

The Interior Empires

Olivier Marbœuf

2020 was to be the year of Africa in France. As it was an election year, this immense national manifestation guaranteed us a few cacophonies and novel exercises in linguistic contortion to separate the good savages from the bad and voters from terrorists. And as we no longer know whether “colonization was a crime against humanity,” or maybe not really, since “there were some elements of civilization,”¹ the year of Africa, which should be the year of the Olympic Games in Japan, would surely register damage control on the list of new Olympic activities. We could instead have spoken of the year of *a certain Africa in France*, as a way of admitting that something has escaped from that particular Africa, an Africa that gleams as much as you could wish, an Africa with no weak signals,² no shadow, no trace on its forehead, projecting a multitude of splendid strong signals, an exuberant Africa, beside itself even, like merchandise bursting out of its brightly coloured packaging. Oh, we see this Africa, it’s all we can see, with its magnificent smile and its well-oiled body, as if it were on the block at a great slave market! An Africa with no secrets and no anger, like an always-ripe fruit, an inexhaustible mineral, product of the capitalism of yesteryear and now. Let’s dig our pickaxes into its chest and groin and forage for survival rations! We’ll open wide for it all the doors of Empire, as if it were the most magnificent of petroleum deposits. And we’ll burn the African witches to music from the same celebration,³ as well as the blue-lipped migrants on the beaches of Europe, and we’ll unveil the women as we did in France’s great period of civilization; we’ll even recover the bodies of the un-buried dead Algerians from the steel-grey embrace of the Seine. Wake up! Wake up, you who sleep with your face to the ground, you who can no longer breathe from the weight of carrying the forces of order on your ribs and your backs. Republic of cleaning women, assembly of night watchmen, dish washers from across the whole continent! Stand up! Africa kneaded by the silky soft hands of the West presents itself, accompanied by a deafening drum roll. Beautiful and exhausted.⁴

To prevent this Africa from malingering in the streets, institutionally approved streets have been made for it;⁵ to prevent it from closing itself off in the obscurity of religion, it was covered with a single sign in the form of a swoosh. As the plantation master sits down with his slaves to listen to the Creole storyteller—because no performance escapes the delight of his senses—so the elected politicians of the Republic now come and try out a few electoral break dance moves at the centre of dance battles. Who would have thought that one day people would actually applaud them? The year of *a certain Africa in France* sets up its rituals and polishes its landscapes, prepares its new, pacified geography.

Will we be able to pull ourselves out of our role as wallpaper and primitive decoration for the *banlieues*, skilfully domesticated but still perfectly authentic? Will we know how to create something that is not made *through* us, with our bodies as alibis and camouflage, as forms of matter and masks for the vanity of the new masters? Where could we go to remove ourselves from all these amicably cannibalistic gazes that dissolve spaces and distances, to escape from these accolades that absorb everything, these forced familiarities?⁶ On the fringes of the festivities currently being organized, the voice of the Creole storyteller can be heard: does a dance of one's own still exist? Who can still spin on their head and destroy space and time, who still knows how to create those invisible gestures?

The Body of the Masters seeks a fable—it demands one, like a survival blanket on the surface of a filthy world, made of a shiny matter in whose reflections it can look at itself, posing today as an armchair militant in the way it once played the sacrificial victim.⁷ No place is allowed to remain vacant, not even the place of victims. Declaring its fragility and perfectly portraying an ethics of privilege,⁸ the Body of the old continent gathers together a community—a community of which it is the heart and the accumulating machine. A family. What festival doesn't have its Black programme, what museum doesn't have its ritual, what theatre doesn't improvise to create a new headquarters for Soft & Black Panthers, what editor doesn't throw him/herself onto whatever resembles a dark epidermis that speaks?⁹ Amid the skilful manoeuvres of cognitive capitalism, we could ask with whom, where, and when we should speak and for whom we produce value. Black matter shines in the hands of experts. It is in this way that the “return” of Africa and the return *in* Africa are organised as the “discovery” of the “*banlieue* without clichés,” that young continent eager to find its great storyteller. Once this pressing desire has been satisfied and the black screen has been installed, old habits can be taken up again and the court can calmly re-compose itself.¹⁰ The old masters elect a new hero who resembles them. The handsome prince lifts polystyrene boulders, clears paths, moves buildings made of foam rubber, tattoos himself with scars, crosses oceans, destroys the frontiers of yesterday with his delicate hands and proclaims: liberty, liberty, liberty! The elders at the back of the parade are clearly moved. “We're saved,” they cry with a single but authentic tear. And see here, their champion delivers to them, all rolled up in his fable, the much-hated young savages from the Seine-Saint-Denis department. “Just like us, they're capable of having taste and free will.” They're respectable now. And the press ecstatically reports on this fabulous capture. All is well. We are reconciled. The mask of the citizen has been glued back on with drool. This is worth a few recompenses.

The Creole storyteller is not far away. He hangs back at the edge of the crowd. He spits at the passing parade. No one can tell if he is sneering or wincing. He always makes a few detours. He wanders at the edge of things, in the dark peripheries of the theatrical stagings of the Empire, gathering and repeating colonial motifs. He knows his rituals, polishes the bones of his tongue and delicately reconstructs the scene of the crime. Since he has never had time or a place, he accumulates this indigestible archive

within himself, absorbing the toxic matter, collections of repetitions, duplicates of the spirit of the Republic. His muscles are full of cries. He can feel the crushed bones in the paste that clogs his intestines. The banquet is disgusting but he eats with the smile of a wedding guest because he understands that merely being here is an act of defiance, an exercise in resistance to contact with a poisonous climate,¹¹ and that it is the condition of a particular knowledge, a dangerous detour that must be taken as a way of creating something that will be there for him at a later date.

He's part of the game, he's not innocent, he's not looking for any kind of respectability because his life depends on the smiling lie he offers to his masters; his life depends on forbidden, lawless things; his life depends on frequenting the scene and the knowledge of its swamps, where he reconstructs the living with the remains of the dead. His life depends on a *negative knowledge*,¹² on the art of pilferage of someone who builds a shelter over there with what has been removed here, brick by brick, branch by branch, a place of his own where he can begin to breathe. His presence is not softened by any comfort. People do not like to see him and they let him know it. He speaks too much, he speaks poorly. He has atrocious manners. Pamphlets are published in newspapers. He is a witch. He is hunted, he is sent away. But ceaselessly he returns to the fringes of the parade, in the gases of the great fable, at a reasonable distance, the distance respected by an undesirable guest who never actually enters in but traces an oblique route. He comes here to confuse the story, to make it stutter; he upsets the ceremony. He is a weak signal; he is hardly anything. He is discouraged and angry. His word is his home. A home that moves. He accumulates words until they rise up into an accretion, a thought, a world never seen before, a story never yet told.¹³

Someone cries out when they see him in the crowd, "Mackandal, malfetkè."¹⁴ Everyone stops laughing, some spit out their mouthfuls of Bordeaux wine. His mouth twisted a bit to the side, chin on his hand, his voice low, the storyteller begins his blarney, repeats the cracking of bones, the barking and public tribunals, fire and smoke, the billy clubs, the music of worms swarming in the wounded leg of a slave. The storyteller takes his time, reassembles within himself the parts of the vast and dispersed history of France. He enters the peripheries, there where the Empire is naked and life has little value.¹⁵ At first what he says can barely be heard with all the racket made by the new masters' ceremony. You must listen with an attentive ear if you wish to hear a few grunts, the sombre pitch of a voice. There. The paint on the stage sets can be scraped off with a fingernail, the marching band is out of tune, the parade disperses in the roar of the champagne flutes. The storyteller makes landscape talk inside him and he vomits it all out into a puddle which the assembly tries to read, in the pungent odours of hints of History.

A film radiates out from every pore of the storyteller's body, or perhaps it's a hallucination: in 1870 in the far-off province of Martinique, a usually calm place with a climate that favours a gentle lifestyle, a revolt erupts.¹⁶ In a few short days the southern

part of the island is afire, which leads to the massacre of the valiant citizen Codé, sacrificed for the French cause.¹⁷ A whole passel of Blacks attacked the honourable plantation owner and his valet, who presented his body as an obstacle. Without, however, saving the man who had been his master and had become a sort of father, that shadowy sort of familiarity that would be swept away by machete strokes, in the vapours of alcohol and the stench of magic. Indecipherable anger that would have been provoked, as legend has it, by an erroneous reading of the promises of the Third Republic. What people here wanted was the most complete equality, they wanted to be like Paris, where the Commune was soon to begin rumbling. Putting Whites, Blacks, Mulattoes, and other free men and women of colour on the same level, imagine that! This was the fantasy, at least, that many of them would carry to their graves, or to the darkest depths of the labour camps they were deported to. The other participants supposedly followed suit because of their taste for blood and alcohol, weak beings always ready to perform some sort of barbarity, animated as they were by their jealous nature. Codé's Black servant, Eugène Lubin, was given a medal for his actions. Such is the nature of the Republican ritual, which is two-sided. Ritual of execution and ritual of respectability, as a distancing of the risk of death.¹⁸ The storyteller adds in the book-keeping for this sombre episode: were there 300 participants here, 600 there? What we do know is that during the week of 22 September in the year 1870, as the Republic had just been proclaimed, groups of men and women deserted their work; pillaged, burned and ransacked dwellings; fomented a civil war; and soon, armed with machetes, pickaxes and bottles of home-made pepper water, faced off against the regular army, which eventually managed to contain them after several days of chaos. The insurgents were angry and wanted people to know it. Twenty-two years after the abolition of slavery in 1848, nothing seemed to have changed in Martinique. If the former slaves were now free, they essentially only enjoyed the freedom to work for land owners to avoid the risk of being trapped by the numerous laws concerning vagrancy.¹⁹ At this point in the tale the Creole storyteller lets out a strangled laugh and cites the latest scheme concocted by a colonial government that no longer wants to hear anything about racial privileges.

And yet the functioning of the laws in place more or less renewed a social organization that clearly contested the right of a large part of the population to own and cultivate land on their own account. Henceforth there would only be citizens, even if some of them would have to be protected from themselves and their unfortunate proclivity for laziness, drunkenness and fornication and, in effect, be forced once again to work for the former (slave)masters. Nothing remained of the insurgents' requests for justice and equality; for nothing could be asked for that wasn't already there, in the margins of the French Republic—except the explosive tale of a series of barbarous actions that would be addressed in a public trial in Fort-de-France (undertaken in seven parts, beginning on 17 March 1871), which rigorously winnowed out many of the participants. Not as a way of rendering justice, of course, but to organize a ritual. From the opening of the trial for the ninety-eight defendants, things were clear. Before being judged, they were already guilty. In court, the President frequently avoided his obligation

to maintain distance and impartiality. He crossed the line, even stomped on it with a seemingly frank enjoyment when he exclaimed, “Do you believe, you band of assassins, pillagers and arsonists, that you can come here and impose yourselves on us? Your denials will have no weight, your judges are already set on your guilt.”²⁰ The defendants would be asked for confessions and some of them would employ a ruse of speech, despite the risk of death.²¹

For the accused, justice was not lenient. The leaders were sentenced to death. The most virulent followers were sent to labour camps for perpetuity, an exile from which they could never return, as the trial had presented them as pestiferous beings and had contaminated members of their families. But perhaps beyond all the physical violence, said the storyteller, at this point pulling himself out of the puddle of vomit where he had been reading his ill-fated tale, we should turn our attention to a few symbolic forms of violence which are the inseparable siblings of this story, without which the state fable wouldn’t have such an implacable power. For everyone else in this affair, the crowd of poor sods “not responsible for their acts,” the verdict was amnesty, pure and simple. The large audience grouped around the storyteller suddenly freezes, with expressions of surprise on their faces. The storyteller continues. But the amnesty came with an important condition: they had to deny there had been any political scope to the occurrence and admit to error and misguidance, or perhaps even the influence and magical powers of the leaders who had led good honest people into fury and blood, through pure jealousy and a spirit of wickedness. This is the very essence of the ritual of respectability that always masks an execution. Any possibility of creating a political story that goes further than the idea of a random murderous act, or passionate blood crime, must be definitively eradicated. Shortly after the executions were performed in the public square, decoration ceremonies were prepared for those who, like Lubin, Codé’s valiant servant, had proved their fidelity and zeal towards their country during the recent troubling events. Now that was a sumptuous way to write the Republican history! Executions and grotesque heroes, that’s the trick! The insurgents thus die a second death. Physically, they are executed and their bodies dispersed. Symbolically, they lose all possibility of incarnating any form of heroism or taking hold of memories. They do not just disappear, they become subjects of shame.²²

Mesmerized by the storyteller’s tale, the audience does not realize that we have now moved on to another era, caught up as they are in the smooth flow of the storyteller’s fluid words. From one hundred and fifty years ago, here we are now a mere fifteen years before the year of *a certain Africa in France*. In 2005, to be precise. The *banlieues* are in disorder, they’re not wearing their ceremonial costumes. When we look closer, they clearly have something in common with those far-off territories, those peripheries of Empire, where the Republic had to relentlessly extract the savage part from the lazy locals. We find the same actors, the same words and the same rituals of execution and respectability.²³

The storyteller is running now, running in a petroleum black sweatsuit. And the crowd follows him, panting. He runs in defiance of the laws of gravity and vagrancy that dictate that you can't congregate in a group and remain immobile in the streets.²⁴ And so you must always run to avoid being stopped by the police, in a street where you have no reason to be alive, to be alive with that body of yours, a body that knows, irrevocably, and on the surface of which the Republic has exhausted all of its rituals of shame and written out all of its laws. Down to the law of death, of which this body is the surviving storyteller, who recounts events, breathing precariously, under the weight of the police. The storyteller runs and sweats. This is his way of creating a place, his way of telling stories, communicating with nature, matter against matter, of both welcoming the environment and affecting it. He ran as a maroon, he runs now as an inhabitant of the *banlieue*, with the same risk of death and the same complicity with the worlds of the living and with his environs. Concrete is his new nature, he twists it with his speed and understands that perhaps somewhere a dance for him exists, a dance that moves so fast it can't be seen, can't be caught and made into a spectacular performance, to celebrate a domesticated and respectable Africa. A dance twisting into his interior. With no face. In his bitter transactions, the storyteller sweats, trembles, and pisses out the ecosystems of yesterday and today. This is his way of revealing the persistent presence of Empire, always chasing at his heels.

In this same year of 2005, on 27 October, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré will die in Clichy-sous-Bois, in the Seine-Saint-Denis Department. They will die because they were running.²⁵ Because they were running to escape the police, and running to escape the police with the kinds of bodies they had is something that is inscribed in an unspoken history of French citizenship. A history that we now know about, from these particular bodies. And again there will be insurrections, which, when they take place in the *banlieues*, will be called riots—unnameable forms of barbarity, irruptions of uncontrolled emotions. But these enraged emanations will not be able to attain, even in the eyes of the politicians on the Left, the status of a political form, however minor.²⁶

The storyteller has come down from the hills. He has tasted the acid surface of the banana leaves, his sweat is flavoured with pesticide. He has a new memory of the laws of death. He crept into the labyrinth in the sugar cane fields, rubbed his skin with the living liquids of the ocean. And now he is back, with his form-of-death, his face scarlet, and he runs. Full of this bitter knowledge, he runs along the chalk cliffs of France, along the national highways, through the industrial zones and the deserted villages, he runs through all the landscapes of splendour of France, through breathtaking traffic jams on the highways, suburban housing developments and concrete monuments; he runs accompanied by the stench of Codé's cadaver, Codé, whom everyone has been forced to mourn, like a white-skinned Christ, like a singular body amid the dark and shameful mass, like a statue made of national flesh. He thinks, "I am Codé" [*« je suis Codé »*]. He gathers all of these stories, from one border of France to the other. They comprise the tale of the bad Black and he knows he could be killed if he tells it here. He

could miss out on the recompenses and the ceremonies, in honour of the return of Africa to the centre of operations. He could miss the festivities, come to the same end as those evil spirits who were sacrificed at the moment of the great ritual.

He knows that Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré are not national bodies, he can feel it. No one is going to cry for them as if they had been children of the nation, or join a march to say “never again.” No one will dare say, “I am Zyed, I am Bouna” [« *Je suis Zyed; Je suis Bouna* »]. They are the children of the others, you others, from the poor *banlieues*, dark savages, offspring of the scum. There have been too many of them since the beginning and fatality weighs them down, as does their proximity to death, as a *negative form of citizenship*, a shadow. But the storyteller knows that these dead will be watched over by those who understand that within their dead bodies lies a history that can never be told, a great history of shameful insurrections. In Clichy-sous-Bois and soon all over France, the *banlieues* will celebrate these ceremonies with the most direct sort of political forms, with semantic shortcuts that remind us of what, in the Martinique insurrection or elsewhere, was a way of saying that we didn’t want to live like this, or die like this. And the names will be cherished, so that they continue to exist outside the mass of the dead, so that they are not swallowed up in the flow of random events, as if they had led lives with no value. There will be Zyed, Bouna, Kader, Adama, Zineb, and many more.²⁷ They will comprise a historic and dispersed motif, which the storytellers will slowly reassemble, piece by piece, at the heart of rituals and wakes. And this ghost Africa will continue to tell its story, through bodies, through marches, by running, with breath, with songs, and with football, as a story that restores a face to Africa within France, the Africa of France, Africa in France.²⁸

Text previously published in French in *Revue Tumultes*, no. 54, “Voix/voies entravées – Percées émancipatrices” (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2020), pp. 105–18.

Translated from the French by Liz Young.

Review by Shela Sheikh.

NOTES

Unless otherwise stated, translations from French are by Liz Young.

¹ In the spring of 2017, Emmanuel Macron, campaigning for the presidential election, declared during a television interview in Algeria for the *Echorouk News*: “[Colonization] is a crime. It is a crime against humanity. It is truly barbarous and it is a part of our past that we must look at directly, presenting our apologies to those toward whom we committed those acts.” These were comments that followed others by Macron that had been presented in the news magazine *Le Point* in November 2016: “Yes, there was torture in Algeria, but there was also the emergence of a state, wealth, middle classes, that is the reality of colonization. There were elements of civilization and elements of barbarity.” Other declarations soon followed, tailored to the famous rule of “at the same time” (« *au même temps* »), so dear to the President, when he presented his apologies “to those French citizens who loved Algeria perhaps more than some Algerians themselves.”

² An enquiry form, intended to detect “weak signals of radicalization” among the students and teaching staff at the University of Cergy-Pointoise (in the Val-d’Oise), was sent by email on Monday, 14 October 2019 to all personnel by the head of security in order to prevent a terrorist threat at the university. Among these weak signals can be found, pell-mell: vestimentary style; a sudden, inexplicable lowering of grades; recurrent absenteeism at the hours of (Muslim) prayer; refusing the authority of women; closing one’s Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp account; questioning the programme and contents of coursework; renouncing the consumption of alcohol and refusing to attend parties...

³ It must be said that the writer and activist Houria Bouteldja has frequently been cast in this role of decolonial witch destined for the pyre. Later in the article we will see that a fundamental ritual for the Republican order is to sacrifice certain radical minority figures in order to better flatter those who have accepted to enter into its ranks, to play the role of the good student and be complicit in the version of events imposed on them by force. The object of the present text is to identify the violent part of this ritual of pacification and the re-establishing of order, which notably inducts into its ranks figures from the cultural milieu and the intelligentsia whose careers are linked to the capitalization of dead or dying forms of struggle and de-weaponized forms of knowledge. All of this, of course, accompanied with a few gestures of condescension for militant fever, which produces, as we know, all sorts of enraged subpar-knowledge, contemptuous counsel emanating from those always cold-thinking heads who know, better than anyone, how to position the screams and burning wounds in the air-conditioned cloisters of museums and the calm library shelves of universities. In the text “Is Decolonizing the New Black,” which appeared in July 2018 (<https://sistersofresistance.wordpress.com/2018/07/12/is-decolonizing-the-new-black/>), the collective Sisters of Resistance calls for a de-colonial mode of thought in universities in particular, which should carry with it a real critique of the structures of transmission of knowledge and form alliances with the militant sphere so that “de-colonizing” becomes something more than the buzz word for new career strategies: “We recognise false critiques all around us, which seem to emerge in the form of new practices and strategies of appropriation. These practices and strategies see the jubilant uplift of the privileged in taking elements of the Other away from the Other, re-configuring them in ways that no longer allow the Other to experience them as benefits, whilst simultaneously creating a branded image of ‘the oppressed’ that erases the possibilities for a resistant subjectivity. This process is one of recolonising in classical capitalist colonial form: Othering and claiming that which is the Other, seeking to assimilate it, exploiting and profiting from it all the while.”

⁴ Considering here the condition of Black existence as that of a resource which is *always being used up* (exhausted), twisted toward the outside of self, ecstatic, and already in the process of disappearance, I think of the work of the African American artist Arthur Jafa, in which these two states (overexposure and disappearance), which everything seems to oppose, form a kind of hellish couple which acts on the Black body. My point in what follows is that Black existence is a potential that is not free to develop itself in all directions, nor toward all possible options, but must make the effort of creating a life for itself, by finding another path, an errancy, a detour.

⁵ The cultural space *Le 104* in Paris' nineteenth arrondissement is probably the prototype for an institutional takeover of the potentials of the street—a thoroughly controlled urban site, dedicated to the pacified theatricalization of minority cultural practices, which go far beyond forms of dance, as ways to influence modalities of assembling together, of transmission and the production of value. In distinction to this, I try in the last note of this text to outline the idea of what, in this context, could be a gesture towards a commons for oneself and by oneself.

⁶ In a decolonial perspective there are several reasons for maintaining one's distance from the repeated use of familial rhetoric, in the way in which the cultural milieu, in particular, utilizes it. I would need to write a longer article to develop this point; I only expose here a few arguments and motives for tension. Concerning the Caribbean context, into the heart of which I propose throughout this text to make a few excursions, Edouard Glissant reminds us that “the ‘family’ in Martinique was at first an ‘anti-family’.” The coupling of a woman and a man for the profit of a master. It was the woman who murmured or cried out: ‘Manjé tè, paf è yich pou lesclavaj’ (‘Land to be sterile, land to die’). It was thus the woman who sometimes refused to carry in her womb the profit of the master. The history of the family institution in Martinique is predicated on this refusal. It is the history of an enormous, primordial abortion: “speech returns to the throat with the first refusal.” Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours Antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 166. Forced coupling, rape, and later “womb control” and non-accountability of fathers, but also games of promiscuity, intrusion, and fake familiarity that create a whole other form of violence that I feel it is important to think about. The geographer Christine Chivallon, whose work we will consider further on in the article, uses these terms when speaking of the tensions of a radically unequal Martinican society in terms of class and race, but which is yet still in perpetual interaction. Interactions that we would be wrong to see as only the sign of a happy, composite society: “Made of donations, obligations, cooptation, small privileges, preferences, concurrential desire, [these interactions] are the means to making racial supremacy bearable, as well as to engender it. In my view they indicate the dimension of symbolic violence when it substitutes itself for physical brutality, as the place where subjugation is manufactured insidiously, in the routinization of domination.” Christine Chivallon, *L’esclavage, du souvenir à la mémoire: contribution à une anthropologie de la Caraïbe* (Paris: Editions Karthala, 2012).

⁷ Later in the text we will see that one aspect of the colonial ritual rests on the idea of the centrality and the heroization of the White Body of Reference, given the horror and obscurity it must face and the burden of carrying, by itself and yet also for all, civilization to every place where it does not exist. It is a sacrificial and singular body, like that of the plantation owner Codé, who would die at the heart of the Martinican Insurrection, a figure we will soon encounter in the text. In his study of a short brochure (*La rébellion au Congo*, edited by the Press Services of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Léopoldville, December, 1964), during a conference given at the Free University of Brussels on 11 October 2019 as part of the seminar “Narrative Zones,” the Congolese artist Toma Muteba Luntumbue underscored how, during the conflicts that opposed the Congolese State and the rebels—whose savagery was averred and described with great use of cannibalistic evocations—only the rare white victims were given the benefit of a preferential photographic consideration. They were always photographed alone in the camera’s frame, their faces occupying the space of the photograph with a dramatic tonality, an air of astonishment. These victims were humans, frozen in attitudes of singular emotion, singular amidst the black mass of Congolese bodies, piles without faces, inert and formless matter,

abstract elements in a decor of terror.

⁸ Using this term I revisit the critique made by the philosopher Norman Ajari, when he speaks of the notion of ethics and deconstructs it to demonstrate that ethics are fundamentally inaccessible for whoever does not enjoy certain privileges, beginning with the privilege of a life without the risk of death: “Falling back on the venerable notion of ethics, I refer neither to any kind of submission to a moral rule as defined by modern philosophy, nor to a way of constructing one’s own subjectivity, according to an acceptance inherent to contemporary philosophy. Obedience to the law as well as the aesthetics of self can only become attainable from the moment when the constant threat of the destruction of an existence has been contained.” Recourse to an ethics without distinction—which I call an ethics of privilege—appears then as an argument of symbolic violence and domination. Norman Ajari, *La dignité ou la mort. Éthique et politique de la race* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2019)

⁹ As the fashion of Black presences in the cultural sphere gains amplitude, some would like to see this as a strong signal of a decolonial moment, but deeper questions concerning structures, organizations, and economies of institutions create many other tensions and some inconvenient situations. As one example: the open letter published in July 2019 in *Artforum*, signed by Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson and Tobi Haslett, questioning the financing of the 2019 Whitney Biennial; the company Safariland, owned by one of the Whitney’s largest donors, Warren Kanders—who sits on the administrative board of the Whitney Museum of American Art—specializes in the furnishing of equipment (including tear gas) to security services and the police, in particular in New York. The authors of the letter followed the trace of the presence of the chemical weapon as it is used in the repression of conflicts, notably those involving minority populations in the United States, and in the pursuit of migrants at borders and elsewhere. Their call to boycott what they decided to call The Tear Gas Biennial provoked a major upset. What is targeted here is not only a veritable solidarity with the minorities that have been assaulted, but also the rupture of a chain of production of market values based on a false sense of humanism and a façade of progress: “There are moments when the disembodied, declarative politics of art are forced into an encounter with real politics, i.e. with violence.” “The Tear Gas Biennial: A statement from Hannah Black, Ciarán Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett regarding Warren Kanders and the 2019 Whitney Biennial,” *Artforum*, 17 July 2019, https://www.artforum.com/slant/hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328?fbclid=IwAR3_7sTsEqCRhLKURK81TbiR5L9pCvIP1n24x3qplN-Mimh2yfZ6ZCJALD8.

¹⁰ Concerning the decolonial “fever,” see Olivier Marboeuf, “Decolonial variations,” 2019, <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/05/09/variations-decoloniales/>.

¹¹ I think here of the unbreathable air, the climate of violence that Christina Sharpe recalls when she writes about the death by asphyxiation of Eric Garner in 2014 on Staten Island. Strangled by police officers, he called out eleven times, “I can’t breathe,” before dying. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 110. A scene that recalls others, almost identical, in Brazil, in France, as leitmotifs of a climate, which take on meaning as soon as the breathing in question is that of a Black man, a precarious breathing, under vigilance. We must learn how to live in this climate—what Sharpe calls “the weather”—living an unliveable life, breathing an unbreathable air, and at the same time resisting by creating possibilities for fugues, maroon escapes, leading us to places of rest, places where we can breathe.

¹² In her book *Se défendre* (“To defend oneself”), Elsa Dorlin develops the idea of *dirty care* in these terms: “the attention that is required on the part of the dominated, and which consists of constantly projecting oneself into the intentions of the other, anticipating his will and desires, blending into his representations with the objective of self-defence, produces a knowledge, an extremely sophisticated knowledge, documented by dominant groups [...] To the ethics of care,

as it is commonly presented, we must add a darker element, an ethics of powerlessness which can be understood from all the efforts used to defend oneself at any cost. In this (negative) sense, dirty care designates the care one reserves for oneself, or more precisely for one's ability to act, by becoming an expert on others, as a way to save one's skin." Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre: Une philosophie de la violence* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 2017), pp. 176–77.

¹³ In his 1997 book *Le discours antillais*, Edouard Glissant theorizes Creole storytelling as an art of words in movement, affected by the ecology of the escape of the maroon, who does not dispose of the time needed to build a peaceful relationship to the surrounding environment or to interact with the land, as he is lacking in tools and skills. It is speech that creates its own meaning precipitously, meaning being born of the crushing sound of language. "An element is thus introduced into the Creole phrase: speed. Not as much speed as a precipitous shock. Perhaps also the continuous flow that turns a sentence into a single indivisible word. If the volume of sound carries thus the signifier of the word, the precipitation or flow of the sounds often organizes the meaning of the discourse." The storyteller, in turn, turns the story into a work of repetitions, modulations, and sounds, of succeeding passages rejoining places already heard before, like a tale in the form of a spiral, where meaning is created through the accumulation of images. "Slavery, a struggle with no witnesses from which we perhaps have acquired the taste for repeating words that recall those rasping whispers deep in our throats, in the huts of the implacably silent world of slavery." Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, translated and with an introduction by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: CARAF Books, University Press of Virginia, 1986), pp. 407, 161.

¹⁴ François Mackandal, Macandal or Makandal (in Haitian Creole, Franswa Makandal), who died in Cap-Français (now known as Cap-Haïtien) on 20 January 1758, was a maroon slave and leader of several rebellions in the north-west sector of the island of Saint-Domingue. Known for his talents as a poisoner, it is believed that he killed nearly 6,000 colonists over the course of his 18 years on the run. Denounced and arrested by the French colonial authorities, he was sentenced to death on 20 January 1758 and sent that same day to be burned at the stake. His life story, around which mysteries still abound, has fuelled legends. He is most often considered to be a symbol of the Black anti-slavery fight and as one of the precursors of the Haitian Revolution of 1791. In the Caribbean, the figure of the maroon remains contradictory. Far from ideas of revolutionary heroism, criminals and con artists are considered to be maroons, as would be someone who betrayed confidences through lying and hucksterism, in the style of Mackandal, from whom our Creole storyteller borrows a few tactics.

¹⁵ For more on this subject, see Lyonel Trouillot in the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, 2 October 2019: "Silence complice sur Haïti: solitude des morts sans importance," <https://www.humanite.fr/lyonel-trouillot-silence-complice-sur-haiti-solitude-des-morts-sans-importance-678016>.

¹⁶ For the detailed account of the Insurrection of 1870 in Martinique and the trial that ensued, I'm greatly indebted to the works of the French geographer Christine Chivallon, regrouped in the volume *L'esclavage, du souvenir à la mémoire* (op cit), in particular chapters 5 and 6 (pp. 201–295). I have used this research essentially with the objective of identifying the foundation of certain leitmotifs of the French Republican history at a key moment for the consolidation of the figure of the citizen. We will try to follow the echoes and replies of these leitmotifs in contemporary political vocabulary, the rituals of nomination and disqualification in state, media, and cultural institutions. We will examine the dark side of the term "citizen," beginning with the deep roots of its foundation, in order to show to what extent it was constructed in the peripheries of the French Empire, both as a body that renders the racial dimension of the Republic opaque and designates what is the only alternative to savagery. I have chosen to follow Chivallon's path and place it in resonance with certain writings by Glissant—notably those of the angry man who wrote meteoric fragments in his *Caribbean Discourse*. The geographer adds clarifications, details

and contradictions, where the poet sketches out with wide strokes a portrait that aimed to represent the Martinican impasse, which was the cornerstone of his thought. It is not my objective here to re-transcribe all the minutiae contained in Chivallon's text, the succession of facts emanating from the rich documentation of the long hours of the trial conducted by the colonial administration—which paradoxically proved in a frequently grotesque form what it was ostensibly trying to hide: the forms of racial persistence in the new Republican order. In the present article I will, however, consider certain dynamics of Chivallon's work, where she cross-references the research of her predecessors with what she uncovers in the written archive, but also, in an effort to give voice to those who were rarely or never allowed to speak, takes the time to look at testimonies from the trial and its defence strategy and at the Martinican socio-economic landscape of the time where, as the geographer specifies, "the lands speak." Through a reading of the registers of landowners, she succeeds in fleshing out a certain consistency to the specific motivations of the insurgents and their individual acts, from those who were purely and simply dispossessed to the small landowners, who united against white supremacy on the island. By translating the composite nature of the assembly of the insurgents—as needs to be done to understand, without romanticism, the singularity of the Haitian revolution for example—Chivallon succeeds in describing a political force outside of any delusion of purity. We will see that this will become an important stake in the construction of a particular form of heroism, the heroism of a community in revolt, and that the creation of a state-approved narrative of the events would tend towards erasing ideas of heroism, through the repeated evocation of the spectre of savagery. The revolt thus became an affair of brute emotions and riot. An action without premeditated thought that emanated from the desperate gesticulations of the repulsive figure of the African slave, or—and this leads back to the same thing, to the result of the sly manipulations of an idiot crowd—orchestrated by a few leaders, who later the court would strip of any honours before executing them. The masses would never have the right to any form of political legitimacy; they would remain completely and permanently unnameable and be obligated to accept their own negation. As Chivallon concludes: "Briefly, in this colonial moment which built the Republic, an extraordinary capacity of conciliating the irreconcilable emerges, overturning perspectives and thrusting into a narrative system subjects who have been placed in the position of necessarily accepting their own domination in the course of what should properly be called a racial Republic" (p. 232). It is this narrative articulation of the state and its enduring persistence that claims my attention here. I consider it as a form of "weaponized storytelling" so as to emphasize that it is precipitated by institutional violence and not by the sole magical power of speech. "The trial [of the 1870 Insurrection] thus forms the vantage point of the event from which the discourse that would emerge from it could be elaborated. The discursive strategies that were used [...] operated through a series of transfigurations which eventually lifted the colonial order up to a supreme rank and made it impossible for the insurgents to ever muster any viable impetus to seek justice. The argument was relatively simple and rested on the deployment of a few strong ideas. The French Nation was intrinsically good, making no distinction between class or race. The insurrection had been a serious violation and an outrage to the assurance that such goodness be dispensed for the benefit of all. The Insurgents were necessarily evil and cruel. But the Nation knew how to stop them in their evil machinations and how to prove that it, alone, has the power to create a just order. An order that was already in place, and for which the proclamation of the Third Republic was only a confirmation of its existence" (p. 222). The underlying narrative and the developments of the trial were conflated, which reminds us that we cannot limit ourselves to producing counter-narratives and imagining possible variants—which are, nevertheless, necessary. We must also create places where they can be engendered and take form. The hypothesis here is that some of these places are formed not as new, infallible institutions, but as *assemblies* grouped around an errant archive, an archive that is living and disturbing, produced by the totality of the secretions of the Creole storyteller's body.

¹⁷ As Chivallon very aptly notes, this insurrection was called the Codé Affair. The patronym of the plantation owner thus literally blankets the entire event, which became a minor news event, one way amongst others of removing from the uprising any political dimension and, yet again, positioning the White Body at the centre of the narrative and of a ritual which borrows greatly

from a Biblical lexicon. Codé is a martyr and it is around his deceased body that Martinican society will be reconstructed. Whatever his past as a plantation owner may have been or his racist proclivities—the white flag of the supremacists hung over his property—Codé is the luminous reference who offers opposition to the dark obscurity of the savages.

¹⁸ Following the adjoining paths of the African American author Christina Sharpe (*In the Wake*, op cit) and the French philosopher Norman Ajari (*La Dignité ou la mort*, op cit), we could consider Black life as a life more exposed than another to the risk of death, and thus re-interpret the rituals of republican respectability as a pact for creating distance from this risk, a pact sealed with the rejection, kept partially secret, of the *form-of-death* (*forme-de-mort*) (Ajari) that is the Black man: the savage, incapable of any political utterance other than screams and violence. From there, we can understand how much the republican narrative, whose central figure is the citizen, is a weaponized and necropolitical narrative that does not so much formulate an ideal of equality as a reprieve. It is in these conditions that the blanket term citizen renders racial conflicts invisible and makes the emergence of political positions difficult at this conjunction in the French context. Any space for a political viewpoint that offers a critique and is *for the self* is thus made impossible, discredited even as racial privileges persist.

¹⁹ “The infamous Second Empire decree, set in place under the Governorship of Rear Admiral Gueydon in 1855, raised the degree of coercion which accompanied the injunction to work to a level comparable to that of slavery. And yet this decree was only the culmination of a vast legislative arsenal established soon after the Abolition Act.” Chivallon, *L’esclavage*, op cit, p. 206.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 226.

²¹ In a situation where possible outcomes to a narrative are paralyzed, where the story is already written and the dialectic of the trial a pure simulacrum, it is interesting to see that silence is not the only solution. There exists a form of refusal through speech, via saturation, the accumulation of words in the form of camouflage. As we can see that it is possible to hide at the surface of the visible, in plain sight, so the storyteller and, here, the accused, create an impossible place at the heart of discourse, a place where they can lose the masters. Words are the cornerstones of this place but they also obscure the way. Confessions can be turned on their heads. Chivallon sees here a sort of fragile improvisation used to exhaust the judicial narrative: “It is equally possible to imagine within the shambles of denouncements and denials which bogged down the trial, tactics for resistance, at first clearly not mastered, but followed by an unexpected effect: the creation of such great disorder that everyone had their say, innocent and guilty [...]. Delicate and so very precarious, the thread of resistance was cobbled together, because heroism earned collectively cannot occur.” Ibid, p. 260.

²² Several times in *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant returns to the process of possession and non-accountability in place at the heart of Martinican society, but also to the inability of creating, by oneself, one’s own heroes. “Martinican history is packed with futile revolts’ (op cit, p. 68). Glissant writes of and then justifies his attachment to the figure of Toussaint Louverture, tragic hero of the Haitian Revolution: “Toussaint Louverture is a maroon, of the same kind, I was going to say the same race, as the most significant and misunderstood of the runaway slaves of Fonds Massacre in Martinique. It is a question of the same historical phenomenon. And it is because the Martinican people have not mythified the defeats of the runaway slaves, but purely and simply acknowledged them, that we have today a debate about Toussaint” (p. 68). Even if we can contest Glissant’s vision of Louverture—a debate that opposes the maroon experience to its metaphor, notably, and perhaps the anthropological perspective to a certain poetics—it nevertheless clearly shows the political processes at work in Martinique that destroy alternative narratives that could counter that of colonial French history, the armed power that pursued its narrative objective long after the official abolition of slavery, to which the episode of the trial of the 1870 Insurrection bears witness. We should not underestimate the frustration this caused

Glissant when he wrote: “Other people’s heroes are not ours; our heroes, of necessity, are primarily those of other people” (p. 69). A reading of the trajectory of his later works considered from this point of view would seem to help us understand in particular why these works abandon perspectives of class, to the extent that the foundation of a peasant class was made impossible in Martinique as much as the construction of heroic forms of revolts, of a positive history of conflicts.

²³ In a Facebook post from 14 October 2018, Léopold Lambert, editor-in-chief of the magazine *The Funambulist*, retraces this colonial continuity from the perspective of a prefect’s trajectory: “I’ve just realized that the prefect of the Val d’Oise (who lied last week about the supposedly ‘unapproved’ motorcycle and the ‘stolen signal’ of Ibrahim Ba, killed last Sunday in Villiers-le-Bel in a collision involving the responsibility of a police vehicle) is none other than Amaury de Saint-Quentin. His life and career present a perfect map of the French colonial continuum (like Papon and Bolotte before him): originally from a family from the Caldoche (white colonists in Kanaky), he grew up in Nouméa in a profoundly colonial environment (Kanak before the Kanak Insurrection of the 1980s was worse than it is today), then worked in the Ministries of Defense (under President Chirac) and the Interior (under President Sarkozy), then served as Prefect of Guadeloupe in 2011-2012 and Prefect of La Réunion in 2017-2018 (he was responsible for declaring the curfew in November 2018 against the Yellow Vest participants in La Réunion, who began the movement), before becoming the Prefect of the Val d’Oise. Kanaky, former colonies annexed into departments, and poor working class regions: different geographies on the French colonial continuum, same tactics, same racism displayed by the police.”

²⁴ “We would like to share here our perplexity concerning the confusion of private/public categories, which results in on the one hand an injunction to circulate rather than remain standing in the public space, and on the other the shock between private and public generated by the transformation of collective spaces in large centres of residence.” Pierrette Poncela, “La pénalisation des comportements dans l’espace public” in *Archives de politique criminelle* 2010/1 (n° 32), pp. 5–21.

²⁵ On 27 October 2005, two adolescents, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, died in Clichy-sous-Bois, electrocuted at an electrical plant where they had taken refuge to escape being stopped by the police. On 16 March 2015, a trial was held to determine if the two police officers involved in the drama were guilty of “non-assistance to person(s) in danger” and “deliberate actions putting the life of another in danger.” The decision, rendered on 18 May 2015, was to drop the charges, the court deeming that neither of the police officers had had “a clear sense of a grave and imminent peril.” This judgment was confirmed by a decree from the court of appeals in Rennes, delivered on 24 June 2016.

²⁶ If there are reasons to see similarities here between the Yellow Vests movement, notably in the use of specific arms by the police and the refusal of the dominant class to recognize in the movement any political dimensions if the discourse emanating from the group does not adhere to the canons of the aforementioned dominant class, the vocabulary employed is not the same. The use of the term *sauvageons* (“savages”), inaugurated by Jean-Charles Chevènement, at the time Minister of the Interior, at the end of the 1990s, changes to *racaille* (“scum”) in the mouth of another Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, in 2005. This marks a clear break, which places the insurrections of the urban *banlieue* on the side of the colonial continuum and not merely as a class struggle. What is quite surprising, to say the least, is that the same Jean-Pierre Chevènement later seemed to find greater clemency in his expression when he wrote on his blog a few weeks before the first round of the 2007 presidential election: “Sauvageons vs racaille” [“Savages vs scum”]: here is the difference between the politics of the left and the politics of the right in matters of security, and it is not insignificant.” Without speculating further about the meaning of this comparison, one can, at least, note that the two expressions clearly share a principle of death, based on the nomination of existences that have lesser values. But it is not necessarily surprising

that on the right the prevailing ideology is contempt for a class and criminal prejudice, while the republican left borrows a figure that, as we have seen earlier, was formed as the antithesis of the colonized citizen. The savage is the person in whom we cannot recognize ourselves, who cannot in any way function as a mirror. The racist dimension is exposed in both cases in a relatively trivialized way. It is also important to note that the Yellow Vests succeeded in being considered as a collective political force. If the contours are imprecise, they nevertheless articulate a demand for social justice, whereas the *sauvageons* and the *racaille* are vilified through the assignation of the aforementioned terms, which serve as markers of death and the expression of a mass devoid of singularity, a resource with no value, out of the range of capitalist domestication. The only function of the “scum” and the “savages,” which has developed greatly in the United States in particular, is thus the economy of coercion that these categories generate despite themselves: the production of arms and prison—here again, an economy of death.

²⁷ The work of the Comité Adama (<https://www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Comite-Verite-pour-Adama>), dedicated to the memory of Adama Traoré, is in this instance remarkable, for it adds to the denunciation of police violence a practice of struggle inscribed in time which gives back to a victim his/her face, dignity and biography, as a way to underline the individuality of a victim amidst the formless, narrative-less mass of deceased “savages.” In answer to this desire for truth concerning the circumstances of Adama’s death, the courts responded with fury at and intimidation of Assa, his sister, who had become a prominent figure in this conflict. Physical violence was again conjugated with a symbolic violence which spoke eloquently about the climate in which Adama ceased to breathe. And yet, more than three years after the events, the face of Adama Traoré has never disappeared and others have joined it, giving consistence to *these unimportant dead* and creating *this alliance of the dead and the living* which had already been asked for by the famous film of the Black Audio Film Collective from 1986, *Handsworth Songs*, made concurrently with the racial revolts in Birmingham, UK. As the Mohamed Collective had done some years earlier in Vitry-sur-Seine (a *banlieue* of Paris), taking up the precarious tools of amateur cinema to produce the film *Ils ont tué Kader* (“They killed Kader”) (1980), a form of mourning, an audiovisual wake and an attempt to raise an individual fate above the trivialization of a destiny that could be summed up crudely as: dead at the entrance to a council estate. And thereby to create a trace from an invisible genealogy, a leitmotiv on a dotted line, which nevertheless serves as a sign of death and at the same time offers the negative path of an urban territory: the *banlieue*. Closer to us, conflicts are renewed by alliance strategies and vital forms of memory. Among these, the Comité Adama is engaged in convergences which take as their basis the body-made-martyr by the police. The wounded body, the dead body, which has long been a central and specific theme of working-class conflicts of French citizens hailing from postcolonial immigration. This can be seen by the police’s usage, long confined to the *banlieues*, of a combat arsenal—notably the sadly infamous Lanceur de Balles de Défense, or LBD 40 (Lancer of Defence Bullets). The Yellow Vests’ conflicts and their unprecedented repression and violence will have opened up in a sad way a space for shared knowledge. In Clichy-sous-Bois, where the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré are still commemorated officially by the municipality, young residents and militants, such as Nawuf Mohamed, prefer to give a living dynamism to the act of memorial. He put the body in action, organizing for example a soccer/football tournament this year, which renewed modes of commemoration of the dead by the living, but also demonstrated the cultural importance of sport in poor working-class suburbs as a resource of imagination and a ritual of representation of self. See <https://www.facebook.com/Nawuf/videos/10220387188810539/>.

²⁸ We are not far from thinking that the organization of the Coupe d’Afrique des quartiers (African Nations of Neighbourhoods Cup) in 2019—first in Créteil and Evry, then later in Clichy-sous-Bois—can be seen as a popular, working class masterpiece of “Africa in France”—even before the start of the festivities programmed for the year of Africa in 2020. Popular here, not in the sense of its capitalist value, which would like to make it a synonym of a mass event, but in the sense of the power of a gesture for self, specifically situated, for the working-class poor. The point here is to produce an imagined Africa that is spawned by desire. To those who

might only see here an affirmation of a displaced nationalism, the presence of Turkey among the competing teams in Clichy-sous-Bois could serve as an answer or at least an indication toward the particular conception of “African” at play here. It is a desire for an Africa that reconstructs, via the body, a jubilatory geography. It is African in the way of that which returns and assembles together from a morbid and dispersed form—like the African images that I wrote about in a recent text, “Ceux qui veillent les images nègres” (“Those who hold a wake for negro images”), exh. cat., Bamako Biennial (Berlin: Archive Books, 2019), <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/12/12/ceux-qui-veillent-les-images-negres-fr-eng/>. This *Africa* answers with joy to the enforced detestation of a dark part of the *French being*, this black and indigenous part whose humiliation and sometimes even whose liquidation constitutes, as we have seen throughout this text, one of the foundational rituals of the act of *becoming a French citizen*.