

SURVIVING

MATTER

REPETITIONS

A TAPESTRY

OF PLOTS

DISTANT ISLANDS SPECTRAL CITIES

BANISTER FLETCHER

FELLOWSHIP

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DE

VIVANTE

ECHOES

L'EMANCIPATION

OVERVIEW



‘Entre-tenir’:^[1] a living archive of emancipation

Note no. 1, January 2024

I am delighted to have been awarded the 2023/24 Banister Fletcher Global Fellowship for my project ‘Distant Islands, Spectral Cities’, hosted by the University of London Institute in Paris (ULIP). As the work unfolds, I am publishing a series of notes that share some of the ambitions and questions driving the research, which will result in texts, invitations and curations as well as a week of gatherings in Paris in April 2024, with satellite events in London. The project focuses on forms of political and aesthetic emancipation and imagination within minority populations in Europe, taking into account their fragility. It will do this while always keeping in view the precariousness that increasingly makes our research processes also prone to fragility, to the powerful systemic effects that undermine their ethics by threatening the production of knowledge commons. ‘Distant Islands, Spectral Cities’ marks the starting point of a collective weaving method that will initiate a ‘community of interpretation’ whose objective is to continue to develop around a site of trust and collaboration and expand beyond this first series of events and encounters.

Olivier Marboeuf

The Banister Fletcher Global Fellowship is traditionally dedicated to questions of urban planning and architecture, disciplines whose canons I have chosen to interrogate and displace from a decolonial perspective.^[2] The aim is to follow the discontinuous threads of Caribbean ways of life and resistance in Paris and London, and their circulation between these two imperial capitals. The sites of knowledge and transmission, the places of memory of the Caribbean diaspora, have a particular geology, a materiality whose crises and mutations we must take the time to sense. For this *diasporic-Caribbean* matter does not always take the form of familiar, solid, stable, easy-to-categorise works and figures: buildings, schools, monuments, congresses, nice colourful events or grand narratives cast into old stone in homage to our national heroes. Nor is it a docile matter from which an easy trade in metaphors might be plied and repurposed in the service of the leading art and education institutions. It demands accountability: to take its share of the risk within a community of solidarity ‘with dirty faces’,^[3] as a product of the histories and life force of the displaced

and dehumanised, of discounted existences that have come up against the racist social structures of the West and yet never ceased to invent – in anger and shame, in deprivation and mourning – gestures, places and aesthetics of resistance.^[4] And they continue to risk doing so. The challenge of this research is to collectively develop a method that does not so much celebrate new minority heroisms as creates the conditions to embrace the impurity of damaged lives, the beauty of fragile alliances and filiations, of unfinished attempts and gestures too often subject to the Law's injustices and History's neglect; those gestures that persist, return and haunt. That's why we want to weave a history that owes much to clever bricolages; to wanderings and chance encounters; to secret detours; to evening classes and all-night conversations; to forbidden, festive, spontaneous and sometimes violent demonstrations that inaugurate ephemeral places through the power of body and sound, the ruse of images and the detours of language. Since we must honour the dead and those lives deemed unworthy, we must archive their ways of standing and resisting, leaving traces on the surface and in the depths of the city. And, in turn, *apprendre à les entre-tenir*.

A collective, transdisciplinary approach is needed to establish a relation – a complicity even – with this dispersed, intimate, fugitive matter. It aims to explore and transmit the strands within these diasporic episodes of a constantly interrupted yet tenacious emancipation project. And in so doing, it will cultivate, through a politics of presence, all the gestures that reactivate it in support of genuine social transformation.

A tapestry of plots: non-linear time and repetition

This short research period allows me to experiment, share and deepen a plot technique inspired by an abolitionist reading of Jamaican author and essayist Sylvia Wynter's famous text 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation'^[5] – an interpretation of which I proposed in my essay *Suites décoloniales : s'enfuir de la plantation*.^[6] I'd like to work, in conversation, on weaving together past and present events, incidents and cultural artefacts that sometimes appear unconnected, yet when placed in relation to one another recall a particular emancipatory movement, in its visible and more discreet forms, its flashes and bifurcations, its aesthetics, ideals and opportunism, which may sometimes appear as betrayals. From this point of view, Stuart Hall's legacy is decisive. His work, and that of his successors in Birmingham and elsewhere, inaugurated a vital way of thinking about what constitutes culture and tradition in the double uprooting of the Caribbean diaspora and its attempts to rebuild both a community and a capacity to act from fragmentary legacies, convivial or tragic episodes under European skies. We will turn the kind of thinking opened up by Wynter's text into a tool to prevent these episodes from remaining temporary disruptions to the grand narrative (the plantation), instead hosting them as spaces to practise the possible (the plot, the Creole garden), connecting and growing them through repetition.

Here, the idea of repetition is twofold. It echoes a non-linear temporal epistemology, the spiral poetics of Caribbean time (Frankétienne), where everything is already there, where events keep coming back in different forms, relegating the relation to what we might call an archive. But the idea of repetition is also useful for underlining the centrality of an abolitionist politics that brings about a desirable life by practising it in fragments, by performing/repeating^[7] it whenever possible – ‘life in rehearsal’ (Ruth Wilson Gilmore). Weaving a tapestry of events also implies paying attention to the ruptures in certain movements, without seeing them as synonymous with failure. These interruptions teach us a great deal about divisive strategies and contradictory impulses, as well as about power relations and false allies in a given context. They are tools and warnings from which to build future rehearsals and our commitment to them.

Interpretive community and the ethics of necessity: extractivism, responsibility and the archive as address^[8]

This approach to repetition structures the ecology and ethics of the work. As already noted, we must invent its forms in light of the fragilities engendered by a knowledge economy oriented ever more to structures premised upon individual success and predation. Our aim here is to develop a relationship with the archive that goes beyond the vocabulary of ‘discovery’, the obsessive pursuit of the ‘first time’ and the ‘new’, in order to imagine regimes of value production other than those driven by extractivist fever, *columbusing* and similar tactics of appropriation. All these practices of interruption contribute to the dispersal of narratives and weaken their transmission. They often exclude those for whom these stories are vital presences, modes of address, even hauntings, embodied to the point of trauma.

Research into the fragmented histories of the Caribbean should not reproduce logics of domination and patterns of material and epistemological violence which, in many ways, are responsible for the tragedy that took place in that part of the world, and still contribute to some of its structural incapacities. But we cannot ignore the damaging effects of the growing precariousness amongst art practitioners and university workers who are drawn into fierce forms of competition to survive on multiple fronts. As a result, aggressive research and production practices are spreading, fencing off parcels of knowledge and delegitimizing many ways of telling, making and imagining histories and their interconnectedness. We choose to consider these harmful systemic effects, this ‘backdrop’, as genuine methodological concerns, in order to inscribe this research in a reparative dynamic. This means questioning who has the privilege of being in the room, of sitting around the table. It also means creating hospitable conditions to engage with situated speech and vocabularies.^[9] The same attentiveness will apply to the uses, benefits and futures of this research, compelling us to think about the continuity of the working community it will bring together, and the necessities and emergencies it will have to face.

This is the meaning of the second reading of the principle of repetition, which requires establishing an *interpretive community*^[10] around an archive, i.e., a group that produces situated translations of events and traces of the past. In so doing, it creates collective property, a shared responsibility and a common project. This last point is important as it allows us to think of *rehearsal* (*performing repetition*) as a gesture that brings the potentialities of the archive into being, that takes up what was left unfinished from an event or form, and reconstitutes a filiation that produces obligation. An *act of continuity* in which the archive is thought of as a ‘blueprint’ – an attempt – and no longer as a commodity, a fetish on the market of cognitive capitalism. In particular, we will look at how marches, wakes, dances, storytelling and poetry, as well as a whole range of performances, participate in this practice of conservation/preparation, linking the act in the past to the act to come while concealing its stakes to the outsider’s gaze.

Entre-tenir les murs:^[11] spaces of sociality

We shall see that what I referred to earlier as ‘an act of continuity’ results in a particular commitment that understands the archive as address calling forth certain kinds of presence, of return, of involving bodies in the spaces where events occurred and could occur again so that the field of study becomes a field of action and a place of reparation. When necessary, we shall leave behind the walls of the university and artistic institutions, freeing ourselves as much as possible from the demands of production in order to collectively test certain types of knowledge and share the risks they entail with those who continue to *entre-tenir* them. At a time when racist and xenophobic policies are on the rise in Europe, when many lives are being criminalised and police violence is being used as a mode of urban governance, we need to find new ways of working with urban spaces where borders, fences and zones of non-being are multiplying. This politics of presence and solidarity must contribute to rethinking the very objects and stakes of our research and our work: inventing hybrid spaces capable of reconciling the actions of both research and sociality. *Entre-tenir* arts of resistance and archives of emancipation, constantly revitalised, rearranged and debated.

Surviving matter and masquerades: an epistemology of transfiguration and the monstrous

Finally, in order to open up the forms and vocabularies of this research still further, I feel it is important to return to some of the particularities of diasporic Caribbean matter. For these will influence the way in which we ‘breathe new life’ into past events, sedimented in the geology of European cities. The dehumanization at the heart of the Transatlantic Slave Trade itself produced new epistemological categories – speaking objects and

matter – whose *(re)humanizing* trajectories strongly impact the aesthetics and modes of knowledge transmission that interest us. We will find traces of this passage to a new being from non-being, this indecipherable becoming, within a hair's breadth of oblivion, through the path of darkness, in nocturnal demonstrations and riots, carnivals and *balls*; in the fugitive writings that run across city walls and the ungovernable infra-bass beats that *make the dead the allies of the living*.^[12] It is to this urban art of necromancy, to this history of unspeakable places that shun definition and police control, that we wish to offer hospitality. This means welcoming artists and authors, researchers and students, choreographers, graffiti artists, poets, activists and community workers into our interpretive community, as well as the uncategorizable voices moved by this matter. All this in celebration of the desire to escape the authorities that govern knowledge and to work (in) languages capable of telling the changing state of this living matter that affects and reconstitutes the ethics of a community to come.

Translated from the French by Lisa Damon

[1] The expression *entre-tenir* evokes a community that supports each other through reparation but also conversation (*'entretien'*), as a 'holding (*tenir*) between one another (*entre*)' that continues in our care (*'entretien'*) for it. Collective speech is understood here as care that incurs no debt.

[2] Sir Banister Flight Fletcher (b. 15 February 1866, d. 17 August 1953) was a British architect and art historian. His treatise *A History of Architecture* (1905–1921) had a lasting influence on the history of architecture in the English-speaking world.

[3] See Olivier Marboeuf, 'Dirty Faces' in *Art and Solidarity Reader: Radical Actions, Politics and Friendships*, ed. Katya García-Antón (Valiz, 2023).

[4] See James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1992).

[5] Sylvia Wynter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou*, no. 5 (1971): 95–102.

[6] Olivier Marboeuf, *Suites décoloniales : s'enfuir de la plantation* (Editions du Commun, 2022).

[7] In French, *répéter* means both 'to repeat' and 'to rehearse'.

[8] I began a conversation about the address carried by minority archives with Haitian-born author and academic Stéphane Martelly at a conference associated with the exhibition 'Sédiment: les archives comme base fragmentaire' curated by Denise Ryner at the Galerie Léonard and Bina Ellen/Concordia University in Montreal (spring 2023). See <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2023/04/02/larchive-comme-lieu-speculatif-conference-et-conversation-avec-stephane-martelly-fr/>.

[9] See Olivier Marboeuf, 'Parler avec des mots à soi / To speak with your own words', originally published on the blog of l'Espace Khiasma, 2018, available at <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2018/12/30/comme-un-lundi-parler-avec-des-mots-a-soi/>.

[10] See Stanley Eugene Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Harvard University Press, 1982). Translated by E. Dobenesque as *Quand lire c'est faire. L'autorité des communautés interprétatives*, with a preface by Yves Citton (Les Prairies Ordinaires/Éditions Amsterdam, 2007).

[11] In the working-class neighbourhoods of France and North Africa, young men deemed idle in the streets are often said to be 'propping up the walls' (*ils tiennent les murs*). This is an attempt to turn a pejorative expression on its head, by imagining the act of standing in a neighbourhood as a way of preserving it, caring for it, keeping it upright and dignified, making it habitable and inhabited. And, by extension, to stand together (*se tenir ensemble*), to hold on to each other (*tenir les uns aux autres*) as an act of protection for the forms of life we value.

[12] See *Handsworth Songs*, dir. Black Audio Film Collective (John Akomfrah; Reece Auguiste; Edward George; Lina Gopaul; Avril Johnson; David Lawson; Trevor Mathison) (1986).