forthrightly. However, even a performance that is very direct and consistent in its politics can also, on occasion, side-step clear-cut meanings. There is an undercurrent of strangeness running through *1902*, as it frequently drifts away from the social reality it seeks to expose. The character of Léon Compère-Léandre, the town cobbler (who, along with the prisoner Cyparis, was one of only two known survivors of the eruption) is a key example. The rambling monologue he gives in an early scene is partly a surreally lurid description of his profession:

LE CORDONNIER A la rue Bertin, mon échoppe est ouverte et je fais des souliers, des dizaines de souliers... non, des centaines de souliers, des milliers de souliers, des milliers et des milliers de souliers... pour vos baptêmes, vos mariages, vos orgies et vos cadavres !! (p. 16)

The costume designed for him and photographed during the performance (p. 48) was a material extension of this derangement. Dragging a tangle of chains attached to the sleeves of his ragged coat, from which hang dozens of shoes, the effect is dreamlike. He is unmistakably a cobbler, but one dragged out of somebody's subconscious. Whilst expounding on his trade, he segues into a cryptic prophecy regarding the fate of the city:

LE CORDONNIER Allumez le ciel de la ville ... Brûlez vos langues seches, gonflées de macaqueries, de simagrées, de messes basses et de cancans amères [*sic*]!! ...regardez la ville s'allume comme des jours de fête et le tonnerre frappe comme mon sang qui cours [*sic*] dans tes veines, oh Mathilde! (p. 16)

Fire constitutes a thread running half-submerged through the minds of Saint-Pierre's most marginalized citizens, binding them together in an alternative, semi-sane community within the colonial capital. In the parochial house, the Abbé Mary recalls her recent encounter with Georgette Charon. Abandoned in infancy and raised in the convent, Georgette had been attacked by her estranged father and subsequently suffered frequent delusions. Lately, she

dreamt of a punitive fire descending upon the city and confided in the Abbé, who is unsure whether to interpret it as premonition or fantasy. When the catastrophe does, of course, occur in the play's climactic scene (complete with reportedly impressive sound effects and a real dust cloud), a woman dressed in red dances around a flame. It is unmistakably a visual representation of the eruption, but one that also feels like a hallucination.

Beuze interprets this dimension to the play as a fringe discourse of irrationality and madness, associated with destitution and blackness. It is developed in opposition to an Authorized discourse based on order and reason or, at least, whatever the local ruling elite deem to fall under those categories. This is embodied in the commission Mouttet, an expedition dispatched by the colonial governor to conduct pseudo-experiments at the summit of Mont Pelée, in order to prove that there will be no eruption and that the elections can proceed safely. The 'tests' involved stethoscopes and hammers: the vacuity of the values propping up this manifestation of authority is made painfully obvious from the outset. Moreover, Beuze argues that these opposing discourses of madness and reason map onto the natural/social antagonism outlined earlier. They thus contribute to the play's overall aim of giving this *lieu de mémoire* an overhaul that is both dramatic and decolonial, in terms of the realities it foregrounds and the sentimentality it dismantles.

Beuze's schematic reading is apt, but also somewhat reductive, in that it overlooks other possibilities for the surreal and supernatural dimension to *1902*. In fact, with its deliberate disavowal of naturalistic staging, its oversized novelty props and its breaking of the fourth wall to disrupt the boundaries of actors/audience, past/present and them/us, the play as a whole is arguably one that presents a 'stretched' reality, much like what is encountered in dreams. The following case study in this chapter, Michèle Césaire's 1993 production of *La Nef*, also takes on a hallucinatory quality as it engages with the darkest aspects of Martinican cultural memory. Nevertheless, the creators involved had quite different priorities for these productions (and indeed for their respective oeuvres more generally), resulting in two plays are very distinct in style, tone and communicative strategy.

Alpha was unabashedly populist in his theatre, in that his primary aim was to excite and entertain. It is worth noting that his career in the arts began singing and dancing in a local cover band, who performed American soul hits at weddings and in hotel bars. The first artist to leave a lasting impression on him was James Brown, the Godfather of Funk, and Alpha has been channelling Brown's dynamism and stagecraft into his own creations ever since. This is evident in the carnivalesque aesthetic of his early work, as well as the pageant-like historical spectacles staged throughout the 1980s, as described earlier. He was (and remains) very

active in the cultural scene in Martinique, working with a variety of different groups and individuals over the course of his career. That said, he never participated in any iteration of the state-sponsored Centre Dramatique Régional (CDR) that was first developed in Martinique during the 1980s. This was at least partly due to his personal situation: Alpha was primarily employed as a healthcare professional within the field of psychomotricity, a branch of occupational therapy that focuses on helping children develop motor skills. This was how he earned his living and provided for his family, as a semi-professional structure such as the CDR could not offer a stable enough income. Indeed, Alpha spoke publicly about the economic precarity of being an artist in Martinique, and how this constrained his creative work practically.²³³ At the same time, there may have been benefits to working outside the decade's emergent official theatre structures. Alpha managed to carve out a prolific creative niche for himself as a well-connected outsider, one who did not necessarily have to conform to what the authorities (be they local, regional or Paris-based) expected of a new 'national' theatre for Martinique. As suggested in Chapter Two, the Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle (the first Martinican group to be recognized and supported by the CDR) chose, at least initially, to stage well-known plays from the European tradition, presumably in the belief that this was the most appropriate base from which to build this collective endeavour. Ironically, it was perhaps his exclusion from this comparatively privileged circle that afforded Alpha the freedom to cultivate his own theatre, one which took Martinican life as its inspiration and aimed, via a range of media drawn from that same culture, to reflect it back at the audience from which it came:

Quant à nous, nous nous voulons, militant, et en situation culturelle et tendant naturellement vers l'universel. Ce qui signifie que nous présentons les revendications propres aux Martiniquais contre un état de choses de moins en moins vivables. Cela dans un langage négro-américain qui combine le conte, le krik-karak, la poésie, les tableaux historiques, le masque, la technique du tréteau en plein-air, la satire comme la distillait la vieille chanson créole...²³⁴

Alpha's practice and productions, to my mind, constitute a significant contribution towards the development of what might usefully be termed an unofficial national theatre, one that was politically alert to its neo-colonial condition, rooted in the island's popular oral culture and which sought to position Martinique within a black American universe.

²³³ “‘Etre professionnel en art, c’est dur...’: une rencontre avec José Alpha’, *Antilla*, 1 June 1982, p. 34-35.

²³⁴ “‘Etre professionnel en art, c’est dur...’: une rencontre avec José Alpha’, p. 35.

While Alpha and Michèle Césaire both worked within the same small theatrical milieu, the latter was somewhat sheltered from its harsher economic realities. Given her status as one of the Césaire dynasty, it is perhaps not surprising that she was able to pursue a career in the arts that was not viable for most other Martinicans. Besides writing her own plays, film scripts and journal articles, she also directed her dramatic work and founded the Racines theatre group that staged *La Nef*, amongst other productions. She later went on to lead the CDR from 1998 to 2002. Michèle Césaire's oeuvre suggests that she shared Alpha's fundamental aim of creating theatre that spoke to Martinican realities, albeit somewhat more indirectly. Her productions prior to writing *La Nef* demonstrate a certain racial consciousness in their attempt to relate life on the island to the wider black world and its predicament, be it through her 1983 adaptation of a collection of poems by the afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, or in her dramatic reimagining of James Baldwin's long poem 'Staggerlee wonders' in 1987. Nevertheless, her aesthetic priorities are very different from Alpha's, as evidenced in *La Nef*. Césaire's academic background seems to have anchored her practice within the much more esoteric tradition of modern French theatre, with Ionesco, Genet and Beckett as reference points. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that *La Nef* is a more cerebral play in terms of how it communicates its ideas. Both plays analysed in this chapter challenge their audiences to think critically about the political, social and cultural issues facing Martinique. But while Alpha has no qualms about doing so in a verbal and visual language that his audience can easily grasp, those watching *La Nef* are supposed to stretch their minds to reach the performers' level. Indeed, disturbing and distorting its modes of representation was Césaire's way of engaging artistically with collective memory as theme in its own right, and how and why it might be patchy, unreliable, buried or lost altogether.

5.3 – Adrift with racial trauma in *La Nef*

La Nef was written by Michèle Césaire and first produced by her theatre company, Racines, as part of the Fort-de-France Festival in July 1993. Like *1902*, it is not a naturalistic play, with relatable characters evolving in an everyday setting. *La Nef*, in which six people are marooned on a drifting boat for no apparent reason and with no clear destination in mind, is partly a Creole take on the ever-popular 'lost at sea' scenario that continues to inspire writers and filmmakers alike. More specifically, however, Michèle Césaire drew on the ancient trope of the Ship of Fools. This originates in Plato's *Republic* as a political allegory of dysfunctional governance in the absence of expert knowledge, and was revitalized across

various art forms during the Middle Ages as a means of critiquing vice in the society of that time. One of Michèle Césaire's expressed aims for *La Nef* was to decentre this metaphor from the European context in which it has developed²³⁵ and, ultimately, use it to probe contemporary Martinique.

The 'Fools' on her ship do not present as real, life-like people, at least not in the conventional sense of those terms. These characters are better understood as receptacles, each holding a jumble of (often contradictory) elements of French Antillean history and contemporary life. Consider Maman La Misère, for example. She exhibits many of the trappings typical of the middle-aged, conservative Martinican middle-class. A schoolteacher by profession, she often adopts this role, even leading the crew in a dictation exercise at one point. Her attitude to sexuality is deeply puritanical and brings her into frequent, judgemental conflict with the other female passenger, Erzulie. The latter has absolutely no such qualms about the intense romantic relationship with Euphrasien (the ship's de facto captain) that defines her existence. Maman la Misère is thus heavily invested in the twin institutions of school and church that feature heavily in Martinican upbringings and, consequently, in the island's collective memory. Moreover, education and religion have always been the guarantors of respectability in this context. La Misère's identity and self-worth are founded on them, and they afford her a significant degree of superiority (from her perspective, at least) in relation to the other passengers.

On several occasions, however, this archetype suddenly becomes unsettled and confused, as if it is picking up unwanted interference from some other source. The third scene of Act One opens calmly enough, with Maman la Misère consummately preparing galettes alongside the foundling Mimo. She sings a Creole song as she works, but stops abruptly, and begins to shudder and scream. When she says the following, it is in a totally different voice, as if she is being possessed by someone or something else:

Ozuzu! Tonnerre! Ce ne sont pas des rythmes d'Afrique, espèce de bâtarde. Redresse ton corps et porte la tête haute. Baise trois fois la terre, crache à la gueule du vent et de l'eau. Plus de force, plus de vigueur, ils ne te respectent pas, ne t'obéissent pas. Je t'ai répété cent fois les commandements à suivre, mais tu rêvasses! Sois plus vigilante et fais attention à toi, ma fille. (p. 15)

²³⁵ Michèle Césaire, *La Nef* (Paris: Éditions Théâtrales, 1992), p. 7; further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Africa surfaces here as another strand of memory. Maman la Misère is aware of it, and approaches it with a mixture of fascination and fear. However, in this scene, as in the rest of the play, engaging with Africa proves to be fraught with difficulty. This memory can only be accessed indirectly, often via some obscure channel (in this instance, the disembodied voice of la Misère's late grandmother). Moreover, Africa survives in fragments, at most. A trace of it endures in Erzulie's name, for example, which is shared with a family of *lwa* (spirits) in the pantheon of Haitian vodou, the largest and best-established syncretic religion of the African diaspora. And yet, while seeking out this kind of memory represents a sincere attempt to explore the Afro-Creole dimension of Caribbean popular culture (which had long been denied and denigrated in Martinique, especially in la Misère's social milieu), the various characters' engagement with the continent often flirts with stereotype. Their preoccupation with rhythm, sacred ritual and spirituality is a problematic reflection of what has always intrigued Europeans about Africa and its 'difference', and indicative of an attitude indelibly marked by this Western perspective and its biases. It is not surprising, then, that these attempts to establish contact with this aspect of Martinican heritage are invariably accompanied by ambivalence. No sooner has the outburst cited above been uttered, Maman la Misère segues into a reminiscence about that most quintessential of the bourgeois child's pursuits, the piano lesson. Elsewhere, a similarly emotive appeal to an illustrious African history and identity is quickly cut off by an assertion of the respectability she and her family managed to achieve in the face of hardship:

(avec passion) Au royaume du Bénin, je descendais au fleuve, parée de mille atours, et mes bracelets de pied faisaient tinter ma vie, ma première vie... *(tout à coup fébrile et agitée)* Oh mais tu sais, après, je m'en suis très bien sortie aussi. Le protocole, la parade, cela ne m'effrayait pas, j'y étais préparée, tu penses, avec l'éducation que nous avons reçue! Maman était une fort belle femme. Il fallait les voir tourner autour d'elle, chabins, mulâtres, quarterons, ils reconnaissaient tous que Cyliane était la veuve idéale; bien jolie et pas trop d'enfants, juste deux ouistitis aux yeux jaunes, mais avec de très bonnes manières. (p. 12)

Here, Maman la Misère begins to cultivate a certain outlook on Africa, one that attempts to reach back to its pre-colonial civilization and, in so doing, invents a vague yet potent recollection of regal glory. In a Caribbean context, however, this endeavour is overlaid with the formidable reality of race. La Misère's monologue is interrupted by a more immediate memory, both deeply personal and collectively resonant. She recalls being 'saved', by virtue of her fair complexion and golden eyes, from blackness and, by extension, from destitution

and despair. Any appreciation of African heritage or black identity can only emerge within Martinican lives and minds moulded by a racist social order. The resulting mental impasse is made painfully clear in dramatic moments such as these. Moreover, the passengers know that they are estranged from this part of their history, often resulting in a sense of contempt for the topic when it is broached. Erzulie, for example, mocks Maman la Misère after the above enunciation ('Le Bénin, c'est de l'autre côté!' (p. 13)), while the envious Kevin belittles Euphrasien for what he sees as his pagan, atavistic obsession with nature:

KEVIN Fout tonnè! Le capitaine batifole, se prend pour le grand demiurge [...] de plus, il appuie sa complaisance sur des theories fantaisistes aux relents d'animisme. Pour ma propre gouverne, j'ai su faire taire la parole embrouillée de mes ancêtres, j'évalue sans emphase l'importance des éléments naturels, je ne me méprends pas sur l'Etre Suprême et ne vénère justement qu'un seul Etre supérieur. (p. 19)

Overall, the ship contains a micro-community that is *stuck*, simultaneously intrigued and repelled by an enduring presence, and unable to articulate (let alone process) the huge loss to which that same trace testifies.

The basic scenario of *La Nef*, that is, six people trapped in a boat at sea, is essentially a representation of this existential paralysis in dramatic form. Neither the backstory to the play's central *huis clos* nor the characters' intentions for their journey are ever fully elucidated, giving the effect of a group severed from both their past and their future, suspended in time as well as in the confined space of the ship. Only glimpses of their respective lives prior to embarkation, and the hardship that marked them, are glimpsed throughout the play. When Kevin mentions Euphrasien's previous employment in a banana warehouse, it is to taunt him about the transience of his liberty and authority as captain of the ship. Were they to dock on dry land again, Euphrasien would quickly be forced to return to this type of anonymous, thankless manual labour. On another occasion, the army veteran Cassino briefly recounts his experiences serving in the Free French forces at the Battle of Monte Cassino (from which he presumably took his moniker) during World War Two. He specifically recalls black soldiers such as himself being systematically put in the front line by their white commanding officers. Mimo, his adoptive son, had apparently been abandoned in a fish crate in the backstreets of a nameless port. He is mute for much of the play, and when asked to share his earliest memory, he mimes only the ship, its sails and rigging, and its pitching and tossing. It would appear that the question of exactly how and why the passengers

boarded the boat is of less importance than the sense of precarity, expendability and exclusion that pushed them towards it.

It is true that nothing much happens to those on board *La Nef*: they talk (a lot), fight, cook, work, sing and make love. In such a mood of stasis, one might struggle to single out episodes as being particularly salient. This is, nonetheless, an aesthetic choice, and one which contributes to the play's dream-like quality. In dreams, it is often difficult to understand the logic behind a sequence of events, or why something is being endowed with significance. Moreover, they do not so much 'conclude' in a satisfactory manner as continue until the dreamer wakes up. It is telling that while the crew of *La Nef* do eventually choose to come in to dock and face society once more (how exactly they arrived at this decision remains unclear), the play ends abruptly with the ship's gangplank slamming down onto dry land, the passengers staring at it, motionless. It is more of an interrupted beginning to a new chapter than a resolution.

Rather than talk about 'events' (and accept the sequential value implied by that term), it is perhaps more apt to identify 'pressure points' within the play, where contradictory desires converge and clash. Erzulie's abrupt announcement of her possible pregnancy, and Euphrasien's equally blunt insistence on abortion, is a case in point:

ERZULIE Je crois qu'un enfant va naître.

EUPHRASIEN Tu crois ou tu en es sûre? Dans ce domaine, il faut avoir de la rigueur. Le rêve se termine au moment de la accouchement.

ERZULIE Un petit ne peut être que le bienvenu...

EUPHRASIEN Un bien né sur ce bateau! Pour toi, cette naissance serait un espoir de devenir, pour moi ce serait plutôt une mort en sursis... Condamnée ma douce, il me semble que nous sommes bel et bien condamnés à errer. Même la mer ne nous appartient pas. Nous ne sommes que des parcelles disséminées et dispersées par la volonté d'un puissant invisible, faisant corps avec cette étendue mais sans pouvoir pourtant se l'approprier.

ERZULIE Je ne voudrais pas avoir un fils pirate.

EUPHRASIEN Et moi, je ne voudrais pas avoir un fils esclave, même affranchi.

ERZULIE Si je suis enceinte...

EUPHRASIEN Il te faudra avorter. (p. 16-17)

As recognizable as the essence of this exchange may be (girl tells guy she might be pregnant, guy panics), it is couched in an abstract discourse that renders it somewhat alien, like so many interactions in *La Nef*. It is perhaps best interpreted not as a true-to-life couple's

dilemma, but as a jumble of desires and fears, confused but nonetheless potent. There is a future-oriented will to have a child, that is, to grow personally and to nurture someone else, to love and be loved. From Euphrasien, however, there is despair. When he speaks lyrically about the sea and their predicament in the boat, it is clearly a metaphor for his and Erzulie's insecurity ('nous ne sommes que des parcelles disséminées et disperses par la volonté d'un puissant invisible') and dispossession ('Même la mer ne nous appartient pas.') in a broader, existential sense. Moreover, these remarks are shot through with the memory of slavery, of families atomized, of identity annihilated and of a vision of life as 'une mort en sursis', that is, as merely a prelude to death. In his only direct reference to the topic ('Et moi, je ne voudrai pas avoir un fils esclave, même affranchi.'), Euphrasien seems to suggest that it is not just the fact of being enslaved that is unbearable, but the mark it leaves even in future generations that no longer suffer it directly. This is the crew's foundational trauma, which, despite its inescapability, can only be expressed obliquely, in the briefest of tangential comments, or as a shadow under the surface of what is being said.

La Nef thus plays out in its own queer half-reality. Its characters are familiar yet strange, and only semi-recognizable, like those encountered in a dream. The manner in which they interact physically and verbally is too disjointed and elliptical to be considered 'natural', yet somehow succeeds in conveying powerful emotions. The scenario, whereby six people are trapped on a boat with no idea where they are going, is surreal enough to have been lifted out of a horror film, or a hallucination, but it is in fact a stylized version of what actually happened to millions of Africans forcibly taken over the Atlantic over several centuries.

There is a substantial (and growing) body of academic scholarship and creative art that probes the intersection between cultural memory and racial trauma. It is helpful to draw on the work of Proma Tagore, in particular, in order to illuminate *La Nef* as a play that thinks through these issues. She draws on existing critical thought pertaining to Holocaust testimonies and, specifically, the impossibilities of speaking about trauma. Working from a black feminist perspective, however, Tagore herself works with what she refers to as 'the archives of colonization', which are not confined to any singular historical moment or geographical space. Instead, they 'range across centuries and impact on many generations, travel through multiple acts of translation, dispersal, or relocation, and are structured across multiple axes of power/difference.'²³⁶ This resonates with how racial trauma resurfaces

²³⁶ Proma Tagore, *Shapes of Silence: Writing by Women of Colour and the Politics of Testimony* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p. 17.

throughout *La Nef* in different guises, be it a glimpse of a lost African identity, an oblique reference to slavery, the memory of a society punitively hierarchized according to skin tone, or the racist orders received on a European battlefield. In *Shapes of Silence*, Tagore examines a corpus of various genres of writing by women of colour, paying particular attention to their silences, that is, their “inarticulations” and “moments of non-discursivity” (p.3). These, she argues, arise as a specific form of witness to the interlocking forms of racial and gendered violence that continue to shape lives and literatures in colonial contexts.

Tagore’s mode of reading offers a way of interpreting the play’s strangeness, as well as the characters’ apparent delusions, and the stilted and unnatural nature of their dialogue. A key concept in this respect is that of the unspeakability of violence, or, the idea that there is something about extreme violence of this magnitude and multifariousness, inflicted arbitrarily across generations of people, that eludes speech and language altogether. This is of particular relevance to the play’s opening scene, in which tensions rise after Cassino interrupts Kevin tracing mysterious symbols in the air above his body as he slept. The ensuing row is both cryptic (no explanation is offered as to the significance of Kevin’s actions, or why Cassino is so infuriated by them) and deeply paranoid, as if fuelled by some latent fear. Then, out of nowhere, Kevin calls for Cassino to be restrained with a straitjacket, and Mimo obliges, with force. The use of this object as a prop (and, more specifically, as the catalyst for a moment of random violence) is significant. The straitjacket, while perhaps not closely associated with Martinique in particular, has a host of disturbing connotations that are universally recognizable: every spectator knows that this is an item that subjugates, humiliates, institutionalizes and, ultimately, dehumanizes the wearer. If the brutalization of black people under slavery and a racist colonial order cannot be adequately verbalized, then perhaps the straitjacket manages to better convey the multifaceted nature of that terror, as an object in which its interlocking modes - material, physical and psychological - are compounded.

Song is another dramatic device that can testify to violence by non-linguistic means. It is, after all, much more than a form of verbal expression. Song is melodic and rhythmic, and, indeed, contemporary press accounts of the 1993 production of *La Nef* draw attention to these musical aspects especially, as opposed to lyrical content. Reviewers commented on the songs’ emotive quality, and their melancholy, no doubt aided by the simplicity of the duo, comprising just a violinist and a percussionist.²³⁷ Having said that, the lyrics can definitely be

²³⁷ ‘*La Nef* prend le large’, *France-Antilles Martinique*, 30 June 1993, p. 7.

appreciated in terms of how they function as a form of witness, brushing up against past atrocity without speaking it entirely. ‘Chant de L’Envol’, initially sung by Maman la Misère, is noteworthy in this respect. Reminiscent of a children’s nursery rhyme, the speaker circles around her family, introducing them one by one:

J’ai volé si haut, si haut, si haut
 Manman, j’ai vole si haut
 Que j’ai volé plus haut que les anges
 Ma mère nous trouva beaux
 Mon père nous trouva beaux
 Ma sœur nous trouva beaux
 Nous sommes beaux, nous sommes beaux
 Nous sommes plus beaux que la reine ... (p. 35)

In doing so, however, it traces the contours of a profound, deathly silence. There were no mothers, fathers or sisters under slavery, in that an institution that treats black people as moveable property cannot countenance the existence of a black family. As far as a slave society was concerned, black children did not belong to their parents, but to the person that legally owned them, and could therefore (upon reaching puberty) be sold to another slaveholder at the owner’s discretion. Under these conditions, the black family could not survive, let alone thrive. A mode of listening attentive to this history of trauma can pick up on the silence it leaves, and hear the colossal absence behind the enunciation of ‘mère ... père ... sœur ... nous’. These are the most prosaic and elementary of words, yet also the most intimate and, in this context, potentially the most harrowing in the loss to which they testify.

Nevertheless, a song is more than a cultural object to be read and interpreted in textual terms. The act of singing, that is, something that one *does*, is an embodied practice that generates new meanings in its own right. This is evident in the improvised wedding ceremony held to consecrate Euphrasien and Erzulie’s union. The event is a hallucinatory syncretism of Catholic mass, Creole story-telling and music session and pagan spirituality. The different elements merge together, as the identity of Erzulie bleeds into that of the Virgin Mary (“EUPHRASIEN Priez pour Erzulie, priez pour la Sainte-Vierge!”(p.33)) and the Kyrie Eleison, a well-known piece of Catholic sung liturgy, is followed by Cassino’s rendition of ‘Zandoli mandé mayé’, a popular Creole nursery rhyme. Euphrasien leads the service, taking on a role that is half priest, half *conteur*. In his part of the proceedings, the complexity of the interplay between subject, speech and voice in *La Nef* becomes particularly apparent.

The issue of Euphrasien and Erzulie's relationship has always been overlaid with a value system that condemns not only extra-marital sex, but expressions of sexuality in general. This is what has ultimately impelled Euphrasien to organize the wedding, and it manifests itself as a distinct voice channelled within his speech, one emanating from an external source, but which he has internalized. It is a discourse obsessed with virginity (in this case, Erzulie's), protocol and respectability: 'EUPHRASIEN Bafouée, rejetée, la rumeur mensongère n'ont pas pu l'entacher, ni même la dévierger [...] Ce jour-même je l'épouse, la nomme publiquement femme formée et fidèle, unie à Euphrasien pour le Meilleur et le pire, dans la plus stricte intimité!' (p. 33) It serves to undermine the real nature of their relationship, which has always been deeply physical and erotic, and to which he periodically refers during the wedding ceremony: 'EUPHRASIEN [...] Erzulie qui s'étend, s'est répandue tout entière hier soir encore dans mes bras pantelants; elle criait ma mémoire, me faisait des enfants.' (p. 33) Euphrasien's duplicity, or, rather, the uncomfortable co-existence of two voices and their accompanying values within one speaking subject, exposes the mechanism of respectability politics. This is where black people live under a particularly strong pressure, often exerted by members of their own community, to distance themselves from practices deemed immoral by the dominant value system, with the aim of gaining some sort of status in a system that denies them any. This kind of moral self-policing has shaped the ship's captain, the rest of the crew and black communities across the Atlantic world for centuries. The psychic rift engendered in Euphrasien is a consequence of this compulsion to assimilate into a white-controlled hegemony and, as such, can be interpreted as another instantiation of racial violence, one that is perhaps less flagrant than an insult or a beating, but more pervasive and pernicious for it.

The whole wedding ceremony is shot through with such internal contradictions. Nevertheless, it is also a joyful, communal occasion, and a tribute to survival. The accompanying Creole drummed music, dance and song was created by the crew's enslaved and oppressed ancestors, in spite of the violent conditions under which they lived and died. It is also a situation in which old bonds are recognized, and new modes of kinship are pieced together. At one point, in what could be a delusion, a Freudian slip, or a conscious gesture, Euphrasien addresses the crew members as 'les esclaves', linking their isolated and individualized experiences to a larger historical process. Moreover, he orchestrates the ceremony so that each member takes on a new familial role: 'EUPHRASIEN Couté, couté Messieurs et Dames, la parole d'Euphrasien qui épouse une fille échappée de l'enfer,

présentée par sa mère. Ressuscitée par ses frères et apaisée par mes mains, elle se tient maintenant confidante au pied de l'autel.' (p. 32)

The wedding can be seen as a 'practice of remembrance', which, according to Tagore, involves both the transmission of memory, and '[the transformation] of those 'hauntings' into an account that can be acted on in the present.'²³⁸ Indeed, the marriage ceremony is not only a reflective moment, but a constructive one. The makeshift family created here shows how engaging in remembrance can be socially transformative. The songs, drumming and dance function partly as a testament to past suffering, but they are also a stimulus to new musical endeavours. At a moment when the industry was becoming ever more globalized, marketized and corporatized, the wedding scene foregrounds what is vital and essential about culture, that is, gathering together to create it when you want and need to do so. Moreover, it is also possible to view the entire performance of *La Nef* as one such process of remembrance. It bears witness (albeit indirectly and inarticulately) to the disappearances and violences that structure the colonial history of the French Caribbean and, as such, offers Martinicans an alternative way of understanding their community to what has traditionally been provided in the classroom, the media and in public life generally.

Michèle Césaire may not have been familiar with the term 'racial trauma', or the mass of research behind it, but in writing and staging *La Nef* she was actually participating in (and, in fact, pre-empting) that strain of creative-critical work. I think that *La Nef*, even more so than *1902* (despite Alpha's emphatic exposé of the racist violence of colonial Saint Pierre), probes the lasting effect that this type of collective trauma has on how a community remembers. Indeed, in this respect, Michèle Césaire's play is something of an outlier amongst Martinican theatre practitioners of the period. While others, such as Alpha, took a more explicitly political approach in their attempt to decolonize the memory that had sedimented around certain places, people and events in Martinique, Césaire engaged with the nature of collective memory itself, resulting in a more contemplative take on its cavities, that is, what a community cannot or will not remember.

After all, Martinique remains a place in which various perspectives on the primacy of race, blackness and African heritage in the island's national consciousness co-exist, often uneasily. In order to illustrate this point, I will end this chapter by placing this production of *La Nef* in its local context, that is, in the small cultural scene of Martinique in July 1993. The

²³⁸ Tagore, p. 66.

play was scheduled as part of the Fort-de-France Festival, then in its twenty-second year. Envisaged as the highlight of the Martinican cultural calendar, this particular edition was billed as a homage to Aimé Césaire on his eightieth birthday, and it was certainly a show of reverence. The opening event, broadcast live on television, featured readings of his poetry, speeches in praise of his role in instigating the Festival and the presentation of a painting as a gift, to rapturous applause.²³⁹ At the same time, the wider event also seems to have been a moment in which Martinicans considered what it was exactly that they owed Césaire. The answer (or answers) they came up with was not altogether straightforward.

There was some ambivalence on display with regards his legacy as a philosopher of Negritude. An international conference on the theme of the universal/particular dialectic in Césairian literature was not well attended except by the participants themselves, most of whom were foreign.²⁴⁰ This would corroborate the commonly held perception that, ironically, Césaire's critical thought was little known and underappreciated in Martinique itself. It is also clear that, amongst those who *were* interested in Negritude as a philosophy, even one person can extract quite contradictory ideas from it. When asked on this occasion about the 'universal' quality of Césaire's thought, the writer-scholar André Lucrèce succinctly summarizes it as a radical humanism, one that not only valorizes blackness, but is actively anti-racist in its challenge to the white West: 'L'œuvre de Césaire, en prenant compte de l'immensité de l'Homme, a voulu mettre en évidence cette négation de la culture de l'Homme noir dans ce qu'elle a de fondatrice de l'Homme, et a tenté de dire à l'Occident que non seulement c'était une erreur, mais aussi une faute, et alors le mettre en face de ses responsabilités.' (p. 8) Then, within the same interview, Lucrèce insists on interpreting Afro-Creole religious practice within a European framework and its gold cultural standard of Classical Greece: '[...] ayant assisté il y a quelques années à une cérémonie vaudou, à Souvenance, dans le nord de Haïti, j'ai dit à un ami que nous venons d'assister à un des plus beaux moments d'expression de poésie tragique. C'était pour moi la tragédie vraie, au sens où Nietzsche le dit, vrai.' (p.8) This substantiates one of the key criticisms of Negritude, that is, that it simply inverted a Western values system and opened it up to black people, without proposing anything fundamentally new or different. Indeed, closer inspection of the 1993 Festival exposes the shortcomings of a humanism that has only engendered a partial and faltering revolution in Martinican minds.

²³⁹ 'Une soirée de feu', *France-Antilles Martinique*, 28 June 1993, p. 5.

²⁴⁰ Adams Kwateh, "'Hors des jours étrangers": bilan d'une 22ème édition', *France-Antilles Martinique*, 13 July 1993, p. 4.

To be fair, some of the theatrical productions made fruitful connections with the wider black Atlantic world. Opera Ebony, an African-American opera company, staged their politically conscious ‘Freedom Show’ over two nights. The performance looks back at the Underground Railroad (via figureheads such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X) and is based on a foundation of negro spirituals and West African tunes. It proved to be a potent blend of black history and music which, although drawn from African-American cultural memory specifically, appealed to Martinican audiences sensitive to the broad theme of black emancipation.²⁴¹ Equally memorable (and the best-attended play of the Festival that year) was a new Haitian staging of Aimé Césaire’s long dramatic poem *Et les chiens se taisaient*. It was a revelation, partly thanks to its unprecedented reimagining of a lesser known, highly abstract source text with little in the way of dialogue or stage directions. The production was also remarkable in terms of how it had survived extreme political repression: the Haitian authorities had attempted to sabotage the play when it opened in Port-au-Prince the previous year. All in all, the performance revitalized Césaire’s thought and art, tracing a line from the Martinique in which it had originally been generated to contemporary Haiti, where the dynamics of black oppression and resistance were at their most urgent and intense.

Nevertheless, the festival’s engagement with Africa was perhaps more problematic. This is epitomized in the performances given by the Ballets Africains de Guinée, a national dance company that offered a spectacular blend of traditional music, dance, dress and storytelling. They turned out to be the most popular events of any genre scheduled that year. On one hand, the Martinican public’s enthusiasm is entirely understandable. Many people felt a strong cultural connection with the music of Africa, especially the drumming rhythms from which much of their own popular music was derived. Moreover, the company developed these performances in order to champion their culture as part of a postcolonial nation-building effort²⁴², a broad aim with which Martinicans of this period could certainly identify. On the other hand, these were very much “shows”, conceived and stylized to appeal to spectators outside of Africa. Packaging culture in this manner risks falling into clichéd representations, and this is arguably what occurred in the work of the Ballets Africains, as well as in that of their Martinican homologue, described in Chapter Two. There is always an element of truth to stereotype, and it may be that the percussive rhythms, natural materials, exposed torsos, dramatic body paint and energetic jumps may be accurate and authentic, even

²⁴¹ ‘Chemin de fer noir américain’, *France-Antilles Martinique*, 26 June 1993, p. 9.

²⁴² Adams Kwateh, ‘Parcours sans faute sur le “Chemin” de la Guinée’, *France-Antilles Martinique*, 2 July 1993, p. 7.

as they mirror the image of Africa long cultivated in the West's popular imagination. However, by focussing exclusively on those expressive practices deemed suitably ancient, rural and traditional, extracting them from their complex social context and running them together in a sequence designed to entertain, and merging the customs of multiple ethnic groups to present one unified national culture, they are effectively distilling a 'quintessence of Africa' for foreign consumption.

The Martinicans who attended the 1993 performances of *La Nef* and Les Ballets Africains were presented with various possibilities regarding the place of Africa in their national identity, which inevitably came up against stumbling blocks. Even while the Festival organizers made a conscious effort to look outwards to the wider black world in a spirit of discovery and solidarity, the performances offered by Les Ballets Africains were designed to let its Martinican spectators be entertained by a certain stylized vision of it, rather than actively question their own relation and attitude to Africa. *La Nef*, in contrast, challenges its audience to think about the slave ship, about what was lost and what survived in that foundational crossing, and about how they see Africa now.

Chapter 6 – *Mas*, Memory and Carnival

Like the two plays discussed in the previous chapter, carnival is quite hallucinatory in spirit and aesthetic. Its participants are ordinary people whom you might recognize from work, school or the neighbourhood in which you live. It takes place in the same streets you walk or drive down every day, year in, year out. Then, during a brief interlude from normal life, the same people and setting tilt off balance. Human beings become physically distorted, their bodies enlarged with stilts or huge structured costumes. Multiple contrasting personae, drawn from the depth and breadth of the performers' imaginations, parade side by side. And yet, these creations are not always the product of individual creativity alone. The two recurrent performances explored in this chapter draw on the island's collective cultural memory. Like *1902* and *La Nef*, however, there are no straightforward, transparent representations here. Instead, these performances engage partially and obliquely with that memory, mediating elements of the past through their blend of artistry and social ritual.

The two case studies in this chapter focus on *maryann lapofig* and *nèg gwo siwo*, both examples of a genre of Caribbean carnival performance known in French as *masques* and in Creole, and across the wider Caribbean, as *mas*. They form part of a range of characters that are well-known and instantly recognizable locally, each of which is associated with a specific costume and behaviour, be it gesture, movement or dance. They are prepared and performed annually, either by individuals or as part of an organized group. However, the oldest characters (categorized in the English-speaking Caribbean as “ole time mas”) can date back over a century, often falling out of fashion when they no longer appeal to contemporary tastes. This is the fate that befell *maryann lapofig* and *nèg gwo siwo* in the post-war decades when, as noted in previous chapters, the island underwent a profound, rapid and widespread period of what has come to be known as decreolization. The inevitable corollary of this encroachment of Western goods, media, lifestyles and values was a (justified) perception that the Martinican economy, society and culture was being eroded. While some attempts to counter this seemingly inexorable process had been made by various local cultural activists from the early days of departmentalisation, the 1980s saw a concentration and intensification of these revival efforts, including in Martinican carnival. The local press reported on the welcome return of these two performances in 1983 and 1987, after a long absence.²⁴³ When placed in their wider historical context, then, it becomes clear that there is more at stake here

²⁴³ See ‘Le Carnaval 83’, *Antilla*, 18 February 1983, p. 25-26 and ‘Kannaval-la té cho!’, *Antilla*, 5 March 1987, pp. 9-11 (p. 9).

than the characters themselves: they play a role in a whole community's sense of losing, and saving, their identity.

The analysis here peels back the layers of Martinican cultural memory embodied in these ritual performances, whilst also viewing them as works of performance art that offer a critique of contemporary society. More specifically, and in keeping with the two plays explored in the previous chapter, the memory dissected and the critique generated centres on issues of race and blackness that usually remain unarticulated in public discourse. The chapter concludes by drawing together all four case studies and identifying a common thread that runs through them all, one which speaks to the problem of Martinique as an anti-nation. If these *mas* are performances where Martinicans remember, then they remember deliriously, as we shall see.

6.1 – The many meanings of banana leaves: *Maryann lapofig* and a new afrocentrism

The Caribbean *mas* genre was borne out of the convergence of two older traditions. One is the Western Christian carnival, whose Early Modern iteration was shipped to the new colonies in the Americas along with European settlers. While its practices of masking and disguise date back to the pagan festivities of Ancient Greece and Rome, and encompass a range of motivations, aesthetics and functions, some elements appear to have played a particularly prominent role in the formation of Caribbean *mas*. The European carnival of the seventeenth and eighteenth century had developed a cast of perennial characters, rooted in continental folklore. Some were very localized (that is, only performed in certain small towns and villages), whereas others, such as Harlequin and Pierrot, were well known across Europe after being incorporated into the *commedia dell'arte* theatre style. While these particular types do not feature in the modern *mas* repertoire, the custom of having a pantheon of stock characters, each with a specific physicality and dramatic function, modifiable yet remaining consistent year on year, has structured carnival in the Caribbean indelibly.

The festival's other main tributary is the broad family of West African masquerades. These were (and are) part of many of the cultures from which enslaved people were taken before being transported to the Caribbean. This is the strand that will be most prominent during this chapter's first case study, which analyses the *mas* known as *maryann lapofig*. This is not because it is 'more African' in essence or origin than any other: as we will see, there is no clear, unbroken line connecting that heritage and any aspect of modern Martinique, and every *mas* develops as an entanglement of multiple influences. Moreover, a *mas* does not

retain the exact same aesthetic and social significance eternally. Rather than view *maryann lapofig* ahistorically, then, this case study will place it in the context of the 1980s, considering the *mas* as part of a conscious effort being made by Martinicans to engage with a neglected African heritage. It will examine what was at stake politically and culturally here, interpreting the *maryann lapofig* of that moment as a performative expression of those issues.

Maryann lapofig manages to be simultaneously quite plain and simple in design, yet nonetheless visually stunning. The *mas* consists of a huge cape and hood, fashioned out of hundreds of dried out banana leaves, pale brown in colour, knotted together in lengths to form a long, thick, dense cloak that completely conceals the wearer, including their head and face. When in motion, it becomes a sonic spectacle as well as a physical one. The dried leaves rustle against each other as the wearer walks, and those performing often spin around rapidly in order to generate maximum noise. While *maryann lapofig* is well known and recognized by Martinicans, it is somewhat less institutionalized than some of the island's other carnival *mas*. Unlike the red devils (or *papa djab*, in Creole), who only parade on *mardi gras* (Shrove Tuesday), *maryann lapofig* are not associated with any particular day of the festive period and can be performed at any point during the day-time street processions.

The *mas* is said to have originated in the nineteenth century, when agricultural labourers made use of a free and abundant resource to represent a brown bear that had become something of a local celebrity. The animal in question, named Marianne, had starred in a travelling circus stationed in Saint-Pierre. (Occasionally, performers replace the hood with a shop-bought plastic bear mask, thus reinforcing the link to this origin story.) On one level, then, the *mas* is a site where local lore and the global enterprise that was the French empire mesh with each other. Here, we see an enduring fascination, not only with an exotic animal never seen before or since in Martinique, but with Europe in general, and all it has to offer its colonial subjects. It is an example of how fragments of the imperial motherland can leave an impression in the collective memory of its most geographically distant territories, feeding their popular imagination and giving rise to creations that are utterly unique. And yet, there is more to this *mas* than the legendary bear of Saint-Pierre. Variants of the same dried banana leaf costume can be found in carnivals across the Caribbean basin, from Guadeloupe to the Dominican Republic, with no direct connection to that particular historical anecdote. All of these *mas*, in addition to having their own localized genesis and development, stem from an older heritage which still endures, albeit in a thoroughly transmuted form.

I want to frame this chapter's analysis of *maryann lapofig* around the problem of Afrocentrism, or, more precisely, the perpetual uncertainty surrounding the extent to which

the Caribbean (and, indeed, black America more widely) ought to be conceived of as African. This quandary has shaped critical scholarship on the African diaspora for much of the twentieth century, from the early anthropological debates of the 1940s opposing Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier (in which the former argued for the persistence of African cultural elements within black American culture, while the latter maintained that any potential links had been definitively severed by the utterly annihilating experience of slavery), to Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and its detractors, who prefer to focus on African *roots* rather than Gilroy's ever more hybridized transoceanic *routes*. Moreover, the place of Africa within the cultures of the New World is more than just an intellectual conversation between academics. It is an old societal conundrum, one whose contradictions rub particularly painfully and awkwardly in the French Antilles. France, as an imperial power, had advocated a colour-blind universalist Republic into which all its subjects could assimilate equally, but also deliberately played Antilleans and Africans off against each other, ultimately instilling a deep-seated sense of separateness and superiority in many Martinicans, Guadeloupeans and Guyanese, a phenomenon described by Frantz Fanon as early as 1955²⁴⁴. This was the island that had helped give the world a seminal expression of pan-Africanist thought in the form of Negritude, yet, as was evident in the Fort-de-France Festival of July 1993, often cultivated a problematic view of Africa as a source of entertainment, rather than a beneficiary of its cultural and political solidarity. We have seen how, in her staging of *La Nef*, Michèle Césaire probed the trauma and shame that still shapes how Martinicans relate to the continent of their ancestors. Elsewhere, however, Africa was beginning to be recognized as a positive and affirmative base upon which a national identity for Martinique could be constructed, in opposition to a purely French/European one that had already proved exclusionary and inadequate in so many respects. A certain amount of this nation-building work was being carried out, consciously or otherwise, within the island's carnival.

In order to understand the persistence and significance of *mas* like *maryann lapofig*, we need to lean into thought that may seem very essentialist when applied wholesale without any qualification. While I am generally not comfortable with expansive macro theories that attempt to account for the whole of African American culture, there are elements of work produced by Afrocentric scholars such as Esiaba Irobi that are indispensable as far as appreciating *mas* is concerned. He argues that not only were crucial aspects of indigenous African festival theatre translocated to the New World but that, in either geo-cultural sphere,

²⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, 'Antillais et africains', *Esprit*, 223 (2), 1955, 261–69.

they continue to function on the basis of a shared kinaesthetic literacy, with the body, what it looks like and how it moves, as a site of signification.²⁴⁵ The emphasis here is not on provenance, and the aim is not to direct us back towards Africa in order to access the ‘truth’ about Caribbean *mas*. There may be physical resemblances between *maryann lapofig* and a number of West African masquerades with regard to their use of vegetation as a primary material. The *zangbeto*, performed by a cult within the Ogu people of Benin, Togo and Nigeria, use a different plant (usually straw dyed in a variety of colours) in order to create a similar haystack-like structure that completely conceals the wearer. Dried banana leaves are also used by the Woyo nation across the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola in the construction of their *ndunga* costumes, albeit in conjunction with feathers and codified wooden masks. Nevertheless, arguing for some kind of direct link between *maryann lapofig* and any African masquerade in particular does not lead anywhere other than a comfortably neat conclusion. Irobi’s thought is more useful in terms of the afrocentric principles it privileges, notably focussing on the body as an instrument for incubating and articulating ideas. Attending to what these semi-human leaf-bodies might be signifying, especially in the Martinican carnival of the 1980s and early 1990s, opens up our discussion of this *mas*.

At this point, I want to consider *maryann lapofig* in the context of an island transformed by departmentalization and, more specifically, by the influx of Euro-American material goods that fostered a consumer culture akin to that of metropolitan France. A British geographer who visited the French Caribbean territories firstly in 1968, then for a second time in 1988, remarked on how Westernized they were in comparison to their independent neighbours.²⁴⁶ He also noted the rise in living standards within that twenty-year interval, epitomized by the unusually high number of American cars owned and driven on the islands. By the 1980s, televisions had also become omnipresent. Local electronics retailers advertised the latest Japanese brands, available for purchase at affordable prices. Television was even (perhaps inevitably) intersecting with carnival, that most frenetic, immersive, outdoor community festival. In March 1986, the Martinican magazine *Fouyaya* produced a feature-length film recording the highlights of that year’s carnival, which they sold on video cassette for 350 francs.²⁴⁷ A comic strip in the preceding issue depicted a group of women eventually

²⁴⁵ Esiaba Irobi, ‘What They Came with: Carnival and the Persistence of African Performance Aesthetics in the Diaspora’, *Journal of Black Studies*, 37.6 (2007), 896–913.

²⁴⁶ Colin G. Clarke, *Mexico and the Caribbean under Castro’s Eyes: A Journal of Decolonization, State Formation and Democratization*, Studies of the Americas (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

²⁴⁷ ‘Revivez le carnaval 86, chez vous’, *Fouyaya*, March 1986, p. 2.

electing to watch the events at home on television²⁴⁸, thus poking fun at contemporary trends and lifestyles, whilst also articulating latent anxieties regarding the future of the festival in a technological age.

The Martinican public's embrace of these emblems of consumer culture was both enthusiastic and uneasy. They (literally) bought into it, yet there is also an awareness, at least in some quarters, that it was not the answer to the island's ills, and was in fact aggravating them. Pieces regularly appeared in the local press that looked beyond the benefits that an increase in disposable income may have brought to individuals. In the same vein as Glissant, there was an element of political discourse that critiqued the departmental condition as a moribund politico-economic system, one which did not allow for real development in any of the French Caribbean islands. Outlining his alternative vision for their political and economic future, the former Communist member of parliament for Guadeloupe Rosan Girard argued that their residents' relatively high standard of living gave an illusion of prosperity. Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guyana were in fact underdeveloped in the sense that their production output was chronically low. Those who share Girard's views continue to maintain that radical systemic change (including control over the technical and organizational means of production, as well as capital investment) is required in order to redress this situation and build a sustainable political economy for these islands.²⁴⁹

Maryann lapofig made an intervention in this period of abundance and dissatisfaction. In many ways, it can be seen as an anti-consumerist, even anti-capitalist *mas*. Banana leaves are free: you do not need to earn or exchange any money in order to accumulate them. As they are not held within the confines of a shop, access to them is not dependant on a vendor. Personal finances are not the ultimate determining factor here, and subsequently there is no sense of individual purchase and ownership. Rather, the large quantities of leaves required to make this costume need to be gathered and dried outside as part of a collective endeavour. This material is the antithesis of 'shiny' or 'new', and the wearer gains no conventional social capital in displaying them on their body. Considered thus, one could argue that a distinct aesthetic is being cultivated in *maryann lapofig*, in which the dullest, most nondescript waste, which Martinicans would normally tread upon without a second thought, is championed as the linchpin of a *mas* that appeals to all the senses. Moreover, this *mas* communicates social ideas. Placed within the backdrop of an island that had been turned into a consumer society

²⁴⁸ 'Titin, le petit négropolitain', *Fouyaya*, February 1986, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ 'Antilla dossier: propositions de Rosan Girard', *Antilla*, 9 March 1990, pp. 19-26.

within the space of a generation, it suggests that Martinicans can and should value other things than what Western manufacturers want them to covet. This community has cultural wealth, one they have accumulated by dint of the creativity and resourcefulness of their ancestors, and which is evident not only in this *mas* but in all the others that make up Martinican carnival. Perhaps, ultimately, *maryann lapofig* demonstrates that being African-American or Afro-Creole is in itself also a kind of richness. That particular cultural identity was borne out of African people, their practices, techniques, aesthetics and body language having somehow survived the most annihilating conditions to endure in *mas* such as these.

Maryann lapofig was admittedly something of a resurrected ritual, in that it was deliberately revived after a period of neglect. It is no coincidence that within a few months of its reappearance in February 1983, Dr Pierre Alier would exhort Martinicans at the opening night of the Fort-de-France festival to know their history, celebrate their culture and speak their language. As stated in Chapter One, that speech, delivered in the wake of the PPM's rise to dominance, articulated the cultural nationalism that party aimed to build in Martinique. It was a type of neo-Negritude developed for the newly decentralised regions of the 1980s, which encouraged an interest in those elements of Antillean culture that are most obviously Afro-Creole in origin and spirit, and thus most clearly distinguish Martinique and its people from France. The 'rediscovery' of *maryann lapofig* certainly complements this endeavour, flirting with its neo-nationalist nostalgia for a carnival (and, indeed, an identity) that could save a community from the slow death that was already underway.

Nevertheless, it is important not to place the *mas* too firmly within this framework, as in doing so we risk positing it as merely incidental to the PPM's quest for a useable past, and discrediting it as a work of art. The African cultural memory of Martinique and its carnival was certainly being consciously and purposefully mobilized here, but the makers of *maryann lapofig* were, to my mind, also doing something much more creative and contemplative. They were developing a new kind of afrocentrism, one that was not especially interested in drawing straight, unbroken lines from the *zangbeto* of Benin to the *mas* of Martinique. These performers are not politically, culturally or intellectually invested in defining themselves or their *mas* as African, or even Afro-Creole: identity construction was not a primary concern for them, at least, not in the urgent way it was for some political leaders, activists and scholars. Instead, these *maryann lapofig* point towards a self-reflective and productive afrocentrism, one that focuses on material, movement and, crucially, the human body, as a means of communicating social ideas. Through privileging these kinaesthetic principles (which were, and remain, integral to the African masquerade performances from which they

partly originate) this *mas* offered a critique of present-day Martinique that not only side-stepped conventional political discourse, but eluded text and language altogether.

Moving on from the masses of dried leaves as a choice of material, part of what makes *maryann lapofig* so visually arresting is how it fully conceals the wearer. Indeed, the *mas* functions on the basis of a fundamental contradiction, in that a huge effort goes into preparing a costume designed to be paraded in public and to attract attention, only for the performer to be completely hidden from view. In order to grasp the significance of this paradox, it is necessary to view *maryann lapofig* as one constituent part of Martinican carnival, a sprawling, multifaceted festival that is far from coherent in its aesthetic or its politics. This *mas* was definitely a minority pursuit, fabricated and performed by a small number of enthusiasts. As such, it is important not to overstate its prominence within carnival as a whole, and to consider it in relation to what were undoubtedly bigger draws.

One of the festival's most popular elements during this period was the Carnival Queen contest, an institution which continues to thrive to this day. Representatives for each town on the island are elected in an initial round of judging, before they all compete in a grand final held in Fort-de-France with the aim of being crowned Carnival Queen of Martinique. Attractive young women are chosen to model a series of costumes, including a spectacular structured piece designed to generate maximum visual impact. Contestants parade for the audience within a frame (sometimes so large it has to be mounted on wheels), decorated according to themes that often privileged aspects of the island's natural bounty, such as its flowers or fruit. All kinds of materials are sourced, from fabrics, foils and feathers, to spandex and sequins, providing the brightest colours and most varied textures.²⁵⁰ The more revealing designs also showcase the beauty of these women's bodies, choosing to highlight their skin, hair or legs. Raedene Copeland and Nancy Hodges' research into the comparable popular phenomenon of *pretty mas* in Trinidadian carnival historicizes a certain shift in carnival aesthetics towards exposure and bare skin, leaving the focus of *mas* less on disguise and concealment, and more on the female body itself. They locate this development within broader changes in the Caribbean that occurred over the second half of the twentieth century. The social and economic independence gained by women during and after the Second World War led to them taking prominence in a carnival previously dominated by largely male

²⁵⁰ For a selection of photographs of contestants modelling for the 1987 all-Martinique Carnival Queen competition, see Association Carnaval Foyal, *Livre d'or des 20 ans de carnaval en Martinique* (Fort-de-France: L'Editeur, 1988), pp. 18–19.

groups and character *mas*. The festival now had to reflect how women wanted to perform and present themselves, hence the new centrality of the female body.²⁵¹

The first official edition of the Carnival Queen competition was organized by the Association Carnaval Foyal in 1966, making it a relatively recent addition to the festival. When contrasted with the aesthetic of older *mas* such as *maryann lapofig*, the divisions within the wider community's vision of what carnival ought to be like, and what purpose it should fulfil, are thrown into relief. The second chapter of this thesis discussed carnival within the context of Martinique's shift to a tourist economy, and the Carnival Queen competition was certainly a key ingredient in this transition, given how well it aligns with the image of the festival that exists in the Western popular imagination: this institution has everything that European and American tourists expect (and want) from the Caribbean, especially seeing how it emulates the tone and appearance of the larger and more famous carnivals of Trinidad and Rio de Janeiro. The Carnival Queen was thus, in many respects, a means of selling Martinique.

However, before immediately characterizing this phenomenon as a form of alienation or of 'selling out', it is important to consider the act of selecting, developing and promoting cultural products from the perspective of Caribbean island societies still tightly locked into colonial dynamics. In a setting where, historically, the black population were completely dispossessed and denied any stake in their economy for centuries, and where much of the agricultural land and large businesses are still owned by the white minority, culture is one of the few types of capital over which Martinicans have meaningful control. As such, it was (and is) their resource of choice when it came to constructing some semblance of an autonomous regional economy. The Martinican Carnival Queen competition, and its role within the commercialization of the island's culture, becomes much more rational when articulated from this standpoint.

In the 'anti-spectacle' of *maryann lapofig*, that is, its exaggerated, conspicuous concealment of the performer's body, there is perhaps something of a defiant contrast to the Carnival Queens, the hyper-visibility of black women's bodies being presented to please and entice white visitors, and the entire capitalist endeavour they serve. Nevertheless, these older, more modest *mas* do not necessarily always constitute an example of radical social and cultural critique. The makers and performers of *maryann lapofig*, as I have argued, certainly

²⁵¹ Raedene Copeland and Nancy Hodges, 'Exploring Masquerade Dress at Trinidad Carnival: Bikinis, Beads, and Feathers and the Emergence of the Popular Pretty Mas', *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 32.3 (2014), 186–201.

had their own ideas to convey, and cultivated their own variant of afrocentrism. They did not, however, exist in a separate artistic realm entirely removed from economic concerns. In fact, historic *mas* were also implicated in the project of tying Martinican carnival to the island's development, even if they were not deliberately and purposefully conceived for this purpose in the same way that the Carnival Queen contest was. If the festival needed, broadly speaking, to march to the beat set by Trinidad and Rio, then it also needed a unique selling point in order to demarcate itself.

The discourse and actions emanating from organizing committees, community leaders and the local press seem to suggest that they saw performances like *maryann lapofig* as just such an asset. They emphasized the centrality of traditional *mas* to Martinican carnival, often romanticizing both the characters themselves and the simpler yet more magical era in which they took prominence. This is evident in the wistful way in which the journalists of the 1980s and 1990s framed multi-page spreads documenting the panoply of Martinican *mas*: 'Quelles étaient ces silhouettes qui du temps jadis, marquaient le carnaval foyalais? Quelles étaient ces figures étranges qui sur la savane, au milieu d'un public curieux et friand de l'occulte, à la recherche de l'émotion, arpentaient les lieux?'²⁵² Elsewhere, George Louis-régis Psyché started the Association Recherches et Traditions in 1980, which gradually became one of the best-known carnival organizations on the island. The group married artisan costume-making with research into fashion and clothing styles from different periods of Martinican history. They also maintained a strong interest in traditional *mas* and undertook pioneering research into the origins and development of these stock characters, including ones which had fallen out of use entirely. The Groupe Psyché, as they became known, even coordinated a mass *maryann lapofig* excursion in 1995, involving over one hundred participants. At the same time, the Association Carnaval Foyal were also advocating the modest yet creative *mas* of centuries past as a distinguishing feature: 'Chez nous, pas le faste lourd de Bruxelles, ou la féerie de Rio de Janeiro, mais le déferlement d'une fantaisie libératrice pour le rire.'²⁵³

If sequins can sell, then so, it would appear, can an island's unique cultural memory. Philip W. Scher's work on the phenomenon of 'copyright heritage' in relation to Trinidadian carnival is useful in terms of understanding this endeavour. He analyses and critiques how the Trinidadian state apparatus (and the scholars that shore it up) maintain an exclusive focus on 'old time carnival', that is, a canon of traditional *mas* with a relatively small following, which

²⁵² 'Figures d'antan', *Antilla*, 15 February 1990, pp. 20-21.

²⁵³ 'Fort de France à l'heure du carnaval', in Association Carnaval Foyal, p. 15.

is thus legitimized as the festival's ultimate mode of expression.²⁵⁴ Martinique may not have a well-endowed state institution akin to Trinidad's National Carnival Commission, but there is a similar impulse behind the promotion, protection and preservation of a particular image of the festival, that is, of a tradition developed prior to the age of mass communication, and which therefore escaped the homogeneity engendered by that change. Moreover, these concerns intersect with local interests of power, in this case, the PPM's preference for a specific and authentic carnival, one that helps legitimize their vision of a Martinique that was culturally independent, if not politically autonomous.

Bearing all this in mind, we can begin to see the *maryann lapofig* of the 1980s and 1990s as complex, polysemic performances. Our engagement with them ought not to be reduced to arguing over the degree to which they ought to be classified as African, European or Creole, or identifying the precise continental masquerade from which they might derive. Rather, looking at *maryann lapofig* more closely opens up our appreciation of the nature of cultural memory in the Caribbean, of how the pre-colonial, the colonial and the departmental sediment over time, and how these layers can move in and out of focus. Contexts and meanings do not stay the same, but still the principle and practice of communicating via the body, its adornment, concealment and ultimately its transformation, endures in this *mas*. Overall, *maryann lapofig* embodies multiple motivations and purposes, and exists as an afrogenetic social ritual, a consciously conceived commodity and a work of performance art.

This piece of analysis has touched on just one facet of the dynamics of visibility/invisibility at work in the *mas* of Martinican carnival. The following case study, which centres on the *nèg gwo siwo*, engages with the issue more fully, linking it to contemporary discourses (and indeed, silences) surrounding race. Ironically, because of the nature of the *maryann lapofig* costume, in which the wearer is completely hidden from view, the idea of 'Africa' becomes somewhat unmoored from that of 'Black', even though the two are usually consubstantial in the rest of the world's popular imagination. The *nèg gwo siwo*, in contrast, renders blackness hyper-visible and unavoidable, putting it centre stage in a carnival, and in a nation, where its articulation has always been muted.

²⁵⁴ Philip W. Scher, 'Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad', in *Perspectives on the Caribbean*, ed. by Scher, pp. 161–73.

6.2 – Painting it Black with the *Nèg gwo siwo*

Mas do not come much simpler, or stickier, than *nèg gwo siwo*. Participants arrive at a designated meeting point prior to joining the street processions: men and boys wear shorts but leave their torso bare, whereas women and girls wear either a bikini top or a vest on their upper half. A thick, black mixture of charcoal and molasses (a syrupy by-product of the manufacture of raw sugar from sugar cane) has been prepared and stored in barrels. The performers take handfuls of this concoction and smear it over their entire bodies, both the exposed skin and their clothing, including their face and hair or bald scalp. Some of them complete the ensemble with a bright red headcloth that contrasts starkly with the black body paint. While the design and artisanship involved in making this *mas* is negligible compared to that of *maryann lapofig*, it is nonetheless visually striking, not only in terms of the intense, transformative colour and lustre of the daub, but in the effect of large groups of these jet-black performers filling the street. In the past, the *nèg gwo siwo* fulfilled what were almost traffic control duties, shouting ‘ban nou lè pou nou pasé!’ (a Creole phrase that translates to ‘Let us through!’) in order to clear the chaotic streets of revellers and let other groups and their floats advance. Even though the modern-day organization and policing of carnival has rendered this function obsolete, the *mas* remains a fun, physical, dynamic, social and interactive experience: the *nèg gwo siwo* make a point of not only parading, but chasing unsuspecting bystanders in order to rub up against them, dirtying their clothes and generally annoying the public.

Similarly to *maryann lapofig*, this *mas* echoes techniques and aesthetics that have been employed in the masking practices of West African secret societies for centuries. A case in point is that of the Ekpo masquerades performed by the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria, in which the legs and arms are painted with a charcoal-based paint, while the head and torso are covered by a huge wooden mask with long fringes made of dried grass. These masquerades nearly always fulfil a spiritual function, whereby members of the society embody the community’s ancestors during a festive period and, as such, are understood as a physical manifestation of the dead. The carnival *mas* of the Americas are obviously performed in a secular context, but they still use the human body as a site on which similar dynamics of absence and presence play out: these figures are physically *there*, but they look as if they are only visiting from another world and could return to it at any moment. After all, they can be witnessed during the carnival period alone, perhaps only appearing on the streets for a few hours within that time frame. For the rest of the year, they simply do not exist. This

common African heritage explains the prevalence of various iterations of fully painted body *mas* across the carnivals of the Caribbean basin. The Jab Jab of Grenada are stylized as black devils complete with real cow horns fixed to a helmet, whereas the Trinidadian equivalent is bright blue.

The *nèg gwo siwo*, however, have a distinct origin story and are not meant to be demonic (The Martinican carnival canon does feature a devil character known *diable rouge* or *papa djab*, but this is a completely different *mas*, performed fully clothed with a huge, elaborate, sculpted mask). They date back to the post-abolition nineteenth century, and were first enacted by black workers in the sugar mills surrounding Le Prêcheur, Saint-Pierre and Le Carbet in the north of the island. The carnival period corresponded with the sugarcane cutting season, in which the mills and their employees were most active. Eager to join in with the celebrations upon leaving the factory, they used the waste molasses (known as *gwo siwo*) they had at hand to fix the soot that had already settled on their bodies from working near the furnaces, giving them an improvised disguise. The genesis of *nèg gwo siwo* is thus rooted in the island's history of black labour (specifically their role in the sugarcane industry that powered the colony), resourcefulness and play.

However, there are other elements of the cultural and social memory of Martinique that have become even more firmly attached to this *mas*. For most Martinicans, the *nèg gwo siwo* represent their enslaved ancestors, and in particular the *marrons*, that is, those who escaped the plantations and managed to evade recapture for varying lengths of time in the mountainous terrain inland. Even though the *mas* may not have originally been intended as such, its blackness has come to refer to the first Africans incarcerated on the island, and the demographics of early colonial Martinique. This is a period which, at least in the local popular imagination, precedes the extensive socio-sexual mixing that has given modern Martinique its hybrid ethnic make-up. It is thus associated with darker skin and, more generally, with proximity to Africa. On one level, then, the Martinicans who perform this *mas* are motivated by a sense of pride in their ancestors' ability to survive and resist under the most brutal conditions. The *nèg gwo siwo* are thus a physical embodiment of the memory of black suffering and emancipation, and also of the precarity of the advances secured and enjoyed over time. *Marronage* was, after all, a lethal form of freedom, one perhaps best described as *unfreedom*: a liberty punishable by mutilation and execution is not really liberty in any meaningful sense of the word.

The *nèg gwo siwo* act as a living repository of these various strands of memory, referring not only to specific groups of people such as the *marrons*, but also to the value of

any semblance of freedom in a colonial slave system, and the risks Martinicans took to obtain it. As such, they fit quite well into the wider discourse of specificity/authenticity being developed by a broad section of the local political class during the 1980s. The logic is as follows: this is what we, the black majority of Martinique endured. The resilience of our ancestors is ours alone, then and now, and this is what distinguishes us from France. Writing about the comparable situation in Guadeloupe, Stéphanie Mulot notes how this vision of the island's identity has become indissociable from the commemoration of its history of slavery. This twofold endeavour reappropriated and retranscribed emblematic events and figures chosen to symbolize popular resistance to colonization.²⁵⁵ The *nèg gwo siwo* were one such emblem. The figure of the *marron* appealed because of its associations with rebellion and outlaw life.²⁵⁶ Moreover, the blackness of this *mas* is a particularly strong physical correlative of the Black/African heritage nexus. Both *maryann lapofig* and *nèg gwo siwo* form part of the same visual language developed in Martinican carnival, but they are saying somewhat different things. The former, with its costume made entirely out of tropical vegetation, refers to Africa in a botanical and cultural sense, whereas the latter embodies the continent in a manner that is much more explicitly racial. Its exaggerated hue acts as a stand-in for all that is different and unassimilatable about that identity.²⁵⁷ When understood in this manner, then, the *nèg gwo siwo* are elevated to a symbol of national identity, almost becoming synonymous with Martinique itself.

To a certain extent, then, the *nèg gwo siwo*, along with other traditional Martinican carnival *mas*, get incorporated into the island's burgeoning neo-nationalist iconography. However, concluding our analysis at this point does not do justice to the political and artistic potential of masking for individuals and communities. The remainder of this case study will think through the *nèg gwo siwo* with Gerard Aching and his understanding of masking as a socially significant practice in the Caribbean, one which he extends beyond the performances of the carnival period, seeing it as a feature of public discourse, literary expression and everyday behaviour. At the root of masking, for him, is '[a] desire to be seen in a more profound manner than the collective gaze that observes'²⁵⁸, a seemingly self-contradictory impulse given that the purpose of donning a mask is surely to hide oneself from view. Aching goes on to consider this paradox within a Caribbean context, and specifically in terms of the

²⁵⁵ Mulot, 'La Trace des masques', p. 111.

²⁵⁶ Mulot, 'La Trace des masques', p. 113.

²⁵⁷ Mulot, 'La Trace des masques', p. 116.

²⁵⁸ Gerard Aching, *Masking and Power: Carnival and Popular Culture in the Caribbean*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, 8 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 1.

phenomenon of covert disclosure described by Glissant (and discussed in relation to the lyrics of Kassav' in Chapter Four). He identified a dynamic within the development of the Creole language in a racist, authoritarian police state, whereby black users had to find ways of hiding meanings even while they spoke and listened publicly, so as to avoid punishment. Seen through the prism of this history, the oddity of forms of masking that actually call attention to their practitioners starts to make more sense, and we are able to see them as tactical activities.

What the *nèg gwo siwo* and its exaggerated blackness does, besides representing certain key episodes and protagonists of Martinican history, is point towards the more nebulous and insidious factors that continue to determine Martinican life. Indeed, this *mas* make race hyper-visible in a context where it often goes unrecognized. One thread that has run consistently through this thesis is the displacement of the facts of this matter from public discourse in Martinique. The first chapter discussed the principle of colour-blindness central to French Republican ideology, the myth of a fundamentally egalitarian nation that ensued, and how this works to marginalize and discredit those who would highlight the deep-rooted racial inequality affecting French people today. It also explored how this situation played out in the Caribbean territories, where Aimé Césaire and the PPM managed to find a way of articulating Martinican national identity that focussed less on its ongoing racialized experience and more on the specific culture of the island within the neo-empire of 'overseas France.'

Racial consciousness in 1980s Martinique was, in many ways, uneven and subdued. There was certainly booming interest in the black culture of Martinique and the wider Atlantic region, and particularly in black music. Apart from the esteem in which local musicians were held at the time (especially those like Eugène Mona, who championed and reinvented the island's most African-rooted traditions), Prince's *Purple Rain* mesmerized cinema-goers and listeners alike in 1985²⁵⁹, and the concert given by Miles Davis in Guadeloupe in 1990 was billed as the cultural event of the year²⁶⁰. However, Martinican engagement with contemporary international affairs from a black perspective is often reduced to 'great man' narratives mirroring that of Aimé Césaire. Local coverage of the imprisonment and release of Nelson Mandela focusses on his strength of conviction and unbending will in the face of white domination and apartheid, describing him as a 'nègre fondamental' in exactly the same way as the Martinican figurehead²⁶¹: public discourse on affairs concerning

²⁵⁹ *Antilla*, 28 June 1985, p. 7.

²⁶⁰ *Antilla*, 15 February 1990, p. 33.

²⁶¹ *Antilla*, 15 February 1990, p. 3.

black people struggles to get out of that messianic mould, one that puts a lot of faith in exceptional men to bring salvation. Meanwhile, the depth with which racial thinking is embedded in Martinican society is rarely touched upon. Racism is usually portrayed as a threat posed from elsewhere, a case in point being Jean-Marie Le Pen's chaotic aborted visit to the island in December 1987, during the decade in which the Front National and their openly racist and pro-colonialist ideology made their electoral breakthrough. Thousands of protestors stormed the runway of the airport in Fort-de-France, forcing the plane in which Le Pen was travelling to circle in the air before being diverted first to Guadeloupe, and ultimately back to France. The incident was immortalized by Djo Dézormo in a carnival *vidé* song a few months later. Despite the strength of feeling evident here, it is difficult to locate any journalists or artists dealing directly with race in a local context, even though this is a place where the hierarchies and precepts of a racist colonial order have irrevocably shaped society, right down to the language Martinicans use every day (as we will soon see). Race, paradoxically, is everywhere yet nowhere.

This is blatantly and deliberately not the case in the *nèg gwo siwo*, where blackness is literally ladled on and paraded centre stage. For all its visual and kinetic spectacle, though, this *mas* also flirts with offensiveness, potentially provoking discomfort in the viewing public or, indeed, in the performers themselves. It may, from some perspectives, look like a derisive caricature of dark-skinned African people. To dismiss it as racist, however, does not do justice to the potential meanings of this *mas* when performed by and for a black Caribbean population who continue to live in a colonial context. In order to grasp what is at stake in this seemingly absurd instance of black people 'blacking up', this case study will engage with the politics of this *gwo siwo*, with what it covers up and what it reveals, and with how this works to create a critique of Martinique and its problem with race.

This is not an elaborate or sophisticated *mas*, but the black body paint (when applied liberally and conscientiously) is very effective at covering up a wide variety of different skin tones and facial features. The resulting impression is of an ethnically homogeneous group, unified in their unambiguous and undifferentiated blackness. The possible significance of this act only comes into focus when considered against the backdrop of modern Martinican society and, specifically, its structuring principle of racial stratification, whereby variation in physical appearance visible within the population has, over the centuries, become codified into a series of racial types familiar to all Martinicans. The Martinican French dialect contains an entire lexicon corresponding to this system of classification: *mulâtre*, *métis*, *chabin* and *nègre*, to name but a few, all denote socio-racial types, with moral and physical

characteristics attributed to members of each category. According to this codification, a *chabin*, for example, is a person whose facial features and hair texture correlate more with what is commonly viewed as ‘black’ or ‘African’, but whose complexion is much closer to what is generally considered ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian’ in terms of light skin tone, fair hair colour and blue or green eyes. Moreover, they are perceived as hot-tempered, unpredictable and sensitive, with female *chabines* also renowned for their purported heightened sexual appetite and prowess. Their ambiguous status, stranded somewhere between two putative racial poles, has made them an enduring object of both fascination and fear.²⁶²

Racial taxonomies of this nature, which are prevalent throughout post-slave societies in the Americas, are not born of innocent human observation. The supposedly objective diagnostic criteria employed here originate in bogus yet hugely consequential biological theories of race, which were systematized from the Enlightenment era onwards. These postulated that discrete ‘races’ of humans exist, which are physiologically distinct from each other. It is important to stress that this pseudo-science was not merely pursued for its own sake. Scientific racism was developed to undergird (and ultimately justify) the joint endeavours of slavery and colonization within European global empires. It rationalized hierarchies of power and esteem based on white supremacy, whereby the proximity of a category to whiteness indicated its “natural” predisposition towards governance, with those closer to blackness standing to gain from various forms of white “protective custody” on account of their perceived inferiority.

Racial classification of the type seen in Martinique reproduces (and in turn legitimizes) these hierarchies: what passes for empirical observation is, in fact, locked into the logic that sanctioned the entire European imperial enterprise. The discriminating values and ideals of a dominant racial ideology have clearly been widely internalized by Martinicans, both by the principal victims of that racism, and those who try to negotiate it in order to advance socially. Historically, the light-skinned middle class known as the *mulâtres* had much to gain from differentiating themselves from “the black people below”, and were thus instrumental in multiplying the intermediary categories of racial classification in order to confirm their upward mobility.²⁶³ For all but those Martinicans on the extreme ends of the colour spectrum, then, these typologies have a strategic importance.

²⁶² Stéphanie Mulet, ‘Chabines et métisses dans l’univers antillais’, *Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, 27 (2008), 115–34.

²⁶³ Michel Giraud, ‘Dialectics of descent and phenotypes in racial classification in Martinique’ in *French and West Indian*, ed. by Burton and Réno, pp. 75–85.

The departmental era, its discontents and the neo-nationalism that ensued may have brought about a certain type of muted and compromised black consciousness, as discussed at various points throughout this thesis. However, it was mainly deployed to help define Martinican specificity in relation to France, in the context of a perpetual yet deeply troubled colonial bind. It did not go so far as to undermine the deep-seated racial ideology that continues, to this day, to influence how Martinicans relate to each other. On this local level, it is possible that for most Martinicans the term ‘black’ (or *noir*) may not actually have meant that much, politically or socially. In the everyday interactions and intimate relationships that made up their lives, after all, it was the shades of black, white and brown that were articulated most keenly.

Enter the *nèg gwo siwo*, who defiantly thrust blackness into carnival and the public eye. What is more, depending on how successfully the *siwo* itself is prepared, they can potentially flaunt a strikingly dark shade of black. This not only confronts watching Martinicans with blackness in its deepest form, but with their fear of it. The fear of blackness, after all, is the photo negative of white supremacy: each is a prerequisite of the other. Fanon articulated the ramifications of this unspoken terror in *Peau noire, masques blancs* with a clarity that no Martinican has replicated since. He was only able to do so, of course, from a distance of several thousand kilometres, and with a set of decolonial politics not shared by the vast majority of his compatriots. On the island itself, the fear of blackness exists beneath the surface of things, unrecognized and unvoiced, even though it undergirds so many of the prevailing structures and attitudes in Martinican society, from the logic of the racial typologies described above, to the neurosis surrounding the Creole language explored in Chapter Three.

To a certain extent, the *nèg gwo siwo* simply identify this terror, render it visible by putting it in living, breathing, moving bodily form and then cast it unapologetically into the public domain, leaving watching Martinicans to deal with it as they see fit. Performers generally do not offer explanations for their *mas*, and there is no overarching narratorial figure guiding spectators through what may be very strange and contradictory scenes. Carnival, after all, is a festival of imaginative heteroclite chaos that has always had an element of terror running through it. The *nèg gwo siwo*, and the fear of blackness writ large across their painted bodies, are perhaps emblematic of the spirit and aesthetic of carnival when considered in this way.

That said, it is possible that the *mas* also has a certain political edge. In order to understand how this is generated, it is worth turning to Aching’s consideration of the

relationship between masked people and observers. He describes how masking mediates social relations, through ‘practices [that] negotiate degrees of recognition, misrecognition and nonrecognition’ (p. 4-5) between these two groups of subjects. On a basic and general level, the *nèg gwo siwo* are recognized by their spectators as fellow Martinicans engaged in this festive public display, even if it might be difficult to single out the real identity of any one participant. Then, the *gwo siwo* makes all the performers black to the same degree, or at least creates this temporary illusion. This is where an element of nonrecognition is introduced, in that observers lose the bearings that allow them to identify and classify those co-citizens whom they are watching. The various colour typologies are thus removed from the equation and, in a process one might call re-recognition, everyone’s attention is redirected towards the fundamental factor holding up the racial order in Martinique. In the eyes of those who have held the balance of power since the genesis of this island society, Martinicans are all black, and therefore fit to be colonized. Positioning oneself and one’s co-citizens at various points along a colour spectrum is a distraction and does nothing to alter that fact. The eye-catchingly uniform blackness of the *nèg gwo siwo* renders this truth visible in a context where it is so often obscured.

Stepping outside the immediate setting of Martinique, the *nèg gwo siwo* is also a *mas* in which the most elementary ideas to do with race in general find expression. It is, essentially, a performance in which black people designate themselves as being a particular race in very knowing and self-conscious manner. The *gwo siwo* is very obviously a crude black body paint. It might be successful in masking a range of skin tones, but in no way does its use result in a realistic representation of a dark-skinned enslaved African. As we have seen in this chapter’s analysis of *1902*, the staging of a performance can be visually effective all whilst drawing attention to its own artifice. If the blackness of the *nèg gwo siwo* is clearly fake, then perhaps this is a means of demonstrating that race is a construct, that is, a means of designating certain human beings as Other in order to maintain control and extract gain from them. Here, the performers go so far as to literally construct blackness themselves. Preparing the *gwo siwo*, mixing it, dipping one’s hands in, smearing it on and helping others reach all the exposed parts of their skin is a physical, tactile, collective and fun endeavour. Crucially, it is black Martinicans themselves who undertake it. This generates the central paradox on which the *nèg gwo siwo* rests: through plastering on an unavoidable and exaggerated blackness of their own making, they are actually separating themselves from the racial designation imposed on them since the beginning of the colonial slave enterprise. It is an example of how a mask, as Aching suggests, can be ‘dynamically employed to (re)configure

and (dis)place competing categories of self-knowledge.’ (p. 16) The *nèg gwo siwo* place race where it can be observed objectively, as opposed to letting it be internalized as a biological or innate fact of their lives and destinies.

This act of ‘blacking up’ is thus a small-scale, performative version of how people of African descent have been racialized, or *made to be black*. This is an old and vast phenomenon that has ramifications well beyond Martinique and its inhabitants. Indeed, the writer James Baldwin argued that reckoning with the feat of racialization not only implicates black America, but the future of the American nation more broadly:

It is entirely up to the American people whether or not they are going to face and deal with and embrace this stranger whom they maligned so long. What white people have to do is try to find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a n-word in the first place. Because I am not a n-word, I am a man. But if you think I’m a n-word, it means you need him. [...] If I am not the n-word here, and you the white people invented him, then you’ve got to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that, whether or not it’s able to ask [itself] that question.²⁶⁴

The same could be said of any European colonial power. The *nèg gwo siwo* may not address metropolitan French people in the same way that Baldwin makes his direct appeal to white America, but they do issue a challenge to all those with a stake in the French nation, including those who lived under its neo-colonial auspices. This *mas* represents the invention of race itself, a creation as artificial and absurd as dousing oneself in charcoal and molasses, but one with devastating and long-lasting consequences. Black Martinicans are undoubtedly on the sharp end of them, but this is a phenomenon that implicates the whole of modern France and its citizens, regardless of whether or not they see race as something that affects them. This is because identifying and portraying race as an invention is not the end of the discussion, or the conclusion to the problem. Rather, it is a starting point that opens up a host of other questions similar to those asked by Baldwin: why did the French need to do this? What purpose does it continue to serve? What does this say about the nation-state that colonial subjects bought into fully and definitively in 1946? How can black Martinicans thrive within it when it does not recognize the consequences of what it created? What kind of future can they have, collectively, when this racial designation is the reason they exist together in the first place? What kind of nation can be built from such a rotten foundation?

The *nèg gwo siwo* are chaotic agents provocateurs in the spirit of carnival, not fully developed political theses. They do not offer answers, preferring to agitate, annoy, and upset

²⁶⁴ ‘The Negro and the American Promise’, *Perspectives*, WGBH Educational Foundation, 24 June 1963.

people's mentalities and sensibilities. As such, they might well be described as 'agents of the anti-nation', embodying the contradictions of the concept explored throughout this thesis. In spite of the politics of Martinican cultural specificity that would recuperate them, the *nèg gwo siwo* were not wholly intended as a clear and confident emblem of a black Caribbean nation, and ought not to be interpreted in so simplistic a manner. For a start, as we have seen, they occupy a murky territory between memory and stereotype: they flaunt the racial thought, the clichés and the caricature that keep Martinicans black and inferior, in their own eyes as well as in those who originally labelled them in this way. This is, in aesthetic terms, quite a basic, sparse *mas* that could easily be mistaken for a show of anti-black mockery. Moreover, Martinique was an anti-nation that, while it sought to excavate and champion its black history and culture, skirted around blackness as a political position.

At the same time, it appears that the *nèg gwo siwo* are engaging in a type of nation-building endeavour, although not one that the PPM or any of the local political establishment would recognize. Aching reads Caribbean blackface *mas* (and, more precisely, their 'exaggeration, overdetermination and hyperreal performances' (p. 26)) as a low-key counteroffensive, or a means of contesting dominant colonial metropolitan regimes by 'claim[ing] public space for blacks both as part of contemporary occidental reality and a historical fact of modernity.' (p. 25-6) This is an example of what he calls lower-frequency politics 'that do not always aim to achieve social upheaval but seek to gain and maintain visible representation within the region's democracies.' (p. 21) This concept is particularly apt for describing the kind of political agency that carnival *mas* can have in the neo-colonial arrangement that characterizes Martinique. These performers are creating something together, outside the institutions of the French nation-state, that reveals multiple layers of their experience as black people surviving on this island. Moreover, the *nèg gwo siwo* take race itself, that structuring principle ordering so many societies on both sides of the Atlantic, out of the Martinican subconscious and into a barrel, thus objectifying and critiquing it.

This *mas* remembers the many modes of race and racism that have existed on this island. These include the graspable reference points about which Martinicans were becoming more and more knowledgeable. Slavery, exploitative agricultural and industrial labour, the unfreedom of the *marrons*: the *nèg gwo siwo* condense all of this social memory into the body of the performer and the arresting visual and kinetic impression it creates. Martinicans can look at this *mas* and recognize the historical human foundations of their nation. At the same time, it also represents something hitherto unknown and unarticulated. In addition to

showing spectators the emblems of Martinican history, this *mas* revealed the colonial and racial neurosis that structured it, that is, the fear of blackness.

6.3 - Memory, delirium and the anti-nation

With their giant telephones, motiveless ocean voyages, semi-human leaf-creatures and bodies so black they defy credulity, each of the performances explored in this chapter and the one preceding it presents a reality that is recognizable yet twisted and distorted, to the point that they almost look and feel like a fever dream. Indeed, this cross-section of Martinican culture seems to thrive on the surreal, each example of delirium operating to different effect according to the aims of the performance, as we have seen. They are, after all, works of art made by creators with their own priorities and specific points that they wanted to communicate.

At the same time, they all worked within the ambient neo-nationalism of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which many Martinicans, especially those who supported the PPM, sought to frame themselves as a civilization with a unique story. This ran from the African ancestors, to the suffering they endured under slavery and colonialism, to their liberation on both fronts (the latter having been secured for them by Aimé Césaire) and ultimately a Martinican nation under construction, confident in its cultural distinctiveness (if lacking political independence). The performances explored in this chapter all engage with this on some level, representing foundational episodes and personalities, normally in terms of how they embody the resilience and resistance of the black population.

Nevertheless, they also draw attention to the deficiencies in that nation-building project and the historical narratives that support it. What kind of nation is this, after all, if it does not acknowledge and address the racial trauma that has long outlasted the abolition of slavery and cannot be consigned to that historical stage? What is the value of this collective endeavour if it can bring the latest consumer goods to individual Martinicans, but has thus far failed to provide an equitable and sustainable alternative to the plantation economy that is supposedly concluded? The tangle of memory being staged, either in any of the individual case studies or when considered together as some kind of contemporary trend, fails to coalesce into the unidirectional vision of the island's history necessary in order for Martinicans to conceive of their nation as postcolonial. The prefix 'post-', after all, implies a clean break between one kind of nation and another, and a fundamental evolution in how it functions as a political entity, an economy, a society and a culture. There is no such vision on

offer in any of the performances analysed in this chapter, where the various strands of memory in question do not lead anywhere so neat and edifying. The most traumatic ones, related to the unfreedom, brutalization and death of black people, actually seem to loop back on themselves, repeating endlessly and deliriously.

Indeed, memory and delirium are intertwined throughout these plays and *mas* in a way that I believe speaks to the concept of the anti-nation. It is partly an aesthetic phenomenon, seen in the various forms of delusion and disturbance that feature across these four performances. Some of these are quite positive and affirmative in tone. A case in point is the way in which, at least visually, *maryann lapofig* blurs the boundaries between human and plant, resulting in quite a surreal presence. By privileging certain materials and techniques, it continues the cultural memory of African festival theatre and, specifically, the use of the body as a vector of social meaning. The delirious elements to the other three performances, however, are more emotionally challenging. The exaggerated hyper-blackness of the *nèg gwo siwo* plays not only on the memory of slavery, but on the invention of race itself, that historical fact that has organized Martinican society since its inception. When the police officers of 1902 push the fleeing citizens of Saint-Pierre into the audience watching it in 1982, they suddenly disrupt the normal categories of past and present, and play and reality, and embody a racist social order that is in no way confined to the moment of the eruption. Some of the imagery employed is pointedly evocative of mental illness, such as the straitjacket in the opening scene of *La Nef*, which manages to articulate a history of racial violence that cannot be adequately verbalized. Some of the characters in this play also channel the voices of others, a kind of possession that seems to be the only means they have of engaging with a precolonial time that is all but inaccessible. Perhaps the most salient neurosis of all, however, is their loss of memory. The lasting impression left by this disjointed play is of the huge voids left between the fragments that can be recollected, a vacuum that bears witness to the memory of kinfolk, community and culture that Martinicans will never retrieve.

Beyond the aesthetic developed across these performances, delirium also has political potential. Indeed, the distorted reality and psychic disturbances seen here speak to Glissant's thought on the state of Martinique, and in particular to his theorization of delirium. He begins from the principle that, in the context of Martinique, it is necessary to recalibrate what is commonly understood by 'abnormality'. The most extreme and successful example of colonization in modern history, he argues, has resulted in barely more than a collection of dominated individuals, who share neither an appropriate mode of relation to the world or

each other, nor any capacity for critical reflection on this.²⁶⁵ Seen in this light, it becomes clear that what we understand to be the norms of this social situation are in fact themselves thoroughly abnormal. Individuals who deviate from them cannot, therefore, be considered ‘abnormal’ in any meaningful sense of the word²⁶⁶, as the distinctions between sanity and madness are always already blurred in this context. In her reading of Glissant’s psychoanalytic evaluation of an alienated Martinique, Celia Britton notes that he appears to view psychosis (another apt way of framing the various departures from reality that occur throughout these performances) in an almost positive light, at least in comparison to the neurotic way in which Martinicans typically relate to their own historical memory. Neurosis involves the repression of ideas, impulses or emotions, whereas in the case of psychosis nothing is repressed. Britton argues that this is what draws Glissant to the latter, in that ‘madness is seen by him as a form of *escape* from repression, and hence even as a kind of choice.’²⁶⁷ Breaking off contact with reality represents an alternative (albeit extreme) mode of engagement with a situation that does not allow Martinicans a shared knowledge of themselves as a collectivity with a history. While it may seem nihilistic, refusing the alienation that passes for normal, everyday reality in Martinique is a political position in itself.

The term anti-nation aims to account for the profound contradictions that mark Martinique, framing it as a place and a people that promises so much in terms of cultural wealth, anti-colonial figureheads and histories of black survival and resistance, yet delivers so little by way of viable economies, transformative political projects and decolonial action. Delirium can constitute a welcome intervention in these circumstances. It does not edify Martinique, at least not in any conventional sense, in that it cannot offer coherent narratives or unambiguously heroic icons. Instead, its memory of racial trauma loops around manically, refusing to head towards any destination or conclusion, or be recuperated into any one individual or group agenda. The resulting vision of Martinique is certainly grimmer for it, but also more honest.

²⁶⁵ Glissant, p. 627.

²⁶⁶ Glissant, p. 632.

²⁶⁷ Celia Britton, ‘History as Neurosis: Psychoanalysis and Marxism in Édouard Glissant’s *Le Discours antillais*’, *French Cultural Studies*, 31.3 (2020), 199–209 (p. 202).

Conclusion

This thesis has essentially been an attempt to understand modern Martinique, using the notion of anti-nation as a means of conceptualizing the political, economic and psychological impasse in which the island found itself in the decades following departmentalization. Anti-nation, as we have seen, is much more than a thought experiment: it is a predicament to be lived in and negotiated. As such, this thesis has engaged with a place and a population that only came into being as a result of a European imperial endeavour (now supposedly defunct as of 1946), and which must now try to find a way to exist that is at least tolerable, and ideally alleviates some of the material poverty and psychological abasement baked into it over centuries. The political issue of local elected representatives trying to carve out a better niche for Martinique within what the French nation-state will allow (and without spooking an economically fragile electorate terrified by the prospect of independence) certainly mattered during the period with which this thesis is concerned, that is, the years shaped by Mitterrand, the PPM and the Maastricht treaty. Over the course of the project and its engagement with a selection of contemporary performances, however, this kind of political manoeuvring fades into the background as the problem of the Martinican anti-nation multiplies into a host of more everyday human concerns, including how to speak and sing, as well as how to remember.

Performance makes a particularly appropriate and compelling arena in which to probe the culture of the anti-nation. Live performance is a phenomenon that offers something singular, regardless of the exact form it may take. While all modes of art can potentially allow people to see themselves as a community with a shared history and destiny, events which are live and public literally bring those concerned within touching distance of each other. A nation, after all, is as much about human bodies as it is about ideas, and a performance brings the physicality of the former and the virtuality of the latter into the same space and moment, where they might coalesce, clash or fail to connect entirely.

Part One of this thesis presented these bodies and ideas. In its examination of the interactions between them, Chapter One highlighted an important paradox that cuts to the heart of the anti-nation, namely, the racialisation of the Martinican population and the racelessness of prevailing local interpretations of the island's identity. The fact that the African-descended people of Martinique have been racially designated as black has placed them in a uniquely compromised margin of Frenchness, in which they have had to negotiate forms of freedom and citizenship specific to black colonial subjects. And yet, the successive

generations of Martinicans who have attempted to articulate their community have sidelined the facticity of race from their thought. This is the island that helped give rise to one of the twentieth century's seminal black thinkers in the form of Aimé Césaire, but whose inhabitants only partially and equivocally engaged with his vision of the political, aesthetic and spiritual potential of blackness. Instead, the discourse promoted during the 1980s by the architects of Créolité, the governing Parti Progressiste Martiniquais and indeed Aimé Césaire himself chose to emphasize *métissage* (that is, the blending of ethnicities and cultures) as the primary condition of being Martinican. The result is a black anti-nation that, ironically, does not usually see itself as black. Chapter Two turned its attention to the stage and the street, positing a multi-sited arena where an anti-nation is constructed, one as vital and vibrant as it is circumscribed. Here, carnival's public, noisy affirmations of black working-class culture have evolved in parallel to the many Martinicans increasingly determined to craft a theatre in their own image. During the 1980s, both were co-opted into the project of regional development being elaborated both in Paris and in Fort-de-France. Development is a concept that suggests progress, and the new cultural infrastructure provided by the SERMAC, for example, undoubtedly brought concrete benefits to Martinique. Nevertheless, this was also a period in which those generating the island's performance culture were put under pressure to conform to a development agenda that was not set by them, be it through attracting and pleasing European and American tourists, or creating a theatrical offering with a suitably classical repertoire and universal appeal.

Chapters Three and Four puzzled out the problem of language in this context, as it manifested itself across the carnival and theatre activity of the time. This was a decade in which Martinique was increasingly coming to see itself as a Creole-speaking nation, albeit with trepidation in many quarters. After all, this language's old associations with disadvantage, ignorance and blackness were not going to be definitively severed within the space of ten years. Moreover, there was no consensus over what kind of Creole should be written, spoken and promoted as standard, as strongly held beliefs regarding its appropriate and rightful degree of autonomy from French overlapped with equally trenchant stances on the island's political status. The writers and performers examined in this chapter all engage with this complex backdrop. There are some declared political positions with regard to defending and developing the Creole language, notably from Georges Mauvois and Kassav'. However, these prove to be compromised stances, in which the most basilectal words and structures are foregone in favour of more acrolectal language crafted to appeal to a range of mouths and ears. It is vital to remember that Martinican people do not only communicate

with each other, and they do not have the privilege of being understood in their native language anywhere outside of their island. Their cultural products (think of Ina Césaire's *Mémoires d'isles*, as well as the zouk music of Djo Dézormo and Kassav') must migrate and adapt en masse, just like the island's human population has had to do for decades. This reality has informed the attitude to language being fostered through this slice of performance culture, one which champions Creole whilst also refusing to conflate it with Martinican-ness in a logic of authenticity or purity. In turn, this approach points towards an understanding of Martinique as an anti-nation, partly in its complicated, equivocal defence of a 'national language', but also in its will to reconfigure the relationship between nation and language entirely, positing multilingualism as a first principle from which to work in an imagined future where, rather than being hierarchized and repressed, languages exist in relation to each other.

Chapters Five and Six saw the thesis turn towards the theme of memory, a complex knot whose various strands these Martinican performers attempted to separate and explore. This was a moment in which self-perceptions of Martinique as a black, African-diasporic community were becoming more normalized. Nevertheless, what comes out surprisingly clearly across the four case studies featured in this chapter was that the creative teams behind these performances did not see racial consciousness as an end goal that can be definitively reached, achieved or attained, but as only the starting point for a host of other interrogative processes. Their work does not posit blackness as the cornerstone of their emergent nation's ultimate, fixed and stable identity. Neither are they interested in any logic of racial hegemony that would exclude Martinicans belonging to minority (in this case, non-black) ethnic groups. While it did act as a type of key allowing Martinicans to know where they came from and decode their current situation, it also proved to be much more slippery than that, generating as many new problems as answers. *Maryann lapofig* and *La Nef* can be interpreted as exercises in Martinicans remembering Africa, and in doing so negotiating a minefield of ignorance, stereotype and nostalgia. The former certainly refers to Africa as an aesthetic and technical source, but it does not treat cultural memory as something to be looked back on and "known". The makers of *maryann lapofig* view African festival theatre as both heritage and creative catalyst, one that incites bodies to publicly communicate meaning in a way that Western traditions tend to avoid. *La Nef* also manages to separate the concept of memory from that of self-knowledge, where normally the two are tightly intertwined. After all, the performance is essentially one where six characters sit on a boat with half-recalled fragments, and silences. These do not solidify into anything clear, let alone edifying. Instead, the play as

a whole dwells on the inevitable lapses and absences of memory in a nation built during and after transatlantic slavery. This is a context in which a play that circles around nothing (or, more precisely, around what can no longer be known) without providing any positive vision of how Martinicans could see themselves collectively is in fact deeply appropriate, given that they lived on the island for centuries on the premise that they had no history or identity outside of the slave system, and no stake in its future. It forms part of the conundrum at the heart of the concept of Martinique as an anti-nation: there is a tension between the desire to define one's community as distinct on one's own terms, and a history of being peripheral to the story of that nation. The problem cannot ever be truly resolved, which is perhaps one of the points which *La Nef* seeks to make. The play also intersects with *1902* and the *nèg gwo siwo* in their articulation of issues relating to race. Again, the picture is complicated. It is one thing to identify as black on a cultural level, which all these performances (along with a lot of the general cultural offering in Martinique at the time) certainly encourage. However, it is another thing to publicly address and interrogate memories of racial trauma. This endeavour does not provide a stable identity which can be traced from its instigation in the past to its healing in the present. Rather, it is a form of delirium that simply continues without end, breaking from reality in a way that is as terrifying as it is political in its rejection of the absurd scenario that passes for 'normality' in Martinique.

What cuts across both these themes is the flight from the conventional certainties of nationalism, that is, from simplistic (yet often potent) commitment to ideas such as the incarnation of a nation in 'its' language, or the designation of 'black' or 'African' as end points in a unified and definitive quest for the identity of Martinique. In eschewing these notions, the performances explored in this thesis map out a terrain that is murkier, and more uneven and inconsistent. It is at times more ambitious and radical, imagining a Martinique that does not privilege any one language at all, and which makes a point of remembering race deliriously. At others, it is clearly still shaped by the insecurities of the anti-nation in which it is generated. More often than not, the most immovable beliefs are not so much those that are explicitly stated and circulated. After all, Martinican neo-nationalism was being successfully mainstreamed by the PPM (and sanctioned by the Mitterrand administration and its *droit à la différence*) to the extent that there was no substantial counter-current to it in public life. More entrenched and insidious is the logic beneath the surface of things, implicit and unarticulated, that undermines Martinican efforts to live and create on their own terms. This infiltrates all areas of public and private life, but it has been thrown into stark relief at several points during this thesis' exploration of performance on the island.

As far as playwriting is concerned, there seems to be an underlying anxiety that focussing too much on Martinique and its issues runs the risk of making its theatre culture too parochial. This results in an ambient preoccupation with being adequately ‘universal’. We have seen how the organizers of the Fort-de-France festival felt they needed to balance the dosage of Martinican acts with an external offering, and how institutions such as the CMAC and the Théâtre de la Soif Nouvelle chose not to see the production of locally-authored plays about Martinique as a priority. With regard to the plays explored in this thesis, some of them embody a certain amount of pushback against the expectation of universality, and of being understood and appreciated everywhere, by everyone. Several plays have made a point of dealing directly with forms of coloniality that were very specific to Martinique, such as the complex social web of gender, class, race and language staged in *Mémoires d’isles*, the neuroses surrounding the Creole language, or the racism that exacerbated the effects of the eruption of Mont Pelée. Moreover, *Misyé Molina* and *1902* in particular were created primarily for a Martinican audience, without a great deal of concern for how they would be received by those from elsewhere.

The extent to which *La Nef* ought to be read as ‘a Martinican play, about Martinique’ is less obvious. In Chapter Five, I interpreted it as a performance that approaches the hitherto buried racial trauma that forms the roots of modern Martinique as a community. Michèle Césaire’s comments on her play, however, indicate that this may not have been her intention. For one thing, she suggests that in focussing on the trope of the marooned crew on the drifting boat, she was not only thinking of the foundational transatlantic slave ship, but of the more recent phenomena of the Vietnamese boat people, and of Haitian refugees fleeing the Duvalier regime by sea to Florida.²⁶⁸ For Michèle Césaire, and the local journalists who reviewed the play, *La Nef* was as much about the exclusion and marginalization that erode any society as it was about Martinique in particular.²⁶⁹ There is thus a discrepancy between what I consider to be the central subject matter of the play, and the author’s impulse to look elsewhere, and to talk more generally. As I see it, however, this says less about the performance itself than it does about the pressure Martinican artists were under (seemingly imposed by themselves) to frame their work as universal. It is the same compulsion that made the island’s cultural administrators prioritize international “balance” in their programming, even at a time when locally-authored productions would have benefitted greatly from more of

²⁶⁸ Adams Kwateh, ‘Michèle Césaire conduit la nef’, *France-Antilles Martinique*, 26 June 1993, p. 9.

²⁶⁹ ‘*La Nef* prend le large’, *France-Antilles Martinique*, 30 June 1993, p. 7.

their support. Universality was seemingly a value that those involved in the theatre culture of Martinique were almost obliged to aspire to (or at least talk about) in order for their work to be considered acceptable and valid. It is also noteworthy that the same was not expected of carnival practitioners, presumably because their creative practice was not considered an art form, and therefore not judged on the same criteria. This is symptomatic of what Richard D.E. Burton calls ‘chronic extroversion’, whereby Martinicans appear to be able to see everything except themselves and their own particular situation.²⁷⁰ Chapter One explored the historical foundations of this phenomenon, which were laid by the *gens de couleur libre* of the Revolutionary period. This group assimilated themselves into the values and meanings of that Revolution, unable to develop their own. In doing so, they set a precedent for how Martinicans struggle to articulate the particularities of their predicament. The ‘endemic other-directedness of Martinican mental and intellectual life’²⁷¹ runs deep, and has not gone away.

What this thesis has demonstrated is that Martinicans understood many of those issues built into their nation that almost kill it off before it can have any kind of life. They were increasingly conscious of being alienated from a language that has been systematically racialized and subjugated, and of their inability to reckon with historical trauma. Moreover, through their carnival and theatre performance, they offer models of community that suggest challenging, dynamic ways of speaking and remembering together. They have sketched the outlines of a Creole nation that is open to all languages, as well as a black nation that, in its delirium, refuses to rationalize its own erasure. At the same time, there are other problems that are more subtle, but all the more damaging in how they persist undetected. The ‘chronic extroversion’ which permeates cultural life in Martinique appears (at least, during this historical period) to fall outside the critical purview of its actors. Anti-nation as a state of mind, it would seem, is hard to shift.

When I introduced the concept of the anti-nation into this thesis, I did so on the understanding that it was never going to draw to a satisfying conclusion. How can there be one in an attempt to build a nation “after” a colonialism that never actually ended? It does not so much result in anything as enter into a cycle of self-perpetuating frustration: the more political, administrative, economic and psychological obstacles that emerge to prevent the people of Martinique from exercising autonomy in a way that benefits them, the more Martinicans multiply their expressions of defiance, separatism, contestation or nationalism,

²⁷⁰ Burton, ‘Between the Particular and the Universal’ in *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean / Vol.2, Unity in Variety: The Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean*, ed. by Hennessy, p. 187.

²⁷¹ Burton, ‘Between the Particular and the Universal’, p. 187.

thus entering into ever harder confrontation with the French authorities, which only leads to further deadlocks, and so it continues.

Thus concludes a thesis that is devoted to the strangeness of Martinique, one of France's first colonies, and amongst its last. It is also, as Glissant suggests, the 'perfect colony', the place where future tourists will visit to see where the imperial endeavours of yore were most fully realized.²⁷² It is a laboratory where alienation is produced, purified and propagated, where Fanon first saw black skin wearing white masks. Nevertheless, this thesis' interrogation of the anti-nation also resonates well beyond the confines of the island of Martinique, especially with regard to the mixed fortunes of the wider Caribbean, whose independent states, as argued in Chapter One, cannot honestly be viewed as examples of "successful" decolonization.

This thesis has explored why and how Martinicans pursued the idea of the nation in a context where nationalism (in some form) was attractive, even urgent, for them, considering both their island's history and its immediate political situation. For many of the island's thinkers, politicians, activists and creatives, nation-building (or at least nation-thinking) was their strategy of choice in unpicking the legacies of racialized empire (or at least finding ways to live with them tolerably). Where that pursuit took them is less clear. Indeed, this thesis has offered a critique of the "cultural nation" as constructed by the PPM, and disturbed the assumed link (both conceptual and practical) between nation and liberation. More fundamentally, it has cast Martinique as a testing ground for the nation as an idea in general and, more precisely, for its limits as a means of grouping humans together (and keeping them apart). If the people and performances studied here fail to coalesce into a vision of a unified community, with a clear consensus on its geographical boundaries and historical origin, the contours of its popular culture and its priorities for the present and the future, then perhaps Martinique reveals the inadequacy of the nation as a supposedly coherent category.

The critical purchase afforded by the nation as a concept thus becomes less and less convincing, even as it remains one of the most universally accepted values in political life, and continues to command profound emotional legitimacy worldwide. I see this not so much as a dead end, though, as an invitation into other, related lines of inquiry. A shift in focus could give rise to a different thesis, one which might take the idea and practice of freedom (instead of nation) in Martinique as its object of analysis: how should we understand freedom, or, more specifically, how can we do so from a black Atlantic perspective? Recent

²⁷² Glissant, p. 13.

philosophical work has disturbed classic liberal stances by locating our understanding of it in the Caribbean phenomenon of *marronage*, a theory that I engaged with fleetingly in Chapter Six. In this liminal space of transition from slavery and towards freedom, the quality of freedom is that of perpetual flight.²⁷³ As such, it opens up new avenues for thinking through the questions of agency and sovereignty that have been at the heart of this thesis. Rather than attempting to ascertain what kind of nation Martinique is, or is not, this could offer a better way of illuminating its political, economic, social and cultural condition. It is perhaps less of an anti-nation, then, and more of a maroon predicament.

²⁷³ Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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