

**IMAGING THE INVISIBLES:
CROSS-DRESSING AND GENDER PLAY IN
THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN**

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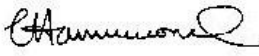
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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Charlotte Hammond, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: 

C A Hammond

Date: 18 September 2014

ABSTRACT

Imaging the Invisibles: Cross-dressing and Gender Play in the French Caribbean

This thesis explores visual and embodied representations of the practice of cross-dressing in Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe and diasporic communities in France. The study examines the strategic performativity of dress as both a covert and overt means of resistance to the gendering, racialization and categorization of bodies during slavery. It pays particular attention to anti-colonial tactics of mimicry, masquerade and mirroring, as deployed in the artistic practices of contemporary Caribbean, diasporic and non-Caribbean film and performance makers. Underpinned by archival research into early performance activities and the historical control of bodies and dress during the Haitian revolutionary period (1791-1804), the study focuses on current expressions of cross-dressing in films and other visual media that negotiate and question this colonial and patriarchal paradigm. It interrogates to what extent corporeal stereotypes that continue to circulate as a legacy of French colonialism are repeated, re-configured and challenged through the performative power of dress, and includes close analysis of identities that cross gender, racial and class binaries in the African-derived religious tradition of Vodou. Beyond textual and historical analysis, the research includes a small scale qualitative audience study of selected works of my corpus, within both the context of the islands and metropolitan France. In its interrogation of these three aspects the thesis draws on Édouard Glissant's theories of opacity and relationality (1981; 1990) with specific reference to cross-dressing and its reception in particular colonial/postcolonial contexts. The accompanying research blog can be accessed at: <<http://leblogdehammond.wordpress.com/>>.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. Quotations in French or Creole are first provided in quotation marks in the text, followed by the English translation, italicised and placed in parentheses. In the case of short phrases or words, where the meaning is evident from the context, no translation is provided.

INTRODUCTION

‘Dans le monde où je m’achemine, je me crée interminablement.’

In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

(Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* 186 ; trans. Charles Lam Markmann
Black Skin 229)

‘Sa ou pa konnen pi gran pase’w.’

That which you don’t know is greater than you.

(Haitian proverb)

On the 28 April 2014 the Martinique-based organisation KAP Caraïbe, who offer *Konsey, Aide, Prevansyon (Advice, Help, Prevention)* to sexual minorities on the French Caribbean island, lodged a formal complaint against the social networking site Facebook at the crown court of the capital, Fort-de-France. Their protest came in response to the Facebook page, ‘Les masques tombent’ (*The masks are falling*), set up by a user on the 29 March to ‘out’ men in Martinique who allegedly have sexual relations with other men. According to several metropolitan-based media sources, these ‘outings’ were published on the social media network after a mobile phone belonging to a homosexual *travesti*, or cross-dresser, found its way into homophobic hands.¹ The phone contained messages archiving a number of liaisons between the biologically male *travesti* and various self-proclaiming ‘heterosexual’ Martinican men. The messages were then re-posted on the Facebook page inciting homophobic comments, several of which were posted in Creole. This case demonstrates the complexity of sexual and gender identity in the Caribbean, particularly in the

¹ See, for example, Simon Challier’s article, ‘Homophobie en Martinique : une plainte déposée contre Facebook,’ published on the 2 May 2014 on the *Rue 89* website : <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2014/05/02/homophobie-martinique-plainte-deposee-contre-facebook-251866>.

French-owned islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, where gendered behaviour and expressions of sexuality have historically been framed along a continuum of visibility and invisibility. Gender identification and desire is articulated first and foremost in relation to the whole community, meaning the individual must learn to ‘brandir la pancarte d’hétéro’ and ‘rester dans la discrétion totale,’ (*brandish the hetero placard [and] remain totally discrete*), as one informant, Fabrice, explained during an interview I conducted with him in Fort-de-France in 2012.² This covert/overt continuum is further complicated in France’s ‘overseas departments’ of Martinique and Guadeloupe, as it is recast through the private/public binary of French political thought and republican universalism, which does not recognize group identities in political representation.³ The Facebook page highlights how the anonymous and fluid nature of digitized spaces can enable acts of masking, but also violent acts of unmasking and conditions of hypervisibility. The duality of this space of possibility recalls Antonio Benítez-Rojo, who reminds us in his seminal study of Caribbean culture, *The Repeating Island*, that the Spanish ‘revelar’ can mean both to reveal and to *re-veil* (215). The use of Creole language further re-veils the violence of the responses directed to these male victims, allowing them to ‘pass’ undetected through Facebook’s censor.⁴ Finally this is a reminder of how certain bodies are policed (in virtual and actual realms) in small island societies such as Martinique, through the heavily visualized practice of *makrelaj*, the theatricalised practice of gossiping. Masquerade and techniques of opacity are deployed to divert the discourse of this panoptic gaze at both a local and, given the media coverage of this incident in France, national level.

Haiti, which unlike Martinique and Guadeloupe, successfully succeeded in defeating France’s colonial troops to gain independence in 1804, thus marking its unique trajectory in Caribbean history as the first Black republic, does not provide an entirely unique narrative of gender and sexuality within the region. Haiti shares with other Caribbean societies many of the same attitudes towards ‘deviant’ bodies and desires, as a result of a common history of colonisation and plantation slavery. Like

² To preserve anonymity, all interlocutors’ names have been changed in this thesis.

³ How the French islands are framed in relation to French universalism is discussed by Agard-Jones in her article ‘Le jeu de qui?’ (8)

⁴ The argument that Facebook administrators should have greater difficulty in translating Creole content than any other language is problematic, however the elasticity of the word formation and spelling due to the bricolaged construction and orality of Creole is certainly a factor.

the French Caribbean islands, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Haiti is largely a heteropatriarchal, homophobic society. The private/public interlocking strategies noted above in a small island francophone context also characterize expressions of gender and sexuality in Haitian society. Where Haiti differs in its conceptualization of gender in the Caribbean, is in its strong retention of Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions. As I intend to show, the African-derived ancestral belief system of Vodou offers a space in which a spectrum of gender identities and sexual desires are openly embraced. In Vodou's liminal communities, other-gendered expressions and the talk they elicit are, as in the case of Martinique, at once both private and very public. Ceremonies do not always take place in enclosed spaces, and the sites of inside and outside even when partitioned are often porous and inter-merging. Moreover they may take place in interim periods, outside the bounds of traditional calendrical events.⁵ This spatio-temporal fluidity dissolves symmetries of inside/outside, centre/margin and feminine/masculine, offering potential for social transformation.

The politics of gender and sexuality in Haiti has also been marked by the ongoing violences of US imperialism. In the recent political climate of so-called 'post-quake Haiti', a prevailing NGO culture, characterized by the increased intervention of North American religious and non-religious 'missionaries,' has impacted on the lives of sexual minorities paradoxically reinforcing the fiction of imported sexualities through a proliferation of imported ideologies and homophobias.⁶ The anti-gay march organized by the Haitian Coalition of Religious and Moral organizations in the capital, Port-au-Prince, on 19 July 2013 is one example of how sexualised and gendered bodies are disciplined within the public sphere. The protest, which subsequently induced violence against individuals from sexual minority communities based in Port-au-Prince, demonstrates how an outside, imperial gaze creates knowledge of certain subaltern groups, who come into sudden focus during unsettling periods of social or environmental catastrophe. Furthermore this case underlines the urgency for scholarly work on the agency of Caribbean

⁵ Rara for example is a Vodou-influenced performance that extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of carnival. See Elizabeth McAlister's book *Rara! : Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (2002).

⁶ One immediate effect manifested through a politics of access to healthcare whereby stigmatized bodies were deemed unworthy of receiving necessary aid by the 'bodies that matter.' Sexual minority groups were also co-opted into religious discourses around the causation of the disaster. For more on evangelical religious reactions to the earthquake and subsequent interventions in Haiti, see McAlister, 'From Slave Revolt' 187-215.

sexual and gender variant minorities that takes into account the role of spirituality in the mediatisation of bodies excluded from state discourse. As McAlister noted in 2000, ‘Of all the anthropologists who have been fascinated with Vodou, none has taken its (homo)sexualised aspects as a serious topic of studying and theorizing’ (‘Love’ 135).⁷

As this dissertation develops, there is an increasing focus on Vodou. This is perhaps due to its non-binary elasticity, which exemplifies many of the theories I deploy highlighting the openness and hybridity that characterizes Creole culture (Glissant; Tinsley). This said, I am conscious that Vodou might also constitute a form of self-othering, in that it serves to frame and define particular sexual or gender attributes. The aim of this thesis is therefore to question the impetus behind diverse forms of gender masquerade and strategies of opacity in the French Caribbean as constant and necessary negotiations of a colonial patriarchal order, as well as more recent post- and neo-colonial representational regimes. These alternative expressions do not always resist (colonially defined) heteronormative patterns, as will be revealed and analysed in further detail, yet cross-dressing in this context is revealed as a response to an inherited sex-gender paradigm, based upon the binaristic emasculation of the colonised male on the one hand and the virilisation of the colonised female on the other. The actors involved in these identity negotiations, and examined in the chapters that follow, are all male. The purpose of this investigation is therefore to question how the performance of femininity as a subversive gender display resists the roles imposed by the colonizer. Special attention is given to how both non-gender normative and non-heteronormative practices use the colonial discourse (and its ascribed gender roles) to disrupt its very foundations.

As my research demonstrates, dressing across one set of binaries, such as gender, is also often contingent on crossing other divisions, particularly in the Caribbean where, due to histories of slavery and colonialism, categories of difference are intimately interlaced. Colonial dominance and the construction of racial otherness was predicated on the sexualisation and objectification of bodies. This involved the emasculation of enslaved men, who were stripped of their sexual

⁷ This demand has been answered by more recent work by members of the scholarly association for the study of Haitian Vodou, KOSANBA, including Roberto Strongman, Charlene Desir and Dasha Chapman, who explore the metaphysicality, philosophy, and transformative potential of Vodou in constructing fluid gender identities.

agency and role of father, and the virilisation of enslaved women, who were portrayed as masculine and sexually aggressive. As Elsa Dorlin and Myriam Paris have pointed out:

Les effets croisés du racisme et de la domination de genre produisent ainsi des catégories mutantes : des hommes efféminés et des femmes virilisées qui peuvent donc être exclus des privilèges anthropologiques, symboliques et politiques de l'humanité. (100)

The crossed effects of racism and gender domination thus produce mutant categories: feminized men and virilised women who can therefore be excluded from the anthropological, symbolic and political privileges of humanity.

Interwoven Methodologies

By centring this study on acts of male-to-female cross-dressing, as performed through and within a male-centric colonial discourse, I examine the complex construction of masculinities in the Caribbean, which has formed the focus of much sociological research over the past decade (Lewis 2004; Reddock 2004; Mulot 2008; Palmiste and Kabile 2012). Male-to-female cross-dressing in Francophone Afro-Caribbean communities is particularly prevalent in visual media, yet has provoked scarce examination using visual and/or performative theories.⁸ I interrogate how, prior to the Haitian Revolution in the eighteenth century, the French-speaking slave societies were organised along heteropatriarchal lines that corresponded to anxieties in French society around binaries of masculinity and femininity, black and white, master and slave at that time. This study therefore begins with an examination of the subjugation and un/gendering of certain bodies in the history of the French Caribbean through evidence-based archival work. I examine the materiality of dress in performing social and political transformation for the enslaved, maroon and free populations of colour in pre-revolutionary Haiti. As a technique of self-styling, dress symbolized a subtle and covert form of resistance to the colonial hierarchies of

⁸ While there is a need for research into cross-dressing in Indo-Caribbean communities (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000) and other demographics within the region, I focus here on the more ubiquitous artistic productions dealing with cross-dressing amongst Afro-Caribbean subjects in the French Caribbean.

power, and interrogated emerging discourses of gendered and racial otherness, particularly during the slave emancipation in Guadeloupe and Saint-Domingue in the 1790s, when uniforms became important visual evidence of negotiations of power between the colonised and the coloniser. Bodies, marked by race and gender during slavery, were disguised and transformed by the visual, external signs of these very same markers during the revolutionary era, proving their very tenets to be meaningless. Costume, in particular the military uniforms that connected the heroes of the same trans-Caribbean emancipatory struggle against the French colonial powers, including Louis Delgrès in Guadeloupe and the Haitian revolutionary leaders Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, formed an important component of this disguise. Modelled on the invisible, yet absolute power of Napoleon Bonaparte, the materiality and visibility of these techniques caused concern amongst the plantocracy and the French troops. In a letter to Napoleon, dated 7 October 1802, General Leclerc voices his contempt for the revolutionary fighters, paying particular attention to their uses of military uniform:

Il faut détruire tous les nègres des montagnes, hommes et femmes, ne garder que les enfants au-dessous de douze ans, détruire moitié de ceux de la plaine et ne pas laisser dans la colonie un seul homme de couleur qui ait porté l'épaulette.

You will have to kill all the negroes in the mountains, women as well as men, except for children under twelve; wipe out half the population in the lowlands and do not leave in the colony a single black man who has worn an epaulette. (Dubois and Garrigus 179-80)

The appropriation of the accoutrements and the épaulettes of the slavemaster by the enslaved proved to be a crucial image in the eyes of the French government of the increased strength and unity of the insurgents.

Toussaint, especially, became an emblematic figure who has haunted French political life as a *revenant* and reminder of black agency (Forsdick, 'Situating' 21). His re-emergence through Aimé Césaire's Negritude philosophy of black consciousness underscores this and in the essay *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (1962), Haiti and the *départements d'outre mer* are treated together through Césaire's exploration of the lines of cultural and political

autonomy negotiated within French assimilation, allying Toussaint's revolutionary strategies with Césaire's own approach to *départementalisation*. As Césaire celebrates in his *Cahier*, Haiti was where 'la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois' (negritude stood up for the first time; 90). In the Paris of 1930s and 1940s France, the literary work of Negritude intellectuals represented an important and necessary riposte against colonialism and its emasculation of African and Caribbean culture. Its preservation and repetition of essentialist notions of Africanness and its (r)emasculation process that tended to exclude women has been criticised by many, including Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, for the conflicting narrative it presents (*Myth* 128-130). While this thesis acknowledges the important process that was Negritude as a creative manipulation and self-conscious quotation of European ideologies, it is less concerned with its fixations for immovable categories and returns to origin than with the cultural dynamism and heterogeneity of the 'repeating islands' (Benítez-Rojo) discussed in the chapters that follow.

How colonial representations are accumulated, repeated and re-vamped in the works of contemporary film and performance makers in the French Caribbean forms the main axis of interrogation in the ensuing sections of this thesis. I question to what extent their artistic works challenge these dominant historical representations and their ongoing legacies in French Caribbean society today. The act of *marronaj* during slavery and the performance it necessitated (Fouchard, *The Haitian* 251-264), for example, can be understood as the beginnings of the Vodou families depicted in Haitian-French film makers' Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire's path-breaking documentary *Des hommes et des dieux (Of Men and Gods; 2002)*. This ethnographic documentary explores the Haitian culture and belief system of Vodou and its embrace of a range of sexual orientations and cross-gender identifications. Syncretic African-derived spiritual traditions, such as Vodou in Haiti, constitute crucial community-building systems in the Caribbean. They produce networks based on a plurality and permeability of kinship relations. Ways of relating to each other in French Caribbean society are thus posited in the development of my argument as an important means of resistance to the rigid patriarchal organization of family, inherited from French colonialism.

In its focus on visual and performance culture, the scope of the project allows for the discussion of technologies and practices of vision which potentially mirror

the power dynamics of visibility and embodiment being played out in colonial and contemporary Caribbean (and diasporic) multisensory performances of the everyday. I consider the work of British artist Leah Gordon, who has been visiting Haiti since 1991, including her *Kanaval* photography series (2010) and short observational film *Bounda pa Bounda: A Drag Zaka* (2008), and, in evoking parallels with American avant-garde film maker Maya Deren, who worked in Haiti in the 1940s, I question the burgeoning role of ‘the artist as ethnographer’ in these works and the problems that arise in capturing the Other through different visual media. In an analysis of their scopical relationship with the island, I question their ‘participation’ in the respective rituals they filmed during their visits to Haiti, and examine the challenges they faced in using both visual and printed media to represent *lezinvisib* (the invisibles) – both the Vodou spirits and those who serve them (as I refer to them in this thesis).

In the final section of the thesis I incorporate audience data from a small-scale audience reception study carried out during research trips to Martinique and France. The audience analysis focuses on responses to the Guadeloupean dramatist Jean-Pierre Sturm’s popular comedy, *Ma Commère Alfred* (2004). It also considers the critical reception of the play and questions its continued popularity, particularly in Metropolitan France. Newspaper reviews consulted in the departmental archives in Martinique provide here the ‘official’ reception data, situating the play in the socio-historical context of its live performance. The audience responses were gathered over a period of eighteen months, during trips to Martinique and Paris, where screenings of the play and the film discussed in the final chapter of this thesis, Claire Denis’s *J’ai pas sommeil* (1994), were followed by a series of individual and group discussions, in person or via the internet.

The final chapter of the thesis shifts, in its focus on Denis’s film *J’ai pas sommeil*, to the French Caribbean diaspora in metropolitan France. Beginning with an interrogation of the political in/visibility of Martinican citizens resident in France, I go on to explore both thematic and stylistic forms of cross-dressing and masquerade in the film. I examine how the cross-dressers or border-crossers depicted negotiate symmetries of centre/periphery, inside/outside, light/dark and feminine/masculine, and symbolize mobility across, and in the recesses between, these binaries. I propose the notion of the film itself as a cross-dresser that, in the

semi-visibility it offers the viewer, counters the transparency of enlightenment and heteropatriarchal discourses.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The corpus chosen underlines the entwinement of gender and sexuality as a result of colonialism and slavery and its afterlives in the trans-Caribbean archipelago (Britton, *Race* 76-94). Male-to-female cross-dressing may therefore be assumed to connote same-sex desire, however given its strategic and carnivalesque uses historically to disrupt a colonial sex/gender system, this is too facile an alignment to draw. Furthermore, in the French Caribbean, as alluded to above, creative spaces for same-sex desires are constructed within a visible-invisible binary, inspired by Enlightenment (thus colonial) ideals. Frantz Fanon points towards the specificity of this continuum of in/visibility in *Peau noire masques blancs*, in his analysis of hegemonic forms of masculinity and heterosexuality in the Caribbean. Although brief, his argument that a Martinican male same-sex desire is performed discreetly within a heterosexual paradigm, is now infamous within the field of Caribbean studies and beyond. This interpretation, which appears in a footnote to his chapter entitled 'The Negro and Psychopathology', locates the particularity of sexuality within wider colonial and postcolonial struggles. Fanon maintains that 'homosexuality', understood as an import constructed using Western theories in relation to oedipal alignments, is foreign to the Caribbean. His assertion underscores the entanglement and contingency of gender and sexuality in the region, as a result of colonial discourses of sexuality, as he reaffirms that an extreme masculinity persists regardless, ensuring that men who cross-dress as women in Martinique remain real men who 'prennent le punch comme n'importe quel gaillard' (*take a punch like any he-man*; 146). The challenge to Eurocentric impositions of gender and sexuality must be acknowledged in Fanon's writing here, as should the historical context in which he, as a black male intellectual, is writing back against colonial emasculation and subjugation. Any potential to defy homophobic thinking is however subsumed into the urgency of his anti-imperialist discourse. He implicitly highlights the contradictory paradigm of men wanting to express same-sex desire who must either outwardly perform the role of passive homosexual (denoted by the

pejoratively understood Creole terms *makomè* in Martinique and Guadeloupe and *masisi* in Haiti),⁹ or the phallocratic he-man, proudly in possession of *dé grenn* (two testicles). This model leaves little if any room for variations of femininity or masculinity between these two oppositional poles.¹⁰ This is particularly the case given that the position of the ‘real (productive) man’, according to A. J. Arnold, is already always occupied by the white male colonizer (‘The Erotics’ 9). In order to ‘pass’ in Martinican society some men must therefore cross-dress across these binaries, not to evade categories, but to conform to their defined boundaries. The act of passing in this context constitutes a relational way of being. These categories of disguise are used to fabricate strategic and fluid roles, to be worn as garments that make up a recognizable costume, as opposed to static and natural assertions of difference. In this thesis I will therefore be asking if these roles, and the assigned spaces for their performance, necessarily preclude possibilities for agency and resistance therein.

Much has been written on Fanon’s notion of sexuality as articulated in the Antilles (Fuss 30; Arnold, ‘The Erotics’ 7; Tinsley 146) and while I do not intend to dwell on his masculinist theories, I wish to highlight their relevance for a project such as this, which seeks to consider ‘other’ traditions of gender identity through a culturally specific lens. There has in recent years been an increased interest in sexuality and gender studies in the Caribbean, coinciding with the legalisation of same-sex marriage in the French administrative departments (DOM-ROM) of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyana and the first march against homophobia in Martinique in 2012.¹¹ In the context of the French-owned islands of Martinique and

⁹ *Makomè* is sometimes spelt *makoumé* or *macoumé* in Creole and comes from the French ‘ma commère’ meaning ‘my godmother’ so originally denoted a maternal role: someone who cares for children. In Antillean society today it more often connotes effeminate looks and behaviour in men and is used to describe a male-to-female cross-dresser or a passively feminine man who has, or is suspected of having, sexual relations with other men. The Haitian term *Masisi* is rooted in African ancestral spirits and is thought to come from the Fon deity Mamsisi who manifests herself in various forms throughout the Caribbean, including in Martinique and Guadeloupe as *Mami Wata*. Rosenthal states: ‘*Mami Wata* is about fertility, femaleness, and beauty. Mostly women become Mamsisi; men who become Mamsisi are particularly good-looking and often dress and plait their hair like women’ (118).

¹⁰ See A. James Arnold (‘The Erotics’) and Thomas Spear (‘Jouissances Carnavalesques’), both of whom critique this paradigm of masculinity in Martinique. More recently Murray (*Opacity*) and Mulot (‘Redevenir un homme’) have analysed the origins of this performance of ‘hypermasculinity’ stressing its dependence on its Other, the passive homosexual or *makomè*.

¹¹ This march was organised by Aides Martinique, a support group for people suffering with HIV/Aids on the island. I attended the meeting organised to debrief following the event, where some

Guadeloupe, foreign (French) interventions have tended to sustain the imperialist narrative that portrays the Antilles as fiercely homophobic, Christian and backward, in opposition to metropolitan France, which is posited as a liberated, safe space. Such discourses are themselves vestiges of colonialism and their pervasiveness in the French media serves to justify the islands' continued dependence on France (Agard-Jones, 'Le jeu de qui?' 7-8). Under the guise of 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité', metropolitan-based gay rights advocacy groups are sent to the islands to 'save' and 'protect' their French Caribbean brothers and sisters. Within the islands, organisations such as Aides have been criticised for their use of copy and paste techniques whereby Euro-American methods and judgements are applied and made to fit local realities. *Créoliste* Martinican author Raphaël Confiant commented in response to the march against homophobia in Martinique on the *Montray Kréyol* website in September 2012:

Messieurs-dames, si vous aviez pris le temps d'étudier notre culture créole au lieu de chercher à nous imposer une manifestation venue d'ailleurs, vous sauriez qu'une "gay pride", une sorte de "gay pride", existe déjà à la Martinique! Eh oui, durant les quatre jours du carnaval, du dimanche gras au mercredi des cendres, il y a des centaines de carnavaliers masculins qui se déguisent en femme et qui défilent dans les rues à visage découvert.¹²

Ladies and gentleman, if you had taken the time to study our Creole culture instead of trying to impose a demonstration from elsewhere, you would know that a 'gay pride,' a sort of 'gay pride,' already exists in Martinique! Indeed, during the four days of carnival from dimanche gras to Ash Wednesday,

members described their participation as a mediatised 'coming out,' with certain familial repercussions.

¹² Confiant's article entitled 'Pour le mariage homosexuel...' was published on 18 September 2012 on the *Montray Kréyol* blog:

<http://montraykreyol.org/spip.php?article5694&debut_article_rubrique_numerotes=60>. Confiant's comments respond to debates surrounding the 'mariage pour tous' (*marriage for everyone*) campaign of French president, Francois Hollande's socialist government and the subsequent 'la manif pour tous' (*protest for everyone*), where tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Paris to protest against gay marriage. The prevailing representation in the French media of the Caribbean islands as ultra-homophobic and violent, addressed in Agard-Jones's article 'Le jeu de qui?' is here undercut by events in France. Financial crisis and political change has instead revealed existing and underlying fractures within metropolitan French society that suggest a dominant heterosexism within the former colonizer's society.

there are hundreds of male carnival-goers who dress up as women and who parade openly in the street.

As a supporter of Creole culture, and one of the founding theorists of *créolité*, he argues for the untranslatability of Creole sexuality and gender, yet his argument is flawed in several fundamental ways. In his critique of the importation of ‘gay pride’ parades, Confiant suppresses any possibility of varied and embodied expressions other than male femininity as a smooth indicator of male same-sex desire, or at least implies an absence of defined characterization of masculinities that do not conform to this binary in Martinique. Masculinity is thus unmarked whereas the passive femininity of the *makomè* is intermittently brought sharply into focus, one occasion being the four-day celebration of Martinican carnival. This spotlight that he refers to assumes that carnival cross-dressing is exclusively linked to sexuality which is not always the case, as I will explore later in this thesis, and that to be *makomè* one must cross-dress. Carnival according to Confiant is a safe space of self-expression and openness, which ignores the demonization of sexual minorities (and other oppressed groups such as women) through the cruel satire of song and parody.¹³ Furthermore, while his statement addresses ‘Messieurs-Dames’ it is not clear how the predominantly male-to-female cross-dressing of carnival offers a liberatory space for *madivinez* female masculinities.¹⁴

Confiant, in his echo of Fanon, speaks to the absence of analysis of the cultural and historical particularities of the production of Caribbean sexualities and genders. Cross-dressing in the Caribbean is not always intricately entwined with sexual politics and in this thesis I will consider its uses more broadly as a form of resistance to colonial dominance, yet also as a means of negotiating and resisting a prevailing and ongoing colonial heteropatriarchy. In particular spatio-temporal conditions it can be seen to reinforce structures of persistent patriarchy, yet on the other hand, as a conceptual tool, cross-dressing crucially functions as a fragmented,

¹³ The most famous song parodying *makomè* in recent carnivals of Martinique, commonly chanted by participants, is that by Taxi Kolor who use the melody of ‘Ziggy’ by Celine Dion in their version, ‘Ziggy ‘cé an makoumé.’ The use of Céline Dion evokes the history of the *chanson créole* in Martinique, which was, according to Julien-Lung Fou, sung by groups who would not only play ‘des airs creoles,’ but would sometimes ‘attaque la mélodie de la dernière chanson française en vogue’ (28; *attack the melody of the latest French song in fashion*). See also the entry on my *Unravelling* blog: ‘Carnaval 2013 pour tous,’ in which I briefly discuss this form of sung mockery: <<http://leblogdehammond.wordpress.com/2013/02/12/carnaval-2013-pour-tous/>>.

¹⁴ *Madivinez* is the Creole word for a same-sex loving female and literally means ‘divine hand’.

‘travesty mirror’ (Benítez-Rojo 306), magnifying colonial categories, reconfiguring Western frames of representation and refracting European ‘light systems’. Indeed, one aim of this study is to challenge the former colonizer’s archaic yet ongoing concern with Enlightenment universalism through the trope of the prism that cross-dressing represents. As a cultural practice cross-dressing allows the Caribbean subject to refract and redefine a colonial signifying system in their own terms and thus forms part of an ongoing process of decolonization. The opacity of this effect on the viewer enables the actor to re-style complex and multiple subjectivities along more pliable and thus egalitarian lines.

In the formulation of my argument I draw on Glissant’s theory of opacity (1981; 1990), which has proven indispensable to studies of the cultural practices of masquerade, creolisation and identity construction in the Caribbean (Murray 2002; Britton 1999, 2008). In the introduction to *Le discours antillais*, published in 1981, Glissant demands ‘le droit à l’opacité’ (*the right to opacity*; 14) and argues in his later work *Poétique de la relation* (1990) that this involves:

Non pas seulement consentir au droit à la différence mais, plus avant, au droit à l’opacité, qui n’est pas l’enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible. Des opacités peuvent coexister, confluer, tramant des tissus dont la véritable compréhension porterait sur la texture de cette trame et non pas sur la nature des composantes. (204)

Not only accept the right to difference, but first and foremost, the right to opacity, which is not imprisonment in an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence in an irreducible singularity. Opacities can co-exist and merge, weaving fabric, the true comprehension of which lies in the texture of this weave and not in the nature of its components.

I want to focus on Glissant’s emphasis on texture in this passage and the notion of the weave in its resistance to European ‘illumination.’ For Glissant, the threads alone have little meaning. It is, as he argues, the arrangement of the enmeshed strands, their linkage and crossing over seas and between borders that constitutes the dynamism of the fabric of Caribbean culture today. It is therefore the multiplicity of crisscrossing and contingent subjectivities that ensures mutual cultural

understanding. This is not to say that each individual strand, each resistance, cannot retain its own particularity.

Rather than cultural specificity equalling a return to cultural essences of ‘[la] bonne vieille société créole’ however, as Confiant implies in his article, or understanding opacity as a protective barrier against outside influence (which itself might already be mixed in its form), I prefer to think in terms of the permeable borders and relationality espoused by Glissant. In the structure of Caribbean society the threads form a scrim which keeps out the transparency of ‘enlightened’ heteropatriarchy whilst allowing the toing and froing of the mobility of culture. The characteristic hybridity of the Caribbean (Gilroy 1993, Bhabha 1994), its construction and ‘architecture’ as an inherently modern zone (Trouillot 1992, Hall 2000), ensures that culture can never be guaranteed as pure. As Linden Lewis states, ‘Caribbean people have never been able to seal off their culture from foreign influence and are not in a position to do so at this historical conjuncture’ (252). Glissant encourages a relational position within a global scaffolding, symptomatic of the postmodern and postcolonial conditions in which we live, where binaries of centre and margin are perpetually shifting. In Glissant’s conceptualisation of creolisation that substitutes an ‘identité-souche’ (*origin-identity*) with an ‘identité-rhizome’, the Caribbean, like the cross-dresser who challenges essences of authentic gender, performs its own ‘category crisis’. The multi-rooted, rhizomatic identity that forms part of Glissant’s philosophy of *Antillanité* extends out the intricately intertwined mangrove of cultural mixing proposed in Confiant, Chamoiseau and Bernabé’s 1989 *Éloge de la créolité* (28) and in doing so opens up spaces for thinking through the intersections of gender and sexuality.¹⁵ The ‘identité-rhizome’ involves the dynamic criss-crossing and transversality of borders and lines, a process which, as we will see, is representative of the refractions and fractality of the cross-dresser in the Caribbean. Glissant’s idea of *relation* builds upon Aimé Césaire’s concept of Caribbean identity as ‘poreux à tous les souffles du monde’ (*porous to all the world’s breaths*; *Cahier* 46). In other words his localised theories embrace and incorporate wider global concerns without erasing borders altogether. In a sense, in

¹⁵ See the introduction to Tinsley’s *Thieving Sugar* for a critique of Glissant, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant’s lack of attention to gendering in their theories (24)

writing this thesis I seek to utilize this porosity to privilege the relations, connections and agency within practices of cross-dressing in the Caribbean.

Language and Terminology

Language is one medium cited by Glissant which offers the potential for elusive rhizomatic resistance and creation (*Le discours* 590). It is important, therefore, to address my use of terminology in this project, particularly in a Caribbean context, where identities have too often been defined and homogenised using Euro-American classifications and where, as Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley notes, 'names and histories multiply volcanically' (6). For the purposes of this study I define cross-dressing as the appropriation of a socially pre-determined set of identifiable and readable visual codes which may be worn together as a mask, either alternately or layered, in order to style multiple versions of the self across a range of socially predetermined borders. Used in both a literal and figurative sense, I employ the term 'creole cross-dressing' to define a specific visual language that emerges from both the shared and particular cultural-historical and colonial/postcolonial contexts of the francophone islands with the aim of blurring the boundaries of a range of social, gendered, racial and spatial categories in dynamic ways for specific purposes.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of 'creole' with 'cross-dressing' foregrounds the liquidity of interwoven relations that disrupt notions of static origin and the linearity of colonial/imperial genealogy. In naming this performative practice 'creole' I am therefore emphasising its potential to reroute and reweave 'legitimate' lines of gender, race and class and enable identities that are situated in-between these poles.

In the conversations and interviews I have conducted in Martinique and Haiti for this study, some interlocutors chose to adopt Western French terms such as *travesti* or *homo* over Creole expressions such as *makomè* or *masisi*, suggesting a globalised stance which refuses to sit neatly with my own anti-imperialist project. I would argue, inspired by the work of Derek Walcott, that a process of renaming

¹⁶ I tend to favour dress over clothing as I include adornment, cosmetics and all bodily surface decoration (including skin) in my analysis. This said, given that I discuss techniques of masquerade, disguise and 'passing,' all of which have slightly different functions but are deployed in the 'l'invention du quotidien' (de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*), I also use costume to signify a practice rather than a fixed set of easily identifiable dress codes.

anew may well involve the repetition of the very same terms set out by the colonizer, in order to attach to them different meaning from that originally intended. Old names therefore become a disguise for new meanings and the potentiality for creating alternative narratives. Additionally, in the French Caribbean, where gender traits and sexualities are often called into question through verbal labelling as a performance in the public space, some desires have not been verbalized or fixed by language at all, due to their aforementioned invisibility in public realms and thus remain, as Tinsley has noted, ‘routinely unnamed’ (104). The logocentricity of the hegemonic system of representation must therefore be interrogated, challenged and reformulated.

A current example of the refusal of imported terminologies is being performed by *Kouraj*, an LGBT rights advocacy group in Haiti. Their ‘M Movement,’ which comprises of *Masisi/ Makomè*, *Madivinez* and *Mix*, whose closest Western equivalences would be effeminate gay, lesbian and bisexual, links specifically Creole terminology of other gendered realities as an important act of identity affirmation. The indigenous terms *masisi* (and *makomè*), *madivinez* and *mix*, which are more commonly used pejoratively in contemporary Caribbean society, are reclaimed and revalued as Creole knowledge systems by the *Kouraj* community. The significance of each term in Creole is explained on their website, though problematically only in English and French. Furthermore they choose to add the Euro-American ‘LGBT’ as an explanatory caption in parentheses after every mention of ‘M’ and refer to the Anglicism, ‘MSM’ (men who have sex with men). *Kouraj*’s Creole assertions nevertheless constitute an important shift in language usage which ties local struggles in Haiti to those of a similar impetus in Martinique and Guadeloupe and flips the script of sexual politics in the Caribbean.

These language collisions form part of an oppositional strategy of creolisation, characteristic of the Caribbean. Benítez-Rojo stresses that ‘in the Caribbean, the “foreign” interacts with the “traditional” like a ray of light with a prism; that is, they produce phenomena of reflection, refraction and decomposition’ (21). Acknowledging the myriad problems of labelling I interweave both European and Creole language and tools throughout this thesis in response to Tinsley’s call to decolonize postcolonial theory.¹⁷ For each individual production examined, I use the

¹⁷ As my study incorporates the cultures of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti, I have chosen to use the spelling ‘Creole’ to signify both the language and culture of the islands generally. In the sections

terms most commonly assumed by either the subjects depicted in the works themselves or the spectators of the study when self-identifying.

Performance, Performativity, Drag

The notion of performativity, as deployed in the chapters that follow, stems from the by now familiar work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler on the formation of identities through affirmative ‘citational’ processes, undertaken by social actors. Butler’s influential theories on gender take the example of cross-dressing to reveal gender as a performance which is socially constructed. For Butler, gender transgressions such as drag, in their imitation and illumination of a normative sexual framework, are menacing in that they threaten to expose the ‘origins’ of gender as a fabrication and trouble the ‘naturalness of “sex”’ (*Gender Trouble* 165). For Butler, ‘in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency’ (175). In Esther Newton’s early book on drag performance, *Mother Camp* (1972), she makes the distinction between the transvestite, who attempts to pass as a member of the opposite sex, and the cross-dresser, who exaggerates the opposite sex’s assumed gender codes to appear obviously, inadequately disguised. However the distinction is not clear-cut in Newton’s conceptualisation. If the transvestite is *attempting* to pass as other, itself a type of gender performance, there is always a risk of slippage. After all, no two performances are the same. A failure to convince the spectator might bring such a performance dangerously close to that of the cross-dresser, who, in Newton’s terms, is a more overt ‘copy of a copy’ (Phelan, ‘Crisscrossing’ 162). Depending on the aim, to successfully pass may be thought of in terms of ‘disguise.’ Furthermore, as Marjorie Garber has asked, ‘Is successful cross-dressing, when undertaken as a constant rather than an episodic activity, and when undetected, still cross-dressing?’ (140). In a French context there is generally a distinction made between *transformistes* (onstage female impersonators) and *travestis* (offstage wearers of feminine clothing): ‘Le transformisme est un art, un métier de spectacle, le

where I specifically discuss Haiti, I use ‘Kreyòl,’ the name recognised in Haiti for the Haitian language.

travestissement est uniquement le fait de porter des vêtements et de se maquiller de façon à ressembler à une femme.’ (*Transformism is an art, a theatre profession, transvestism is merely wearing clothes and make-up to resemble a woman.*) This definition provided on the ‘transformistes.fr’ website is problematic firstly in its assumption of a male-to-female unidirectionality. Secondly such a distinction would not be satisfactory in a Martinican context where carnival cross-dressers are referred to as *travestis* in this annual street theatre discussed below. These performances *en femme* and their categorisation as *travestisme* thus blur an onstage/offstage spatial division enabling artistically theatrical cross-dressing beyond the mise-en-scène of the proscenium.

Theorists such as Butler, Newton and Garber have all studied gender performance within a Western framework, with limited interrogation of its reception beyond these bounds. The normative gendered body for Butler is thus shaped by a Cartesian dualism, and the challenge to this dichotomous mode of thinking that cross-dressing constitutes in her study is in turn analysed through a singular Western lens. Butler’s culturally constructed conception of gender and sexuality allows for fluid modes of cross-gender identification, where masculine and feminine values can be layered onto the bodies of both sexes. This potential for gender invention seems relevant to the ever constructed social space of the Caribbean. Yet while gender cross-dressing may potentially work to disrupt clear Cartesian binaries of the self and the body, it needs to first be contextualised within specific histories of sex and gender construction in the French Caribbean. Transposing ‘generalizations of “the body”’ cross-culturally and ahistorically in this manner represents in itself an imperialist project. In undergirding this project with archival material, I delve into colonial discourse to provide a historical context for the various forms of cross-dressing that took place in the late eighteenth century and which served as tactics to manage the self and one’s visibility, enabling people of African descent to ‘perform back’ against the French Empire.

Previous examples (Murray 2002; Arnold 1994), for the most part anthropological in form, of attempts made by foreigners to de-mask ‘authentic’ gender identities in French Caribbean culture, have been to little or no avail. Currently living and studying outside the Caribbean, I have formerly spent two years living and working in Martinique (in 2004 and 2011/12 respectively) and have

conducted shorter periods of fieldwork in Haiti during stays in 2011 and 2013. Given my position on the outside looking in, I would like to stress that my aim is not to unmask the subjects of these productions to reveal their ‘real’ inner selves, but rather to comprehend how the process of masquerade as a cultural aesthetic and an artistic technique mediates marginal and transgressive bodies and imagines spaces for subjectivity and transcendence in contemporary French Caribbean society.

Mimicry, Masquerade and *Mas-culinity*

As Fanon and others have examined in a French Caribbean context, one of the enduring effects of slavery was the internalisation of a desire to be part of dominant white society.¹⁸ Post-slavery Caribbean society thus countered the gender identities assigned during slavery by imitating the rigid European values of the colonizer in order to obtain the ‘privileges of humanity’, ‘civilisation’ and modernity. European definitions of family and sexual relations as the dominant norm were upheld with even more vigour in Martinique and Guadeloupe, which unlike Haiti, and other newly formed Caribbean nations since the 1950s and 1960s, have remained colonies/*départements* of France.

As the first chapter of this thesis will show, mimicry across the social lines and divisions, inscribed by the dominant colonial power, is central to everyday performances of the new world. This was not only a one-way process, exclusively the colonized African mimicking the European colonizer, but rather fashions crisscrossed bilaterally, and multilaterally if we also consider Amerindian influences and the arrival of indentured labour from South Asia and China during the period of 1838 to 1917. Sidney Mintz and Richard Price contend that creolisation in plantation society involved a multitude of ‘nodal points of contact and flow’ (32). Such cultural translations and repetitions result in a slightly modified version of the previous version (that which is presumed to be ‘original’). Indeed a performance can never be repeated exactly without some slight differences, an art which Glissant considers to be ‘neuf et fécond’ (*new and inventive; Le discours* 264). It is these differences and micro-modifications, what Homi Bhabha refers to as ‘slippage,’ that are unsettling in

¹⁸ See also Glissant, *Discours* 15 and Walcott *The Antilles* 6.

their challenge to any claim of the European colonizer to cultural authenticity. Through the mimicry and mastery of European habits and fashions, colonized peoples found a way to ‘dress up’ as their European other and in doing so disrupted a notion of Europeanness as an original model. As Petrine Archer has argued, parody in this power dynamic is deployed as a performative tactic, negotiating and reclaiming agency and even masculinity (‘Accessories’ 103). My discussion of dress, the body, emasculation and race draws on Bhabha’s theories of mimicry in the colonial context whilst focusing in closer detail on operations of gender and class mimicry, two forms that Bhabha neglects to address in his analysis.

In my use of theories of mimicry I refer to Richard D. E. Burton’s concept of ‘play’ in the Caribbean and rethink its relevance to performances of gender. Burton contextualises ‘play’ historically in colonial descriptions as ‘any weekend celebration involving music, dance, food, and drink,’ (*Afro-Creole* 8) and expands it in his analysis of Afro-Creole cultures to include religion (Afro-Christianity, Vodou), festivals (carnival mas, Jonkonnu) and sporting activities (stickfighting, cricket). Burton argues that ‘in the Caribbean all play is oppositional and all oppositionality is “playful”’ and considers how such acts resist external *and* internal nexuses of power. Taking my lead from Burton’s thesis I posit the cross-dressing in the works of my chosen corpus to be a form of ‘gender play,’ used within Afro-diasporic religions, festivals and occasionally beyond these cultural spatio-temporal demarcations, constituting a tactic of anti-colonial resistance that interrogates gender relations and resists easy classification. Creolized forms of cross-dressing are staged as indecipherable magic mirrors that ‘fashion back’ and act to displace the colonizer’s panoptic gaze and may in turn disrupt the gaze of the spectators/performers within the production as well as those watching it from the outside.

I address also the ambiguity of mimicry as a tactic of cultural resistance, what Burton described as its ‘double-edged’ nature (*Afro-Creole* 8). I will show that there is a continuity in post-slavery societies of the dominant gender norms that operated within a heteropatriarchal scaffolding during the colonial period. These ‘new’ Caribbean masculinities imitate colonial patriarchy in order to legitimize the nation’s claims to civilization (Sheller 157-158; Mulot, ‘Redevenir’ 127). Male identities emerge in post-slavery society clothed in a renewed ‘hypermasculinity.’ This

appropriated costume signifies a mastery of white male heterosexuality the power of which was denied men of African descent during slavery. The public performance of 'hypermasculinity' becomes therefore an important measure of male hypersexuality in an already established heteropatriarchal power structure.

In his article from 1994, 'The Erotics of Colonialism,' A. James Arnold begins by critiquing masculinist Caribbean thinkers such as Glissant or Fanon, attributing their heteropatriarchal posturing to the now oft-cited logic of emasculation, which characterized the colonial project. He makes connections with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which famously argued that Western imperialism functioned to feminize its other, the colonized, as a means of legitimizing colonisation. Arnold thus posits a very narrow theorisation of Caribbean masculinity, stating that:

Such a primitive and utterly unsatisfactory model of the colonial situation leaves no place whatever for the colonized male, who can only conceptualize himself as feminine, whence Fanon's Martinican cross-dressers who are, must be, really heterosexual. (8)

There has been significant research into the precarity and even obliteration of Caribbean masculinity in the French Caribbean (Lésel 2000; Palmiste and Kabile 2012), which recognizes the structural violence and humiliation of slavery as a determining factor in this social legacy. In accusing Glissant of subscribing to these norms, Arnold fails however to see cross-dressing as a strategic response in itself, a form of gender play and even Glissantian opacity, with the potential to undo this logic. While he emphasizes Glissant's representation of the maroon as the super-male, I am interested in the other histories of *marronaj* that include women's crucial participation (Dash, *Édouard* 169; Brown *Mama Lola*) and highlight the fluidity of such alternative spaces that destabilize centre versus periphery whilst enabling complex crossings of gender and class as part of a communal identity.

Family Formation and France

The colonial binary of active masculinity (the colonizer) versus passive femininity (the colonized) was further upheld by the maternal and equally paternal symbolic

relationship France maintained with its colonies. Again Burton's study of the construction of the Martinican family in the aftermath of slavery provides a basis for the development of my discussion of Caribbean masculinities. As he concedes, until *départementalisation* in 1946, France was referred to as *la mère-patrie* whilst Martinique and Guadeloupe were commonly thought of as *les filles*, who were dependent on France to nurture and educate them. France was gendered as the sustaining mother and illuminating source of 'civilisation' and the islands (her feminized children) were locked into a subordinate relationship with this force that came to be known as the Métropole. Republican France oscillated between the providing mother and the authoritative father, embodied by the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, who came to 'save' Martinique from slavery in 1848. The French colonies, known also as *la petite patrie*, came to internalise this colonial discourse of the family and its associative patriarchy. Similarly in post-emancipation Haiti, the regard towards France (and Europe), a country which has indelibly marked Haitian history and its culture, continued, and France retained the image of *la grande patrie* as Haitian society modelled masculinity and family life along French patriarchal lines (Sheller 154-158). The discourse of family was therefore crucial in both subjugating peoples and in turn enabling resistance through other forms of *lyannaj* (linking) and relationality in colonial and post-slavery societies. It is no coincidence that a term sometimes used by same-sex desiring subjects in Martinique to self-identify is 'branché', literally meaning connected. There is revolutionary power in the way individuals relate and connect to each other, not only in opposition to, but also within, the hegemonic colonialist model.

There have been numerous studies of the Afro-diasporic family and the cultural-historical origins of the pronounced gender differences that have traditionally characterized the Caribbean. Sociological work undertaken by the likes of Frazier (1939), Herskovits (1937) and R.T. Smith (1956), mostly dealing with the Anglophone Americas, has been supplemented by the ground-breaking research of the 'Gender and Development Studies' centre at the University of the West Indies (Mohammed; Kempadoo 2004). A French Caribbean nuance which takes into account the islands' unique and ongoing relationship with metropolitan France comes slightly later with the work of Fanon mentioned above (1952), as well as Jacques André (1987), Livia Lésel (1995) and Stéphanie Mulot (2009), which have

subsequently informed research projects around themes of gender and culture carried out by the CRPLC (Centre de Recherches sur les Pouvoirs Locaux) at l'Université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Martinique (Kabile; Lefaucheur; Palmiste). Mulot's call to situate discussions of gender identity in post-slavery Caribbean societies within the larger context of racial, social and cultural identity construction is crucial to contemporary understandings of gender codes. Her study of how masculinity is learnt and passed on in Martinique and Guadeloupe is particularly useful to my argument on how the performance of masculinity shapes bodies and their reception. In identifying the role of the legitimizing gaze of various parties (the mother, other men, female partner), she implies the visual authority of surface appearance in this context, which is an aspect I expand upon through my focus on the visibility of cross-dressing. How these performances operate within racial, social and cultural constraints inherited from colonial society is part of what Mulot terms a 'compétence créole' ('Redevenir' 122). The specificity of functioning in multiple registers and the oppositionality to be found within this tactic is central to my study.

The phenomenon of matrifocality as a form of resistance to the imitation and interiorisation of idealized European hegemonic models of family, discussed in a French Caribbean context by André, Burton (*La famille* 232-236) and Mulot ('Je suis la mère'), must also be taken into consideration as its effects can be evidenced in the representation of family in my chosen corpus (particularly in the films *Des hommes* and *J'ai pas sommeil*). A matrifocal family is one which is organised around the mother who acts as a central pillar (or *poto-mitan*) and in which the role of the father is largely peripheral. If it is understood that matrifocality represents a singular subversion of the European nuclear family model, I examine the cultural-historical construction of this model and how it is currently being revised in contemporary Caribbean society through my analysis of discussions arising from the audience study. In this respect, the dialogue generated with spectator-participants provides possibilities to reassess the continued relevance of hegemonic singular family models, and consider new non-essentialist family formations.

Most of the scholarship on cross-dressing in Caribbean culture to date tends to be incorporated into wider studies of sexuality, which is not the focus I want to bring to the practice in my work. Anthropologists Vanessa Agard-Jones and David A.B Murray have both carried out extensive research into same-sex desire and

citizenship in Martinique, with minor reference to both Guadeloupe and Haiti. Murray's study on *Opacity* (2002) includes a chapter on carnival cross-dressing, in which he questions the liberatory and subversive potential of these performances within the temporal delineations of this zone. One theory proposed by Murray suggests that the parody of women's bodies and their dress reinforces rather than challenges a dominant ideology of normative masculinity in Martinican public discourse. As Butler observes, 'drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms' (*Bodies* 125). Another source on carnival in Martinique is the short book by Véronique Rochais and Patrick Bruneteaux *Le Carnaval des travestis* (2006), published by Martinican press *Éditions Lafontaine*. In French the word *travesti* is a somewhat ambiguous term and can signify someone who cross-dresses *en femme* or *en homme* or simply someone *dressed up* or disguised in a costume. The book details the history of Martinican carnival and its various *travestis*, dedicating a chapter to 'Travestis Makoumè.' The authors agree with Murray and conclude that cross-dressing in this context functions to reinforce dominant gender norms, magnifying the masculinity of these performers.

I came to a similar conclusion when I first attended Martinique's carnival as a spectator in 2005, watching bearded, muscular male-to-female *travestis* parade in the streets. However, further research into the historical uses of cross-dressing to parody both the colonial elite and the imposed emasculated stereotypes of colonized males is imperative to better understand contemporary representations, which neither Murray nor Rochais and Bruneteaux provide. Furthermore, since my own participation in carnival in 2012 and following conversations with a range of informants for my reception study, I have come to realize that there is no straightforward evaluation of such performances. As Peggy Phelan states, 'The appropriation of woman at the heart of male cross-dressing cannot be simply declared 'celebratory' or 'misogynist' without accounting for the role of race, class, sexuality, economics, and history which determine that appropriation' ('Crisscrossing' 159).

Given that I am starting from the premise that all gender is performative, I recognize carnival bodies as liminal and involved in a constant process of self-fashioning. The liberatory potential of cross-dressing may depend less, as Thomas

Spear has observed, ‘on the side of the masquerade on which one sits’ (*Carnavalesque*). In other words, even if a subject is located on the receiving end of carnival mockery, what is more important is the mobile position one negotiates. While many of the songs sung by carnival crowds openly ridicule certain groups who, due to their gender identity and/or sexuality, find themselves socially marginalised, such performances can also act as masks and/or screens. In other words behind the front of ‘hypermasculinity,’ the four days of carnival offer a space of what Sheller calls ‘erotic agency’ and homosociality, where desires are played out on a more public stage. Katherine Dunham, who travelled to Haiti, Martinique, Trinidad and Jamaica in 1936 as part of her study of African ritual dance, noted that,

In the Grand-Rue, Port-au-Prince, the season of the mask becomes actually a season of unmasking. Masked or as part of a masked band, one is no longer oneself but is either the being represented in the mask or is merely a part of the crowd. (. . .) It is common for men and women to exchange clothes, perhaps with the desire to satisfy homosexual inclinations. (. . .) A person who, in everyday life, shows no abnormal inclinations will, under the increasing momentum of the Mardi Gras, seek out persons of his own sex for the erotic dances. (*Dances of Haiti* 44)

In *Thieving Sugar*, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley traces spaces of same-sex female desire within the colonial and postcolonial landscapes of the Caribbean. In doing so she seeks to challenge the universality of Eurocentric queer theories and demonstrates how connections and ways of relating can resist the imperial categorizations and divisions of slavery. Christian Flaugh’s short essay picks up on Tinsley’s concept of ‘gender complexity’ in the Caribbean, to provide a useful overview of gender-crossing practices in online media (45). Agard-Jones’s extraordinary essay, ‘What the Sands Remember’, which questions the ‘invisibility’ of same-sex loving women and their spaces of emplacement and dwelling (rather than movement) as they are imprinted on the physical landscape of the Caribbean, offers a short section on *travestissement*. Again her discussion is within the context of Martinican carnival, this time in nineteenth-century literary portrayals of Saint-Pierre, the then capital. Within the context of Haiti, Roberto Strongman’s work on Vodou and gender outlines a dichotomous relationship between Cartesian Western philosophies and Afro-Caribbean philosophical traditions, in order to examine cross-

gender identification as articulated through the practice of possession. While not dealing with cross-dressing per se, Strongman makes an invaluable contribution in emphasising the elasticity and non-binary quality of Vodou. His rejection of any link between cross-gender spirit possession and secular cross-dressing ('Transcorporality' 27) seems to contradict, I would argue, the African philosophies he brings to the fore so judiciously in his study, which recognize the closely interwoven relationship between fabric, power and the body (Buckridge; Tselos; Thompson).

Finally, the most recent and perhaps the most important source, in terms of how it dialogues with my own analysis on cross-dressing in the region, is the edited volume by Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Bénédicte Ledent and Roberto del Valle Alacalá entitled *The Cross-Dressed Caribbean: Writing, Politics, Sexuality* published in 2013. While the studies mentioned above include cross-dressing as an appendix to research on discourses of sexuality within the region, Fumagalli et al.'s volume is centred on the multiple functionality of cross-dressing. Its many uses (not always as a liberatory deconstruction of repressive colonial values) are explored within a larger project of anti-colonial resistance that both highlights and challenges not only gender binaries, but also the racial, patriarchal and class divisions that continue to underpin Caribbean society as a legacy of colonialism and slavery. This collection of essays, which commendably traverses the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch islands, covers actual and symbolic forms of cross-dressing in literary works that blur these inherited colonial categories.

This thesis, in concentrating on the French Caribbean islands, examines the cross-dresser who performs within and against the particularities of French colonialism and imperialism. It offers analysis that is embedded in historical context, unravelling in turn the gendered dissimulations of the colonial archive, and which questions transgressions and transvestisms of the contemporary viewer. In focusing on both Caribbean and non-Caribbean artists who stage and image mutually embodied and visual modes of crossing and passing through dress, I am able to critique the visual regimes that have shaped the islands and the body as a multi-sensory site where identities are continually being re-negotiated. These images and shifting, repeating figures symbolize the islands themselves which intermittently partake in political 'French dressing.'

Travestis aux Antilles

Further to corporeal crossings we might also consider the historical oceanic crossings and trans-culturations that have occurred in the formation of the Caribbean. In Martinique and Guadeloupe, ‘Antilles’ is used interchangeably to denote both the French *départements* and the entire Caribbean archipelago of islands, encompassing nation-states, departments, territories with diverse histories, cultures, languages and landscapes. In the context of this study, whilst critical of the term’s explicit reflection of colonial mapping, I deploy ‘Antilles’ to order to re-evaluate the historical and ongoing cultural connections, conjunctions and distinctions between the former French colonies which made up the *Grandes Antilles* (Haiti), and the *Lesser Antilles* (Martinique and Guadeloupe), and the *île de France* (Paris), despite the arbitrary and artificial geopolitical divisions that aim to separate the peoples of the former French sugar islands. The etymology of the name *Antilles* remains uncertain. Charles de Rochefort, the French pastor and writer, and Jean-Baptiste Du Tertre, the botanist and missionary, both of whom travelled to the French islands in the latter half of the seventeenth-century, emphasized the Greek origins of the word. Writing in 1658 Rochefort claimed that *Antilles* was a composite of *île* and the Greek *ἀντί* meaning ‘opposite to.’ He (along with Du Tertre) considered the term to be thus named as the archipelago of smaller islands formed a barrier opposite the larger *îles de l’Amérique* (*Histoire* 57). The term was also known to have been used more generally in the seventeenth-century to incorporate the larger islands of Saint-Domingue (Haiti), Jamaica, Cuba and Puerto Rico (Linschotten *Description*). In the nineteenth century, Alexandre Moreau de Jonnés refuted Rochefort and Du Tertre’s theory, arguing in his *Histoire physique des Antilles Françaises* that, according to the writings of Pierre Martyr d’Angleria in 1493, after discovering Cuba, Columbus came upon what was referred to as the islands of *Antilia* (8).

The notion of the Antilles constructed as a threshold or arc to pass beyond seems to evoke the connected shorelines of Glissant’s *Antillanité* where the ‘Terre d’au-delà devenue terre en soi’ (*The land beyond became land in itself*; *Poétique* 20). Guyanese author Wilson Harris conceptualizes Caribbean modernity in his theorization of the Middle Passage as a ‘limbo gateway between Africa and the

Caribbean.’ For Harris, the act of crossing creates new possibilities, and from within this new setting emerges an ‘arts of imagination’ beyond the literary (151). The limbo, a dance that originated on the slave ships of the Middle Passage, ritually remembers the physical trauma of slavery through contortions of the body in a limited space. Harris’s metaphor suggests how enslaved bodies were forced to navigate and resist from within their containment and can be compared to other syncretic spiritual practices of resistance and memory in the region such as Vodou in Haiti. Vodou incorporates Catholic and Taino elements into African religions while, for Harris, the trope of limbo connects the old world to the new. The notion of a gateway which must be passed in order to transcend and create anew is embodied by the Vodou spirit of crossing, Papa Legba, who survived the passage from Yorubaland in West Africa where he is known as Esu-Elegbara (Thompson, *Flash* 18-20; Cosentino, ‘Who is that Fellow’ 261). The complex designs of the cornmeal *vèvè* that are sketched on the ground by the *oungan* at the opening of a Vodou ceremony call and invite spirits to descend via the *poto-mitan* central pillar of the temple. They represent intersections between the realms of the visible and invisible, but also the African, European and Taino cultural forces that have shaped Haiti’s history (fig.1). As guardian of the crossroads, Legba’s crisscross *vèvè* symmetrically traces the horizontal *chronos* and the vertical *chyros*, both of which Vodou encompasses, and which designate his liminal position as a double-faced Janus who looks both forward and back. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson claims that Legba,

sometimes even “wears” the crossroads as a cap, colored black on one side, red on the other, provoking in his wake foolish arguments about whether his cap is black or red, wittingly insisting by implication that we view a person or a thing from all sides before we form a general judgement. (*Flash* 19)



Figure 1: Vévè being sketched out in cornmeal for Ezili at a Vodou seremoni in Port-au-Prince, 2011.

Image: Charlotte Hammond.

An itinerant cross-dresser, Legba crafts an in-between site of possibilities onto the bodies of his adherents. During the Middle Passage his clothing became tattered and frayed, yet through his many transient embodiments he weaves back into the seams of his suit personal histories that have been effaced by an official History. Cross-dressing becomes a sign by which this singular system is destabilized and in its ‘fabric-ation’ of another body, other histories are concomitantly written with dress.¹⁹

As Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos Febres has argued with a nod to its history, ‘The Caribbean *is* transvestism’ (Hoving 253). Santos Febres’s *trans* analogy is particularly poignant for a region historically marked, moulded and made-

¹⁹ I use the term fabric-ation in reference to Yinka Shonibare’s 2013 exhibition of the same name in which he uses cloth to explore the complexities of a postcolonial identity.

over by tres-passing on other lands, the unclenching and dispossession of the cultural assets of African people, the gain of material ‘possessions’ and the swapping, superimposition and layering of colonial empires. I have heard on more than one occasion the island of Martinique described, with a tone of disappointment, as ‘la France avec les palmiers’ (*France with palm trees*). A Caribbean island dressed up to resemble France in its hand-me down jewellery and accoutrements, it is dressed up for occasions to publicize and flaunt the wealth and influence of the master.

Even the naming of the islands involved dissimulation and masking as any interrogation of the designation ‘West Indies’ reveals (Loichot, ‘Renaming’). Original names, Madinina or Matinina (Martinique), Karukera or Queraquiera (Guadeloupe), were crossed out and islands were forced to cross-dress as Christian saints: St. Lucia, St. Martin or Sainte-Marie de la Guadeloupe (Moreau de Jonnès 11). Resistance to forced acculturation also took the form of mimicry and masking when African ancestral religions were transported across the Atlantic and came into contact with Catholicism (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 463).²⁰ Due to many constraints, including concerns over the incitement of slave revolts on the part of the colonial authorities, Yoruban spirits that had survived the Middle Passage were costumed as Catholic saints in order to survive. The Yoruba spirits of West Africa, Legba, Ogou and Danballah were concealed behind the masks of Saint Peter, Saint Jacques and Saint Patrick. These collaged costumes remained and were recuperated into the creolized blend of Haitian Vodou culture, integrating the slave master’s religion in a creolised extension of Africa, and ultimately constituting a more complex means of performing back to the colonizer.

Invisible Networks of Cultural Power

The African-derived religious system of Vodou was founded by slaves and runaways, or *marrons*, during the Haitian Revolution in the late eighteenth century, which resulted in Haiti’s independence in 1804. Much has been written (Geggus 2002; Beauvoir-Dominique 2002; Dubois 2004) on the Vodou ceremony of Bwa

²⁰ Some, particularly in the French Caribbean, have argued that very little African culture survived the Middle Passage. Confiant, speaking from a Martinican context that has been assimilated into French culture more than the other French-speaking islands, claims that only ‘une quelconque pépite d’africanité’ (*a fragment of Africanness*) remains in the Martinican consciousness (*Aimé* 131).

Kayman (Bois Caïman) which took place in August 1791 and was thought to have incited the initial revolts amongst the enslaved populations of Saint-Domingue (as it was known during colonial rule). Such scholarship is crucial in proving Vodou's origins as a modern political and cultural system, which undergirds Haitian society at large. Others such as Strongman (2002), Desmangles (1992) and Deren (1953), have focused on the syncretism of Vodou, foregrounding its nonlinearity and non-dichotomous foundations that form a permeable system that has always incorporated outside influences and worldviews and adapts in very modern ways to the needs of the community for which it cares. Vodou is understood as a localised site of syncretism, meaning that from within the oppressive constraints of the plantation economy the religion engaged the self-conscious appropriation of imposed New World ideology, interacting with European and Native American cultures, whilst preserving displaced components of African culture to create a revolutionary network of resistance. Such a phenomenon might seem comparable to the assimilative and homogenising cultural process of 'transculturation' outlined by Fernando Ortiz, but rather constitutes, as Sybille Fischer attests, not 'the bittersweet ground of Caribbean nationhood but . . . a contestatory cultural formation in the hemispheric struggle for emancipation' (*Modernity* 213).²¹ This process of bricolage must not be romanticised as a process of seamless blending, but should be understood in all its conflicted complexity.

There is a paucity of scholarship however exploring the religion and connections to its African roots, particular those of the Yoruba religious tradition of West Africa. Through masking rituals (parades, displays, pilgrimages) or possession 'performances,' Yoruba specialists of southwestern Nigeria 'bring spectacles of cloth, dance and music into the world from their otherworldly domain and send them away again to close the performance.' Margaret Drewal has stressed the journey that is undertaken through Yoruba ritual, where deities journey into the world, yet it is also important to look at how these masking practices have journeyed into the New

²¹ Fernando Ortiz coined the term 'transculturation' to better describe the oppressive process of 'acculturation' within the context of the plantation economy of the Americas (*Cuban* 98). However Ortiz's definition has been criticized by the likes of Fischer for its assimilation of different forms of oppression, with little concern for social and ethnic nuance (*Modernity* 212-214). See also Nigel Bolland's conceptualisation of créolisation in 'Créolisation and Creole Societies.' For Bolland it is 'not a homogenizing process, but rather a process of contention' which takes into account 'structural contradictions and social conflicts' (72).

World on the slave ships bound for Cuba, Brazil or Haiti, where Yoruba traditions remain strongest. The survival and continuing impulse of spiritual-performative traditions that made the crossing evoke what Drewal refers to as the ‘reflexive, progressive, transformative experience of ritual participation’ (xiii). The African-based performances of cloth and personhood discussed in this study not only recall the trauma of slavery but also evoke memories of *Ginen* (Africa) whilst simultaneously moving forward and evolving as important social strategies of cultural transformation.

Children of Lesser Gods

Western narratives of ‘voodoo’ continue to circulate, and practitioners and scholars of Vodou continue to challenge the misrepresentations of the religion and the prevailing stereotypes. Performance artist and scholar, Gina Athena Ulysse, has shared her own frustrations, stating:

Those four ohs [Voodoo] have multiple significations. Dolls and Zombies, bad Hollywood movies and other sordid fantasies. The V-o-d-o-u that I know and struggle to love is not this stereotype. It is about families, spirits, healing, protection, heritage. Most importantly it is about self-making.²²

Nadège Clitandre argues that the ‘singularizing narratives’ of Haiti and its ‘exceptionalism,’ in other words how Haiti is framed and studied from the outside, freezes Haiti in revolutionary time (‘Haiti’s Vision’).²³ The emergence of Vodou in parallel to Haitian independence is significant here. The singularity of the revolution refuses considerations of Haiti as part of a narrative of modernity in Western discourse. Haiti’s projected exceptionalism therefore ensures that it cannot be conceived within a modern frame, and moreover it is within and through this

²² This was a comment in response to the piece ‘Living with Music: Madison Smartt Bell’ on *Paper Cuts: A Blog about Books* posted 11 January 2009 and then cited in Bellegarde-Smith and Michel, ‘Danbala/Ayida’, 2013, 479. A group of Haitian scholars came together in 2011, including Kate Ramsey, Leslie Desmangles and other members of KOSANBA, the scholarly association for the study of Haitian Vodou, and worked and petitioned towards changing the US Library of Congress spelling of the religion from ‘Voodooism’ to ‘Vodou,’ the name officially recognized by the Haitian government in 2003. Their request was granted and the decision was made to change the spelling in 2012, and while such a shift may not instantly prevent the old narratives, it constitutes an important development in English language usage of the term. See Ramsey ‘From ‘Voodooism’ to ‘Vodou’ (2012).

²³ See also Clitandre, ‘Haitian Exceptionalism’ (2011).

discourse that allied cultural influences such as Vodou, are shown to be progress-resistant (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 21). Haiti (like other non-Western societies) was classified outside of history, considered ‘too black and too strong’ and paradoxically has been made to suffer to pay for its freedom.²⁴ As Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot has pointed out in his seminal text *Silencing the Past*, the Haitian Revolution was a non-event, ‘unthinkable even as it happened’ (27) and what became crucial to Western historiography were the partial and synecdochal fictions that created the power of this story. Fischer in her book *Modernity Disavowed* provides an interpretation of reactions among French colonists and the slaveholding elite in the Antilles, who saw equality as a temporary mask or fictional ‘as if’ (171). They struggled to come to terms with the cross-cultural dress of former enslaved people who now wore the revolutionary tricorne as a vital visual signifier of empowerment. In her later essay ‘Haiti: Fantasies of Bare Life’ she argues:

The discourse of Haiti as a place where the ordinary constraints of human society do not apply goes back to the origins of the state in a slave revolution, which was perceived by French colonists and most observers abroad not as a political event with political goals, an event to be understood in the context of the revolutionary age, but as a matter of bloodshed, rape and boundless material destruction. (2)

Such accounts feed a European imaginary that, as Fischer states, ‘looks to Haiti to see only this: insurrectional bodies, tortured bodies, bodies in trance’ (2). The enduring web of gazes and counter-gazes, attractions and repulsions, underpin how certain bodies deemed ‘disposable’ continue to be defined and policed by hegemonic power both externally and internally.

Benítez-Rojo (1992), Burton (1997) and Ramsey (2011) have all considered Vodou’s role historically in offering an alternative *sosyete* (society) to the official one and an important sense of inclusion and affirmation to its members. Any interrogation of Vodou’s historical importance during slavery reveals the creation of what Benítez-Rojo calls ‘networks of cultural power’ (166). These came about through the movement of enslaved peoples (*marronaj*) and their night-time

²⁴ Following independence in the nineteenth century the Haitian state was made to pay 90 million gold francs to France as reparations for the loss of profit to slave-owners. See Geggus *The Impact* and Dessens *From Saint-Domingue*.

gatherings (*rasanblaj*),²⁵ which existed within and against the constraints of a dominant colonial/postcolonial order. As a strategy this recalls, as I discuss in chapter two, both Glissantian opacity and the extended kinship system he proposes as a form of contestation to the imposition of European nuclear models of family organisation and the plantation groupings that were enforced to fuel the economy of slavery. The communities I discuss represented in Lescot and Magloire's documentary *Des hommes* can be said to forge, to borrow the title of Mimi Sheller's most recent book on Haiti, 'citizenship from below.' This alternative mode of belonging in contemporary Caribbean society involves the contestation of the racialised hierarchy of bodies and gender norms privileged during slavery. As Alessandra Benedicty states in reference to disenfranchised citizens in Haiti:

Here, the activities that matter are those that are not officially part of the nation – from sexual relationships to grassroots and religious organizing, they are behaviours that enable individuals to set up networks that are independent from the more official (national) institutions that disenfranchise them.

('Questions' 11)

The Kreyòl *lezinvisib*, meaning 'the invisibles', and from where the title of this study is taken, is used in Haiti to refer to the Vodou spirits, or *lwa*. I am also deploying the term in this thesis to refer to subjectivities that are marked, whether by race or gender, and often experience as a consequence extreme visibility, yet remain under-represented.

I must point out that my portrait of the religion of Vodou, while mindful of the history of its oppression and denigration, is not always uncritical and while I cannot speak with any authority from within Vodou (and Haitian society), I hope to generate mutual understandings of this ancestral belief system that rupture the discourse of development in which postcolonial Haiti is so often sited and locate the fissures and recesses out of which dynamic cultural transformation may be enabled. Perhaps we should be asking, as Karen McCarthy Brown encouraged, not what we can teach Haiti, but rather what Haiti can teach us (*Mama Lola* xiv). This project

²⁵ See the call for contributions for the fall 2014 edition of *e-misférica* (11.2) on 'Rasanblaj' edited by Gina Athena Ulysse and publicized on the *Repeating Islands* blog on 22 January 2014. As Ulysse points out, article 16 of the *Code Noir* published in 1685 forbade the gathering of different slaves at any time and under any circumstance: <<http://repeatingislands.com/2014/01/22/call-for-submissions-caribbean-rasanblaj/>>.

questions the degree to which marginal citizens – the colonized, the enslaved, the maroon and other gendered bodies - enact negotiations within protective sociocultural nexuses, such as the religious communities of Vodou, in order to imagine and exercise mobility, acceptance and agency across broader social and spatial borders. Performance-based border-crossing (whether spiritual or material) in one domain may therefore grant the power and freedom of the unsurveyable needed to survive and constitute forms of ‘erotic agency’. As Peggy Phelan suggests, ‘the binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility is falsifying. There is real power in remaining unmarked’ (*Unmarked* 6). I am therefore interested in questioning under what circumstances these marginal subjects become visible. Furthermore I would like to ask whether Vodou is used as a form of strategic opacity or even a protective mask. I will also seek to question the extent to which it is ‘put on’ as a form of social armour in order to survive. If we consider the Vodou family in Lescot and Magloire’s *Des hommes* within the framework of the Anglo-American ‘closet’, then the expectation is that there will be a moment of ‘coming out’ or a departure from the support system of the Vodou family (Sedgwick). Yet the men shown in the film do not identify with an Anglo-American rupture of ‘coming out’ as it does not necessarily afford them the freedom they desire. The project implicitly seeks therefore, in highlighting first the extended familial support structures which historically were so important to processes of *marronaj* and revolution, to decolonize the imposition of Eurocentric understandings of gender, particularly given the enduring economic and cultural dominance of France and the U.S. in the region; and, in the context of Martinique and Guadeloupe, the inheritance that is France’s colonial policy of assimilation.

My approach responds to the new types of scholarship pointed to by Benedicty in a recent edition of the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, and thus privileges the narratives of selves and communities that are fashioned across local and translocal axes (47). I examine artistic expressions that depict localised and uniquely Creole forms of cross-dressing as practised in the geographically dispersed Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe and by members of their respective diaspora in France. These former slave societies, whose very existence was defined by the economic and social machine of transatlantic slavery, share a cultural history of creolisation: of interaction and collision between a range of European, African and indigenous

cultures. In recognizing their shared and distinct histories I seek to avoid generalizing fashionable theories of creolisation and identify instead a common counter-culture that emerges within and between these spaces, whose aim it is to act against French enlightenment ideals and persistent colonial binaries. I begin with the period of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, which saw the parallel historical trajectories of the French sugar islands take drastically different turns. While Haiti gained independence in 1804, becoming the first black republic (later suffering American occupation, dictatorships and military coups), the slave trade continued until 1848 in Martinique and Guadeloupe, which remained, despite the temporary abolition of slavery during the revolutionary period, colonies of France, later renamed *départements* in 1946.²⁶ Just as the enslaved peoples who rebelled across the French Caribbean in 1791 used the ideals of the French Revolution to provoke what Caroline Fick termed a ‘revolution from below’ (*The Making* 9) in order to fashion their freedom, this project considers Creole expressions that work within, through and beyond the leftovers of French colonialism to literally ‘wear’ down and ‘wear’ across binary lines of Western thought. In doing so it questions the possibilities of agency within the patriarchal and colonial paradigms that have been set up and that continue to prevail in service to European economic and political agendas.

Vodou as a translocal and transcultural religion has crossed to the postcolonial peripheries of Paris, where it is practised in private at home or in fabricated temples. The Paris-based *vodwizan* (practitioners of Vodou) whom I engaged with for this study were not only Haitian, but also included Guadeloupean and French metropolitan subjects. While Quimbois (Tchenbwa) in Martinique and Guadeloupe has these days limited public visibility in everyday life, Vodou is embraced in the metropolitan space of Paris, as a rich African ancestral belief and healthcare system, born of the history of slavery and anti-colonial resistance in the French Caribbean.²⁷ Vodou provides a sense of belonging and an alternative history,

²⁶ In both Guadeloupe and Saint-Domingue people of African descent demanded rights using the language of Universalist Republicanism. This pursuit for freedom led to the abolition of slavery in the French Empire in 1794. Slavery was later officially re-established in Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1803. See Dubois, *A Colony* (6-9).

²⁷ Dimitri Bechacq has done anthropological research on the practice of Vodou in Paris, see in particular his article ‘Histoire (s) et actualité du vodou à Paris.’ For reports on occasional resurgences of Quimbois in Martinique and Guadeloupe visit the *Bondamanjak* site, where articles such as, ‘Dieu merci . . . le développement durable du quimbois est assuré en Martinique’ published on 2 March 2013

its revolutionary heritage standing as a postcolonial model for the rest of the Antilles. Vodou has become an important arena for the embodied performance of memory and *konesans* (knowledge), a realm beyond that of written history. Diana Taylor has described performance as an embodied practice, a way of ‘storing and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity’ (278). In Haiti, performance-based knowledge is learnt, reiterated and transferred through the pantheon of Vodou spirits who are, as Dayan has claimed, the ‘revenants carried in the memories of the descendants of slaves’ (‘Erzulie’ 11). They are the carriers of the stories that have been stifled by official historiography.

Visual narratives of the Caribbean

The Caribbean continues to expand and shift. In this manifold space, experiences produced through the visual create meeting-points breaking through a multiplicity of barriers. (Cozier 7)

As demonstrated by the insistent dominance of stereotypes of ‘Voodoo,’ visibility is powerful and the pervasiveness of images is hard to undo. A politics of visibility and invisibility emerges as a common feature of the images discussed, as subjects manipulate surface appearance and in turn the gaze of the spectator. Haiti, throughout its pre- and post-revolutionary history, has insistentlly been fixed and mythologized through visual grammar, particularly in North American and metropolitan French contexts. In unpacking the stereotypes on which colonial society was forged, I run the risk of repeating and reasserting their currency. Yet the imperative for renewed research on gender and other bodies in the archive deploying a less linear and static approach has never been stronger. Furthermore in this study I ensure that attention is paid to examining the mechanics of the Western system of representation, which I myself am complicitly locked into.

can be found: <<http://www.bondamanjak.com/dieu-merci-le-developpement-durable-du-quimbois-est-assure-en-martinique/>>.

Systems of Performance in the Street

As discussed above, Caribbean masculinity is staged, performed and sedimented in the very public space of the street. Little has been written however on the reception of these gender performances, and the need of the performer for validation by an audience which sociologists Clara Palmiste and Joëlle Kabile identify as crucial to male socialisation in the French Caribbean ('Famille'). Benítez-Rojo states that 'Caribbean performance, including the ordinary act of walking, does not reflect back on the performer alone but rather it also directs itself toward a public in search of carnivalesque catharsis,' constituting a rupture from the Plantation machine (22). The role of the spectator is crucial in the new public *mise-en-scène* of the street, where as Benítez-Rojo suggests, 'excesses of violence' are diverted. Yet in contemporary Caribbean society it can be said that there remains an underlying threat of violence for those whose clothing, language and gesture fail to 'perform' and conform to social conventions that are often still fixed in the repetitive cycle of the Plantation order. I am interested in questioning how the performing body is staged as spectacle in particular private and public social contexts (from Vodou temple to the fashionable milieus of Paris) and what this tells us about the onlookers both as they operate as performer within the artistic work, but also as cultural spectator who watches the fictive/non-fictive representation.

Elizabeth Freeman has described reiterations of gender more broadly, with reference to one of the Caribbean's most prolific performance expressions as, 'the gestural, sensory call-and-response' (161) which constructs, corrects or unravels gender identity within a given context. Call-and-response tradition, which underpins social and cultural interaction in the Caribbean, is here used as a trope to understand everyday performances which involve the 'call' (certain actions or provocations) which is given in order to elicit pre-established 'responses' from an audience. As an interlocking, interactive tool it accentuates the role of the individual within the collective, which has implications for how gender identity is played out in Martinique and Guadeloupe. It also provides the framework to showcase one's mastery of certain gender norms. As Ruth Minott Egglestone asserts in reference to Jamaican performance scholar and choreographer Rex Nettleford, 'You just give me

the start and I will show you how I will finish.’²⁸ Glissant stresses the compulsion of these everyday performances in a Martinican context where, ‘Il faut peut-être remarquer que la pulsion de représentation, faute de s’accomplir dans des œuvres, tend à s’inscrire dans le quotidien. La vie du Martiniquais est certes dramatique, et le théâtre dans la rue’ (*It is perhaps worth noting that the urge to represent, through lack of fulfilment in art, tends to be part of the everyday. The life of a Martinican is certainly dramatic, and there is the street theatre; Le discours* 695).

These theorisations signal the survival of African based oral traditions that continue to thrive in the French-owned islands. According to Bridget Jones, this is the case not only in rural areas but also urban centres that have supposedly seen greater assimilation into French culture (‘Comment identifier’ 35-50). Verbal boasting is an important activity in the reputation/respectability paradigm first proposed by Peter Wilson in 1969 and later examined in a francophone context by André (1987), Christian Bougerol (2002) and Mulot (2000; 2009). This binary was established as a means of characterizing gender normative behaviour in the Caribbean region more broadly. ‘Respectability’ for Wilson is constructed from a colonial inheritance which privileges moral, religious and educational values and is predominantly associated with the Caribbean woman (in turn linking the woman to the white male colonizer). The notion of ‘reputation’, on the other hand, due to its development as a crucial means of remodelling post-slavery society, is considered essentially more Caribbean, and is thus the domain of the Caribbean man. As Mulot explains, ‘la défense de l’honneur, la sagesse, les talents de parleur ou d’artiste font partie des valeurs de la réputation’ (*defending one’s honour, wisdom, being a talented orator or artist all make up the values of reputation; ‘Redevenir’* 119). While such an oppositional dialectic has been criticized in more recent studies by Caribbean scholars (Besson, 1992; Cooper, 2004), I consider its formulation in the post-slavery context, examined in the second chapter of this thesis, in order to consider how norms of masculine and feminine identity were constructed in the French Caribbean in response to French colonialism. As Mulot notes, *parole* and *observation* on the public stage of the street are central gestures to the perpetuation

²⁸ Seminar given by Egglestone at Central School of Speech and Drama, 3 March 2014.

of gender conformity, particularly the hypervirility exhibited by Caribbean men ('Redevenir' 120).

These everyday street performances also require an element of costuming. Novelist Jamaica Kincaid in *The Autobiography of my Mother*, set in Dominica, writes of the father character's fabrication of his masculinity thus:

This walk of my father's was not natural to my father and his gestures were not natural to him, either. My father had invented himself, had made himself up as he went along; when he wanted something, he made himself meet the situation, he made his cut fit the jib. (. . .) The personality they were observing was like a suit of clothes my father had made for himself. And eventually he wore it so long that it became impossible to remove. (53)

Dress is an important component in the performance of publicizing of one's masculinity in public spaces. Appearances matter in ensuring the *maniè moun ka gadé'w* (the way one is seen) and the perpetuation of gender norms. The power of the one who *inspects* is thus primordial in gaining *respect* and shaping gender reception. Not only gender but cultural and racial belonging is often determined by the clothing of the wearer. For example, Haitian immigrants living in Martinique are often identified by their brightly coloured clothing, a stereotype that intimates a proximity to the bright colours of African dress (and thus *africanité*) and furthermore that darker skin tones 'suit' a stronger palette of hues. This assumption is but one example of how rigid Plantation hierarchies of class and colour are maintained through encounters between dress and the legitimizing gaze in the public sphere. Such equations are dependent on the 'eye of the beholder' and do not rule out, as I demonstrate in my examination of performative identities, a continuum of racial and cultural crisscrossing.

Audience methodology

In including an audience reception study of two of the works of my corpus (*Ma commère Alfred* and *J'ai pas sommeil*), I offer a close reading of the relationship between the performer, the performance and the audience. A great deal has been written about the performance of gender (Butler 1990; Garber 1992), with little

regard for the spectator of these performances. As Joseph Harris points out, in his critique of Butler's exploration of cross-dressing, the 'spectator's particular cultural-historical context might attenuate or even counteract the supposedly subversive potential of cross-dressing' (68). The experience of watching is notoriously difficult to record. The slippery, ephemeral quality of spectatorship eludes and resists definitive, fixed conclusions as to the genuine points of view of participants. Writing on the ontology of performance, Peggy Phelan explains that 'performance honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward' (*Unmarked* 149). What is going on in the mind of the spectator remains a mystery and invites closer investigation of the gaps revealed between how a spectator acts and their actual opinions. Audience identities are contradictory and changing, encompassing multiple and mobile subjectivities, thus their exact thoughts are notoriously tricky to 'know'. In the spectator's role as intermediary, he or she not only responds to the images represented on stage or screen, but also situates them in the immediate cultural-historical context outside the auditorium. How viewers interact with an image, a site of negotiation, referred to by Stuart Hall as an 'arena of consent and resistance' ('Notes' 239), is culturally contingent and always influenced by wider, extra-textual social discourses. It is also important to consider the spectator's precise role or agenda within a specific history or context and how that influences the meaning they construe from the performance or, in this instance, screening. A 20-year-old Martinican man who cross-dresses each year during carnival is unlikely to view the cross-gender costuming of a Guadeloupean theatre play in the same way as a 50-year-old St-Lucian man, or a 25-year-old same-sex desiring Parisian woman viewing the play in Martinique. The St Lucian might feel uncomfortable faced with an image of men dressed up as women, the Parisian might not like the superficial interpretation of femininity, and the Martinican might see the onstage representations as liberating and wonder where the main character bought his size 42 heels. Of course none of these stereotypical assumptions may be true. As Dennis Kennedy reminds us, 'There are many tales to tell about spectators, but there is no single story' (4). Many accounts of spectatorship remain imagined and speculative. In the introduction to her book on theatre costume, as perceived by fictive theatre audiences, Aoife Monks asserts, 'it isn't possible to know exactly what the actor 'does' for spectators' (12). The pleasures and experiences of other spectators are

examined here by Monks through their representation in novels, films, paintings and reviews, however without the specific perspectives of the watchers themselves, the study is unable to address fully the possibilities of spectator agency and the different layers of experience when viewing costume. Despite the difficulties involved in writing about spectators, I am still of the opinion that an attempt is needed to do just that within the context of this research project.

Anba Kabann: Cross-dressing and the Carnavalesque

The notion of the carnivalesque, whether in a real or metaphorical sense, connects all the works chosen for study in this thesis. While carnival studies has evolved since the publication of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1965) and his theories need refining in a Caribbean context, the strategic adaptability of his theory should be acknowledged before I build my argument further. Bakhtin's conceptualisation of carnival as a 'second culture' and the alternative hierarchical arrangements it allowed for may well have implications for understanding the 'carnavalesque' behaviours and military dress patterns of Toussaint and other Revolutionary leaders of the Haitian Revolution (or even Haiti's constitution as a nation) and the Vodou communities examined in this thesis. For Bakhtin:

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. (*Rabelais* 10)

However Bakhtin underlines from the outset the temporary nature of this cyclical suspension of norms (10). When interrogating the carnivalesque nature of the Haitian Revolution, as noted above, emphasizing the mobile and passing impermanence of the incursions and inversions of this period only serve to reinforce the discourse of the Republic, who as Fischer has noted only saw emancipation in Haiti as a temporary disruption of normality and social discipline (*Modernity* 171).

Carnavalesque creativity should therefore be evaluated as part of the common everyday experience and as an open-ended and ongoing response to the dispersed

authoritative voices of the collective. In my analysis of ‘gender play’ as a (dis)order that repeats itself without concern for origin, I anchor my argumentation in the street theatre of carnival in order to consider, in turn, carnivalesque performances of gender fluidity during the remaining 360 days.

Carnival in the French Caribbean was introduced by French Catholics who brought to the islands this tradition of a short ‘letting off of steam’ before the long period of discipline that was *karèm* (lent). Enslaved Africans and their descendants used the same Catholic scaffolding to create an original festival of their own, influenced by the Creole mix of African, indigenous and European cultures. This was particularly the case following the definitive abolition of slavery in 1804 in Haiti, and 1848 in Guadeloupe and Martinique (Julien-Lung Fou 81). Without means to afford elaborate costumes, former slaves recuperated materials and *bricolaged* bits and pieces together to create makeshift garments and headgear, which they would store *anba kabann* (under the bed), and which later came to denote a Creole dressing-up box of sorts.

As many Caribbean scholars have examined elsewhere, cross-dressing is a recurring feature of pre-Lenten carnival festivities, particularly in the francophone Caribbean.²⁹ The prominence of male-to-female over female-to-male cross-dressing may be due to the male-dominated performances of early post-slavery carnivals, as both Marie-Thérèse Julien-Lung Fou and Louis Collomb have suggested.³⁰ While they note the occasional existence of female-to-male crossing, the women’s role was traditionally that of *spectatrice*. Early inversions of sex are described on the other hand by Errol Hill as ‘part of ancient carnival tradition [that] permits bolder ribaldry than would be possible if the roles were taken by women’ (81). A sanctioned transgression of gender role which surfaces during the four days of the event, from *dimanche gras* to *mercredi des cendres*, this burlesque practice has been a part of traditional masquerade performances in the region for over one hundred years. In Martinique, carnival practices such as the *mariage burlesque*, analysed in reference to Glissant (*Le discours* 514) in chapter two of this thesis (fig. 2), and men who dress up as women (nowadays known more commonly as *travestis makomè*) are said to

²⁹ For further work on carnival cross-dressing see R.S. King, ‘Dressing Down’ 25-36; Murray, *Opacity* and ‘Defiance or Defilement?’ 343-354; or Rochais and Bruneteaux, *Le carnaval* (for a specifically Francophone Caribbean context).

³⁰ See Collomb’s ‘Carnaval en Guadeloupe’ originally published in *Vie et mort de Vaval* 1991.

have originated in the former capital of the island, Saint-Pierre, in the nineteenth century before the volcanic eruption of Mont Pelée in 1902.³¹ The eruption that destroyed Saint-Pierre, known during the nineteenth century as the ‘Paris of the Antilles,’ dispersed many of these performance forms including the *Touloulou*. They found new homes either in the newly appointed capital, Fort-de-France, or with fleeing refugees who migrated to Guyana.³² In Trinidad, the gradual sanitization and suppression of carnival by the elite, combined with the colonial administration following emancipation in 1838, led to the prohibition in 1895 of cross-dressing (Burton, *Afro-Creole* 203, Hill 108). The Dame Lorraine masque, worn by a man cross-dressed as a woman, parodied the indoor dances and eighteenth-century fashions of the French aristocracy. *Pissenlit* (wet the bed) bands were made up exclusively of men attired in nightdresses, or wearing a red-stained menstruation cloth, who enacted sexual scenes described by the *Port of Spain Gazette* in 1884 as ‘obscenity of gesture and language’ (Crowley ‘The Traditional’ 196; Burton, *Afro-Creole* 210).³³

Carnival in Haiti acts as a performance archive of the country’s carnivalesque history incorporating pre-colonial traditions and pre-revolutionary dissent. Art historian Don Cosentino has written on the parody of effeminate French lords, quoting communications minister Ady Jean-Gardy:

[Carnival] thrives on political stories. It goes on throughout the eighteenth century . . . adding more and more buffoonery, including male transvestites, mercilessly mocking the effete lords of French nobility particularly the regent of state Philippe d’Orléans, the homosexual, provoking his subjects [into wearing] his skirts and lacy frills everywhere. To this day, this character is part of Carnival. (‘My Heart’ 275)³⁴

³¹ Information on Saint Pierre carnival was gathered during an informal interview with the long-standing director of Martinican Carnival, Yves-Marie Seraline in his workshop in Fort-de-France, Martinique, in May 2012. Seraline directs l’OMDAC (Office Municipal d’Action Culturelle) created by Aimé Césaire in 1974. See also Agard-Jones, ‘What the Sands Remember’ 332-33, and Julien-Lung Fou *Le Carnaval*.

³² The Guyanese carnival masquerade of the *touloulou*, whose gender is disguised by layers of costume, is said to have originated in the former carnival centre of Saint-Pierre, Martinique. See the photographs of Claudine Doury (1997).

³³ *Pissenlit* or *Baisser-pisser* mas also have a history in Haiti: see Cosentino, ‘My Heart’ 275.

³⁴ In an email correspondence (31 May 2013) Cosentino explained to me that he had picked up this interview with Jean-Gardy in a copy of the magazine *Sourire 1* while he was attending Port-au-Prince carnival in 1995.



Figure 2: Mariage burlesque masqueraders with the Plastic System Band, lundi gras in Lamentin, Martinique, 2012. Photo: Charlotte Hammond.

Carnival cross-dressing, as the above examples suggest, does not always exclusively involve gender role reversal. As part of an ancient carnival tradition it was equally enmeshed with resistance to colonialism and the practices of the French aristocracy. Such a pointed expression, ‘brimming with *pwen*’ (critical points), incorporates not only ‘failed’ mimicry of the other’s gender traits, but also crosses cultural boundaries in its critique. Carnavalesque cultural fluidity might lead to what Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins call ‘a model of disruptive difference in its display of an ‘alter-body’ (in the Bakhtinian sense) that beguiles and reworks imperialist systems of representation’ (87). In other words it is the very potentiality that carnivalesque cross-dressing represents in its elucidation of colonial relations and power systems, which allows for multifaceted forms of challenge and transcendence of the prevailing order.

In Haiti carnival blends into the period of *karèm* (lent) when the whirling street music and parades of traditional *rara* groups spontaneously erupt at any moment winding their way through what is ordinarily a period of relative calm. Elizabeth McAlister’s book, *Rara: Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, details the activities of these musical armies who in their military organisation, costumes and rituals have grown out of Vodou *sosyete* (congregations). The more unconventional costumes of *rara* are often empowered by the spirits of Vodou themselves, as imaged in Leah Gordon’s short film *Bounda pa Bounda* (2008), discussed in this thesis in chapter three. *Rara*, entwined with Vodou, offers an inverted image of carnival (Benítez-Rojo 166) and in turn, the power structures of the nation.

Rara’s unpredictable nature and the military style organisation of its political action is comparable to the eruption of social action in recent years in Guadeloupe and Martinique, which surfaced during the month-long general strikes of February 2009. The strikes, organised by the LKP (lyannaj kont pwofitasyon; *linking against exploitation*) movement, replaced, or rather constituted the noise and rupture of carnival that year. The chant of the LKP, ‘*Matinik sé tan nou*’ (*Martinique belongs to us*), directed in particular at the *béké* white Creole elite who maintain economic power on the islands, was later appropriated by KAP Caraïbe, the local advocacy group fighting against homophobia. KAP married an anti-colonial chant (against the *béké*) from the strikes with an anti-homophobic message, through their slogan:

‘Matinik sé tan nou . . . ossi!’ (*Martinique belongs to us . . . as well!*) This appropriation comments on the slippage and interdependence of discourses of racial and sexual oppression, highlighting the importance of sexuality to the colonizing project, whilst demanding greater representational visibility. By inserting themselves into a Creole *pwen*, these subjects insert the struggle against imported and Caribbean homophobias into a movement against all discrimination, rooted within the history of the country. Yet paradoxically this alliance runs the risk of reinforcing the colonizer’s orientalising stigmatisation of pederasty, sodomy and effeminacy/masculinity to define non-Western others as inferior.

The creation of armour and political uniforms, whether the red t-shirts of the LKP movement emblazoned with Article 38 of the Code Noir, outlining punishment for escaped slaves, or the Yoruba-influenced strip costumes and batons of rara bands, requires the organisation of people working together.³⁵ The process of sewing and fashioning carnival garments brings together members of the Guadeloupean carnival group *Kiss* in preparation for the annual celebration. The group who first performed in Guadeloupe in 2012 welcome a range of gender and sexual-identifying participants under the mantra that, ‘Kiss est une vraie famille où les valeurs de respect, tolerance et d’unité sont de rigueur’ (*Kiss is a real family where values of respect, tolerance and unity are a must*). Television network *Outre-mer première* broadcast a report on the group on the evening of *mardi gras* 2012 with a selection of mostly supportive interview excerpts from Guadeloupean audience members.³⁶ On the other hand, carnival props and accoutrements can also be a way of violating the bodies of those performing. In 2013 the practice space of the dance group *Gran Lakou*, based in Jacmel, Haiti, was raided in a homophobic attack: drum skins were punctured and costumes damaged.³⁷ While carnival is supposedly considered a safe space for people of all sexualities and gender expressions, a mini gay-pride as

³⁵ The ‘Code Noir,’ written in March 1685 at Versailles by order of Louis XIV, was an ‘Edict Regarding the Government and the Administration of the French Islands of America and the Discipline and Commerce of Blacks and Slaves in the Said Countries.’ Its laws were compiled as a document intended to protect the planter’s property (including the slaves), yet it functioned instead as a script which denied the slaves’ humanity (Dayan, *Haiti* 70-71). Chapter one of this thesis examines the ‘Code Noir’ in more detail.

³⁶ See also Flaugh, ‘Crossings’ 51-53 for more analysis of this media coverage.

³⁷ For more details on this attack see the article ‘Rise in Discrimination in Jacmel’ on the Jakmelekspresyon arts group blog: <<http://jakmelekspresyon.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/rise-in-discrimination-in-jacmel/>>.

Confiant claimed, the violence such acts symbolize is a reminder of the threats posed to these communities in the endless carnival of everyday life.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter of this thesis, ‘Costuming Colonial Resistance in the New World,’ focuses on historical representation of dress and theatre costume in the French-owned sugar islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Haiti. Archival research carried out at the *Archives d’outre-mer* in Aix-en-Provence, France and the *Archives nationales* in Paris will inform this examination of early performance activities, dress regulations and fashions of the islands during the late eighteenth century/early nineteenth century period of the slave emancipation and the Haitian revolution (1791-1804). Drawing predominantly on the reflections and observations of Martinican lawyer Moreau de Saint-Méry in his *Notes Historiques*, written whilst he was living in Haiti during the pre-revolutionary period, this chapter will address the colonial control and containment of bodies and dress prior to the revolution. In interrogating these ‘eyewitness’ accounts, seen through colonial eyes, and their limits, gaps and contradictions, I hope to present a re-reading of bodies obscured by the archive.

Chapter two, “‘Children’ of the Gods: Cross-gender Expression and Healing in *Des hommes et des dieux*,” continues the discussion of the alliance and re-assembly of communities through *marronaj* by initially offering an overview of the cultural, social and historic specificities of the Creole family structure. Using cultural and sociological theories put forward by André (1987), Glissant (1981, 1990), Burton (1994) and Mulot (2008, 2009), this section will deal with the construction of hegemonic gender norms and behaviour within the Antillean family that, shaped by the historical legacy of slavery and colonialism, are rehearsed, repeated and re-imagined through processes of creolisation.

Through close analysis of the documentary *Des hommes*, this chapter argues that spiritual membership of an extended family can enable survival and empower beyond the walls of the *ounfo* (Vodou temple). My argument interrogates to what extent Vodou communities constitute a form of opacity, what Ramsey has termed ‘personalized protective assemblages’ (*The Spirits* 44), guarding non-gender

conforming corporeal performances given by Haitian male citizens on an everyday basis. Drawing on material from interviews carried out with practitioners in Haiti and France, and through close analysis of the spirit family Ezili, I will explore how social empowerment through Vodou holds the potential to confound categories of gender and race.

The following chapter, 'Imaging the Invisibles: Flipping the Colonial Gaze in Haitian Vodou,' shifts away from the thematic content in its exploration of the observational documentary form as an ethnographic project of 'possession'. The main focus is on the role of the filmmaker-observer as 'possessor' behind the camera and the opportunities for those 'possessed' in front of the lens to resist the ethnographic gaze. This consideration of the images from the perspective of the 'subjects of scrutiny' aims to decolonize an inside/outside, subject/object system of spectating. I extend my discussion of mimicry in this section of the thesis and use the trope of the mirror, in comparative reference to both the Haitian religion of Vodou and the visual medium of film, as a means of understanding bodies that tell an inverted narrative of Haiti. I argue that the non-gender normative individuals depicted in Gordon's *Bounda* (2008), and Lescot and Magloire's *Des hommes* (2002), find themselves negotiating between spaces and states of visibility and invisibility, as they performatively construct their identities, within and beyond the frames of the camera.

Theories of the colonial gaze proposed by Fanon (1952), Trini Minh-ha (1991) and Catherine Russell (1999) underpin my discussion of representational oppositions. In attending to the power binaries of looking, I will furthermore examine how the conventional operations of the gaze have been disrupted and diverted by Vodou practitioners who strategically perform *en kachet* (covertly), and how tactics of opacity work as a means of evading over-simplified and homogenous representations of the Other.

Chapter four, 'Spectators *en travesti*,' will introduce the audience reception strand of this study. I will firstly discuss in greater detail my methodological approach to the qualitative audience research carried out in Martinique and Paris. I then question the extent to which artistic practices of cross-dressing influence how spectators may feel about their own identities, bodies and social status. This chapter

therefore speculates as to how this influence may be measured and what form it takes. Theories on spectatorship as a form of temporary transgression into the sphere of the Other put forward by Bennett (1997) and Kennedy (2009) will be used in support of my argument.

In my analysis of audience reception data, collected in response to Jean-Pierre Sturm's dramatic production, *Ma commère Alfred* (2004), I consider the multiple costumes or bodies inhabited by the actors and characters in the play and the extent to which they encode the recognisable figure of the 'makomè' as a motif of pleasurable spectacle or a scenic object within Creole society. These responses will be supported by costume theory by Monks (2010) and Mulot's notion of a 'compétence Créole' (2009), in order to unpick how this oscillating figure moves between gendered, classed and racial identities. My interpretations take into account the mobility of viewing positions. In other words I posit audience identities as contradictory and changing, encompassing multiple and mobile subjectivities. The incongruity of direct responses with actual opinions will be examined via spectator reactions that encompass failed expectations, gaps in understanding and deviations from intended interpretation.

The final chapter, 'Dressed to Kill: Opacity and Masquerade in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil*,' theorizes the intersection of gazes that Denis choreographs in this 1994 film noir. I return to Fanon and his writing on colonial visibility and the alienation experienced by the black man on first arriving in the *métropole*. Themes of relationality and broken connection re-emerge in this final chapter as I discuss Denis's treatment of the Thierry Paulin murders in the 1980s in France. The murders provoked significant media coverage and political commentary that revealed contemporary concerns with the visibility of identity in enabling social disguise and dissimulation. This chapter emphasizes how the visibility of cross-dressing, both in Denis's film and the real-life affair on which the film was based, is foregrounded in tracking down the sartorial wanderer and killer of over twenty old women, the so-called 'monstre' of the Montmartre quarter of Paris. Particular attention is paid to how the director constructs and deconstructs stereotypes of gender and race, with reference to theories put forward by Rosello (1998) and Bhabha (2004), and what effect these images have on audiences, as demonstrated using further qualitative responses collected during the reception study.

In its examination of the costumed constructions of gender and sexuality through the prism not only of Creole particularity, but also the history of transatlantic slavery and contemporary considerations of globalisation, this thesis proposes a renewed perspective on the translocalized expression and dissemination of gender play in the French *départements d'outre mer*, Haiti and France, reading them as important and open-ended acts of cultural memory and resistance. It offers an investigation into 'Creole cross-dressing,' the reassemblage and sometimes repetition of post/colonial signs of gender, race and social class, as a crucial mode of deflecting and dispersing a Eurocentric, totalizing gaze and disrupting a visual order shaped by French colonialism.

CHAPTER ONE

Costuming Colonial Resistance in the New World

In the colonial encounter, the privilege granted to the gaze tended to foreground dress as the most immediate and telling of visual signifiers not only of gender identification, but also of social position. Dressing the body meant setting the scene for the face-to-face confrontation between different parties transported to the New World context of the Caribbean. As a medium, dress constitutes a visual language that created complex and contradictory images on the colonial stage and was employed as a strategy in marking the ambitions, as well as forging both individual and uniform identities, of the different groups of actors co-habiting the slave-holding societies of Martinique, Guadeloupe and pre-revolutionary Haiti (then known as Saint-Domingue).

This chapter will consider the gendered and clothed body in the French Caribbean as it emerges in the colonial textuality of the archives during the period of slave emancipation (1791-1804). As a technique of self-styling, dress symbolized a subtle and covert form of resistance to the colonial hierarchies of power, and interrogated emerging discourses of gendered and racial otherness. I then examine, in the chapters that follow, how these representations are accumulated, repeated and re-vamped in contemporary performances of French Afro-Caribbean expressive cultures. My emphasis is primarily on the body as a site of performative transformation, with particular focus on the political possibilities of dress as a means of transgression and resistance, as well as adherence to colonial authority.

Printed sources, published soon after Haitian independence in 1804, together with archival research carried out at the *Archives d'outre-mer* in Aix-en-Provence and the *Archives nationales* in Paris, will inform this examination of dress regulations and early performance activities of the islands during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century period of the slave emancipation and the Haitian revolution. As Jean Fouchard has noted, the importance that dress was afforded amongst the slaves was enough 'to stir the colonists to restrain this

seemingly dangerous form of slave ascension' (*The Haitian*, 41), through the introduction of legislative prohibition and a series of *ordonnances*, that policed the way certain bodies could be attired.¹ It is these stirrings, changes in policy and strategies adopted, as they become evident in colonial discourse of the period, that will inform this study. Drawing largely on the reflections and observations of that 'rigorous codifier of colonial law' (Dayan, *Haiti* 179), Martinican born M d ric Louis  lie Moreau de Saint-M ry, from his *Notes Historiques*, written whilst he was living in Saint-Domingue, the first part of the chapter will re-examine the colonial control and containment of bodies and gender prior to the revolution. The earliest legal document referenced will be the Code Noir, authorized by Louis XIV into French law in 1685. This document comprised sixty articles, inscribed the terms of the French colonial project of the transatlantic slave trade in the Americas, outlining 'the Commerce, Administration of Justice, and the Policing of the French Colonies of America.'²

The second part will consider the materiality of dress as a weapon for undermining, and revealing the arbitrary nature of, colonial legislation and European moral codes, that served to camouflage a social order increasingly based on differences of gender and racial otherness. This will lead to an interrogation of the mimetic and counter-mimetic strategies of disguise and masquerade employed by the enslaved, *marron* (the formerly enslaved who had fled the plantation and had formed communities in rural areas of the island) and free populations of colour as they sought to gain social and economic mobility within plantation society and survive in everyday performances on the French colonial 'stage'. I focus on the performance activities and familial *marronaj* of the different urban centres, considered to be the 'Perles des Antilles': Le Cap (Saint Domingue), St Pierre (Martinique) and Pointe-  Pitre (Guadeloupe). In each example I explore I hope to remain cogniscent of the historical power bias of the archive as a source of reliable narrative, avoiding what Arlette Gautier condemns as repetition of the sinister history according to the slavemaster (9). My aim is therefore to read against the grain of the archive, as

¹ I employ the term 'slave' cautiously, aware of its diverse meanings in varying contexts. In this context I am using it to signify African people transported to the Caribbean as the imported commodities of European colonial enslavers.

² See *Le Code Noir ou recueil des r glements rendus jusqu'  pr sent concernant le gouvernement, l'administration de la justice, la police, la discipline et le commerce des n gres dans les colonies fran aises*; also its interpretation in Roach, 'Body of Law.'

Haitian historian Michel-Rolphe Trouillot (47) urged, as I draw attention to the vestiges of habit and uniform that were unravelling and undoing the official laws and constitutions in the late eighteenth-century.

While Gautier stressed the lack of preservation of French Caribbean slave narratives, analogous with those edited by abolitionists in the United States, Deborah Jenson's *Beyond the Slave Narrative* challenges this assumption in its presentation of a Haitian literary voice of the formerly enslaved. Her approach of reading between colonial texts, interrogating different forms of mediation and popular Creole poetry, challenges notions of authorship and power whilst demonstrating that archival sources are not limited to the perspective of a unique social group.

Studies that have given attention to gender roles amongst the enslaved and free populations of the French Caribbean during the eighteenth century have tended to focus exclusively on society in the colony of Saint-Domingue.³ In this study, I have also drawn upon several sources from plantation records from the smaller French-owned islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, whose societies, also founded on sugar production, were relatively similar up until Haitian independence in 1804. Yet it is important to note that the extent of material from these smaller islands does not compare to the surprisingly complete records of Saint-Domingue plantation trade and labour; slave-owners preserved documentation, including letters and proof of property, in order to claim compensation for their losses during the revolution. So despite many having emigrated to Louisiana, Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic) and further afield, the details of their plantations and the indemnities they requested in the 1820s have largely remained in the possession of the French government and can now be found in the *Centre d'archives d'outre-mer* in France (Geggus, *The Impact*; Dessens).

Gender and Slavery

Opinions differ as to the extent to which gender was considered an important and defining divider of plantation societies in the French colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint Domingue. Gautier's pathbreaking study of women slaves in

³ Such as those by Socolow (1996); Geggus (1996); Garrigus (1997); Jenson (2011).

the French Caribbean, *Les soeurs de solitude*, foregrounds the enslaved woman's central economic role in the reproduction of slavery and addresses differences of gender in former African contexts as well as the metamorphosis of their roles once transplanted to a New World context: 'Dans l'affrontement de deux cultures, la division entre les sexes est essentielle car, si elle informe le moindre des gestes, elle peut être très différente' (*In the confrontation between two cultures, gender division is essential because, if it informs the least gesture, it can be very different*; 7). Other arguments, in attending to this re-alignment of roles as a result of forced migration, have highlighted the erasure of gender binaries and thus the blanket of homogeneity shrouding slavery, with female slaves expected to take on the same physical work as their male counterparts.⁴ A slant towards this androgynous account of gender equality, however, fails to take into account gender difference amongst the free population of *affranchis*, who were an increasingly influential group in Caribbean societies of the late eighteenth century.⁵ It also ignores the exaggerated feminization of non-white men by white Creoles and European travellers and conveniently fails to address the sexual exploitation of free and enslaved women by men, no matter what their skin tone.⁶ Such inattention to particularities of gender would also suggest that modes of resistance to the systemic violence and patriarchal power of the colonizer would take the same form for both sexes; however, as I hope to demonstrate further, this is not always the case.

Despite evidence of women's active participation in the revolution, Laurent Dubois, in his study of slave emancipation in Guadeloupe and Saint-Domingue in the 1790s, *A Colony of Citizens*, asserts that many of the French political texts written at this time focused on the passage from slavery to manhood (162). As

⁴ See Pierre de Vaissière's description of the different roles within the *ateliers* in *Saint Domingue* 168; also Schoelcher *Des Colonies Francaises* and Moitt 'Slave Women and Resistance.'

⁵ *Affranchis* were slaves who had earned, bought or gained freedom in plantation society. The slave-owner might grant a slave his or her freedom after they had completed a loyal service over a certain number of years. The offspring of *affranchis* were automatically considered free, as were *mulâtres* or *mulâtresses* (of mixed black and white racial descent) fathered by the slavemaster. Many of the *affranchis* were mixed race and referred to as *gens de couleur*, which denoted anyone who was not considered of pure white lineage in plantation society. For work on *gens de couleur* see Garrigus, 'Sons of the Same Father'; Socolow, 'Economic Roles'; S.R. King, *Blue Coat*.

⁶ If enslaved women were shown to be just as capable of working in the fields and carrying out physical labour, enslaved men consequently were rendered redundant and impotent, thus feminized. For more on the double oppression of the bodies of black women as both slave (and reproducer of slaves) and sexual object for white, mixed and black residents of plantation society, see Gautier 262-3; Geggus, 'Slave and Free'; Moitt 'Slave Women and Resistance'.

slaves, black African and Creole men had been denied the possibility of masculinity, a right which was symbolically reclaimed through the adoption of military regalia during the Revolution. The role of the (French and Spanish) military uniforms as performative strategy, worn by both male and female slave rebels, should not be underestimated. Perceptions of this military garb, with its associations of pomp and parade for both the enslaved and colonizer, contributed significantly to the slave uprising as it erupted in Saint-Domingue in 1791.

This tactic of fashioning themselves with the same trimmings as their enemy constituted a desire for gendered and political equality amongst the slaves, but more importantly, mastery of dress was a means of unpicking political and ideological mastery for the purposes of social agency. In successfully miming the colonial authority and its privileges, slaves demonstrated the markers of distinction upholding this power to be imitable and therefore based on artifice. Performance in this case does not enact the 'real', that which is presumed to be original, but rather shows all reality to be socially designed. In the context of the Haitian Revolution, wearing the clothing of one's other as social performance unveiled the construct of self and other in the negotiation of power. Thus at the point at which mimicry reveals, it also defuses the authenticity and therefore the originality of any claim made by the colonizer to authority (Bhabha 86-88).

Dress Codes and Colonial Relations

In Steve O. Buckridge's 2004 study of dress and resistance in eighteenth and nineteenth century Jamaica, he argues that,

colonial society [was] founded on exploitation and force. Therefore, colonial domination was ultimately grounded in the notion of a face-to-face relationship between local co-residents. Dress, as the principal visible element in this face-to-face relationship, not only portrayed multiple ideologies of the 'other' but also served as the medium within which colonial relationships were enacted and contested. (78)

Dress functioned as a code to decipher social status: on the one hand keeping separate different social groups within the colony, whilst on the other, offering the

potential to assert identity along the same axes of identification, blurring as it drew attention to the dividing boundaries of power.

The affective impact of the early visual encounter between dressed bodies is addressed in travelogue accounts written by missionaries such as Père J.-B. Labat or Père J.-B. Du Tertre, who spent time in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint-Christophe in the latter half of the seventeenth century. On slave attire P. Du Tertre remarks,

C'est ici où paraît véritablement la misère des esclaves, car si l'on juge ordinairement de la qualité d'une personne par la richesse des habits qui la couvrent on a lieu de dire en voyant la pauvreté des haillons de nos nègres qu'ils sont très misérables et de la dernière condition qui soit au monde. (II, 585)

It is here where the real poverty of the slaves is revealed, as one normally judges a person's stature by the richness of the clothing that covers them, it is possible to say that on seeing the state of the rags worn by our negroes, that they are very pitiful and in the worst condition in the world.

Karol K. Weaver suggests that such descriptions of poor clothing, in these early days of the colony, conveyed a critique of the harshness of slavery (48). However I would question whether these religious clerics were offering a genuine admonishment of the 'evils of slavery' per se, but rather the 'evils' of the semi-nudity of the slaves, often remarked upon by new-comers to the colonies.⁷

Dress is cited much later during the early nineteenth century as a strategy for regaining possession of the colony of Saint Domingue. In a letter addressed to the King of France in 1814, the colonist Brulley states:

Tous ceux qui connaissent les nègres conviendront qu'un propriétaire, même leur maître qui se présenterait à eux vêtu en simple particulier, ou avec l'uniforme de dragon ou de fusilier, sans aucune marque de commandement,

⁷ Common reactions towards nudity by European visitors on entering the colonies are listed by Fouchard (*The Haitian*, 48). Comaroff also notes that in early Evangelical culture brought to Africa, 'clothedness was next to godliness' (402).

obtiendra difficilement le respect et la subordination, sans lesquels il n'y a nul espoir de restauration des cultures et manufactures de Saint Domingue.⁸

All those who know the negroes agree that an owner, even their master who presents himself to them dressed in a simple outfit, or in the uniform of a dragoon or rifleman, without any mark of grade, will not gain the respect or subordination of the former, without which there is no hope of the restoration of Saint-Domingue's agriculture and trade.

Dress had previously been employed in the colonies by the arbiters of power as a dividing barrier, creating and maintaining the separation and outer limits of the bodies of a range of social archetypes, loosely condensed into the dichotomy of those who commanded respect and those who were considered subordinate. The above statement, read now, perhaps indicates however that the colonists were also influenced by the tactics employed by the slaves during the revolution.

An examination of more detailed accounts of slave clothing shows that surface dress was not always a straightforward signifier of social identity. Colonist and lawyer, Moreau de Saint-Méry, alludes to the narrative of dress amongst the slave population of eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue as yielding the potential to alter dominant representations of economic division and power. On the head-wraps worn by enslaved women, he says this:

Ce mouchoir qui ceint le chef (. . .) tantôt il est simple, et n'a d'autres valeur que dans ses contours ; tantôt la forme de la coiffure exige que dix ou douze mouchoirs soient successivement placés les uns par-dessus les autres, pour former un énorme bonnet (. . .) Quel luxe quand le moindre de ces douze mouchoirs coûte un demi-louis de France, et qu'on songe que celui du dessus ne pouvant être mis plus de huit jours, il faut avoir des suppléments !

(Description 76)

This headscarf which frames the head (. . .) sometimes it is simple and its only value is the outline; sometimes the shape of the headdress requires ten or twelve scarves to be placed on top of each other to form an enormous

⁸ 'Propositions pour rentrer en possession de la partie française de Saint-Domingue, présenté au Roi par M. Brulley, Paris 1814. Archives nationales d'outre-mer (hereafter cited as ANOM); Collection Moreau de Saint Méry (MSM), 1er série Volume no. 179 (87 MIOM 59).

bonnet (. . .) What luxury when each handkerchief alone costs a French Demi-louis and if one thinks that the outer can only be worn for eight days, one must have extra funds!

The economic situation of slaves, who were transported to the islands dispossessed of all material objects, was not reflected in their clothing, the visibility of which became a privileged marker of identity and self-worth. Adopting the latest fashion styles and materials coming out of Paris was therefore a means of filling this void of displaced memories (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 40). On Sundays or holidays, dress narrated a different story to that of work days. Historian Gabriel Debien notes that Sunday became ‘le jour de la coquetterie’ (243).⁹ Du Tertre also observed that Sunday garb was particularly decorative:

Les hommes ont une chemise et un caleçon de couleur avec un chapeau. Les femmes ont aussi une chemise avec une jupe de toile blanche ou de quelque serge rouge ou bleue (. . .) elles portent des colliers et des bracelets de rassade blanches à quatre ou cinq rangs avec des rubans de couleur à leurs cheveux. (II, 486)

The men have a shirt and coloured trousers with a hat. The women have a blouse with a skirt made from white cloth or red or blue twill (. . .) they wear necklaces and rows of four or five bracelets of white glass and ribbons in their hair.

The transgression of an established dress order, which represented the social hierarchy of the colony, caused concern amongst the colonial administration. As Debien explains,

Les administrateurs et magistrats, gens grognons par profession, trouvaient ces habitudes dangereuses, cause des grandes dépenses au-dessus des moyens des esclaves portées ainsi aux vols et au libertinage. Ils ne voyaient pas d’équilibre entre le luxe des femmes et leur vertu – au moins le dimanche. (243)

⁹ Trouillot (82) and Kate Ramsey (*The Spirits* 25) have pointed out that planters used Sunday dress, dances and performance gatherings as proof of ‘the contentment of slaves.’

The administrators and magistrates, bad-tempered for a living, found these habits dangerous due to the large expenses above the means of the slaves, which led to theft and libertinism. They did not see a balance between women's luxury and their virtue – at least on Sundays.

The colonized rapidly re-defined lavish dress modes, however the colonizer then recast these 'acts' as legal transgression. Such forms of anti-colonial resistance, as Debien suggests, soon masqueraded as a breach of European 'morality'.

The legislative body of articles which made up the Code Noir, to some extent was designed to protect slaves from negligent treatment on the part of their masters. Article XXV ordered that every slave should each year be provided with two sets of clothing or four *aunes* (ells) of cloth by their master.¹⁰ However as de Vaissière asserted, 'c'est qu'en ce qui touche l'esclavage, l'usage est tout, la loi n'est rien' (*As far as slavery is concerned, practice is everything, law means nothing*; 174). It is doubtful that these regulations were respected by slave-owners and enslaved peoples were lucky to receive one per year, often just before Christmas in time for seasonal festivities. This was particularly so for domestic slaves, working in the *grand'case*, who, if they appeared well-dressed at work, were so as an extension of the *colon's* vanity, highlighting his status and/or desire to appear a fair master (Girod 138; Debien 241). The same batches of fabric, known as 'balendrap', were used to clothe the *petits blancs*,¹¹ package the cotton, cover the floor of the *grand'cases* and as hospital sheets on the plantation (Debien 236 – 237). Either a dressmaker from the master's house would sew the clothing for each slave or the slave would be given the fabric, some thread and expected to fabricate their own garments, which permitted more individuality in their creation, also allowing for the introduction of some African styles to be crafted in this European-imported cloth. Slavemasters also realised that it was much cheaper to allow slaves to cultivate their own garden patch, than providing them with food themselves, and so it was decreed that, 'il sera

¹⁰ An aune (ell) was the equivalent of four roman feet and was used as a measurement until 1793 when the metric system took over (DuPlessis 175-191). Article XXV of the Code Noir stated: 'Seront tenus les maîtres de fournir à chaque esclave, par chacun an, deux habits de toile, ou quatre aunes de toile, au gré des maîtres.'

¹¹ Described by Debien as 'ces habitants peu fortunés' (238), the *petits blancs* were the lower class, poorer white residents of the colonies, those who worked under the plantation owner or planter as managers or overseers or, in the towns, those employed as shopkeepers, notaries or similar provincial trades (C.L.R. James 26).

distribué à chaque Negre ou Nègresse une petite portion de l'habitation, pour être par eux cultivée à leur profit, ainsi que bon leur semblera' (*Each Negro and Negress will be given a small portion of the plantation to be farmed for their own gain, whichever way they see best*).¹² The growing of their own provisions provided the opportunity to sell extra produce at local markets and many slaves were able to buy more extravagant fabrics and accessories as a result.

Inside the wardrobes of the *colons*

In a short passage on *le vêtement* of everyday society in eighteenth century Saint-Domingue, historian François Girod begins with the statement that dress 'ne sera jamais l'objet de grandes discussions chez les colons de Saint-Domingue; le climat et les habitudes apportées d'Afrique permettaient, en effet, de le simplifier considérablement' (*will never be the subject of great discussion amongst the colonists of Saint-Domingue; the climate and the customs brought from Africa actually allowed it to become considerably simplified*; 137). While the clothing of the *colons* is not my focus in this study, I think their dress habits, contrary to Girod's assertion, do require attention, particularly as he goes on to describe, in stark contrast, the well-documented extravagance and taste for finery exhibited by the enslaved population. The comparison evokes the question of who had the right to luxury, and perhaps more importantly its public display, at this time. Girod seems to contradict himself by concluding that, 'les raffinements dans la tenue allaient généralement de pair avec la créolisation' (*refinements of dress went hand in hand with creolisation*). However there is evidence that the process of creolisation altered trends in dress amongst the enslaved, the *affranchi* as well as the white Creole communities, who like the colonized subject, adopted habits of their Other as a form of lessening their power. Moreau de Saint-Méry describes the rivalry between white Creole women and the *mulâtresses* of Saint-Domingue in terms of 'une antipathie qui prend sa source dans la persuasion que leurs vues s'entre-nuisent' (*an antipathy*

¹² Outlined in the *Ordonnance du roi*, of the 15th October 1786, concerning the judges, *economes-gerans* treasurer-managers of the Windward Island plantations, ANOM, F3 265. See also Peytraud, *L'esclavage* 227.

which comes from the conviction that their views interweave in harmful ways; Description 111). In first revealing the ambivalent blurring of social boundaries caused by this bi-directional mimesis, he is then quick to attribute the ruinous effect on the Creole family structure to the pleasure-seeking *Mulâtresse* as well as to the jealous white Creole woman who took the former as a model, even going as far as adopting the same *madrás* headwraps.¹³

It is also worth considering the influence of Parisian fashions on white Creole dress tastes, particularly those who could afford trips back to France, where they would spend several months in Paris indulging their tastes and ‘luxuriating in the amenities of civilization’ (James 23). Accounts from the Rochechouart habitation in Anse à l’Ane, Martinique between 1761 and 1782 reveal a survey of the sumptuous fabrics and high-cost adornments purchased from various *tapissiers*, *cordonniers* and *perruquiers* in Paris by the plantation owner and his family.¹⁴ Some of the fabrics listed are quite heavy and ill-suited to the Caribbean climate, such as velour, *futaine* (a heavy cotton used for menswear) or the *peluche*, which would have been used to stiffen and line the Baron’s silk dress coats. The colour choices also represent eighteenth century Parisian fashions, including rich crimsons, cinnamon browns, ivory and blue. Presumably for the Marquise de Marie Anne Claude de Rochechouart herself, garment styles constructed in Paris, to be shipped back to Martinique, followed the contemporary trends, with a satin *polonaise*¹⁵ costing approximately fifty-two *livres* including material and tailoring costs, and a *robe à l’anglaise*, also made up of satin. The choice of satin over a figured or chiné silk in constructing these styles might suggest an economic constraint of some sort. According to these records, Rochechouart bought five *aunes* of white satin for forty

¹³ In Leonora (Hassal) Sansay’s *Secret History*, a series of letters she wrote during the Haitian revolution which were published in 1808, she describes the arrival of Pauline Leclerc to Le Cap, who is soon seen to act and dress like a Creole, even wearing a Madras headwrap: ‘She has a voluptuous mouth, and is rendered interesting by an air of languor which spreads itself over her whole frame. She was dressed in a muslin morning gown, with a Madras handkerchief on her head’ (8). The paintings of Agostino Brunias, an Italian artist who emigrated to the Antilles in the 1770s, also reveal fascinating depictions of racially ambiguous women adorned in Madras head ties. His work was said to have a subversive effect, in its undoing of the racial order of slave society. Toussaint L’Ouverture was believed to be an admirer of the artist’s work, and the buttons on the revolutionary leader’s waistcoat were decorated with scenes from Brunias’s paintings (Bagneris, *Coloring*).

¹⁴ The Rochechouart papers are kept in the Archives Nationales (hereafter cited as AN) in Paris, FR/CHAN/T/355.

¹⁵ The *polonaise* was a style of dress originating in France, which was fashionable between 1776 and 1780. Folds and drapes of silk are gathered up on the skirt and stitched into place, ensuring both a decorative and functional result. See Hart and North 66.

livres, whereas five *aunes* of velour is shown to have cost a hundred and ninety-three *livres*. Colonial lawyer Michel René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, visitor to Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century, asserted that, 'le luxe de parure n'annonce point la liberté ni le bonheur, mais le luxe de commodité est le partage des hommes heureux' (*Luxurious finery does not declare freedom nor happiness, but luxurious commodity is shared by the fortunate*; 106). There is also a sense in Hilliard d'Auberteuil's writing that far-removed from the norms and fashions of the métropole, a single-facing satin would 'pass' more easily in Creole social circles. Thus the desire to construct an appearance of sumptuous luxury was arguably just as strong amongst the *colons* as amongst the slaves.

The latest trends from Paris were highly sought after and colonists would sometimes allow a more privileged slave to accompany them on trips to France, in order to gain training in the latest *couture* techniques (Weaver 48). This short advert in *La Gazette de la Martinique* in January 1784 announces the exciting news that:

Le Sieur Pallu, arrivé depuis peu de France, demeurant chez Mde Dandaunau, près la Calle de la Magdeleine, exerce la profession de Tailleur, & travaille dans le dernier goût, venant de quitter Paris. On trouvera chez lui des habits de drap des premieres fabriques, des vestes et des habits brodés, très-propres au Pays.¹⁶

Sire Pallu, recently arrived from France, residing at Madame Dandaunau's house, near to the Calle de la Magdeleine, is a practicing tailor by trade and fashions the latest trends, having only just left Paris. You can find clothing of the finest cloth, embroidered jackets and garments, distinctive to the country.

In describing the colonizer's dress, Hilliard d'Auberteuil implicitly denounces the social rapprochement of the slaves and the enfranchised inhabitants of colour (and perhaps also the white creole populace) via this avenue of access: 'c'est souvent en habits de velours qu'on va se renfermer à la Comédie' (*it's often dressed in velvet that we shut ourselves away in the Comédie*), he says in reference to the boxes in one of the largest theatres in Le Cap.¹⁷ 'Le moindre inconvénient de ce luxe

¹⁶ ANOM, Moreau de Saint-Méry, R.C. 2eme Série, vol. 30.

¹⁷ The theatre Comédie du Cap was established in 1740, with a troop of twelve men and eight women (Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* 360).

de vanité, c'est que le désir immodéré de paraître rend égaux aux yeux de bien des gens tous les moyens de satisfaire ce désir' (*The slight inconvenience of this luxurious vanity is that the uncontrollable desire to maintain appearances renders equal, in the eyes of many, all the means of satisfying this desire*; 101).¹⁸ Hilliard d'Auberteuil's obsession with the blurring of social boundaries via the act of 'paraître' seems to mask an underlying concern with the rising economic, social and aesthetic power of certain groups in the colonies at this time, particularly the increasingly influential *gens de couleur*. This anxiety leads the colonizer to resort to race as a marker of difference and means of quelling potential 'contamination.'

As Colin Dayan points out:

What is allowed, admired, or unquestioned in Europe becomes ludicrous in the colonies. The glories and refinements of the Old Regime, when practiced by those who did not inherit the right to do so, can be nothing but the worst kind of imitation, degraded and degrading. When does luxury become cheap? When does love become debauch? Some answered: When Paris comes to Saint-Domingue. (*Haiti* 172)

Glissant describes the legacy of the 'origins' of this social order in *Le Discours Antillais*, when he proposes that:

Toute mimesis suppose que ce qui est représenté est le 'vrai réel'. Quand elle porte sur deux réalités dont l'une est vouée à reproduire l'autre, il ne peut manquer que les tenants de l'opération se considèrent comme vivant un irréel permanent. C'est notre cas. (774)

All mimesis presupposes that what is represented is the 'true real'. When it is brought to bear on two realities, one of which is devoted to the reproduction of the other, the tenants of the operation consider themselves to be living a permanent unreality. This is the case for us.

While the colonial subject is represented as actively seeking to assimilate the ways of the colonizer, and ridiculed in the process, the colonizer passively succumbs to infection by the other (Dayan, *Haiti* 175). Moreau de Saint-Mère, for example,

¹⁸ The white creole plantocracy, far removed from the moral codes of the métropole, were often criticised by French visitors to the colonies for being weak-willed and languorous. See De Vaissière, *Saint-Domingue* 77-78, 303-4; CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* 24.

represents white Creole women as weak in that they allow themselves to be influenced by habits of the *Mulâtresse* women of colour. Herein lies an important difference, which assumes the originality of the colonizer's culture by fixing the Other as an always almost, but failed, imitation, and refusing to conceive of how oppressed peoples might utilize and transcend what is conceived as an 'original' model in creative ways for revolutionary purposes. Mimicry of dress did not only upset social status, but by demonstrating an ability to master European fashions, it created a mirror which deflected the colonial gaze. As a performative strategy it reveals, and takes apart at the seams, the very tenets of the corporeal codes that sought to suppress subjectivity.

The distinction of strategic mimicry from what is imposed as an authoritative culture is articulated most succinctly in Homi K. Bhabha's use of Lacan's theories of the gaze. Lacan states, 'The effect of mimicry is camouflage . . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare' (Qtd in Bhabha 85). This strategy does not involve fusing and harmonizing, which as Bhabha argues involves the repression of difference, which became a crucial element of the civilising projects of the Enlightenment and later evident in France's assimilatory policies, but is rather a form of resemblance hiding no essence, thus disrupting the coherency of any 'vrai réel'. Paradoxically the visibility of this technique frustrates the desire of the colonizer to see *through* and know that which makes up the other. Instead he/she is forced to look *at* the opacity of what is in fact a form of empowered resistance. The mimetic impulse as tactic, resulting in what Bhabha refers to as the colonial subject's 'partial' presence, becomes part of what Glissant calls, in terms of his own island experience, 'le réel martiniquais' (799).

Lynn Hunt in her analysis of gender divisions and dress in the French Revolution describes the Enlightenment's obsession with transparency, which promoted the idea that, 'clothes should reveal the inner person, not provide a means of dissimulation' (234). The appropriation of the colonial Other's dress, a strategy which emerges in the archival records I have consulted, works to ensure dissimulation and enact and sometimes effect the takeover of colonial power. By translating this new sign system of modernity in the colonial space, *performing* and *deforming* a structure, which related identity to image, enslaved peoples saw an

opportunity to move beyond the racism and class prejudice of the *Ancien Régime*. This negotiation of subjectivity involved claiming citizenship, by subscribing to the principles of modernity, the promise of which ultimately revealed itself to be merely ‘a shift in vocabulary’ (Bhabha 242) in the position of authority. However, in fighting for independence and achieving in Saint-Domingue what Trouillot terms as the ‘unthinkable’, slaves challenged ‘the very framework within which proponents and opponents had examined race, colonialism, and slavery in the Americas’ (83).¹⁹

Speaking Through Dress: the *Mulâtresses*

Clothing not only became politicized amongst the enslaved, but also offered transformative political possibilities for the *gens de couleur*, a group who were closely allied to the French revolutionaries. While parallels are often drawn between the role of the *Mulâtresse affranchie* and that of a European courtesan (Moreau, *Description* 109; C.L.R. James 26), Moreau de Saint-Méry himself insists on the specificity of this character, painting an image of a narcissistic, libertine, free class of women in Saint-Dominguan society, who seduce upper-class white Creoles as capital against much sought after *habillements* and refinery. Objectified themselves, they are represented as being obsessed with embellishing their own bodies with material trophies: garments, jewellery and accessories. The concessions of men such as Moreau de Saint-Méry, and their infringement of France’s norms and laws in colonial society, are attributed thus to the surrender of these women to their material and physical ‘needs’ as well as to the ‘chaleur du climat’ (*warm climate*), often cited as contributing to the unique context in which desired bodies were exchanged in the colonial space.²⁰

¹⁹ Although I do not have the space in this study to dedicate a more detailed comparison of dress regulations and practices as they developed in both the French and Haitian revolutionary contexts respectively, it is important to consider the French Revolution of 1789 that preceded the slave revolution, as representing a promise of social change and better conditions for the enslaved populations of the French colonies. By demanding their right to the benefits of ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’ during the slave revolts of Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe, the enslaved were able to do what was conceived as ‘unthinkable.’ Clothing in both contexts became politicized, constituting an important signifier of shifting boundaries of power, class and gender.

²⁰ Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) as Garrigus (147) points out, was widely read in Saint-Domingue by 1765, and its discussion of the ‘physical and political effects of warm climates’ and the ‘dangerous consequences of female vice’ may have influenced the thoughts of Moreau de Saint-Méry.

Many of the same sought-after materials cited by this colonial figure are also recorded in the Paris accounts of the white Creole elite at this time.

Tout ce que l'Inde produit de plus beau, de plus précieux en mousseline, en mouchoirs, en étoffes et en toiles, vient prendre les formes de la mode pour embellir ce sexe coloré. De riches dentelles, des bijoux dont la multiplicité, plus que le genre, augmente la valeur, sont employés avec profusion; et le désir de ces choses coûteuses est tellement insatiable, qu'on voit un assez grand nombre de Mulâtresses à Saint-Domingue, qui pourraient changer en entier de vêtements, tous les jours d'une année. (*Description* 107)

The most beautiful fabrics that India produces, the most precious muslins, scarves, cloth and canvas, create the styles that embellish this coloured sex. Ornate lace, jewellery, of which the quantity worn is valued more than the type, are widely adopted; and the desire for these costly things is so insatiable that one sees a large number of Mulâtresses in Saint-Domingue, who, for each day of the year, could change into an entirely different outfit.

The aesthetic effect of this extravagant attire functioned at one level to publicize these women's social prestige. At another, their self-fashioning (particularly as luxury 'accessories') within certain contexts, was carefully designed as social critique.

Haitian author Marie Vieux-Chauvet's novel, *La danse sur le volcan* (1957), is based on the true story of the opera singer, Minette, an *affranchie*, who gained considerable success on the stages of Saint Domingue in the late eighteenth century (Fouchard, *Théâtre* 255) and who was criticised by commentators at the time for her lavish dress. Vieux-Chauvet's book illustrates how particular fabrics and extravagant dress styles were worn by the *affranchi* class, to express discontent and opposition to the discriminatory attitudes and policies of Creole society's white elite:

A cause du matelot tué, les colons firent pendre pour l'exemple deux hommes de couleur. Bien qu'ils jurassent n'avoir été sur les lieux qu'en spectateurs, on les mena sur la place publique où ils furent pendus à des lanternes après un simulacre de jugement. Par coïncidence ce jour-là, et comme si elles s'étaient donné le mot, des affranchies, délaissant leurs sandales, leurs jupes d'indienne et leur madras, s'exhibèrent avec ostentation

sur les places publiques en robe de dentelle et de velours, au bras des plus beaux officiers de la colonie. De plus, elles étaient chaussées, ce qui acheva de rendre furieuses les blanches créoles et européennes. (91)

Because of the sailor killed, the colonists hung two men of colour as an example. Although they swore to only have been present as observers, they led them to the public square where they were hung off lanterns following a pretence of a trial. By coincidence, on that day, and as if they had been given the word, the enfranchised left behind their sandals, their Indian skirts and scarves, and ostentatiously paraded around the public squares in dresses of lace and velvet, on the arms of the most beautiful officers of the colony. What is more they were wearing shoes, which succeeded in making the white Creole and European women furious.

Shoes were, as Fouchard underlines, the ‘first sign of derisory ascent from the level of the beast of labour’ (*The Haitian* 42).²¹ It was also the very public nature of this parade of defiantly rich elegance that ignited outrage amongst white Saint-Domingue. The sexual power that these *femmes publiques* were purported to wield over white men was deemed even more morally indecent due to the openness of its performance in Creole society. The visibility of the *mulâtresses* constituted ‘intrusions’ into the dominant public sphere, a domain which was markedly white and masculine. By contesting the private/public binary, they therefore enjoyed a mobility which granted them access to privileges of class and gender and rendered them performers of revolutionary politics.

The *affranchi* population posed a continual threat to white Creole society, not only for their ‘distinguishable’ sensuality and desire for material riches, but also, as it was increasingly noted, their economic, social, military and even racial ‘indistinguishability.’²² Race, crucially, is not explicitly cited in criticism of this desire for class ascension, insinuating the possibility of those who moved in circles considered to be ‘racially’ inferior, to cross into a more empowered class domain, or as Jenson so astutely puts it: ‘to unbecome what one had never consented to be’ (299). The growing numbers of the free populace are referred to again and again in

²¹ When shoes were denied, the *mulâtresses* adorned their feet with jewels and precious stones. See the opening of Chauvet’s *La Danse sur le volcan* (2).

²² See Garrigus, ‘Sons of the Same’ 138.

Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Notes historiques* in various contradictory ways, demonstrating the fears and anxieties of the colonizer vis-à-vis this 'unknowable' group. It is clear that the colonial elite did not know whether to associate or distance themselves politically from this powerful group:

Le progrès de leur population est tel que bientôt ils seront les plus nombreux. Leur analogie avec le climat les rend propres à ces régions. Les affranchis, lorsqu'ils seront citoyens, seront la sauvegarde contre les révoltes des esclaves et les conquêtes de l'ennemi. Si les événemens amenaient jamais les antilles à former des Etats indépendans, ce ne devait que par le moyen des affranchis.²³

The progress of their population is such that soon they will be the in the majority. Their affinity with the climate makes them suitable to these regions. The enfranchised, once they become citizens, will safeguard against slave revolts and enemy attacks. If events ever lead the Antilles to form independent states, it would only be due to the enfranchised.

Later in the same dossier of 1791, it is written:

Unis aux gens de couleur, nous serons surs de la soumission des esclaves et de la conservation de nos propriétés. Il ne faut pas de dissimuler que le nombre des gens de couleur est égal à celui des blancs, qui faits au climat, ils finiraient par nous dicter des lois.

United with the people of colour, we will be sure of the submission of the slaves and the preservation of our properties. It cannot be denied that the number of people of colour is equal to that of the whites, and who, made for the climate, will end up dictating the laws.

Desperately clinging on to their foothold on the uppermost echelon of Creole society, the wives of the *colons* encouraged sumptuary laws, which were reinforced on 2 June 1780 and forbade the *gens de couleur* from wearing luxurious or elaborate clothing in public. Police were to 'faire arreter les Mulâtresses qui se présenteraient le dt jour à la comédie avec des écharpes sa ceintures de soye ou autre vetements de luxe' (*arrest Mulâtresses who arrive at the Comédie with scarves silk wraps or other*

²³ Writings on colour in the *Notes historiques*, ANOM, F3 141 bis.

luxurious clothing).²⁴ The upset that the policing of their bodily adornments caused is expressed in one of the songs included amongst Moreau de Saint-Méry's *Notes historiques*, entitled *Chanson pour les Mulâtresses du Cap*:

D'où vient donc la tristesse

Des pauvres Mulâtresses

Elles gémissent sans cesse

Et soupirent tout bas ah ah

La pollice traîtresse

Avec impollitesse

Leur coupe au ras des fesses

Rubans et falbalas ah ah.²⁵

What is the source of this sadness

Of the poor mulattas

They always groan

And sigh very low oh oh

The treacherous police

With their impoliteness

Have cut their ribbons and frills

Up to their behinds oh oh.

The jealous wives' plan failed, however, as recounted by Leonora (Hassal) Sansay in a letter printed in 1808, one of a series written to Colonel Burr, the then vice-

²⁴ AN, F3 189, Arrêté du conseil du Cap concerning the execution of police regulations and ordinances, particularly on the subject of the *gens de couleur*. There had been earlier efforts in 1720 to reinforce simplicity of dress amongst both the enslaved and free population: 'L'article 1er déclare que les mulâtres et Indiens, esclaves employés à la culture des terres, ne pourront être habillés que conformément au Code Noir, sous peine de prison et de confiscation' (Durand-Molard, I, 159).

²⁵ ANOM, F3 141 bis. See also Jenson *Beyond* 279-289 for more analysis on the significance and performance of these Creole songs found amongst Moreau de Saint-Méry's papers.

president of the United States during a visit to Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century:

They determined to oppose this tyranny, and took for that purpose a singular but effectual resolution. They shut themselves up in their houses, and appeared no more in public. The merchants soon felt the bad effects of this determination, and represented so forcibly the injury the decree did to commerce, that it was reversed and the olive beauties triumphed. (78)

Denied freedom of dress, the *mulâtresses* used gender-specific tactics and their economic clout to resist and eventually reverse the authority of the colonists' law. The fact that the law was later abolished is an indicator of the 'moral' standards and hypocrisy of the white creole plantocracy at this time, as well as the economic power asserted by these *mûlatresse* women, who proved capable of rearranging the colonial order.

Gender and feminine sexuality were privileged as the principal means of othering the *gens de couleur* who threatened to contaminate French colonial society. As Garrigus argues,

Before the dominance of sugar slavery in the 1700s, censuses of Saint-Domingue counted free men, women, children and servants, not "whites" and "mulattoes" (. . .) Even in 1685, the metropolitan authors of the Code Noir were more concerned about sin than race and racial mixture. (138-9)

Moral virtuosity and corresponding gender normative behaviour, in this early period, mattered more than complexion in defining one's social position. According to the terms of the Code Noir, slaves who had been born into the family of a *colon* and/or had gained their freedom, were granted the same rights as whites.²⁶ Through self-fashioning and their informal sexual relations with white men, the influence of the free *mulâtresses* reached beyond their assigned social category. This social freedom ensured a certain degree of autonomy within patriarchal economic spheres, much more so than white women. While scholars such as Stewart King have focused solely on the feminization of both male and female *gens de couleur*, an area which warrants further study would be an examination of perceptions of the *mulâtresses* as strong

²⁶ For more on how race increasingly entered both social and legal discourse in the eighteenth century see Garrigus 137-153.

matriarchal figures or as astute *Menagères*, who negotiate masculine domains, a counter-identity which can be seen to persist in modern-day stereotypes of the *chabine* in Martinique and Guadeloupe (the representations of which are discussed in the final chapter of this thesis).²⁷ The social and economic power they wielded was interpreted as further proof of their sinful, non-gender conforming tendencies. All of the above ‘weaknesses’ came to symbolize more generally the shortcomings of French colonial society, what Hilliard d’Auberteuil, on his travels to the colony, termed an ‘empire based on *libertinage*’ (II, 27).

In response to these stereotypes of libertine habits and deviant traits, the family units formed within this class, if not always biological, were especially solid, with their members keen to present an image of respectability (S.R. King 186). This projection of familial order was based however on a Republican model of domesticity, whereby the civilised body is clearly male or female, white or non-white (Colwill 220). The arrival of French revolutionary Sonthonax to Saint-Domingue in 1792, sent to suppress the *colons* (most of whom were Royalists), enforced the rights of the *gens de couleur* as equal citizens and put an end to the slave revolt, promised conditional freedom. Yet the anti-slavery rhetoric was no more than an Enlightenment project, which sought to westernize and thus control the other, promoting a recognisable image of the noble savage.

L’esprit de famille est le premier lien des sociétés politique ; l’homme libre qui n’a ni femme ni enfans, ne peut qu’être un sauvage ou un brigand ; l’homme vraiment digne de la liberté, et qui en sent le prix, ne peut pas souffrir que sa compagne et ses enfans végètent dans l’esclavage.²⁸

The spirit of the family is the first tie of political societies; the free man who has neither wife nor child can only be a savage or a brigand; the man who is really worthy of freedom and who feels its reward, cannot let his companion and children vegetate in slavery.

²⁷ Socolow examines the role of the *mulâtresses* as economic actors and includes information about their work as housekeepers or *ménagères* (280).

²⁸ This proclamation made by Etienne Polverel and Leger-Félicité Sonthonax was published in the colonial newspaper *Affiches Americaines* on 14 July 1793, ANOM, MSM 1ère série vol.no.53, (87 MIOM 17).

Emancipation on these terms meant assimilation into a European family model of ‘civilisation’ and *virilité*, which was shown to contrast with the ‘savagery’ of a libertine Creole society.

Performing masculinity: the *Mulâtre* and the *Candio*

An important member of this kinship construction was the *mulâtre* who, like his female counterpart, was represented as a voracious sexual being and a narcissistic character in the archival scripts of the late eighteenth century. The construction of public buildings, theatres and social meeting places in the towns during the latter half of the century brought about further humiliating attempts to exclude this increasingly wealthy and influential class from the public sphere. Free *gens de couleur* were forbidden not only from wearing luxurious attire, but also were not to carry a sword and public seating was carved up to segregate them from the white population in churches, theatres or music halls (Garrigus 149; Fouchard, *Le Théâtre* 145-165).²⁹ The denial of the sword exemplifies the emasculating process with which the colonial elite sought to diffuse the increasing military power of the *mulâtre* social group. The other masculine prop appropriated by this group in their everyday performances of citizenship was the horse, which challenged claims of effeminacy fabricated by the whites and was a sign of their elevated status from the slaves. This attachment to horses did not go unnoticed and in his *Notes historiques*, Moreau de Saint-Méry writes, ‘Dans toutes les colonies le gout des Mulâtres pour l’espece du cheval qui a le triple avantage de favoriser leur plaisir, leur paraitre et leur libertinage qu’ils se sont attiré le titre de *mulâtres voler choul*. C’est le l’injure qu’on adresse à un mulâtre’ (*Throughout the colonies the Mulâtres attraction to horses, which has the advantage of encouraging their pleasure, their appearance and their libertinism, has earned them the nickname of mulatto horse thief. That is the insult which is directed at the mulatto*).³⁰ In order to demean the horse as a symbol of

²⁹ These injunctions not only applied to the free and enslaved *mulâtres* but were also enforced upon the black African and Creole population. Du Tertre expressed his annoyance at the sight of a sword in the enemy’s hands: ‘Autrefois il y avait des nègres à la Martinique qui, par un abus intolérable, portaient l’épée’ (II, 522).

³⁰ MSM *Notes historiques*, ANOM F3 133. Slaves on the other hand were forbidden from owning horses, as decreed by the governor of Saint-Domingue, 1 August 1704 (MSM, *Description* II, 11), which might account for the references to horses in Vodou as a form of alternative political participation: the initiate (the horse) is mounted by the spirit during possession.

social, political and financial participation, the *mulâtre* was swiftly given the Creole nickname of ‘horse-thief.’

Another male actor on this stage whose performance is noted in the colonial archives is that of the figure of the *Candio*, whose liminality caused similar concerns in the upper strata of Creole society to those evoked by the *Mulâtresse*. Planter Drouin de Bercy, in a proposal for the re-establishment of the colony, published as *De Saint Domingue* in 1814, describes ‘les cultivateurs les plus délurés’ (*the most cunning slaves*) as those who go under the name of ‘*Docteur, Candio, Caprelata, don Pedro et Vaudou*’ (170), ordering them to be sent to France.

Le nègre Candio ou Docteur, est ainsi appelé, parce qu’il s’habille avec plus de soin que les autres ; il est entreprenant, libertin et se fait entretenir par les négresses. (175)

The negro Candio or Doctor, is so called, because he dresses with more care than the others; he is enterprising, libertine and is maintained by the negresses.

Colonial commentator, Michel Étienne Descourtilz describes the attire of one of his slaves whom he refers to as a *Candiot* or *Petit Maître*, in considerable detail:

Je vis mon homme, ayant ses larges mains revêtues d’une paire de gants blancs de femme qu’il avait trouvée je ne sais où et qui, n’ayant pu se prêter par leur élasticité à la grosseur de ses doigts, étaient déchirés de toute part et n’en recouvraient absolument que les phalanges ; un chapeau à la main, d’une forme très haute, la tête suifée et poudrée à blanc par derrière . . . de longues boucles d’oreilles ayant peine à suivre le contour de sa cravate qui l’engonçait jusqu’aux yeux, et par-dessus laquelle étaient trois rangs de colliers ; une veste de nankin qui, ne lui appartenant pas, lui était de beaucoup trop courte et laissait voir deux avant-bras noirs, contrastant avec la blancheur de ses gants . . . enfin des bottes, je ne sais de quel siècle, car je ne crois pas jamais en avoir vu de pareille forme : voilà son costume ! (130)

I see my man, with his large hands covered by a pair of white ladies gloves, that he’d found goodness knows where and whose elastic would not stretch to cover the size of his fingers. Ripped all over they only just covered the stems

of his fingers. Carrying a hat in his hand, of a very tall shape, hair greased and powdered with white at the back, . . . long earrings almost reaching his cravat, which stiffened him up to the eyes, and over which he wore three rows of necklaces; a jacket made of nankeen, which did not belong to him, was far too small for him and revealed two black forearms, contrasting with the whiteness of his gloves . . . and finally the boots, from which century I do not know. I've never seen anything quite like them. And that was his costume!

The detail in which Descourtiz describes the slave's attire, imaging this sartorial display in caricatural proportions, suggests that, although merely surface appearance, it somehow poses a deeper threat to his own manhood. The multiplicity of the detail provided works to feminize and objectify this character, undermining the powers of desirability, this dandy-like figure is purported to possess amongst his *commères*. As a slave he is reduced to material commodity, but in this description he becomes further marked by materiality, in much the same way as the *Mulâtresse*, as he is scrutinised and dissected under the panoptic gaze of the colonizer. Through his attention-grabbing appearance the *Candio* is associated with an aesthetic of theatricality, which manifests itself in the language of excess used by the colonist: *large hands, fingers, very tall, long, much too short*. Remarks on the ladies' white gloves add to the mocking tone of the portrait and the fact that they were acquired 'goodness knows where,' hints at the common accusation of theft of women's gowns from the plantations, directed towards those seen to be wearing garments above their means (Hilliard d'Auberteuil 111).

Revolutionary cross-dressing

The pillage and wearing of clothing and fabrics from the slavemaster's house did occur during times of rebellion. These material plunders were not exclusive to the French Caribbean. Buckridge gives the example of the Tacky's Rebellion of 1760 in Jamaica, when 'great houses were attacked, and European clothes were taken and destroyed' (79).³¹ More discrete acts of apparel theft were often carried out for the

³¹ Buckridge also intimates the use of colonists' dress in religious rituals: in acts of spiritual resistance to the cruelty of an enslaver (80-81).

purpose of creating disguises for those slaves considering running away from the plantation and often involved donning the clothes of one's gendered other (Fouchard, *The Haitian* 251-264). Forms of cross-dressing during the revolutionary period in the French Caribbean broadly fall into two types of performance: firstly, what I shall term revolutionary cross-dressing and secondly, as I discuss in the next section, a practice better understood as revolutionary disguise. Revolutionary cross-dressing involved the re-use of possessions as a release from being possessed, through the act of male-to-female cross-dressing, designed to unsettle the colonial fantasy of clear racial, classed and gendered divisions.

The appropriation of women's dresses by revolutionaries constituted a form of embodied empowerment in its disruption of the social order of plantation society, but can also be understood as an enactment of ritualized violence. Weaver describes how enslaved seamstresses engaged in the destruction of clothing, or 'occupational sabotage' as she calls it (44-59). By damaging and discretely unravelling the costumes of the *colons*, enslaved peoples symbolically massacred the body or bodies of the oppressor. The destruction of these valuable commodities of the plantation system, including fashions and fabrics sought during trips to Paris, ensured a covert and contained attack, disguising the perpetrators, before the eventual onslaught of open rebellion.

The uprisings of the late eighteenth century saw the more overt adoption of Creole women's ballgowns by male rebels during the armed battles that ensued. This playful re-use of colonial spoils not only assaulted the mistress but also the slavemaster. By accessing the wife via her regalia, the revolutionaries in turn insulted their former masters, among whose most guarded and out-of-reach possessions (for the male slaves), were their wives. The former slaves and maroons were able to manipulate this economic, social and aesthetic symbol in their own revolutionary idiom in order to suggest new social hierarchies.

Scenes from Madison Smartt Bell's historical novel, *All Souls Rising*, evoke similar images of the reappropriation of white Creole women's clothing:

A congo detached himself and approached the wagon. A gentleman's powdered peruke was crookedly perched on his huge shaven head and his ragged teeth had all been carefully blackened to resemble little chunks of coal

and he had put on backward the sky-blue dress Emilie had worn the night before. The V of its back could not close over his chest and so he was bare almost to the navel. He carried a soldier's bayonet stuck through a rip in the cloth so it knocked against his belly. (166)

Here the finery of the 'gentleman's' wig is juxtaposed with the huge shaven head of the maroon slave. The tattered, partially deconstructed ballgown, powdery and pale blue against the coal-like skin and teeth of the Congo, as a subversive portrait, has surfaced repeatedly over the last two hundred years of Haitian art, particularly during moments of political and social upheaval. In the twentieth century, Andre Pierre's *Vodou Pantheon* (1980), painted during the Duvalier dictatorship, depicted a family of black and light-skinned spirits (*lwa*), dressed up in the *décolletés*, epaulettes, ribbons and accoutrements looted from the wardrobes of colonial Saint-Domingue (Cosentino, 'Baby' 137). The *lwa*, as spiritual mirrors of the revolutionaries, clad and display themselves in the same tattered, deconstructed ballgowns. Similarly, Edouard Duval-Carrié's *Mardigras at Fort Dimanche* (1992), showing Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier in a wedding dress, employs cross-dressing as a tool to represent the slipperiness of this political figure.³² The carnivalesque roots of these contemporary reincarnations may be traced to the revolutionary period, which itself became, like carnival, a time for looting the closet of the other and a space for the creative inversion of social norms through parody.

British photographer Leah Gordon's black and white collection *Kanaval* (2010), depicts several contemporary cross-dressing narratives in Haiti. In one portrait (fig. 3), the plunging 'v' opening of a sequined dress reveals the white bra fastening of one male carnavalier, inciting the corrective observation: 'Your bra's showing' from onlookers. The broken fragments of 'fancy' dress - the slippage of the visible bra - ridiculed by the viewer, echo the dual repugnance and fascination of Bell's colonial family faced with the Congo slave. In the narrative, planter's wife Claudine Arnaud 'could not help herself from glancing briefly back at him. It might have been comical, how his shoulder blades protruded from what had meant for *décolletage*' (166). This attempt to turn 'grotesque material into comic form,'

³² The cross-dressing in Duval-Carrié's satirical painting, set in the torture chamber of Fort Dimanche prison, calls into question Duvalier's heterosexuality, whilst the imagery of the white wedding dress alludes to his mother's Vodou initiation.

renders the body of scrutiny, as Stallybrass and White have noted, ‘the object of cathartic laughter’ (171). The indeterminacy of the image points to ambivalences in European society around gender and civilisation in the late eighteenth century and how the black body has been imaged historically in French colonial representation. As a trope, the unreadability of the cross-dressed *marrons* invokes fear of the incompleteness and multiplicity of shape-shifting creatures that persists in popular mythology of the Caribbean today.³³



Figure 3: Leah Gordon, Kanaval 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

³³ The fear of the return of this rebel slave/maroon figure persists in popular folktales repeated to young children in Martinique. Similar to the Bogeyman or Shantymen in Jamaica, children are told if they go out late at night the spirits or maroons will get them. For more on the literary trope of the maroon, see James A. Arnold, ‘From the Problematic Maroon’.

In his critique of Bell's trilogy, Charles Forsdick highlights the spoils of war and 'concrete objects that accumulate' and are reconfigured in the narrative. These include: 'jewellery, trinket boxes, clothing, wigs, musical instruments and other trappings of late eighteenth century culture, constituting the possessions used to characterize the 'libertine colony' of the pre-revolutionary period.' He goes on to assert that the 'destruction or redistribution of the[se] artefacts marks the development of new social formations' (196). These colonial *objets trouvés* become what Bhabha calls 'part-objects of presence' (92), props, or to use the full term 'properties', of a colonial drama that are appropriated and rearticulated in an attempt to piece together the displaced rituals and remnants of memory scattered during the Middle Passage. The strategic process of transcendence of the West's control over these textiles and trimmings has come to define the modernity of Caribbean creolisation.

If, as I have suggested above, dress was a crucial means of social and political transformation, providing legitimacy, particularly amongst the 'libertine' free population of the colonies, the diverse re-employment of dress also gave slaves during the revolutionary period a means of expressing a subtle and covert form of resistance to the colonial hierarchies of power and emerging discourse of difference. This did not always involve a straightforward inversion of social roles, as the tactic of cross-dressing was equally used to veil and disguise bodies in order to evade colonial laws.

Marronaj and Revolutionary Disguise

Jean Fouchard provides the most complete analysis of the causes, tactics and practices of maroon slaves, who had fled their plantations to reside in the mountains of Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century in his studies *Les Marrons du syllabaire* and *Les Marrons de la liberté*. These works draw on newspaper advertisements featured in such colonial newspapers as the *Affiches américaines* or notarial documents, which recorded lost and found maroons. Often these maroons were the more creolized, thus integrated, slaves and thanks to their language capabilities, trades and contacts in the colony they were taken in and housed in secret by families of *affranchis*. Both men and women with 'la soif de liberté' (*Syllabaire*

31) entered into *marronaj* and while the geography of the smaller islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique did not lend themselves to concealing runaways, there is evidence that such practices did exist regardless, particularly during the period leading up to the revolution. The *Gazette de la Martinique* printed the following notice in 1783:

La métive Adélaïde, taille épaisse de 4 pieds 10 pouces, âgée de 22 ans, ayant une cicatrice sur le front, nez plat, très-blanche, est marronne depuis le 24 Juin dernier ; ses allures sont aux Trois-Islets, à la Rivière-Salée, à la Rivière-Pilote, et au-dessus du Lamentin : elle se dit vendue à un Habitant ; c'est un très-mauvais sujet capable de tout ; la Negresse François, est aussi marronne depuis 6 mois : ceux qui feront conduire ces deux esclaves à M (Levache) de Boisville, au Fort-Royal, auront bonne récompense.³⁴

Mestiza Adélaïde, thickly built at 4 foot 10 inches, aged 22, with a scar on her front, flat nose, very white, escaped since 24 of last June ; she has been spotted in Trois-Islets, in Rivière-Salée, in Rivière-Pilote and above Lamentin: she claims to be sold to a resident; she's a very bad character capable of anything; the Negress François has also been marronne for 6 months: the person who delivers these two slaves to Mr (Levache) de Boisville in Fort-Royal will be well compensated.

Physical appearance and moral characteristics of the *marronnes* are highlighted in this listing and the fact that Adélaïde is described as *très-blanche* and known to employ the tactic of claiming to be 'vendue à un Habitant,' sold to a white resident, provides insight into the concerns of the slaveholders regarding racial and social blurring in the colonies, as well as the performative measures taken by slaves in order to escape capture by the *Maréchaussée*, which would mean a return to servitude.³⁵

The *Gazette de la Martinique* in 1785 warns of:

³⁴ ANOM MSM F3 141 bis, 7 aout 1783, 146.

³⁵ The *Maréchaussée* were a division of the Colonial Police, often made up of mulatto or slaves promised freedom, who were trained to hunt down Maroon bands. Their creation and composition on the islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Lucia and Tobago is outlined in an *ordonnance du Roi*, ANOM, F3 265 carton 9, 411 cote: vi/memoires/29/411.

Le negre Joseph, créole, âgé de 20 ans, taille de 5p6 à 7p de mince corpulence, jolie figure, parlant bien françois, toujours bien vêtu, portant queue, se disant libre, peut-être muni d'un faux billet . . .³⁶

The negro Joseph, creole, aged 20, standing at 5 foot 6 to 7 inches, of slender build, nice face, speaks good French, always well-dressed, carries a cane, says that he is free, perhaps in possession of false papers . . .

And then in 1790 lists :

Le métif Edouard, créole de St Pierre, d'environ 38 ans . . . Il a la teint si beau et la peau si blanche, que, ne le connoissant point, on le prend pour un blanc.³⁷

The mestizo Edouard, creole from St Pierre, aged about 38 . . . He has such a beautiful complexion, with skin so white, that if you did not know him, you would take him for a white.

The maroons' strategic performance, including language, dress and appearance, is given in detail, revealing elements of their project to pass as *affranchi* or free. These examples suggest that maroons were in fact able to challenge the pseudo-scientific racial classification system fixed by Moreau de Saint-Méry in 1789 (*Description* 83 - 101),³⁸ by demonstrating that race was a malleable socially constructed concept.

Fouchard cites examples not only of how slaves performed status but also how they crossed gender in their disguises in order to slip past the gaze of the colonial authorities:

Félicité, very tall, with white skin spots, suspected of disguising herself as a man, sometimes poorly, sometimes well, dressed occasionally barefoot, at other times wearing shoes. (*The Haitian* 251-264)

This form of deception was adopted by women to reduce the risk of rape, which as Gautier argues was a powerful obstacle facing those planning an escape (237). In

³⁶ ANOM (87 MIOM 83), jeudi 29 décembre 1785, MSM R.C. 2eme Série, vol. 30.

³⁷ ANOM (87 MIOM 83), jeudi 13 mai 1790, MSM R.C. 2eme Série, vol.30.

³⁸ Leah Gordon's *Caste* photographic series critiques Moreau de Saint-Méry's racial grading of the colony, once described by Dayan as 'stranger than any supernatural fiction' (*Haiti* 232).

noting methods of escape in southern US states and the Caribbean, historian Joan Cashin contends that cross-dressing provided camouflage to both male and female maroons, who sought to blend and elude capture. Drawing parallels with the Harrises in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she describes how 'women dressed as men and men as women; girls dressed as boys and vice versa, sometimes changing gender identities several times to evade slave-catchers . . . A few bold disguises transcended the ordinary categories of gender *and* race: One black man cross-dressed and powdered his face to pass successfully as a white woman' (456).

The successful deception of the *Maréchaussée* slave-catchers and white Creole population ensured that covert forms of cross-dressing quickly became accepted as a necessary revolutionary shield. As playwright Mojisola Adebayo puts it: 'slavery necessitates performance' (Osborne, 'No Straight Answers,' 12). In a French Caribbean context the practice of strategic cross-dressing was not limited to the emancipatory period of 1791 -1804 and was not only adopted by slaves and free *gens de couleur*.³⁹ Furthermore it should be noted that the organized system of marronaj evolved as a counter-hegemonic force not only against the French colonizer in pre-revolutionary Saint-Domingue but also continued against the dominance of the Creoles in post-revolutionary Haiti, who enforced what Haitian sociologist Jean Casimir refers to as 'contre-plantation' (89).⁴⁰ There is evidence of the persistence of this past in the marginal communities of same-sex loving men, represented in Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire's documentary *Des hommes et des dieux* (2004). Re-reading the film in the context of historical practices of marronaj and by acknowledging herein the roots of Haitian Vodou, one can better understand the realities of these subaltern communities as they seek to survive through everyday cross-gender performances, the negotiation of which will be conceptualised in the following chapter. Operating under the cohesive group identity

³⁹ See Frostin, *Les Révoltes des Blanches* (189-191) for details of a rebellion in Le Cap in November 1723, when 60 men, armed and wearing women's attire and more than 300 women, some covered in flour and wearing fake moustaches stormed the Maison de l'Afrique in protest against trade privileges.

⁴⁰ Under the newly established leaders of Haiti the Creoles were keen to preserve the existing system based on plantation slavery, which particularly impacted rural communities, where 'codes noirs' were replaced with equivalent constraints of the 'codes ruraux'. For Barthélémy, 'L'élément principal, le rapport fondateur d'une réaction de marronaj est indéniablement l'oppression' (*The main element, the common factor for the foundation of maroon communities can only be oppression*; 854). The findings of Casimir and Barthélémy suggest the continuation of the subaltern culture of the maroons well into the nineteenth century, where slave constraints were substituted with restrictions placed on the rural peasant classes.

of their Vodou family, the question of whether these religious cross-dressing rituals are adopted as a further mask for transgressive bodies, demands further exploration. However the interactive nodes of their Vodou family together with its tradition of counter-hegemonic revolution provide the adherents with a strong and cohesive group identity, which both protects and equips them, facilitating their freedom and 'blending' within Haitian society at large.

Rags, Tinsel and Maroon Regalia

To examine the uniforms worn by *marrons* and revolutionary leaders reveals that dress was not only a means of dissimulation and survival amongst the slaves, but as the revolution progressed the military uniforms adopted pronounced leadership within the troops, just as in the army of their enemy. Fouchard's reference to chief *marron*, Jean-Francois, describes him as someone who, 'loved ostentation', and whose 'general's or "grand admiral's" uniform was covered with decorations, gold braid, and stripes' (*The Haitian* 347). While the regalia of the slaves was mocked by the whites, the military dress was an important means of claiming political agency and proving manliness. Tailors among the *marrons* would be called upon to modify and embellish costumes that at once commanded respect within the maroon encampment; offered opportunity to explore relations of colonial subordination; and ultimately weakened the power of their former masters.

While Fouchard emphasises a natural inclination for 'ostentation and tinsel', which he traces to Africa, a heritage I do not wish to deny, my aim is to consider this new world legacy as constructed in response to the shifting relations of power within the islands and their coordinates in France during the period of slave emancipation. The long-lasting effects of the normative force of legal ritual employed by French colonial administration, to keep separate different groups in the colony, and how communities have challenged these apparatuses in the Caribbean during the eighteenth century and subsequently, will become more evident as I begin to sample this legacy in the following chapters with examples of contemporary cross-gender performances.

Gaps in archival writings, often produced through the eyes of the colonial power, disclose the desires of the male traveller, conveniently eradicated in their

philosophical ponderings on the mix of violent luxury, pleasure and sex, considered so destructive to the colony. 'Excessive,' 'voluptuous' creole femininity is orientalist, made foreign and offset against the 'reasonable' European body, which shows concerns around said body in European society. The colonizer is unable to view this subversive double-play of 'possessing' or 'appearing' to possess luxurious goods and elegant gowns as anything other than grotesque imitation or travesty. Yet as I have implied, such transvestite forms have been reincarnated throughout Caribbean history, evading, upsetting and re-shaping the social order.

Social relations were reconfigured through the aesthetics of dress, a means of undermining the social hierarchies of eighteenth century French Caribbean society and proposing possibilities for 'fashioning freedom' (Weaver). There is of course a danger of looking too hard for agency in what may be a simple act of dressing up, yet why were the colonists so quick to control these forms of expression? It is these 'small acts' (Gilroy) of political re-fashioning, these bits and pieces, tattered and torn by the Middle Passage and the trauma of plantation slavery that, when collaged together, form a cohesive challenge to the social apparatus of the plantation system.

Cross-dressing, as it surfaces in revolutionary accounts, is shown to be both an overt and covert tactical expression, that breaks down inflexible binaries of masculinity and femininity, black and white, master and slave, the significance of which European society was grappling to understand at this time. As a modern tool, its employment reveals a range of intergendered, interracial and interclassed subjectivities, the malleability of which plays upon representational traditions of black people as ambivalent and fluid (Bhabha 18-36). In order to explore contemporary cross-dressing images, the culmination of over two hundred years of multilayered masquerade and street theatre, it is therefore necessary first to return to colonial history, and consider how these images repeat, rupture and reimagine historical stereotypes. The colonial context necessitated double-faced masking and costume performances as survival and deliverance to a better existence.

Costumes are re-designed and re-styled in acts of memory, power subversion, and transcendent creativity. Given the codes and colonial laws controlling slave-holding societies, subjects were forced to seek expression through opaque and resourceful means. What Glissant referred to as 'l'art de la répétition' (*Le discours*

264) encompasses these 'small acts' of political re-fashioning. Maya Deren, in her attempt to make sense of the unknowable figure of the *Gede* spirit of sex and death in Vodou culture, emphasizes the inbetween hybridity of such a character in a description where the conjunction 'and' connotes the hybridity of Caribbean identity: 'Although Ghede's vast range of power and information never confuses him, he may delight in using it to confound others. He is both tattered and beautiful. He confounds sex with sex, dressing women as men and men as women' (111). Composite subjects such as the Candio gede or *Kanaval*'s uber-masculine cross-dressers wear and perform a proliferation of borrowed bits and pieces. In doing so, they make up a layered and multi-faced challenge to the clear-cut social and gendered dichotomies of the plantation system which over time *transforms* colonial regimes of monolithic visibility.

CHAPTER TWO

Children of the Gods: Cross-gender Expression and Healing in *Des hommes et des dieux*

‘What is being enacted on the floor of the *hounfor* is nothing less than the drama of the Haitian nation itself.’ (Burton, *Afro-Creole* 249)

This strand of the thesis will draw on historical research (Ramsey 2011; Sheller 2012) and sociological studies (André 1987; Burton 1994; Mulot 2000, 2009) in order to explore African-derived spiritual practices and family structures in the French Caribbean. Through close analysis of contemporary visual representation of gender negotiation in Haitian Vodou, I argue that spiritual membership of an extended family can enable survival and empower beyond the walls of the *ounfo* (Vodou temple) at a secular level. My argument interrogates to what extent Vodou communities constitute what Kate Ramsey has termed ‘personalized protective assemblages’ or *garde-corps*, guarding non-gender conforming corporeal performances given by Haitian male citizens on an everyday basis (*The Spirits* 44). It examines how male *vodwizan* inhabit the vestments of the spirits, or *lwa*, in their local community and how these costumed Vodou performances run parallel to, and imagine, alternative Caribbean experiences of gender and empowerment. Using the ethnographic documentary film *Des hommes et des dieux* (2002) by Haitian French directors Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire, the chapter will furthermore examine the role of healing and *konesans* (spiritual knowledge) in gaining mutual respect in this community, ensuring social mobility and encouraging acceptance of cross-gender identities across a wider spectrum of society.

The documentary *Des hommes et des dieux* by Lescot and Magloire discusses the place of same-sex desire and cross-gender expression within Haiti, focusing on the syncretic religious belief system of Haitian Vodou. The directors introduce us to a small cast of men from mostly urban communities. The viewer is led through their everyday experiences and identifications as, to use the Kreyòl term the subjects

themselves re-appropriate in the film, *masisi*.¹ They share their concerns, fears and desires and importantly the role of Vodou within their lives. Through Vodou possession, the body of the initiate is transformed and takes on the gender and characteristics of the *lwa*, regardless of the initiate's biological sex. However some of the interviewees in *Des hommes* claim that Vodou provides an explanation for their sexual orientation, that the *lwa* Ezili Dantò, a hardworking mother spirit, whose Catholic lithographs splice the film, has made them who they are. 'Ezili Dantò chose me when I was very young' argues one of the men or even 'Lwa gate'm' (*The spirits ruined me*).

Before discussing the contemporary implications of such assertions, I will first trace the processes of re/gendering and family formation in the post-emancipation, post-revolutionary period of Haitian society. This necessarily brief contextualization is essential in order to better understand the power structures by, through and against which, these communities have come to self-define historically. This will be important in forming a bridge between the previous chapter and the ensuing investigation of the complexities of visibility and invisibility that characterize Francophone Caribbean constructions of gender identity. In this chapter I argue that Vodou communities provide tactical opacity to their members. In making this assertion, I take as a theoretical scaffolding Glissant's call to challenge Western obsessions with transparency (*Poétique* 203-209), which links visibility smoothly to empowerment. Glissant affirms in *Poétique de la relation*: 'La transparence n'apparaît plus comme le fond du miroir où l'humanité occidentale reflétait le monde à son image; au fond du miroir il y a maintenant de l'opacité' (*Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror*; 125). Born out of the undercover practice of *marronaj*, the veiled existence of same-sex loving Vodou practitioners *en kachet* recalls Francophone Caribbean histories of sexuality, whereby pleasure was *dérobé* or stolen on the run in the dense cane fields of the plantation (Glissant, *Le discours* 505; Tinsley 177).

¹ In this chapter I will use the spelling most commonly employed in Haiti to denote the Haitian language: *Kreyòl*. The term *masisi* has been traced back to the Fon word *mamisis*, the name given to the 'feminine' initiates of the aquatic mother spirit Mami Wata in Benin and Togo (H.J. Drewal, 'Performing'). In reference to individuals depicted in the film I will employ the local *Kreyòl* term, (as opposed to imposing a Western category such as 'gay' or 'transgender') that the subjects themselves have reclaimed to describe their lived experiences.

Vodou provides what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley describes in her characterization of Caribbean same-sex desire as 'a space of alternative vision that nurtures both eroticism and resistance' (104).

Family *Rasanblaj* in Post-revolutionary Haiti

As I examined in the previous chapter, following the abolition of slavery and the declaration of independence in 1804, Haiti came to symbolize the 'unthinkable' triumph of soldiers of African descent, 'black Jacobins', in their radical project to become citizens and participants in the formation of the first ever Republic of its kind. As the revolution happened, and during its aftermath, European powers struggled to frame the appearance of slaves in uniforms and revolutionary tricornered hats. As Sibylle Fischer contends, they dismissed it 'not as reality but as carnival – a temporary reversal of hierarchies' or a 'mock revolution' (*Modernity* 171). In order to make equality a reality in the eyes of the former colonial powers, Haitian citizens drew on the ideals of family to consolidate this new social order. If, prior to the revolution, as argued in the previous chapter, Haiti was feminized by the colonizer, using the bodies of the colonial subjects as a particular locus to fix the other, the post-revolutionary period saw the black man oppose and counter this representation and recuperate his right to assume the role of father, leader and protector of the Haitian nation and its people (Sheller 148). The notion of family had a military bearing during the emancipatory process, equating images of male soldiers with newly made citizens, whose job it was to protect their women and offspring. Pamela Scully and Diana Paton have argued that in the Atlantic world 'slave emancipation everywhere took gendered forms, restructuring relationships between men and women and making men's entitlement to leadership of a family a central feature of postemancipation societies' (3).

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution a strong family image spanning class, racial and regional lines was considered crucial in stabilising a nation at risk of further attack. Under the appointed emperor (or father) Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti was constructed using the idiom of family, with no discrimination between her 'children.' Dessalines proclaimed:

All distinctions of colour among the children of one and the same family, of which the Head of State is the father, necessarily ceasing, the Haitians will henceforth be known only by the generic denomination of blacks [*noirs*]. (Sheller 149)

However in reality, contrary to this egalitarian familial rhetoric, many of the former inequalities and power structures governing, in particular, the rural majority persisted in post-slavery Haiti. The organisation of agricultural production did not differ drastically from the plantation system under the white Creole planters. Inhabitants were either ‘propriétaires’ or ‘paysans’, as marked on each person’s birth certificate (Beauvoir-Dominique, ‘Possibilities’). *Marronaj* as resistance to this familiar order did not cease, which gives a strong indication of the continued dissatisfaction within post-slavery society. While Dessalines hoped to erase racial divisions with his familial rhetoric, many of the new elite classes of Haiti were using the family to replicate former colonial patterns and legitimate their ‘civilised’ status. The absorption of French family values further promoted a Republican view of the civilised body, which was clearly defined in terms of Manichean oppositions of gender and race. Bodies were either male or female, white or non-white, and were prohibited from performing any variant between these markers. Displaying one’s virility was crucial to the nation-building project of Haiti’s elite with its military ideals and paternalism inherited from French colonialism.

Despite the role attributed to African-derived magico-religious systems in organizing and unifying enslaved, maroon and free warriors as they fought for freedom, particularly during the beginning stages of the revolution (Geggus, ‘Haitian Voodoo’ 48; Pluchon, ‘Vaudou, sorciers’ 138), ancestral-based spiritual and healing practices were perversely denied and considered a hindrance to this post-independence narrative of progress.² In *The Spirits and the Law*, Kate Ramsey

² This is a claim that continues to circulate today. It has echoed in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake for example, when Vodou was scapegoated as genesis of the disaster in its prevention of Haiti’s development (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 21). While Christian missionaries have played a significant role in providing support and services since the quake, *vodwizan* and sexual minorities are two groups reported to have been denied aid and food, based on their religious beliefs and sexual practices respectively. Elizabeth McAlister looks into this intervening role in the aftermath of the catastrophe in her important essay, ‘From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan.’ On the role of the most famous Vodou assembly of Bwa Kayman (Bois Caïman) in 1791, thought to have incited the initial revolts, see Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary* 81-92; Dubois *Avengers* and Beauvoir-Dominique ‘The Bois Caïman.’ In a Martinican context, anthropologist Thierry L’Étang has investigated how reinterpretations of the 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée point to the *malédiction* of the then capital of

examines how enslaved peoples negotiated legal prohibitions concerning ritual assembly and healing practices under French colonialism, by covertly undermining them, which could include the means by which dress regulations were performed (and transformed). How legislation continues to shape, and is shaped itself by communities, is analysed by Ramsey in order to understand how the denigration of Vodou and both temple, and family-based, ritual practices through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has served to politically and economically marginalize predominantly rural populations. In her analysis of these processes, she is particularly careful to stress the myriad and varied ways of serving the spirits (*sèvi lwa*), which may differ according to regional, environmental, historical and familial factors. As she states, Vodou ('one way of serving spirits') came 'to be figured by outsiders as the metonymic sign for a demarcatable "whole"' (5).

One of the first, and perhaps the most well-known, written references to Vodou culture was published by Saint-Domingue resident Moreau de Saint-Méry in 1797. As Haitian ethnologist Jean Price-Mars remarked, Moreau's detailed analysis under the designation of Vodou in his *Description* of the island 'resta célèbre et devint le thème amplifié, démarqué, de la plupart des relations qui ont été faites des cérémonies culturelles du 'Vodou' par des écrivains qui n'ont même pas eu l'occasion de les observer' (*remained famous and became the singular and magnified subject of the links made about 'Vodou' cultural ceremonies by writers who had not even had the opportunity to observe them*; 114). He uses the generic term of 'le Vaudoux' to gloss 'an all-powerful supernatural being', animated as a snake, a form of dance and a 'superstitious institution', stressing its danger to the colonial order of the time (64-69; Ramsey 40). Commenting on what he claims is a secret sect, and positioning himself on the outside, he observes that the male and female 'priests' of '*Vaudoux*' are known to their servers as 'Roi' and 'Reine', 'maître' and 'maîtresse' and 'papa' and 'maman' respectively. These titles indicate how Vodou ritual mirrors and performs political power structures of the Caribbean, but also points to the importance of different hierarchical roles within the *sosyete*

Martinique, Saint-Pierre, as causation of the disaster. The oral histories he has documented from residents of the city include references to 'magically related gender transgression.' Vanessa Agard-Jones, who discusses L'Étang's research in relation to Effé Géache's novel *Une nuit d'orgies à Saint-Pierre, Martinique* (1892), cites the story of a couple who would appear in town 'dressed as women . . . [who] frightened the young' ('What the Sands' 333).

(society) of the Vodou family.³ These roles mimicked civil and political realities and men, women and spirits took on duties and responsibilities within *l'espace clos* of the Vodou temple that mirrored those of the public authorities of the state (Ardouin 63-64).

The *lwa* (spirits) of the Vodou pantheon are divided into *nanchon* (nations) of which the two most important are the Rada - from the West African Dahomean town of Arada - and the Petwo - originally thought to be Creole in origin, but which has since been traced to the western central African region of the Kongo, from where many slaves were brought in the latter half of the eighteenth century.⁴ The organisation of Rada *nanchon* is based on an open familial support system, and privileges group consciousness and collective welfare. The Rada *lwa* forge a loyal and reciprocal bond with their servers and in turn expect to be served with the same familial level of care. The early leaders, Dessalines, Christophe and even Toussaint, in their struggle against French colonialism, were seen as embodiments of the *lwa* Ogou Feray, whose African origins tie him to the Rada family of spirits.⁵ As Maya Deren remarked, 'If one were to assemble the various manifestations of Ogoun and parade them in order, one would have, in fact, a procession of the hero-types of history' (131). One aspect, his strength as a military warrior, is reconfigured to represent the shifting political developments of the nation, but can also be seen to reach beyond the borders of Haiti. In Guadeloupe the militant masculinity of Ogou is symbolically sketched out in the oppositional power patterns of Mayolet stickfighting (or the art of Danmyè in Martinique), and in the Anglophone Caribbean he resides in the cane or rod-wielding figures of Rastafari culture, examined by Richard D. E. Burton in his *Afro-Creole* study. Burton regards Ogou's position as being 'at the crux of the dialectic of power and powerlessness' (249). His location at

³ The term *sosyete* refers to the community of people attached to a particular *ounfo*, whose members may not necessarily live in its vicinity. According to Maya Deren writing in the 1950s, on arrival at a ceremony, the commonly heard greeting is: 'Bonjour, la société' (154). These collectives are said to be African-derived and evolved in *marronaj* and the emancipatory struggle (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 17).

⁴ For Creole claims on the Petwo *nanchon* see Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description* 69; and Burton *Afro-Creole*. On scholarship evidencing the Kongo connections see McCarthy Brown, *Mama* 100-101; Thompson, 'From the Isle' 101-114; Fleurant 28.

⁵ For more on Ogou Feray (Feraille), who is represented by the Catholic chromolithograph of Sin Jak Majè (Saint Jacques Majeur or Santiago) mounted on a horse, see McCarthy Brown, 'Systematic'; Burton, *Afro-Creole* 249-252. See also Sheller's analysis of Edouard Duval-Carrié's painting, 'Le Nouveau Familier' (1986) which portrays Jean-Jacques Dessalines wearing the tricorn hat, clothed in the red and blue colours of Ogou Feray and brandishing a machete, in her chapter 'Sword-Bearing Citizens' (156).

the threshold of this axis is important, particularly as he symbolically embodies in his multiple emanations, not only a figure of warfare and catharsis, but also the traditional masculinity of the Caribbean father figure, who may be seen to hold an equally ambiguous relation to power within the region (250). This liminal position recalls Legba, the guardian of the gateway or crossroads and connotes the complex relationship between inside/outside and masculinity/femininity in the Caribbean.

L'anti-famille and the Caribbean Father

In an interview, Guadeloupean author Simone Schwarz-Bart highlights the fluidity of the father figure in the Caribbean:

Mes amis parlaient de plusieurs pères . . . On parlait de beau-père, pas de père, d'un homme de passage, dans la maison. Les femmes, les mères, recherchaient un père, un poteau-mitan, mais se retrouvaient chaque fois toutes seules. (17)

My friends spoke of several fathers . . . We talked of a stepfather, not a father, of a man passing through the house. Women, mothers, looked for a father, a central pillar, but every time found themselves all alone.

Schwarz-Bart's testimony of the absent/present father in Guadeloupe speaks to the subjects of the film *Des hommes et des dieux* who describe their mothers as enacting the role of both mother and father. One interviewee, Denis, depicted in figure 4, describes his father as 'a stranger . . . my mother acted as my father' in a scene where we see him kneeling and placing offerings to his surrogate mother Ezili. The Vodou adherents in the film consider themselves the 'children' of the maternal spirit of Ezili Dantò. The mother-son relationship is thus extended within the realm of Vodou, where Dantò offers maternal protection in the face of the patriarchy of outside society.



Figure 4: Film Still. Denis talks about motherhood against images of his spiritual mother, Ezili Dantò, in the background. Image permission: Anne Lescot, Le Collectif 2004 Images.

Any consideration of gender positions and their particularities in contemporary Caribbean society must take into account their origins in plantation slavery, which continues to have consequences on how men and women relate to one another in the region today. The legacy of slavery on how gender roles are performed is condensed in the Creole proverb, ‘fem-n cé chataign, n’hom-n cé foyaypin’ (*woman is a chestnut, man is a breadfruit*).⁶ In other words, women are strong while men, like the large breadfruit of the *Artocarpus* tree, easily fall to pieces. During slavery this opposition constituted a crucial psychological tool, wielded by the white slavemaster in order to deny agency to the black man. The origins of the father function in the Caribbean are problematic, in that they can be traced to somewhere between the patriarchal omnipresence of the white master as

⁶ This proverb is cited by Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé in the introduction to her essay on French Caribbean women writers, ‘La Parole des femmes’ (4).

head of the family on the one hand and the absence of the disenfranchised, emasculated black male slave on the other. Édouard Glissant's conceptualisation of the 'anti-famille' defines family under the authority of the slavemaster as the violently imposed 'accouplement d'une femme et d'un homme pour le profit d'un maître' (*union of a woman and a man for the profit of the master; Le discours* 166). In order to resist reproduction of the system of domination and servitude, enslaved women used their bodies as weapons. This refusal of an imposed 'corps familial' was thus violently performed via the contested terrain of the mother's body, who promoted sterility as she cried in despair: 'manjé tè, pa fè yich pou lesclavaj' (*eat earth, don't make children for slavery; 166*) Despite women's anti-colonial resistance, the memory of which is played out through the dramas of Ezili Dantò in Haitian Vodou, colonial dependence, particularly in Martinique and Guadeloupe, has prevented the development of 'un contre-pouvoir spirituel de la féminité' (*a spiritual resistance of femininity; Poétique* 72). This leads us to question the ambiguous absorption of colonial frameworks of patriarchy in post-slavery Caribbean societies or what might be considered the negative side of mimicry.

La famille étendue

In parallel to the closed plantation family, from which it was strictly forbidden to stray during slavery, exists what Glissant terms 'la famille étendue' (*Le discours* 166). This extended family, rooted in African kinship traditions, centres around a strong attachment to the mother, who heads the household. The rhizomatic formation also allows for the incorporation of non-biological members who are in need of a support system and thus a specifically Caribbean model is born out of the phenomenon of *marronaj* or transgression from the boundaries of the plantation. In resisting the linearity of 'la filiation originelle', idealised by the coloniser, the limits of these kinship networks were permeable and encompassing. However rather than a complete openness of borders with respect to the formation of families, it is important to stress that these matrices were not altogether free-form, as Glissant reminds us:

Il est remarquable que le refus de la famille en tant que sous-groupe consacré (imposé) s'accompagne de l'extension d'un rituel et de stricts devoirs à

travers et envers un réseau invraisemblablement complexe de parenté : tantes, cousines, das, marraines. (*Le discours* 151)

It is noteworthy that the rejection of family as an established (imposed) subgroup is accompanied by the extension of ritual and strict duties across and towards an incredibly complex kinship network: aunts, cousins, nannies, godmothers.

If we consider this organisation as an affiliation of *marronaj* during the Haitian Revolution, it is similarly noteworthy that these fictive kinship networks were not without a hierarchical system of authority. Maroon slaves adopted both military and familial roles and titles, which were strictly respected and required particular civic responsibilities. The importance of an investment in fixing labels is valued as a process of appropriation, affirmation and self-valorisation for the formerly enslaved, for whom the memory of a name was erased by the master.⁷ Clothing (as discussed in the previous chapter) and titles were sought after as signs of social transformation. As mentioned above the pseudonyms adopted filtered down to the naming of Vodou spirits: Couzin Zaka, Bawon Samedi and General Ogou (Burton, *Afro-Creole* 232). These subaltern social orders, termed *govenman lannuit* (night governments) by Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (*Haiti* 19), were also, as Burton suggests, divided into cabinets: Zaka (agriculture), Ogou (military), Legba (home affairs) and acted as a social (and judicial) system in the absence of support from the actual government (238).

Following independence, in addition to military and aristocratic appropriations, Haitian elites borrowed from the influential European-based Order of Freemasons, whose societies established themselves in Haiti in the nineteenth century (Sheller 158-60). This all-male institution played an important role in instilling a sense of moral responsibility and political participation for young Haitian men, who were keen to construct their manhood along the same patriarchal lines. Haitian women and the rural and urban poor were excluded from this ‘civilising process.’ Haitian citizenship was therefore formed out of the simulation of European

⁷ For more on re-naming in a postcolonial context see Césaire’s dramatization of decolonization, *La tragédie du roi Christophe*: ‘Allons de noms de gloire je veux couvrir vos noms d’esclaves’ (*With names of glory I will cover your slave names*; 37); also Glissant’s use of names as masks in *La Case du commandeur*; and Walcott *Collected* 11-12. Loichot examines Glissant and Walcott in her article ‘Renaming the Name.’

monarchic, military and elitist power structures. While these frameworks empowered and allowed for upward social mobility, their mimicry performed and reproduced former colonial structures of patriarchal family and military discipline.

Le nouveau familial

These projects seemed to be progressively pressing and moulding the Caribbean family into the template of a Western nuclear family. This idealised postcolonial design served as a symbol of the ‘education’ and ‘civilisation’ of the ‘enfant’-like masses. Rhoda Reddock argues that, ‘the Afro-Caribbean family, the product of its West African origins and its transformation during slavery, was never understood in its own right but always as a deviant form of a Western or European norm’ (2). Even under the leadership of Toussaint, the argument persisted that the labour system he implemented to rebuild Haiti could only work if African forms of worship were rejected and marriage under the Catholic Church adopted. This however did not necessarily result in a rigid European articulation of family performed in a Caribbean context. Glissant highlights the social and financial benefits of ‘official’ marriage in modern-day Martinique and Guadeloupe, aimed at legitimising official family units. Yet as he asserts, this ‘structuration imposée’ has proven ineffectual in asserting any real ‘attachement familial’, in the Western sense of the term: ‘Le caractère tribal – la grande extension – de la famille en Martinique est une parade (culturellement africaine) à ce refus’ (*The tribal character – the large extension – of the family in Martinique is a (culturally African) display of this refusal; Le discours 161*). The result is necessarily contradictory and hegemonic constructions of modern-day Creole family contain undercurrents of both the *anti-famille* of slavery and the African *famille étendue*, as they vary in their opposition *and* adherence to European hegemonic formations.⁸

Representation of resistance to a European familial institution, and arguably the imposition of bourgeois ideals from above, surfaces in the popular low-down

⁸ The participation of women in the workplace provides one example of this African and Creole duality, as its development can be derived from both pre-colonial African custom and the function women, equal to men, served in working the fields of the plantation.

pageant of the *mariage burlesque* (fig. 5) played out annually in the carnivals of Martinique and Guadeloupe. This parody, while temporally limited, subverts the heterosexual nuclear family (*filiation*) through cross-gender permeability and distorted caricature:

Il est une occasion en Martinique où hommes et femmes se rencontrent d'accord pour donner une semblable représentation de leurs rapports: c'est dans la coutume des mariages burlesques du Carnaval, critique de la structure familiale. L'homme y tient le rôle de l'épouse (le plus souvent enceinte) et la femme celui de l'époux ; un adulte y tient le rôle d'un enfant au berceau. (*Le discours*, 514)

*There is an occasion in Martinique in which men and women both agree to give an interpretation of their relationship. This is the tradition of the burlesque marriage during carnival, a critique of family structure. The man adopts the role of the wife (most often pregnant) and the woman that of the husband; an adult adopts the role of an infant in a crib.*⁹

⁹ For reflections and video footage on my own participation in this carnival tradition in 2012, which takes place annually on *lundi gras* in Martinique, see the blog entry: 'A Martinican Mariage Burlesque,' *Unravelling: Dress, Performance and Gender*, <<http://leblogdehammond.wordpress.com/2012/02/>>. For more historical context (including photographs) on this symbolic inversion see Louis Collomb's notes on the *Mariage Burlesque* tradition in his article 'Carnaval en Guadeloupe.'



Figure 5: The Mariage burlesque of the Plastic System Band carnival group in Lamentin, Martinique, lundi gras, 2012. Photo: Charlotte Hammond.

Matrifocality and the Métropole/Mère-trop-pôle

There is a significant amount of literature on the specificity of the historically determined matrifocality of Caribbean familial arrangements.¹⁰ As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, its genealogy is not uniquely traceable to Africa. Sociological studies on the phenomenon in the French Caribbean by scholars such as André (1987), Lésel (2003) and Mulot (2000), as well as Fanon (1952), Glissant (1981) and Burton (1994), have necessarily taken into consideration the symbolic status of ‘le bon père blanc’ (a re-imagining of the white master through to the ‘état-père’ role of the state; Lésel 19; Burton, *La Famille* 19), recurrent throughout the history of Martinique and Guadeloupe, and the effects of the internalisation of

¹⁰ The term ‘matrifocal’ was first employed by Raymond T. Smith in his book *The Negro Family in British Guiana* (1956) in which he explores patterns of Afro-Guyanese domestic grouping, highlighting the specific role of the mother as head of the household.

French hegemonic familial values in creating obedient overseas citizens. The most famous ‘bon père blanc’ in Martinique is the abolitionist Victor Schoelcher, who represents the white man’s ‘instrumental’ role in emancipation. His legacy is visible throughout the island: with a University town, the most prestigious lycée in Martinique and the capital’s main library in Fort-de-France named after him. A statue at the former *Palais de Justice* in Fort-de-France depicts Schoelcher as an embodiment of the Métropole, with his hand placed on a young *fille*, symbolising the island of Martinique.¹¹ In this section I will discuss in further detail the effects of the continued familial discourse employed by France to foster and keep its ‘children’, often coded as feminine ‘filles’, in a permanent relationship of dependence (Hintjens 64-76). Burton discusses the symbolic role of France up until departmentalization in 1946 as being both feminine and masculine, and maternal and paternal, in its influence (*La Famille* 14). A generation of Martinicans and Guadeloupeans still alive today can testify to the absorption of an ideology of having two ‘mothers’ that fed and nurtured their ‘children’: a ‘literal’ mother and ‘la Mère-patrie,’ as France was dubbed.¹² As Burton attests in *La famille coloniale*, post-1946, ‘la Mère-patrie’ was made-over to become ‘la Métropole’, meaning ‘cité-mère en grec’, which thinly disguised France’s enduring maternal role (14).

Sheller examines how this familial imagery in official colonial discourse was also prevalent in nineteenth century post-independence Haiti, both internally, by an elite class who had interiorised French Enlightenment ideals in fashioning the new nation, and externally, by forces whose eyes were very much still on Haiti (162-65). This narrative of educating the ‘children’ to become citizens was used to justify political subjugation and “enlightened” leadership by their wise elders’ (163). Matrilocality in this context became therefore, not a direct rejection of a European hegemonic family, based on *filiation*, but rather a refutation of the internalised

¹¹ In resistance to the central position this figure has been allocated in Martinican history, another statue of this figure, located in Schoelcher was recently defaced, literally the face was carved off, and scrawled with the following graffiti: ‘Cette (sic) homme ne nous a rien donné. Le peu que nous avons a été acqueri par la souffrance’ (*This man gave us nothing. The little we have has been gained through suffering*). See the article from 12 September 2013 on the *Bondamanjak* website ‘Victor perd la face à #Schoelcher’ <<http://www.bondamanjak.com/victor-perd-la-face-a-schoelcher/>>.

¹² Whilst in Martinique in January 2012 I attended a talk at the University Campus in Schoelcher, given by several *dissidents Martiniquais*, who spoke about their wartime experiences and defection from the Vichy regime to nearby Anglophone islands. To hear this generation of Martinicans talk about their ‘two mothers’ and the reciprocity involved in this relationship, awakened my sensibilities to the power of France’s familial discourse in assimilating its ‘children’.

paternalism of the extended family, which characterised post-slavery Caribbean society. Burton's contribution to the debates on matrifocality remains crucial, in its challenge to the over-focalisation (André 1987; Gracchus 1980) on the mother as a central pilaster, who directly interiorises and refracts European values of the 'père blanc':

Du fait que la matrifocalité représente une dérogation à la norme familiale 'européenne', d'aucuns ont pu voir en elle un foyer d'opposition à l'hégémonie des valeurs françaises en vigueur à la Martinique. (232)

Considering that matrifocality represents a dispensation of the 'European' family norm, no one has seen it as an oppositional force against the hegemony of French values in circulation in Martinique.

Women are once again caught in double opposition as the patriarchal power of the white man is mimicked by the black man in what can be understood as a form of ideological transvestism. While in the previous chapter I was concerned with that form of mimicry which creates gaps and space within the existing model, in order to alter, critique and revolt in creative ways against hegemony, I am now forced to address the more conservative side of this tactic: mimicry's capacity to reinscribe rather than resist the paradigms pre-established by the colonial powers. A creole patriarchy replaces the dominant white patriarchy in this process of historiography (Mohammed, 'A Social' 32). In resisting the dominance of the colonizer from within, the colonized 'unconsciously [...] reproduce[s] its underlying structures even as it consciously challenges its visible dominance' (Burton, *Afro-Creole* 8). Opposition takes place, but merely within the existing framework of reference. Matrifocality, and the plurality of relations it forges centred around the maternal figure of Ezili Dantò in Vodou, is at once a weapon of decolonization, promoting a West African heritage of nodes of relation and intimacy as resistance, and a challenge, as Burton suggests, to an internalised neo-colonial patriarchy.

André recalls Fanon in his description of how this psychic reproduction of colonial dependence is absorbed into family arrangements and cites Gracchus to underscore that:

La relation de domination, de servitude, n'est pas une relation en extériorité: d'un côté le dominant, de l'autre le dominé ; le colonisé installe en lui-même ce pouvoir qui l'aliène. Le maître est dans la tête, on le porte en soi. (248)

The relation of domination, of servitude, is not an external one: on one side the dominant, on the other the dominated; the colonised internalises this power that alienates him or her. The master is in the head, we wear him.

According to André, in Martinican society it is the mother's responsibility to teach her son to perform virility. What I posit as an unknowing, unwitting performance is judged on articulations of gesture, stance, costume and oratory skill and crucially symbolizes the Caribbean male's transition to active participation in the masculinist public domain. In addition, sexual virility, often linked to infidelity in Caribbean culture, validates a prevailing heteronormativity, from which one should not deviate. The mother therefore plays a pivotal role in her son's quest for 'reputation', characteristic of post-slavery Caribbean society, in contrast to her daughter's obligatory preservation of 'respectability', which is thought to be based on a system of values and conventions inherited from colonial society.

Peter Wilson was the first to suggest such a dichotomy as symptomatic of the ordering of Caribbean society in 1969, with his *Crab Antics* study discussing this theory further appearing in 1973.¹³ Reputation involves learning to become or appear as 'a real man' and to exteriorise and project oneself via one's dress, behaviour and *paroles*. It is about how one sees oneself and how one wants to be seen. Appearances matter, and are played out and reconfirmed to an ever-vigilant audience of male friends, female acquaintances and one's own mother. This performance is what David Murray terms as 'hypermasculinity' in the context of Martinique ('Homosexuality' 252). Failure to convince spectators risks the exposure of being labelled a *masisi*, *makomè* or other Creole pejorative to describe men who have sex with men. Gender performance can therefore potentially undermine the underpinning of one's sexuality for the community that acts as audience, attesting to the close

¹³ The value attributed to displaying and announcing one's virility and the visual consciousness of respectability vs. reputation in constructing Caribbean masculinity is examined further in chapter four of this thesis. André (1987), Mulot (2000) and Bougerol (2002) have all furthered the theory proposed by Wilson in a francophone context. Mulot, furthermore, places as much emphasis on appearances when encountering other men and the gaze of the female partner as that of the mother in the construction of masculine identity ('Redevenir un homme' 120).

alignment of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. As André explains, ‘s’il reste ainsi dans ses jupes, à tourner dans la cuisine, que s’il ne sort pas afin de courir, de jouer, on pensera de lui qu’il est un makomè’ (*If he stays wrapped up in her skirts, hanging around the kitchen, if he doesn’t go outside to run and play, people will think he is a makomè*; 165).¹⁴ The importance given to performances of hypermasculinity, as well as social standing and material wealth, in the French Caribbean are enmeshed in what can be seen as a restoration project. Dispossessed and emasculated males pieced together virility and commodity worth, according to colonial blueprints. The more these carbon copies are reproduced the more they gain force in the ‘postcolonial’, post-slavery imagination. Further research is needed into the supposed gendering of the reputation/respectability binary in the French Caribbean. I would argue that this desire to perform reputation and be publicly seen by others as one sees oneself is not unique to men in the region. As the histories of the *mulâtresses* of Saint Domingue in the previous chapter demonstrate, French Caribbean women have been blurring this gendered split for a long time.

If ‘reputation’ is traditionally considered a male realm and ‘respectability’ a female realm, then the slavery/post-slavery dichotomy is also gendered. Female ‘respectability’, with its spaces of the domestic home and church are associated with the colonizer, whilst male ‘reputation’ is seen as internally produced, and particular to Creole societies (Wilson 233; Burton, *Afro-Creole* 158). Wilson’s binary formula however does not leave room for contemporaneous configurations of female ‘reputation’ and male ‘respectability’ and all the degrees in between.¹⁵ It also erases nuances of class (and race), discussed below in relation to ethnographic filmic representation and Ezili Freda, the Vodou spirit of fine taste and *coquetterie*, to whom both men and women are devoted.

Masculinity was privileged and seen as crucial to the nation-building project in Haiti, and the claims for political and cultural autonomy in the post-slavery contexts of Martinique and Guadeloupe (Murray ‘Homosexuality’). New

¹⁴ The normalising function of this remark is based on an inside/outside spatial orientation, but it is important to consider that such a comment might be applicable to dress, body image or gesture. For example it is not uncommon to hear in Martinique that the sexuality of a man is called into question due to his body size erring on the thinner side of normative acceptance. Male body image is arguably scrutinized as much as female in Caribbean society.

¹⁵ Jean Besson (25) has explored female reputation systems in Jamaica; see also Carolyn Cooper’s discussion of slackness in female dancehall performances (*Noises* 156-57).

masculinities emerge that are not only imbricated in constructions of the self, but by extension are inherited from colonial conceptualisations of the nation-state. As a seemingly anti-colonial antidote, performative hypermasculinity resists the imposition of an effeminate, childlike masculine identity, which has characterised French colonial *and* post-slavery representations of the islands. Yet this act paradoxically re-enacts patriarchal *his*-tories and encourages heterocentricity within the region.

Children of the House

While women have traditionally held a privileged position of influence within the domestic, familial sphere in Caribbean society, their authority in the persistently patriarchal public sphere has remained limited (Lewis 261). It is with this in mind that Karen McCarthy Brown insists of Vodou, as one of the more gender egalitarian and inclusive religious systems, that a ‘decision to serve the spirits’ represents ‘a decision to stop serving men’ (*Mama* 167). Vodou therefore provides a context in which to challenge patriarchal notions of the nation and neo-colonialism. Divine relationships are not only seen as an extension of human ones, but, in the loyalty, economic stability and support they provide, are often preferable. Ancestral spirits are counted as part of the ‘*famille étendue*’ of Vodou and remain attached to the familial land (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 7; Richman 117-118). R.T. Smith uses the expression ‘house people’ to include ‘spirits of the dead as well as intimate friends who feel at home in the house’ (51) in his seminal analysis of Caribbean kinship. The drop of rum or beer spilt on the floor of the *lakay* (house) or yard for the ancestral ‘house people’ is a ritual enacted throughout the region. Vodou bridges the ‘spirits of the dead’ with the living family. When employed for healing purposes, it involves service to the *lwa*, but guidance is also often mediated through the acquired *konesans* (wisdom) of the family, both literal and in the expansive sense I have outlined above, incorporating circular layers of the local community into ‘all one family’. This is particularly the case in urban settings, such as Port-au-Prince, given the rural to urban migrations which took place in Haiti over the twentieth century, diffracting and dispersing patriarchal ‘family’ relationships as well as ancestral ties

to the land.¹⁶ Spiritual heritage ‘encompassing familial spirits and the ritual knowledge of how properly to serve them’ (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 7) became more fragmented with these moves, resulting in an increased demand for ritual practitioners and specialists, *oungan* and *mambo*. Urban Vodou communities have preserved a symbolic connection with the land and are organised as inclusive and arbitrary family units for practical reasons. Just as in a family, the ‘children of the house’ (the *sevitè* or initiates of the temple) must respect the parents (*oungan/mambo*) and by extension the parental *lwa*, whose healing authority flows across social divides. As Maya Deren explains:

In calling both the priest and the loa “papa” (or “maman”), as is the common practice, the serviteur simultaneously indicates two basic concepts: first, that he expects of both the divinity and the priest the protective prejudice which a child assumes of its parent; and second, that the parent commands an authority and respect similar to that which is accorded the priest and the loa. (153)

Oungan and Hierarchy in *Des hommes*

The *oungan* interviewed in Lescot and Magloire’s documentary seem to benefit from the prestige attached to their role of spiritual ‘healer’ as it enables them to gain influence and respect within the parameters of a Vodou *sosyete*, demarcated within a more hostile heterocentric society. ‘People used to mock my way of dressing or my hairstyle’, claims Innocente, ‘this has stopped since I became an *oungan*. People come knocking at my door. . .’ As such Innocente’s social standing is elevated as he acquires more spiritual *konesans*. As a sacred specialist one’s healing knowledge and authority crosses social divisions, effecting upward mobility in the hierarchy of the Vodou family. The *oungan* are shown in *Des hommes* to be ridiculed for their sexuality and failure to outwardly perform masculinity, yet revered for their religious and medical power. This tension suggests that the *oungan* are in service to

¹⁶ E.F. Frazier also attributes the marginal status of the father, giving rise to the phenomenon of matrifocality, to this process of urbanisation in his *Negro Family* study. However I agree with Lésel’s challenge to this supposition, as already the displacements and dispersals of slavery resulted in dispersed rearrangements of family (23). The notion of the *anti-famille* and the slavemaster’s preoccupation with maternity must also be factored in to the preponderance of matrifocality in the region.

heteronormative identities, who ‘need’ them to restore balance. It also illustrates the different spaces (private/public; un/seen) deployed for different performances, as these ‘actors’ trade services and remedies across spiritual, social and gendered lines. Despite some resistance, their clients accept them in wider society, as they know it will pay off in the end.

Their fluid gender identity, tales of seduction and honorary *konesans* raise parallels with the *Candio*, or *Docteur*, manoeuvring in eighteenth century Saint-Domingue, whose sartorial performances I analyse in chapter one.¹⁷ Employing the wit and style of the *Candio Gede*, these composite subjects use their bodies to traverse binaries of masculinity/femininity, sacred/profane and visibility/invisibility. The men’s performances and their reception are contextual, with Vodou operating differently in public and domestic spaces. In public spaces such as the *Marché de fer* in Port-au-Prince, Blondine remains silent and so the camera accentuates his costume and gesture as visual surfaces for the viewer to navigate. Rendered as a somatic spectacle to those who cry ‘*Masisi!*’ in the scene, viewers of the film then hear Blondine’s recuperation of the role assigned to him in the voiceover. ‘If I can’t be myself in Haiti’, he claims, ‘I would rather die or move to the Dominican Republic.’

Lescot and Magloire’s film allows us to view how bodies act in both seen and unseen spaces. The filmic techniques employed to try and ‘capture’ the invisible will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Straddling these two spaces, it is suffice to signal at this stage how bodies in the film are made up of not one costume but an entire wardrobe of uniforms and accessories that are put on and adjusted according to the script required by society. The initiates’ performances and costumes in the film reveal the constructed social and gendered identities of each individual and the need for the repetition of stock characters in the process of self-possession.

While it may be argued that this honorable spiritual authority commanded by initiates resonates beyond the boundaries of Vodou practice into Haitian society as a whole, the continuity and permanence of this permeation is still questionable. However the ability to overcome this hostility and survive is very much a part of

¹⁷ See Drouin de Bercy’s use of ‘Docteur’ in reference to the dandified figure of the ‘Candio’ in *De Saint Domingue* 175.

Haitian existence. Vodou, born as it was as resistance to the dehumanization of slavery on the island, reflects yet also aims to heal and ease this struggle. Blondine's claims in *Des hommes* that men receive superior treatment and care *chez un masisi* may stem more widely from socially therapeutic processes fundamental to the practice of Vodou as both healing system and sacred knowledge in Haiti. As Claudine Michel points out,

A l'inverse d'autres religions, le Vodou ne connaît pas les concepts d'Age d'or, de Paradis ou de Ciel. La vie après la mort pourrait bien être aussi terrible que les conditions de vie terrestre. Des lors, c'est la survie sur terre qui est la valeur primordiale, survie de la personne et du groupe. La guérison qui prolonge la vie dans le temps est l'un des principes constitutifs du Vodou. ('Le Pouvoir' 101)

Unlike in other religions there is no concept of a Golden Age, Paradise or Heaven. Life after death could well be just as bad as the conditions of life on earth. Therefore of utmost value is one's survival on earth, survival of the individual and the group. Healing which prolongs life in the now is one of the constitutive principles of Vodou.

Comfort and equilibrium are sought through the African-derived existential concepts of Vodou ritual, which unlike other monotheistic religions is not governed by a written ethical code (85). Vodou's malleable and contextual moral order ensures that the *lwa* provide the *masisi* with protection, and crucially a place within Haitian society, in return for services and food offerings. As Michel affirms, 'Les adeptes du Vodou doivent *balanser*', through relationships of mutual dependence. What is perhaps significant in considering the subjects of *Des hommes* is that none seem to have been excluded from their actual families on the basis of their non-normative gender or sexuality.¹⁸ This, as the film suggests, is due to their privileged role within Vodou and their reciprocal system of exchange with the spirits. While *Oungan* are granted respect in Vodou as spiritual parents, they must equally earn this respect by providing a spiritual service.

¹⁸ In contrast to the 'children of the houses' in Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), many of whom have been forced to leave home from an early age.

Rural, urban, regional, diasporic, family-based or temple-based forms can influence patterns of collective and private worship. Spiritual heritage and familial *konesans* is preserved in individual and collective memory in very specific ways, which effects precisely how a community and its individual members are able to relate and in turn, survive. Reflecting this survival philosophy, ceremonies occur where and when there is a need within the community (Laguerre 22). As my discussion above of family configurations as part of the legacy of plantation slavery and the negotiated and non-linear syncretism of Vodou has demonstrated, to talk of actual family, with its implications of a Western triangular household, seems irrelevant in this context. Vodou rites have a cathartic, therapeutic function for vulnerable individuals who find themselves on the margins of Haitian society. But more crucially it is the religion's familial organization and self-definition which maintains this culture in all its rhizomatic complexity. For the adepts depicted in *Des hommes*, Vodou provides a protective 'pod.' It brings into proximity and (corporeal) contact those vulnerable individuals who find themselves on the margins of Haitian society. The intimacy of this contact shapes an arbitrary 'family' but crucially ensures 'familiarity' both within and towards the community. 'Familiarity' is what Sara Ahmed describes in reference to Fanon as 'implicit knowledge' or "the world we implicitly know as a world that is organised in specific ways" (124). Vodou still functions therefore as a means of organising disparate peoples as well as giving them an individual role within the collective. The preservation of spiritual heritage and familial *konesans* in individual and collective memory takes many forms, which effects precisely how a community and its individual members are able to survive (Ramsey 7).

Attempts to maintain and/or recreate family are carried out for different purposes and to different ends, as Barbara Browning asserts:

Reconstitution of family means something different when the 'literal' family is, in all likelihood, 'not' the nuclear family, but an extended family, an economically vulnerable family in flux, in which grandmothers, aunts, and sisters are as likely to nurture children as mothers. (163)

Des hommes shows the surrogate mother figures who lead the families and nurture their children, to be incarnations of the spirit Ezili Dantò. This diligent and

courageous spirit is said to have fought on the front line of the maroon armies during the Haitian revolution, where she gained the facial scars we see depicted in the more static representations of her Catholic chromolithograph. The maternal figure of Dantò is thus a spiritual incarnation of the strong Afro-Caribbean mother who is considered to be a *poto-mitan*, or central pillar of the *peristil* (interior yard of the temple) or *lakou* extended family. In Vodou possession, in order to mount the *chwal* (horse or spirit vessel) the spirit must pass through this pivotal post in order to enter the *ounfo* (temple). Considering the *poto-mitan* as a metaphor for the mother suggests she is not only a point of focalization round which the family is organised but may also be seen as a facilitator or conduit, enabling transcendence and deliverance.

In her essay on fictive representations of cross-gendered individuals in contemporary Caribbean literature, Rosamond King highlights the recurrence of the depiction of ‘trans characters’ as nurses or midwives, endowed with both metaphorical and emotional healing power, who ‘deliver’ the centrally positioned protagonists who conveniently display ‘normative’ gender ideals ‘back to reality, nurse them to health and/or understanding, and then deliver their stories to us.’¹⁹ Although none of the characters are strictly of the nursing profession in *Des hommes*, their status as carers and herbalists within the Vodou community is in parallel to the device of the ‘nurse’ put forward in King’s argument as someone able to offer treatment for both physical and emotional suffering.

King’s evocation of the ‘midwifing of selves’ and the delivery of stories also points to the idea of bringing certain histories to bear through the intermediary figure of the ‘nurse’ which results in cathartic restoration of balance and agency for the recipient. In the case of *Des hommes*, the *Vodwizan* can be seen to represent the *fanm-saj* (midwives) of rural Haiti, who deliver us, the spectators of the film, through the telling of their individual stories and shared experiences to a place of better understanding and renewed perspective. The power structure of film maker as ‘possessor’ (coloniser) and film subject as ‘possessed’ mediator also calls into question the position of the spectator, examined more closely in subsequent chapters.

¹⁹ R.S. King, ‘Re/Presenting’ 593. King’s corpus includes Mayra Santos-Febres’s *Sirena Selena* (2000); Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996); and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987).

This construction also evokes the possession performances of the spirit Ezili, through which shared histories of colonial relations between the oppressor and the oppressed are retold and re-enacted.

Mirrors and Maps: Ezili Dantò and Ezili Freda

The spirits that make up the *Ezili* family have many faces and forms, reflecting the multiple female characters witnessed manoeuvring and acting in the social circles of colonial Saint-Domingue, as well as their modern-day counterparts in contemporary Haitian society and its diaspora. Karen McCarthy Brown in her foundational ethnographic study *Mama Lola* describes these female spirits as ‘both mirrors and maps, making the present comprehensible and offering direction for the future’ (221).²⁰ In Martinique and Guadeloupe, the binary-based simplification of these manifold representations translates along the lines of the popular stereotypes of the *fanm cho* (hot woman) and the *fanm poto-mitan*, that continue to pervade the popular consciousness of contemporary Antillean society (Couti, ‘Abject’). In Vodou, the *lwa* Ezili Freda and Ezili Dantò may complement, and at other times, oppose one another. This splitting juxtaposition of the light-skinned Freda with the dark-skinned Dantò recalls Fanon’s argument that whiteness is reliant on blackness to make it whole (179). Analogies with the stereotypical Catholic pairing of Madonna/Magdalen as female opposites of good/evil persist. In Vodou iconography Freda has therefore traditionally been masked by lithographs of the Mater Dolorosa (mother of sorrows), while Dantò is usually portrayed with child and so uses Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Mater Salvatoris (Polish Black Virgin: Our Lady of Czestochowa) and Our Lady of Lourdes as her insignia. What Vodou demonstrates, however, is that differences between paired female spirits are blurred and contradictory. This forces us to question the need for such types in the first instance and why they are still so widely pervasive in the Caribbean.

²⁰ McCarthy Brown also discusses the African origins of Lasyrenn, who like Dantò and Freda, is one of the most important of the Ezili group of spirits. She suggests the origins of Lasyrenn can be traced to the West African deity Mami Wata. According to McCarthy Brown the fluidly gendered figure of Lasyrenn, whose mythical counterpart in Martinique and Guadeloupe is the water-dwelling Maman Dlo, has been carved from the mermaid figures adorning the ships which transported slaves across the Atlantic. Lasyrenn embodies therefore both the wisdom of Ginen (Africa) *anba dlo* (beneath the water) and the violent displacement of enslaved peoples across the water.

During an interview conducted in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 2011 with *vodwizan* Georges René, who is spiritually married to both Freda and Dantò, I asked him about the differences of class between these two *lwa*. His response underlines the plurality of Ezili and how she plays out the revolutionary history of Haiti:

G: Freda is very class...aristocracy. But she is liberal... she's dangerous. She's a hot pepper, when she comes she sees, don't matter if you dark, if you ugly, she sit with you. But she can be fresh...if you don't take a bath...she tell you go take a bath. She loves men... but Dantò she's always knife, because she fight with Dessalines

C: at the frontline?

G: Yes. And Freda was there. Yes Freda would go cross more to Alexandre Pétion.

The alliance of Dantò with the revolutionary warrior Jean-Jacques Dessalines and that of Freda with the leader of the mulatto army, Alexandre Pétion, situates gender identity within the larger context of the constructed racial and classed divisions of colonial and postcolonial Haitian society. Freda as a light-skinned spirit of romance and beauty, concerned with appearances, is thus identified as rich and upper-class in a society where most women engage in physical labour and according to Manbo Mama Lola, never aspire to find love, but merely secure affiliations (McCarthy Brown, *Mama* 247). While the argument of this thesis focuses on mimicry and masquerade, an imperative to survive economically is an important undercurrent of all of the films I discuss. In *Des hommes*, the men seek security through relations not only with other men, but also with their spiritual families, through their service to the *lwa*.

In their service the two Ezili spirits are treated as a pair but are also spatially and temporally segregated. This was evident when I visited the family home of Alex Jeune, a Haitian Vodou practitioner who lives in Paris.²¹ The altar and room dedicated to Ezili was situated in the basement of the house, separate from the other bedrooms as if to avoid rivalry. Above each pillow on the mattress where Alex sleeps was taped a different emanation of Ezili. On the left hand side was an image

²¹ Names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of informants.

of Dantò, whom Alex serves on Tuesdays and the right hand side was Freda, to whom Thursdays are devoted.²² As Colin Dayan explains: ‘Her presence when she visits devotees is known by her demands and need for adoration. Not love, not romance, but a promise of the most intense rendezvous, one night alone with her every week’ (‘The Call’ 26). In the context of urban Haiti shown in *Des hommes*, these material demands can prove difficult to meet, given the economic realities faced by the initiates. ‘Erzulie demands an exuberance of devotion that plays itself out as a surfeit of matter. Those who do not have are possessed by the spirits of those who did’ (Dayan, ‘Erzulie’ 14). In other words, Ezili’s performance of fine things, jewels and other props – or properties – of the plantation, her consumption of champagne and sweet delicacies, questions the continued unobtainability of these accoutrements in real life. Service to Ezili recalls a history of possession by and servitude to the master. Yet by replaying the desires of the master through these possession performances, and robing oneself in the excesses of Ezili, *Vodwizan* simultaneously subvert slavery’s story of submission, in what can be understood as both ‘acts’ of memory and transgression.

Ezili Freda

Freda, Dantò’s Rada counterpart, resonates in *Des hommes* through the elaborate ritual of her *toilette*. She is alluded to in the cosmetics, nails and hairspray of the group of men preparing, decorating and arming themselves for a night out. We also observe a possession performance by the mistress herself, which serves as a reminder that regardless of one’s sexuality, cross-gender possession frequently occurs in Vodou.²³ Just as Ezili marries both men and women, she is just as likely to possess a man as she is a woman. In this scene of the film a moustached male initiate lends his body to Freda, who wears a red frilly dress and proceeds to sing a beautiful melodic song. His body is thus transformed by the femininity of the female spirit. Similarly *Vodwizan* Alex reports of singing like a woman when possessed by Ezili. He explained to me:

²² Alex explained that in order to keep the spirits in a relationship of benevolence he would not sleep with any other woman, spirit or human, on these days.

²³ For further analysis of cross-gender spirit possession in Vodou see Strongman ‘Afro-diasporic’ and ‘Transcorporeality.’

Quand la Freda se manifeste sur moi, tout ce que je fais on dirait que c'est une femme. Physiquement on voit c'est un homme, mais je me comporte comme une femme et voilà que je demande de maquillage ou me maquiller ou faire des ongles tout ça...mais je dis c'est pas vrai ça.

When Freda manifests herself through me, everything I do, you would think I am a woman. Physically you see that it's a man, but I act like a woman and there I am asking for make-up or putting it on, doing my nails, all that...and after I say it can't be true.

In her book *Infectious Rhythm*, Barbara Browning evokes Ezili in her analysis of Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*. I would contend that Dantò does seem to shine through the mothers of the fictive fashion houses to which drag ball participants in the film seek belonging and familial protection. Browning draws our attention more specifically to Ezili Freda in a scene where ball walker, Octavia St Laurent, is worshipping the white supermodel posters tacked to her bedroom wall (166). The superficiality of feminine performance and the desire for material possessions and to clothe oneself in those possessions reveals the precarity of Freda. As Georges explained in our interview: 'Ezili Freda she's more perfume, jewel that's her business, yes she's rich... she's richer than Dantò. But Dantò fight. She's a beautiful black woman.' On the one hand Freda is perfumed, bejewelled and of a desirable social standing. She performs markers of beauty that signify social power and prestige. Yet for Haitians, as McCarthy Brown points out, Freda also represents a reminder of the dangers of an over-reliance on surface appearance and material wealth. If the spirits were shaped on the realities of everyday colonial society, Ezili reflects what was being observed by the former enslaved. As Dayan has remarked, the word Vodoun, which comes from the Fon people of Dahomey, refers to 'spirit' but also 'image'. Through the bodies of her devotees, Ezili images the demands and riches of the master in colonial Haiti. In doing so she repeats and critiques a desire to be part of that same society. If Ezili is, as Dayan has written, a 'mimicry of excess' (14), ridiculing our attachment to beauty and luxury, she in turn dramatizes an obsession with skin colour. The irony of this worship is conveyed in Livingston's film, which shows intertwined whiteness and femininity sought as a protective two-piece suit.

In *Paris is Burning*, ball walkers share their material desires whilst sat in front of sewing machines. The men are sewing outfits not only to emulate ‘women,’ but more specifically white upper class North American women. If the ballwalkers in *Paris is Burning* want to pass in mainstream North American society, the *vodwizan* of *Des hommes* seek belonging first and foremost in the Vodou *sosyete*. Similar dreams of luxury are shared in *Des hommes*, and one man exclaims that he ‘pulled out all stops’ to get that dress, as they prepare throughout the film in a local hair salon.

The contemplation and narcissism of these scenes, illustrated in figure 6, where they ‘make up’ their identities further unites them as family. Like Ezili Freda, who is often greeted with a mirror by her *sevitè*, the film subjects self-consciously style their gender and sexuality collectively. This symbolic preparation leads up to the climatic and trance-like parallel scenes of the Vodou *sévis* and the local *kompas* soirée. In both films the visibility of the subjects’ performance in one domain facilitates their ability to ‘pass’ within another more public space, whether that be the arena of the drag ball allowing for survival on the streets of New York or the umbrella of a Vodou belief system that enables an inclusive spectrum of same-sex desires to be tolerated in everyday Haitian society. Browning sees the communities in both drag ball and Afro-diasporic religious contexts as providing a space for the ‘children’ to re-fashion their spiritual, aesthetic and political beliefs (159). The balls in *Paris is Burning* are thus carnivalesque in their inversion of uniforms of race, gender and class. Indeed similarities can also be found in the cross-dressing, cross-gender parades of Martinican carnival, with *Travesti-Makomè* inverting norms to different ends through costuming.

Outward markers of gender and race are privileged by the film subjects, yet paradoxically deconstructed and ironized through the montage of the film itself (Bennett 186; hooks, *Black Looks* 151). Livingston depicts a desire to be seen, a desire for status and wealth amongst the performers, whilst also ridiculing that desire, revealing the mechanisms of the deal necessary for survival. The realness performed in the film is what Judith Halberstam has discussed in terms of ‘the way that people, minorities, excluded from the domain of the real, appropriate the real and its effects’ (*In a Queer* 51).



Figure 6: Blondine and Innocente get ready for a night out in the local hair salon. Image permission: Anne Lescot, *Le Collectif* 2004 Images.

Dayan argues that ‘Ezili takes on the garb of femininity - and even speaks excellent French - in order to confound and discard the culturally defined roles of men and women’ (‘Erzulie’ 3). Her performance is not one of uncomplicated mimicry, as in order to deconstruct a gendered historiography she must wear the femininity, and repeat the language, of the colonizer. If the subjects of *Paris is Burning* perform feminine submissiveness for the viewer’s consumption, they, like Ezili or the mulâtresses of colonial Saint-Domingue, are merely performing the deals necessary to get by, using the only cultural capital available to them. They work on their own bodies out of necessity, using them as, ‘canvases of representation’ (Hall, ‘What’ 109). Spirit possession is another embodied means of retelling and subverting colonial histories of dominance and submission, of remembering the past. Ezili’s embellishments and contradictory costumes furthermore enable gender complexity and self-possession, that ‘transcend the limits of the colonizing eye’

(hooks, 'In our glory' 53). As a mirror she offers a space for memory, rebirth and an examination of stereotypes through the bodies of her initiates.

Roberto Strongman has critiqued the authors of *Des hommes* for foregrounding the reasons that 'turn' these men into *masisi* ('Afro-Diasporic' 27). He calls instead for a more useful interrogation of why so many men who desire men gravitate towards this religion. McCarthy Brown and Mama Lola have highlighted the economic and survival imperatives informing a decision to serve the spirits (167), as well as its response to disappointment with real life relationships with men. For the men in *Des hommes* the network of permeable relations forged through Vodou in contemporary Haitian society enables resistance and protection against a prevailing heteropatriarchy, inherited from Haiti's colonial past. Their less public performances *en kachet* however might suggest that Vodou itself can be viewed as merely masquerade, a dressing-up ritual to disguise 'real' subaltern and transgressive identities. Yet such a reading would itself be superficial, in its suggestion that syncretic African-derived religious traditions are essentialist by nature.

What *Des hommes* demonstrates well, when considered within its historical context, is that in Haitian Vodou, created as it was out of an imagined kinship support system, gender has always been considered 'performative' and thus transcendental. In African-derived religious systems the body is merely a vehicle, open to transformation by the spirit, as it enables the articulation of a spectrum of gendered subjectivities. The syncretism of Vodou as a discursive site for political and aesthetic resistance collapses binaries of masculine versus feminine, sacred versus profane, visible versus invisible, and rather creates an inclusive moral template which continually adapts to the practicalities of Haitian life. As Maya Deren attests, 'It must provide the *means* for living [and] serve as a practical methodology, not as an irrational hope' (73). Commendably, *Des hommes* presents non-heteronormative men, who articulate a range of gendered subjectivities, as central figures. In doing so the film, like the *parole* of the poet to which Glissant refers, considers the peripheral as central, obliterating the very notion of a centre/periphery divide (*Poétique* 41). The film, like their mother, Ezili Dantò, brings these men into focus and makes their voices be heard in an alternative family portrait. The words sung by *oungan* Erol Josué in the close of the film's commentary honour the role of these subjects within Haitian society, echoing the sacred *konesans*

of the maroon which filtered down to the whole community, offering direction for the future:

Pawol pa'm la ou pa vle we

Se li-menm ki fe tout kok chante

Kose pa nan ou pa vle we

Se li-menm ki fe tout kok chante

Tout zanmi ki pa vle we tout zanmi pawol lan ba.

It's my words that you don't want to hear

My way of being that you don't want to accept

But it's this way of being that makes the cockerels crow

This way of being which makes life progress.

CHAPTER THREE

Imaging the Invisibles: Flipping the Colonial Gaze in Haitian Vodou

Expressions of ‘non-normative’ sexuality in the context of the Caribbean, due to histories of colonialism and slavery, are often formulated around a binary: either considered to be trailing behind, in pursuit of more ‘progressive’ Western models of homosexuality; or branded a foreign imposition.¹ I have argued thus far for a re-evaluation of the historic specificities and political nuances of gender difference within the region in order to better reflect upon the articulation and dissemination of local identities as performances of memory and resistance. My main focus in this chapter will be on the role of the filmmaker and while not wishing to ignore the position of the spectator in my analysis, their role will be given greater import in the subsequent sections of this thesis. I will here instead turn my attention to the techniques employed by the filmmaker in mediating expressions of crossing, as they are overtly manifested through dress and the body. The function of cross-dressing, as I argue in this thesis, is not exclusively limited to gender transgression, but also includes crossing arbitrary categories of race and class, which remain persistently intertwined in the Caribbean.

Visual representation encounters particular challenges when it attempts to interpret the sacred rituals of the Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion of Vodou in Haiti. The Kreyòl term *lezenvezib*, or ‘the invisibles’, is used in Haiti to describe the spirits or *lwa*. My first concern is therefore with the possibility and problems inherent in ‘capturing’ *lezenvisib* through the highly visual medium of film. In my analysis I would like to extend an understanding of *lezenvisib* to include not only the spirits and those who serve them, but also those subjects who remain economically

¹ Due to histories of slavery and colonial oppression, gender and sexuality have quite understandably been subsumed by racial or political concerns. Any discussion of gender has been refracted through a racial discursive lens. While Lola Young in her book *Fear of the Dark* rightly criticizes white feminists for their failure to take this important historical context into account, in the case of Haiti outlined here I would question the ideological work behind the implication that gender politics have been left behind (24).

and ideologically oppressed and find themselves on the margins of Haitian society. Vodou is said to reflect an inverted image of Haiti. As a visual and embodied culture of decolonization, it constitutes what I would like to term, with a nod to Benítez-Rojo's writing on carnival, a 'travesty mirror' of Haitian society.² By this I am suggesting that Vodou reflects the revolutionary and carnivalesque spirit of the people; the spaces, routes and roots of *marronaj*; and the acts of resistance to externally imposed imperialist values. Like documentary film, it offers an altered 'reality.' The representation of Vodou reveals how bodies are used to tell an 'other' story, which exists on the other side of the mirror. This alternative narrative allows for fluid performances of gender, race and social standing, merging the future and the past in the present.

Through a comparison of film makers Maya Deren and Leah Gordon, both non-Haitian women who have had long-term scopical relationships with Haiti and Vodou culture, I will begin to unravel cases of representational resistance and a politics of 'looking back,' which since pre-revolutionary times has been a feature of anti-colonial contestation in Haitian culture. It is perhaps due to Vodou's syncretic and encompassing system that a consideration of alternative collaborations and multifaceted challenges to the dualistic relationship of film subject (outside) and film-maker and viewer (inside) is rendered possible. The multi-textured and multi-sensorial affect of Vodou, the vibrations of the drumming, the tracing of ceremonial *vévé* (signs) and the tasting of the rum, also play a role in disrupting an over-reliance on this image-making dichotomy and may transform, through performance, the ritual of filming.

Twofold in its structure, the first part of the chapter will address filmic representation of the more popular expression of cross-dressing found in carnival performance, using the work of British artist Leah Gordon, whose 2008 film, *Bounda pa Bounda: A Drag Zaka*, blurs the boundaries of secular and sacred in its depiction of the satirical costume performance of a rara band ritual in Haiti.³ While

² See the Cuban novelist's influential study *The Repeating Island* (306).

³ Rara bands are self-organized drumming and dance groups that perform processional rituals and tributes in the streets during the period of *karèm* (Lent) in Haiti. As the festivities of *Mercredi des cendres* come to a conclusion, carnival continues and extends into the period of *karèm* in the form of rara, which retains links both to spirit worship and the Vodou *ounfo* as a base. See McAlister, 'Rara' 129-143, for a historical contextualization of the military organization of these groups.

Bounda pa Bounda reveals male virility superficially masked in parody of the female body, the second part of this chapter will use the 2002 documentary by Anne Lescot and Laurence Magloire, *Des hommes et des dieux (Of Men and Gods)* as a case study to examine bodies that resist binaries of gender and sexuality in everyday life. The latter, as was revealed in the previous chapter, is concerned with more enduring gender transformation through rituals of Vodou possession. Here, small visual signifiers of cross-gender dress denote sexual desire and demonstrate more permanence in their embodiment. More detailed analysis of this film is needed however in order to analyse the work of the authors in revealing this other ritually sanctioned space for cross-gender expression and social mobility.

Theories of the gaze proposed by Fanon (1952), Trinh Minh-ha (1991) and Catherine Russell (1999), will provide the framework through which I will discuss these bodies that creatively cross social boundaries, and the underlying power structures governing the subjects' relationship to the filmmaker. Through all these layers of lenses and looks, how might a visual and performative resistance to not only the social and racial 'epidermal schema' of colonialism, but also the neo-colonial 'regimes of representation' that have become firmly established with respect to Haiti, begin to emerge? The challenges of representation will be examined from both sides of the camera. In particular I am interested in the small, surreptitious and embodied tactics of those who are politically invisible but who persistently remain in front of the camera as hypervisible bodies. I will be asking how the subject of the film uses image to re-imagine themselves in front of the camera/mirror in order to bring about cultural transformation.

If a mirror is a threshold between the visible and the invisible, Vodou's performance involves ritual specialists whose bodies span private but also very public spaces. These practitioners communicate between seen and unseen realms, bringing that which is imagined and inaccessible into the world of the visual, where it can be interpreted. This 'travesty mirror' of Haitian society attracts foreign artists and researchers, such as myself, who are granted access to what is perceived on the surface as a 'private' world. It is important to remember however that this may just be another officialised layer of opaque 'privacy', masking a complex system of communication. In the same way that a mirror frames the space that the body of the filmmaker/observer occupies, it simultaneously makes it suddenly

visible for both self and others. The film-maker is no longer a passive observer at the spiritual altar in this viewing structure that breaks down conventional forms of spectatorship. Nevertheless, access to ritual ceremony does not always mean participation on equal terms. Building upon French documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch's notion of the filmmaker as part of the ritual (Stoller 83), my argument employs the trope of Vodou possession in order to examine the extent to which the film-maker can be seen as 'possessor' behind the camera.

During slavery, Vodou *rasanblaj* (assemblies/gatherings) would draw colonial observers, travellers and other members of the plantocracy down from the slave-owner's house to witness (from the outermost circles) the ceremonies taking place by night. The rhythms of the Vodou drums would lead these spectators to the gathering. Writing in 1779, Moreau de Saint-Méry is one such colonial 'tourist' who wrote of whites watching a Vodou ceremony and the fear of contagion he experienced (*Description* 44-51). This fear of giving oneself up to the rhythm of Vodou, and the crossing between spatial boundaries of inside/outside, viewing/participating, resonates in the relationships forged in making contemporary films around such 'catching' rituals.⁴

Given the histories of representing Otherness in and outside of the Caribbean, and mindful of the importance given to image in the formation of subjectivities, particularly in urban areas of Haiti, I am also interested in the possibilities for a counter-gaze. In other words I will be asking how Vodou as mirror might deflect the predominance of an interdependent 'us' and 'them' dialectic, underpinning how pre- and post-revolutionary Haiti has historically been imaged and represented, providing the possibility to re-image and re-dress that which has been labelled 'other'. As a space for creation, the mirror, like a tool of mimicry, does not simply duplicate or reflect the real. Rather it makes visible bodies and realities that are almost, but not quite, the same as the gendered and racialised paradigms that have dominated nation-building narratives, as discussed in the previous chapter. This shift in focus might be said to fragment the mirrored and non-gender conforming body into what Basia Sliwinska calls a 'mirror ball, covered in little reflecting surfaces that play with limitations and appearances.' In other words, Vodou allows for the

⁴ Barbara Browning discussed the fears of contagion and cultural flows around Vodou in her paper 'Catching the Rhythm.'

dissolution, fragmentation and reassemblage of the self to form composite and binary-resistant images that hover between the real and the imaginary.

Following an earthquake which brought into focus the ‘bodies that matter’ and the persistent discriminatory regard towards both Vodou and non-normative sexualities,⁵ from eyes both within and on Haiti, filmic histories are, more than ever, crucial contestations to an image problem that Gina Athena Ulysse has referred to as ‘Haiti’s burden’.⁶ In order to unpick this scopic relationship, the analysis presented here aims not only to address the role of the film-maker in relation to the films *Bounda* and *Des hommes*, but also to consider the images from the perspective of the Vodou practitioners themselves. This extension of my study responds to M. Drewal’s de Certeau-inspired assertion that ‘terms such as ritual have traditionally defined the gaze of the anthropologist and the historian of religion more so than they have defined what their subjects of study actually do and think’ (xiv). Paying due attention to the intentionality of the ‘subjects of study’ also allows occasion for deciphering the role-reversal that takes place when the film-maker becomes the film.

The Incomplete Carnival body

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque (1968), Peter Stallybrass and Allen White describe the carnival body as ‘always in process, it is always “becoming”, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion’ (9). An ‘open’, incomplete carnival body stands in opposition to a ‘closed’, finished, Cartesian conception of the body. Roberto Strongman, in his analysis of Afro-diasporic philosophical traditions,

⁵ Interpretations of the earthquake of 12 January 2010 by individuals from Christian factions in and outside of Haiti quickly scapegoated Vodou as a cause of the disaster. Such narratives echo attacks on the religion following the success of the Haitian revolution in 1804 and during the US occupation of 1915-34. While Christian missionaries have played a significant role in providing much-needed support and services since the quake, *vodwizan* and homosexuals are two groups reported to have been denied aid and food, based on their religious beliefs and sexual practices respectively. Elizabeth McAlister looks into this intervening role in the aftermath of the catastrophe in her important essay ‘From Slave Revolt to a Blood Pact with Satan.’

⁶ The inconceivability of the birth of the first black republic in the white imagination, following the revolutionary upheaval of a colonial regime, is posited by Ulysse as fundamental to ensuing and enduring negative portrayals of Haiti (41).

explains that in Vodou the head, which becomes the locus in such rituals as the *pò tet* discussed by Alfred Métraux (199) and Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (134), is considered an open container. A Cartesian notion of a sealed, enclosed self is not only unfavourable but also invites associations with death ('Transcorporeality' 19). The carnival body is viewed as if through a fairground mirror, with shifting boundaries that transcend the limits of sex and gender. Carnival, like the site of ritual, intensifies, magnifies and inverts bodily signifiers, which are in turn important symbols of social classification.

As a form of 'subversive' gender costuming in the Bakhtinian sense, it is still unclear whether *travesti* expressions, such as those filmed in *Bounda*, veritably constitute a specific and convincing critique of categories of gender per se. Moreover it would be too demanding a task for them to realistically undermine existing gender binaries within the sanctioned space and limited time period of the carnival event. Richard Burton has argued against Bakhtin's concept that 'what happens during Carnival is essentially different from what happens during the rest of the year, that the three or four days it lasts are a negation in every respect of the laws and behaviours that hold good for the remaining 360 odd' (*Afro-Creole* 156-157). He cites other examples, where carnival practices have seeped beyond their designated boundaries in Trinidad and Haiti, challenging the notion of carnival as a sealed off space of subversion. Carnival has periodically been a catalyst for more direct change, coinciding with, but also provoking, active political revolt, such as the general strike action and social protests that took place during the carnival month of February 2009 in Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁷ Cosentino, furthermore, refers to the flight of Haitian presidents after particularly politically charged carnival seasons ('My Heart' 275). Carnival season historically in the Caribbean, not unlike the festive season of Christmas described by Errol Hill, was a time when 'the authorities were always on the alert against any attempt by the slaves to use their temporary freedom for plotting revolt. Insurrections were hatched and outbreaks were known to occur at this time of the year' (13). As a symbolic subversion of colonial power structures, the political power of cross-dressing is alluded to by Hill in his brief reference to the ban on transvestite masqueraders which was introduced in 1895 in Trinidad. While he does

⁷ The strikes organized by the LKP (Iyannaj kont pwofitasyon) movement are discussed further in the introduction to this thesis.

not enter into detail on this legal prohibition, its very existence suggests that cross-dressing might once have constituted a particularly powerful representation within carnival (108). These recurring performances do to some extent have implications for understanding relationships between men and women and the hegemonic gender roles in circulation in the region. Carnival, and by extension *rara*, provided opportunity to appropriate the opposite gender temporarily. As a mode of mimicry, whether to glorify or mock, carnival cross-dressing ensured an ongoing gender dialectic.

The Camera and the Spirit

The spiritual possession performances within Vodou culture, similar to the trance-like states of the carnival masquerade, allow for a transformation of character or a crossing of gendered rules for a limited, ritually prescribed time period. Although these acts, however controlled and rehearsed they may be, can never be replicated exactly, their material recreation and embodiment ensures an affective collective ‘counter-memory’ amongst both participants and spectators through their repeated reinscription onto the bodies of the individual adherents. As Claude Planson observed, ‘le vaudou est bien une communauté vivante, une maison de culture et ‘un théâtre’ dans la mesure où le théâtre est une manifestation du sacré.’ (*Vodou is indeed a vibrant community, a cultural centre and a “theatre” insofar as theatre is an expression of the sacred; Vaudou 46*). The stock characters, images and symbols of these spiritual performances, whether during carnival or a Vodou *sévis* (ceremony), are recurrently drawn upon by social actors, who renew and adapt them to work for contemporary realities. Rooted in Vodou communities, *rara*, with its sharp critique and sung *pwen*, has been used for example to disseminate health information about HIV.

Glissant argues for the double nature of theatrical expression in the Caribbean, which incorporates both the modes of *sacré* and *sacrilège*, ‘qui n’en font qu’un, ou plutôt qui font l’un (l’unité)’ (*which form one or rather the one (the unity)*); *Le discours 687*). The constantly negotiated gender performances I discuss form part of a continuum of revolutionary new as well as existing exchanges between the body, the individual and the collective social and political landscape of Haiti. The

body as a canvas in ritual and carnival becomes a locus for the interaction of the political *and* the religious. It is the inherited respect of the existing aesthetic in the structure of these acts that confirms their performance to be an unfinished, incomplete process. If traditions of transgression stem from a desire to become 'other', come out of oneself and become a spirit, then the re-staging of these sequences and the material re-dressing of bodies suggests a desire on the part of the player, as well as a collective need, to repeatedly situate these oppositional performances at centre stage. The documentation of this process by the filmmaker risks undermining these intentions, particularly as images become fixed (as a blueprint), preventing the cyclical propulsion of carnival regeneration. Furthermore, the filmmaker's interests in putting these 'other subjectivities' on display raises the question of whether modern practices of visual ethnography differ drastically from anthropological representations of colonial populations. Glissant stresses the importance of the self in embodied forms of representation when he asserts that, 'L'expression théâtrale se fixe à partir de l'expression d'un fond folklorique commun, qui cesse alors d'être vécu pour être représenté, c'est-à-dire pensé . . . Se représenter, se penser : les deux ne font que l'acte même de l'unité' (*Theatrical expression forms from the expression of a common folkloric base, which stops being lived in order to be represented, or thought . . . Representing oneself, thinking oneself: the two are simply the act of unity itself*; 686-687). Carnival therefore becomes a crucial site for self-representation: re-imagining and re-assembling the self through performance. Deconstruction is an important and very modern process in maintaining folk culture, enabling opportunities for the renewal of human subjectivity along more egalitarian lines.⁸ In spaces where the sacred and secular are interlaced, such as carnival or a Vodou performance, gender is recognized as construction and deconstruction, and is not biologically determined.

⁸ Each year on Ash Wednesday in Martinique, carnival 'mourners' dress in black and white and burn the papier maché effigy, known as the *vaval*. The *vaval*, which is constructed for carnival, represents a political theme from the year which has been celebrated, lauded or satirized. For the close of carnival, the *vaval* is destroyed, as weeping mourners look on.

Jakmel Kanaval: ‘Where the Light Enters’

While this chapter focuses primarily on film-making, British artist Leah Gordon is known first and foremost for her work as a photographer. Some of the characters she has filmed, including Bounda, feature in her black and white photography collection *Kanaval*, which was published as a book in 2010 (fig. 7). These still images depict several contemporary cross-dressing narratives in Haiti that implicitly conflate the sacred and secular. The collection acts as a form of documentation of the fifteen years she spent photographing and collecting oral histories of the characters of Jacmel carnival. The festivities in this south-eastern town of Haiti are particularly relevant in consideration of the aforementioned allocation of relatively contained spaces for the performance of inversion. Although carnival celebrations in Jacmel take place according to the Catholic calendar of Lenten observances, they do not adhere to the structured, parade formation of other, more popular, commercial Caribbean carnivals. In the carnival of Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, for example, (traditional drum) bands or floats, revellers *mofwazé-en-mas* (disguised through masquerade) dance behind *gwo-ka* forming a *déboulé* (dance parade), which allows for ease of spectatorship as the town throbs with the heavy influx of tourists. The crowd, often positioned behind rope barriers, tends to consist of Guadeloupeans returning from abroad or of Metropolitan French, who visit this yearly event as tourists.⁹ By comparison, Jacmel carnival has been described by Richard Fleming as truly ‘impromptu theatre . . . not so much a parade as a collective flowering of street performance’ (16). In Jacmelian celebrations, therefore, there are no rules dictating where the narratives of Haitian history are played out and walking the streets with her camera, Gordon would often bump into errant characters *en mas* down small side

⁹ The carnival of Martinique does allow some fusion between the role of spectator and that of carnival performer. The carnival parade is accepting of the spontaneous participation of bystanders, who for the most part are costumed and made up, respecting the different colour themes of the *jours gras* and may enter and meld into the throng of the *vidé* at various points. In Guadeloupe, groups such as Voukoum (meaning noisy disturbance in Creole), whose performances are infused with Afro-diasporic spirituality, provide an exception to the more prettified and controlled spectacles on parade. Marching forward like a guerilla band, they are more akin to the competitive rara performances found in Haiti. See Francois Perlier’s short film *Voukoum* (2012), which also highlights the group’s involvement in the social protests against high cost of living in 2009 in Guadeloupe (and Martinique).

streets, such as the *Lanse Kòd* rope throwers who re-enact enslavement, or the *Zindyen*, who represent the indigenous Taino population of the island.



Figure 7: Leah Gordon Bounda pa Bounda 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

The fact that Gordon does not limit herself to the photographic form in her representation of this cast of spiritual characters demands a closer interrogation of her choice of media. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, photography became a popular means in Europe for systemizing racial and social

categories in ‘other’ cultures. In the French colonies, anthropologists and travel writers, such as Lafcadio Hearn in Martinique (1890), began to use photography as an instrument of racial classification. As Emmanuelle Saada explains, ‘C’est aux frontières de l’espace colonial et national que l’utilisation des photographies dans une perspective de contrôle de la population a d’abord été expérimentée’ (*It is at the border of colonial and national space that the use of photographs as a means of controlling the population was first tested*; 135). The technology of photography therefore became an important means of propagating ideologies between France and its then current and former colonies. In its illumination of corporeal traits and specificities, it also enabled such features to be grouped, classified and displayed according to the prevailing pseudo-scientific fictions of race, which were created to serve European economic interests. Photography was a means of objectifying and possessing the colonial subject, of representing the ‘femme-objet.’ Consequently, racial phenotypes became associated with the female body.

Gordon’s *Kanaval* images provide a stock of familiar spirits drawn from Haiti’s history. These *revenants* correspond to the racial stereotypes that have persisted through colonial, postcolonial and imperial periods of the country’s history. For their spectators the photos are like postcards, a collection of spectacular bodies, from the holiday destination that Jill Dando once warned viewers to avoid.¹⁰ From the *lanse kòd* daubed in molasses and cracking whips, to the costume of a white wedding dress worn defiantly by a young man, as if puncturing aristocratic female whiteness and wearing it as a grotesque mask, there remains an excess of violence in these images. They are a reminder for the viewer of the need for violence in carnival; how the violence of slavery and plantation society has been translated through the carnival mix. The viewer thus engages in a complex and paradoxical relationship with these photographs. Particularly so considering that carnival was historically envisaged by the colonial authorities as an annual performance that would appease and pacify the slaves before their return to the violence of slave labour (Benítez-Rojo 22, 306-7, 311). The pieces regenerate a chaotic combination

¹⁰ Gordon first visited Haiti in 1991 after watching Jill Dando on the *Holiday* programme warn viewers not to go there by mistake, whilst holidaying in the Dominican Republic. Gordon later wrote the first edition of the *Lonely Planet* guide to Haiti published in 1999. See Mark Hudson, ‘There is no Good or Evil in Voodoo.’ *Telegraph* 20 Oct. 2012 and Sarah Phillips, ‘Leah Gordon’s best photograph.’ *Guardian* 20 June 2012.

of death and resurrection, tragedy and comedy and the Vodou and politics that permeate the whole of Jacmel carnival. The effect is a series of images that seem to resist the imposition of a dominant ethnographic look. Therefore despite the public nature of Gordon's photographic act, and the maintenance of a subject/object binary, the opacity of the mask for the viewer very much remains.¹¹

Gordon's short observational film *Bounda pa Bounda* (translated by Gordon herself as *Arse by Cheek*), made in 2008, follows the ritual transformation of one of the characters photographed in her *Kanaval* series of stills. The film depicts Dieuli Laurent 'dressing up' as the carnival character of Bounda for a performance with his rara band.¹² Until the mid-twentieth century rara was predominantly a rural practice. As a result there is very little visual documentation of this tradition (Tselos, 'Threads' 61). For Gordon's film, Laurent descended from the hills above Jacmel where he lives, to perform in the Vodou temple of *Oungan Fritzner*, known to Gordon from previous ceremonies she has attended. As illustrated in figure 8, we observe the visual 'making up' and 'dressing up' transition of the male band leader, as he applies female costuming in preparation for this performance.

The *Kanaval* photos demand closer scrutiny to decipher the enveloped bodies, as they show the staged result, a static and threatening *travesti* posing in full rig-out. The film, on the other hand, inflicts a far messier and less efficient masquerade effect on the viewer. In the still images, Gordon, using the boundaries of the camera, traces the limits of the body. In *Bounda*, despite it being Gordon who conducts the final edit, it is the subject of the film, Dieuli Laurent, who seems to sketch out the framework of his 'look', constructing an ephemeral self-

¹¹ The power relationship between subject and object is further cemented through Gordon's payment for the privilege of photographing the masqueraders.

¹² The film *Bounda pa Bounda: A Drag Zaka* (2008) can be viewed on Leah Gordon's website at: <<http://www.leahgordon.co.uk/films/3.htm>>.



Figure 8: Film stills. Leah Gordon Bounda pa Bounda 2008.

portrait. His use of performative power, in opposition to Gordon's decision-making power, enables him to create his gendered mask as if treating the camera itself as mirror (at times drawing in close, with interruptions from others passing in front of its glass and calling for his attention), while the viewer/film-maker observes. The film highlights the metamorphosis from being part of the collective to being a distinguished role in the performance.

With little at stake, due to the ephemeral and sanctioned nature of what can be seen as harmless gender mimicry, the ease with which such temporary crossover is obtained makes the act seem, on first viewing, a particularly intrusive form of impersonation. The man, adopting female dress, carelessly forays into the realm of the Other (the woman), without any concern for 'realness' in order to mock that which he does not successfully emulate in what Helen Gilbert terms a 'spectacle of not passing.'¹³ As a process of reinscribing and renewing aesthetic standards however, it constitutes an important means of emphasizing prevailing modes of representation.

Considered within the historical and cultural context of Vodou, Laurent's creation honours *Gran Bwa*, the spirit of the forest and healing, whilst also referencing the *pacotilleuses* of colonial Saint-Domingue: the peddlers or revolutionary agents, who delivered medicinal leaves and remedies in the baskets of merchandise carried on their heads.¹⁴ The importance of the head in the Caribbean, as I have shown, dates back to slavery, when madras headscarves became loaded with political significance, and further still to African spiritual and cultural practices such as the Egungun masquerade of Yoruba origin (Soyinka 25; M. Drewal 182; Tselos, 'Threads' 64). There remains a preoccupation with the head both in carnival and ritual contexts (Burton, *Afro-Creole* 244-248). Carnival masquerades often include elaborate headdress as a focal point of the costume, whilst, as signposted above, Vodou encourages openness of the head as a divine vessel. In the film both performer and camera juxtapose feminine and masculine-associated articles of Vodou insignia and thus Haitian history: Zaka's machete, Ezili's cosmetics, images of Sen Jak, a receptacle basket balanced on Laurent's head, from which Bounda

¹³ The transparent 'aesthetic construction' and revelatory nature of 'not passing' as a form of impersonation is discussed by Helen Gilbert in relation to whiteface/blackface minstrelsy ('Black and White').

¹⁴ See Marie-Vieux Chauvet's novel *La danse sur le volcan* for narratives of the *pacotilleuses*.

distributes Gran Bwa's healing leaves, and Gede's sunglasses. Bounda at once subverts and reinforces normative categories of identity in this constructed performance of the female body and its association with healing. This representation is problematized further if we consider that it is controlled by the male rural Vodou figure of Dieuli Laurent and then further mediated by the female Western vision of artist Leah Gordon. Such authorial layers mould the image of the body in very specific ways, highlighting how traditionally carnival (and filmic objectification), has silenced and denigrated certain social groups, such as women and sexual minorities (Stallybrass and White 19)

Dress (as gender) rehearsal

Partitioned from the *peristil*, the dressing room in Gordon's film doubles up as a rehearsal space in which we see how the performer uses mirrors to perfect and rehearse his look, whilst in the background we can faintly hear the rest of the band warming up with songs, or lyrical *pwen*, created by Laurent such as, 'Bounda'm tro piti, ou ap taye'm compa' (*My arse is too small, you are going to put me on the kompa rhythm*; Gordon, *Kanaval* 100).¹⁵ The lyrical content here echoes the parody of the costume of the bandleader with its strap-on, padded-out bottom. The taunting comment on his enlarged buttocks is based on a male predication that associates a large female posterior with the social skill of dancing a good kompa. In this instance the application of false curves, wig, perfume and cosmetics, the 'almost but not quite' drag as a uniform, not so much conceals, but rather knowingly reveals and magnifies the hypermasculine posturing of the wearer. The conscious lack of effort to 'pass' in this spectacle, as in the deliberate flaunting of his unshaven moustache, further accentuates dominant visions of the female body in its male authorship and before he emerges to join the band he brandishes a machete wrapped in a red flag, mirroring the images of the warrior spirit Ogou behind him. Laurent's symbolic use of the machete, a 'masculine' weapon of revolt amongst the maroon slaves, further

¹⁵ The sung *pwen* are often characterized by opaque derisory or critical references, comparable to other musical genres known for their social and political commentary, such as calypso in the Anglophone Caribbean, in which the criticism is allusively embedded in the lyrical content.

emphasizes gender distinction as a phallic symbol of the ‘truth’ that lies beneath the costume.

Staging Possession

Although mostly shot in close-up, the film allows us to explore to a certain extent the space in which Laurent prepares his costume. The room, known as the *bagi* and which is normally adjacent to the *peristil*, the main ceremonial space, is shown as a sacred space with the back wall taken up by a Vodou altar, made up of carefully assembled vessels, flags and chromolithographs. A sanctuary of sorts, the room also stores the appropriate props and costumes the possessed will need in the moment of possession by the *lwa*. Thus in Gordon’s film we see Kouzen Zaka’s straw satchel and his North American style straw hat hung at the ready.¹⁶

Wilmeth and Wilmeth’s study of the influence of *commedia dell’arte* theatrical traditions in Vodou, brought to the island in 1764, pays particular attention not only to the incorporated gestures and dramatic personae, but also the costumes, dressing rooms and props (27-37). Similarly Alfred Métraux describes a Vodou ceremony in an area of Port-au-Prince which had been exposed to *commedia* dramatic forms in the pre-revolutionary period:

Every possession has a theatrical aspect. This is at once apparent in the general concern for disguise. Sanctuary rooms serve to a certain extent as the wings of a stage where the possessed can find all the accessories they need . . . Some in the eyes of spectators, succeed better than others in representing such and such a god . . . And yet what else can it be called except *theatre* when the possessed turn the simultaneous manifestation of several gods in different people into an organized *impromptu*? . . . Ritual trances pose a fundamental problem: are they genuine disassociations of the personality

¹⁶ Zaka is the spirit of agriculture and is the head of the Djouba *nanchon* (nation) of earth spirits, originally said to be from Martinique. During possession by Zaka (or Kouzen/Cousin Zaka as he is affectionately referred to), mountees adopt a peasant-style dress of straw hat, denim dungarees, and sometimes brandish a traditional pipe (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 112). Denis, one of the subjects of *Des hommes*, is shown wearing a similar garb in a scene of possession captured by Lescot in the film.

comparable to those found in certain cases of hysteria, or are they entirely simulated. . . ? (126-129)

Métraux's allusion to hysteria needs challenging here, as his distrust of the authenticity of possession, deeming its apprehension only possible through a Western psychoanalytical lens and his resignation that anything else can only amount to simulation, positions such practice in opposition to notions of the 'real.' Though apparently unable to consider possession as a form of immersed, embodied performance, Métraux does paradoxically describe cultural traits in theatrical terms as he compares 'sanctuary rooms' to 'the wings of a stage' (126). Anthropologist James Lorand Matory, by contrast, dispels any notion of theatricality in his discussion of Oyo-Yoruba cross-dressing which he firmly maintains to be 'actual spirit possession' and the 'very antitype of theatre' (182).

The act of filming possession has tended to question authenticity by separating out 'reality' and folkloric spectacle. If the camera operates as a 'travesty mirror,' for the spectator of a film it becomes even harder to decipher what is real and what is illusion 'performed up' to the lens. It is possible that possession ritual may spread beyond the frames of folklorism and film. American avant-garde film maker and choreographer, Maya Deren, made many trips to Haiti during the period of 1947 – 1951 in order to film Haitian dance. In 1953 she published the book *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haitian Voodoo* as documentation of her field work. The footage for the film project remained unedited until 1973, when Deren's last husband, Teiji Ito, and his then wife, Cherel Winett, collaborated to piece together some of what was captured by the film-maker. Several scenes of trance in the film are said to depict cross-gender possession during Vodou ceremonies, yet as Catherine Russell points out, such transformations may not be visible to the film viewer: 'We may know from Deren's book that women are often possessed by male 'loas' and take on their characters, but we cannot see that the woman is 'not herself'' (215).¹⁷ Similarly the accompanying texts provided in Gordon's book act as a key to what the viewer witnesses in the photos and the film.

¹⁷ Deren's Haitian footage includes scenes of cross-dressing and cross-gender possession. The African context provided by Deren to these performances was omitted from the text as deemed too 'difficult' by the editorial team (Sullivan 223).

Yet not everyone decodes what they see in the same way. Even within the same community, there may exist multiple narratives.

In the foreword to Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* Joseph Campbell cites the Haitian proverb, 'When the anthropologist arrives, the gods depart' (x). As an anthropologist armed with a camera, Deren, like many others since her, struggled to gain an 'authentic' representation of the sacred.¹⁸ As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the mirror as object, performance and metaphor is omnipresent in Vodou. The proximity of spirits is even sought through the use of reflective textiles. Mirrored and sequined costumes are worn to let the light, and in turn the *lwa*, enter.¹⁹ In his essay entitled 'The Camera and the Man,' French documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch described the camera or box that lets the light enter, as a 'thief of reflections' (*Ciné-ethnography* 31). Given the importance of reflection and mirrored surfaces in Vodou, it is hardly surprising that the camera, incites a fear of upsetting the ancestral spirits. Haitian author Edwige Danticat, in her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, observes such suspicions through the character of the grandmother, who declares, 'They do scare me those things. The light in and out. The whole thing is suspect. Seems you can trap somebody's soul in there' (129).

Images of Vodou during the U.S. Marine occupation (1915-1934) tended to depict fake possessions of white tourists in order to legitimize the continued American presence in Haiti. Following this period in the 1940s, direct repression of Vodou practitioners became widespread. Supported by the Catholic church and the government led by then president Elie Lescot (Anne Lescot's grandfather), 'anti-superstition campaigns' were organised throughout Haiti. Following this harsh repression, Vodou was recuperated by the state and staged as stylized 'voodoo' spectacle for tourists from the north during the 1940s and 1950s (Ramsey, *The Spirits* 177-248).

Misrepresentation of Vodou has led to a mistrust of the camera in Vodou communities, but also a desire to pick up the camera, create images and disseminate a different edit of Haiti. This is why at ceremonies in Port-au-Prince today, it is possible to witness a sea of camera-phones amongst the congregation. These are

¹⁸ Others include Leah Gordon or Fabienne Kanor who attempts to film the spirits in Burkina Faso in her documentary *Maris de nuit* (2012).

¹⁹ See Tselos, 'Threads' 58-65 and 'Dressing,' 45-63.

operated not only by tourists, but by young Haitians, who disseminate these videos on Youtube with the aim of undoing Vodou's bad press.²⁰ This dispels the often heard complaint that the religion is no longer 'in style' for the younger generation in Haiti. Certainly the commodification of Vodou ritual packaged for Western audiences has not helped considerations of the theatricality of ritual.²¹ The fact that Gordon paid Laurent in order to film the sequence might also suggest that the ritual has been emptied of its sacred power and can only be viewed as exoticised spectacle for those of us viewing via an internet connection.

However it should be noted that my intention is not merely to reduce possession to a form of fakery nor to assume initiates to be merely 'representing such and such a god'; rather I am considering such acts through a performative lens in order to understand the *bagi* of masks that are adopted within *and* beyond the *peristil* on a daily basis. The process of doubling or masking, not exclusive to Haitian culture, exists within and reaches beyond theatre, carnival and sacred ritual, in as much as these acts are firmly a part of daily life, enabling a social actor to play more than one role, and wear more than one mask. Laurent, the leader of the rara group *Bounda*, alludes to how carnival narratives both are and, at the same time, mirror the everyday theatre of Haitian culture when he states, 'We are all Vodou believers and born into it [. . .] We are a Mardi Gras but also we are just the women bringing the leaves of the forest from Gran Bwa' (Gordon, *Kanaval* 101). A substantiating statement such as this one points to the blurred boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the burlesque and the banal, and demonstrates how serving the spirits is reflexively attended to within everyday life in Haiti. As Wade Davis explains in his definition of the religion:

Vodoun cannot be abstracted from the day to day life of the believers. In Haiti, as in Africa, there is no separation between the sacred and the secular, between the holy and the profane, between the material and the spiritual. Every dance, every song, every action is but a

²⁰ See also the guerilla media of the Tele Ghetto young artists: <<http://www.teleghetto.com/>>.

²¹ The transnational industry of Vodou as tourist performance has surely contributed to the wariness expressed by scholars (Matory; Strongman) towards 'possession performance'. Although those who *pran poz* and act 'as if' possessed are condemned in Vodou, my concern here is with the theatrical nature of its practice rather than its authenticity. For a good definition of 'possession performance,' see McCarthy Brown, 'Afro-Caribbean' 13.

particle of the whole, each gesture a prayer for the survival of the entire community. (72)

Vodou responds to reality, working practically with everyday concerns to heal when deemed necessary within the community. Unlike in some monotheistic religions which rely on dualistic separations (good vs. evil; political vs. religious), in Vodou philosophy all aspects of life are interconnected like an inclusive Venn diagram. It is rooted in West African Yoruba ritual, in which, as Soyinka explains, the spiritual and political are intimately interlaced: 'The personal is political; the political is spiritual and the spiritual affects both the individual and the whole world. Western criticism tends not to give equal weight to rationalism and mystical experience' (xxxviii).

Film-making as possession

If the sanctuary room constitutes a private space of ritual transformation from one costume to another in the film, what can be said of the presence of the film-maker (and viewer) within the space? Furthermore we might question what role the film maker plays in possession performances. In his reading of Gordon's photography, Myron Beasley argues for the critical stance of the photographer in what he calls 'performance ethnography', whereby the ethnographer works alongside what he labels the 'co-participants', or the subjects of the film/photograph, to create a performance (107). This approach creates a social, egalitarian space of encounter and facilitates a continual dialogue between the participants, the ethnographer and the audience as they strive to produce meaning collectively. Gordon, as an artist-ethnographer herself, became increasingly conscious of the unequal systems of representation prevalent in a global image economy and, as she states, 'After seven years of photographic documentation, [she] realised that the images were not enough, [she] needed the signified alongside the signifier.'²² Associating the image with a printed text anchors the display of bodies in the local (translated) narrative and might, as I discuss later, be less objectifying. Whilst in the film *Dieuli Laurent* remains silent, in the *Kanaval* publication, he provides an oral history which traces the formation of the carnival group from the perspective of the practitioner and

²² Gordon, 'Kanaval: A People's History of Haiti.'

works together with Gordon's visual *mise-en-scène*.²³ We learn of the origins of the *Drag Zaka* character and how it appeared to him in a vision whilst he was working in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic:

I decided to form a group to follow my revelation. It was then that I realised that the character in the trees was Gran Bwa, the Vodou spirit of the forest. I started to wear a long red dress, wig, mascara and carried a basket of leaves and flowers on my head. I brought together musicians and dancers and called the group Bounda Pa Bounda. (Gordon, *Kanaval* 101)

When I spoke to Gordon about the character, she described Laurent as very quiet as himself, but quite wild when playing Bounda.²⁴ It might be therefore that Laurent draws power from this transformation, a play of cultural symbols, allowing him to transcend his social self. As Stallybrass and White state: 'Carnavalesque fragments formed unstable discursive compounds, sometimes disruptive, sometimes therapeutic' (182). In this context, cross-dressing can be seen as an emblem of powerful subjectivity, a pastiche appropriation of the other's gestures and attire, ameliorating one's own social condition. In the same way the inclusion of Laurent's story becomes a 'carnavalesque fragment' in the multitude of subjectivities offered through the printed medium, forcing the viewer to shift focus from Gordon's authored image.

Maya Deren, filming Vodou rituals in the late 1940s, would often become involved in the ceremonies herself. Although never listed as a cast member she would appear on screen as an anonymous participant, as if herself transformed by a spirit other. Gordon, despite not being a Vodou practitioner herself, does confirm that 'all possession, good or bad, always has the capacity to command me and forbid any challenge. I collude with the drama wholeheartedly' ('Took my Heart' 184). This statement seems to suggest that Gordon is not only observing but is perhaps overwhelmed by what she observes, indicating a degree of participation or absorption. On his entry into Songhay possession performances, Jean Rouch writes:

²³ The oral histories in the *Kanaval* collection are translated from Kreyòl into English by Leah Gordon, Andre Eugene and Chantal Regnault.

²⁴ This conversation took place via email on 11 April 2012.

When the moment comes that the observer becomes a simple spectator among other spectators, when the moment comes that [s]he speaks and understands the language sufficiently to know what is being said and to respond to it sometimes, [s]he ‘participates’ just like [her] neighbours. (Qtd in Stoller 83)

In *Bounda*, Gordon remains silent throughout and does not appear at any point in front of the camera. During the filming process she is merely viewing, which reinforces a separation between herself and the subjects of the film.²⁵

It is therefore important to be wary of what Beasley has coined Gordon’s ‘participation’, which could very easily be interpreted as the artist’s (not forgetting the viewer’s) ‘intrusion’ into this private quarter adjoining the ‘stage’. As long as Gordon holds the camera (in the power imbalance of photography or film), she will never completely evade the exotification inherent in representing the Other. She describes herself as ‘a kind of scopophiliac, without the sex bit,’ saying, ‘I cannot tire of sucking Haiti in through my eyes. I know of no land that can give me more visual pleasure. A hideous contradiction for those that live there, I know’ (‘Took my heart’ 184). The asymmetry of the gaze in (post)colonial contact zones, but also ‘the way tourists and local people face each other (. . .) hear each other, smell each other, or touch each other are all part of the power relations by which forms of gender and racial inequality are brought into being along with national boundaries of belonging and exclusion’ (Sheller 211). An ‘us’ and ‘them’ opposition of objectified Other and film-maker (and audience) is sustained but also modified in *Bounda pa Bounda*. While the work remains locked into an observational filmic framework and bound to colonial hierarchies of representing Otherness on the one hand, it also offers openings and opportunities for revisioning Otherness. As Catherine Russell explains,

Experimental ethnography involves a reconceptualization of the historical nature of Otherness, including not only how the Other was (and is) constructed in colonial discourse but also how cultural

²⁵ Gordon’s more recent photography project *Caste* (2012) recreates Moreau de Saint-Méry’s eighteenth century racial classification system, using poses from Renaissance portraits. Commendably she places herself in the series, exposing her whiteness at one end of the black/white binary construction.

difference and ‘authenticity’ are related in the postcolonial present and future. (11)

Cultural ‘authenticity’ is challenged in *Bounda* through meaning which evades and transcends the paradigm of documentary ‘realism’. The most explicit example of this in Gordon’s film is when the ethnographic subject destabilizes the ‘reality’ being recorded by committing the ethnographic crime of looking at the camera (Nichols 130).²⁶ Within the mechanics of viewing the piece as a whole, there seems to be a difference between the image transaction in the private intimacy of the *bagi* and the open, more public space of the exterior *peristil*. At the end of the dressing sequence, when Laurent looks directly into the camera for the first time and adds the finishing touch of an innately visual prop, a pair of kitsch flashing plastic sunglasses, he is commenting on the ridiculousness of the spectator’s intentional observation of his private ritual up till that point. The viewer’s voyeuristic role is suddenly highlighted and briefly exposed as the positions of power are challenged in this moment of deflection, in which the gaze is returned. Up until this point Laurent had had no say in how he wished to be represented in a process where Gordon equally gave no direction to the subject and simply set up the tripod - an object referred to by Minh-ha as a ‘fixed observation post’ (34) - in the corner of the temple letting the camera roll in what she refers to as ‘an exercise in observational documentary’.²⁷ While Laurent always wears outrageous spectacles to match the spectacle of the ‘Bounda’ character, he seems to particularly relish adding them here, to the surprise of Gordon who had given this particular pair to him as a gift a few days previously.²⁸ The sudden illusion of proximity that this look creates between the observer and the observed destabilizes the powerful asymmetry of the touristic gaze discussed by Sheller (210-236). The unidirectional gaze crucial to seeing and thus fixing or ‘knowing’ the Other – as described by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (88-104) – is disrupted by the bandleader’s defiant and unexpected look into

²⁶ The look at the camera was criminalized by film makers such as Jean Vigo and Dziga Vertov in the 1920s who sought to catch ‘life unawares’ (Vertov, ‘The Birth’ 41).

²⁷ In email correspondence with Leah Gordon (11 April 2012), she explained: ‘I’m actually not a proponent of observational theory (if anything a critic) but I felt it was the best tool for the type of film I wanted to make.’

²⁸ As Gordon explained via email (11 April 2012), the filming of *Bounda* took place after having known Dieuli Laurent for over six years. Both Dieuli and the *oungan* Fritzner, whose space was used for the filming, were paid for their participation and, along with many others from the temple, attended a screening of the final production in 2009.

the camera lens. As if suddenly viewing himself as other, he mirrors the spectatorial gaze, demonstrating the performative power of the subject and upsetting the historical divide between subject and object in the process.

The challenge of the returned look in Gordon's film, within the private space of the *Bagi*, only proves to be momentary as the rara band launch into their dance within the relatively open power-dynamic of the *peristil* and the viewer is ignored once again, restored to the comfort of a position screened in, and therefore protected by, online anonymity. Other than during that brief camera address, the bandleader seems unperturbed by the film-maker's presence, and other figures, noises and objects are seen to pass into the space while he is dressing. If the performance has not been set up to consciously incorporate Gordon's position, then it is unclear how her work ultimately functions as a critique of the conventions of ethnographic objectivity, as Beasley's perspective of 'performance ethnography' implies. The power division inherent in the documentary form remains intact through the opposition of private ritual (concealed 'out there') and public exposure (revealed 'in here' and disseminated across the internet). According to Minh-ha, rooted in this model lies 'the Cartesian division between subject and object which perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world' (35), which, it should be noted, is starkly at odds with the non-Western, non-binaristic thinking of the Vodou belief system. What is presented as 'real' and what is perceived as 'real' by the viewer, and in turn from my own position as critic, is always through the film-maker's lens, which can never be neutral. Regardless of whether the exchange itself is an act of participation, the resultant piece will always obscure the power balances of the event. In other words, the film maker-observer, in the act of recording and playing back images and sounds, unconsciously modifies the 'collaboration.' This can result in the reaffirmation of a colonial visual order whereby 'some groups have historically had the licence to "look" openly while other groups have "looked" illicitly' (Gaines, 'White' 76).

The Camera as Mask

While the above example demonstrates the possible interstices of resistance through the reversal of the gaze underlying ethnographic representation, a straightforward

inversion of roles does not necessarily fracture the ‘authentic’ images of a particular cultural identity. In 2009 Leah Gordon collaborated with Haitian artists Andre Eugene and Celeur Herard to co-curate the first Ghetto Biennale in their neighbourhood of the Grand Rue in Port-au-Prince. The event was organised in response to visa restrictions preventing Haitian artists from attending international exhibitions of their own work. Though designed to by-pass the constraints of the international art world and conceived as an alternative reconfiguration of the art biennale model, many of the same power disparities and contradictions of a global art circuit persisted. One of the more affective pieces that spontaneously emerged out of the context of the Ghetto Biennale used the device of mimicry to critique this encounter between foreign artists and local artists in its exploration of the pursuit of filming the Other. The performative piece was devised by three members of the *Ti Moun Rezistans*, or ‘Télé Ghetto’ as they came to be known, who fabricated a mock video camera from a disused oil container, complete with a microphone made from discarded wood, bound with adhesive tape.²⁹ They used this bricolaged prop to ‘film’ the event, with the performance incorporating an interview with Haiti’s minister of culture at the time, Marie Joslin Lassergue. The carnivalesque intervention of the *Ti Moun* artists constituted an alternative, situated form of social action. Originating partly from an economic imperative, the work managed, nonetheless, to both mirror documentation of the event whilst also critiquing an outside desire for its inscription and dissemination.

The call for international artists for the most recent Ghetto Biennale, staged in 2013, requested lens-free projects. Ironically, Gordon explained that she had received mostly lens-based proposals from participating Haitian artists. Ahead of the event Gordon observed, ‘for once it will be the Haitians behind the camera’, and this time perhaps the artist-tourists, who become the objects of filmic attention. Yet the original conception of the Télé Ghetto project was more than simply reversing the ethnographic paradigm by switching the role of film-maker and subject. Instead the piece opened up potential for revisioning and transforming this opposition from within its very constraints, by using the technique of *recupasyon*. The reassembled props made from recycled materials and the ritualized action of filming represents a

²⁹ *Ti Moun Rezistans* are a group of young artists between the ages of six and eighteen years old, who are mentored by the Grand Rue artist collective in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

live repossession of controlling media representations, which simultaneously affirms the identity of those involved whilst also speaking to outsiders. In its critique of the historic and contemporary scrutiny of Haitian people by visiting travellers, tourists, journalists and artists like myself, this performance offers a further example of how the colonial gaze is flipped and returned, constituting a ‘visual riposte’ (Amad 49) that seeks to reconfigure access to systems of representation. Haitian culture, particularly the shaping of Vodou, was founded upon and continues to renew itself through syncretic responses to externally imposed frameworks, constituting a form of what Karen E. Richman terms ‘mimetic interplay’ (203). Michael Taussig underlines the power of mimesis, which he believes ‘lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power’ (xiii). The makeshift imitation camera may still pose a ‘real’ threat, albeit symbolic, in its exposure of the mechanics of this act of looking. In the same way, interstices within the representation of Vodou ritual might offer occasion for actual social transformation through performance.

Visual Riposte

There exists, as I have shown, potential to elude the boundaries of the visual realm. Certain forms of resistance to cinematic representation prove to be beyond the reach of the film-maker, as Maya Deren discovered when she was forced to abandon what she herself described as a ‘concrete, defined film project’ (6) on her arrival in Haiti in September 1947. Deren’s initial artistic intention was to represent the bodies of Vodou dance through image, yet as she began to learn more about Vodou mythology, she found the medium of film an unsatisfactory means of capturing the spirits and their myriad significations. Instead, she conceded, by documenting her experiences in a book:

I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations (6).

It would seem, as in the case of Leah Gordon’s *Kanaval* project, that the text became just as, if not more, important than the images. Or perhaps, to think of it another

way, in representing possession, images have proven to be more ‘possessive,’ thus more threatening, than words. Visual culture, as mentioned earlier, was after all an important instrument of classification and therefore domination in the French colonies.

As Susan Sontag states, ‘there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture’: a view which can easily be applicable to those artists also wielding the video camera. From behind the lens they are involved in ‘seeing [their subjects] as they never see themselves’, gaining ‘knowledge of them they can never have’ themselves (14). Sontag considers such practice a form of symbolic possession, objectifying those in front of the lens and stripping them of their agency. The subjects of a film who are depicted in a state of trance, mounted by the Vodou *lwa* might be considered to be locked into a double possession. Thus the camera becomes, like the sword, drum or flag in Vodou ritual, a magical instrument, fundamental to Western modes of possession. However, just as the polysemic nature of images allows for multiple meanings and unexpected readings, the polysemic nature of Vodou equally disrupts the normative order of representation, evading the frames of the camera. Laurent Dubois describes a Vodou *sévis* or ceremony he attended in Bobigny, Paris, in the late 1990s, at which a television cameraman had set up his tripod with the intention of filming the proceedings. During the possession ‘performance’, the *lwa* Ogou – the spirit of warfare and power – was seen by the *vodwizan* present to become manifest within the body of the *oungan*. Seemingly provoked by the cameraman’s neglectful failure to gain Ogou’s permission to film, the spirit charged the camera technician destroying his equipment and preventing any further predatory ‘shooting’ of the film (‘Filming’ 215). For those uninitiated there is no way of knowing the authenticity of the trance. The desire of the ethnographer to gain visual authority and total ‘knowledge,’ as in Deren’s case above, is disturbed and diverted through Vodou’s resistance to filmic representation.

Men Performing in Marronaj

As explored in the previous chapter, Vodou’s origins in the unifying and rallying practice of flight from slavery or *marronaj*, when considered with reference to Lescot and Magloire’s 2002 documentary, *Des hommes et des dieux*, account for the

communal and family-like solidarity of those represented. The underground nature of *marronaj* and Vodou creates a mask for the same-sex desires of the initiates granting them the power and freedom of the unsurveyable. This forces us to examine, as a result, the circumstances in which these minoritised subjects gain visibility. If we were to consider this community of *vodwizan* in relation to the Anglo-American notion of the ‘closet’, then there would be an expectation of a ‘coming out’ or departure from the support system of the Vodou family.³⁰ The moment in the film when the *oungan*, Erol and Fritzner, deny the link between homosexuality and Vodou could be seen as an act of ‘outing’ and exposing the secret. The sudden visibility and social acceptance of those recently initiated as *oungan*, such as Innocente, and the ensuing new-found respect they encounter can also be seen as emergence and renewed acknowledgement of the subject in society. However, these expressions still remain enveloped in the subterranean of Vodou and the Anglo-American rupture of ‘coming out’ has no currency for the men depicted here as it does not necessarily afford them the freedom they desire. The film rather suggests a blurring of private and public spaces in Vodou and thus a blurring of how bodies operate across realms of visibility and invisibility in the community portrayed. It therefore becomes apparent that continuing to perform from *within marronaj*, an extension of the masquerade, allows these human agents to construct the necessary armor, a sense of belonging and a strong group network in order to tackle external hegemonic opponents.

Performing *en kachet*

The *vodwizan* of *Des hommes* are shown to present their stories and lived experiences openly in an exchange with the film-maker, whose Kreyòl can be heard from time to time, reminding the viewer of her presence in certain scenes. From the perspective of the Vodou practitioner, a documentary such as this, with extracts circulating on Youtube, brings the intimacy of the community into sudden view, which may have differing effects on the social standing of its members. It is uncertain whether the *vodwizan* are passively ‘allowing’ themselves and certain ritual acts to be filmed or actively ‘presenting’ themselves, which would suggest the

³⁰ See Sedgwick, *Epistemology*.

act of ‘performing to’ the camera. However, their visibility through these images can be seen as an important means of revealing the agency to be found within this particular Vodou community, which is promoted within the film, as provider of both social protection and assurance of wider participation in Haitian society. The film which captures and fixes the reclaimed unity of the group, becomes therefore an important reference point for future identifications.

It is imagined by the ways in which *Des hommes* has been disseminated that the intention of those involved with the project was to promote a culture which has been insistently misunderstood, particularly by Western observers.³¹ The aesthetic strategies employed in Lescot and Magloire’s documentary avoid claims to authenticity and an all-totalizing ‘knowledge’ of this community, in what constitutes a challenge to dominant discourses of representing Afro-creole spiritual practices. Just as in a Vodou ceremony, where ‘la participation est réelle, effective. Il n’y a pas ce clivage scène/salle, temps fictive et temps vécu, comme dans le théâtre traditionnel’ (*participation is real, active. There is not this divide between stage and audience, imaginary time and real time, like in traditional theatre*; Fouché 105), the spectator of *Des hommes* cannot act as simple voyeur, static and uninvolved. The weave of multivocal threads and contestatory positions from the localized perspectives represented diffuses any revelatory mission or authoritative oversight of the film-maker. This presents a challenge to the viewer, as *Des hommes* refuses the privilege of facile explanations and conclusions, rendering the minority identities represented complex and opaque. Glissant’s demand for ‘le droit à l’opacité’ (*the right to opacity*; *Le discours* 11) seems relevant here as it is surely from within this opacity that the subjects of the film may enjoy the freedom to perform from behind a series of masks and we as viewers of the film are left unable to fix and ‘know’ an ‘authentic’ ‘masisi’ identity despite their visual presentation to us and our observation of the subjects in front of the lens. The non-textual form of the film disrupts a traditional Western desire to uncover the unknown, to master it and thus in

³¹ A series of free public screenings were organized following the film’s release, including one in 2002 at Champ de Mars, Port-au-Prince. In the same year of release, the film won the *Prix Chantal Lapaire* for the documentary most ‘developing attitudes in the North’ at the Festival Vues d’Afrique, Montreal, and a year later the *Dwa Fanm* Voices of Women award for ‘activism, courage and achievement in film’, Women’s History Month, March 2003, New York. In November 2007, in Paris, Louis Georges Tin awarded *Des Hommes* the Diplôme Isidore for its role in fighting homophobic attitudes.

this case to define it in a totalizing binary opposition to a supposedly more egalitarian or progressive Western model. As Gayatri Spivak maintains, ‘the heterogeneity of one’s own culture is protected, because one sees oneself as outside of the cultural construction of gender and race or as victim of it; whereas the homogeneity of other cultures is implicitly taken for granted’ (*The Post-colonial* 123).

A traditional textual conclusion where answers are neatly unraveled is denied in *Des hommes* and as spectator we must work to make sense of the gaps left and the fragments offered to us, which suggests the importance of considering the construction of any (including our own normative) interpretations of gender and sexuality as relational and contextual. As Vodou continues to be repressed and forced underground in Haiti, then, the film represents these *oungan* as ‘center of the Periphery’ (Laguerre 141).³² Representation of ‘heteronormative’ individuals in *Des hommes* remains marginal, inviting us to examine more closely the choices made by the film maker in reassembling constructions of gender. This absence encourages nuanced readings of gender identity, less as oppositions of ‘male’ versus ‘female’, but rather as a culmination of a complex historical and social process.

The filmic style further emphasizes the need for complexity and specificity in representing Haitian tradition. Magloire’s editing is spliced with shots of drumming, close-ups of bare feet dancing, and musical and visual *appels* that flag changes in direction, loops of repetition and layered poly-rhythms. Again Glissant draws our attention to the ability of repetition, like the tactic of mimicry, not to clarify ideas but to render them more opaque or impossible to scrutinize (*Le discours* 14). Such strategies are employed by marginalized people to resist a transparent universality (‘l’universel de la transparence’) imposed by the ‘project’ (‘Ce n’est pas un lieu, c’est un projet’, he maintains) which is the West. Thus the film both reveals and shields its subjects, as Lescot and Magloire articulate the heterogeneity and multiplicity of gender identities functioning within Haitian society, which destabilizes the maintenance of simplified binaries in the collective memory and

³² Under president Michel Martelly, Article 297 (drawn up in 1987), which had eradicated anti-superstition laws originally instated in the 1930s, was repealed in 2012. This means that the 1935 decree law against ‘superstitious practices’ can once again be enforced against Vodou practitioners. See Ulysse’s *Huffington Post* article ‘Defending Vodou in Haiti,’ 18 October 2012: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-athena-ulysses/defending-vodou-in-haiti_b_1973374.html#>.

prevents the upholders of the normative from using such identities as a weapon against its own people. Furthermore the opacity of those represented enables both subject and spectator to transcend (recognize and move beyond) limited simplifications and incorporate and blend the marginalized enough so they may negotiate and survive the mainstream social order.

It is important to remember that possession does not last forever and thus may only bring temporary status reversal. Temporary traversals, whether through spirit worship and possession trance or, as in the case of carnival, through the adoption of theatrical devices of mimicry and disguise, do however allow individuals to imagine alternative subjectivities in the face of oppression. The masks that are adopted during Vodou ritual and carnival reiterate existing narratives, whilst creating patterns for future performances. In their embodied acts they offer the potential to reaffirm *and* shape real-life roles in everyday life. As I consider the interwoven strands of Vodou and carnival in the social fabric of Haiti, the costume practices they involve can be perceived as what M. Drewal refers to as ‘actor-mediated’ (174), forging future understandings and identifications within Haiti. If we add to this the filmic layer of authorship/possession, we can also begin to usefully think through how the film-maker and subsequently the spectator not only reflects but also actively shapes perceptions of social identity for a particular audience. In the case of both Vodou and the documentary medium, ‘the as *if* becomes *is*, as illusion becomes its own reality, or more appropriately, illusion reveals an otherwise undisclosed reality’ (90). If the practice of filming is itself a magical ritual that creates optical ‘doubles’, (symmetry and double images hold particular power in Vodou), film makers such as Deren or Gordon can be said to be holding a looking glass to these traditions. The result is a set of magical images of transformation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Spectators en travesti

This chapter firstly aims to re-examine the complex social design of French Afro-Caribbean performances of normative masculinity as it relates to Guadeloupean dramatist Jean-Pierre Sturm's 2004 play *Ma commère Alfred*. In order to analyse the extent to which the work constitutes a form of resistance to the regulatory gender norms in circulation, I will examine audience responses that the production and dissemination of this play generated, collected during research trips to Martinique and Paris. My interest lies therefore in the connections, gaps and disconnections that emerge between normative discourses of sexuality and gender in the French Caribbean, how they are 'encoded' into visual representation through performance events and filmic texts, and how the spectator negotiates, complicates and responds to these depictions whilst constructing their own self-image. The hegemonic norms I refer to, examined as a heritage of transatlantic slavery and Plantation society in the first two chapters of this dissertation, can be broadly defined as a binary of über-masculinity on the one hand, enacted in order to authenticate male heterosexuality and reputation, set against a femininity that is played out in more private, domestic spaces, considered to be closely aligned with the colonizer's culture and judged on European moral constraints (Wilson 233; Burton, *Afro-Creole* 158; Murray, 'Homosexuality' 252). One of the aims of this study is to re-view those norms in order to identify current gender complexities and conditions that impinge upon the meanings a spectator (viewing from within the 'home' culture and/or the *métropole*) may draw from a production. As John Fiske reminds us, 'the study of culture must not be confined to the readings of texts, for the conditions of a text's reception necessarily become part of the meanings and pleasures it offers the viewer' (*Television* 72). This comparative approach of gathering data from Francophone Antillean and Metropolitan interlocutors from communities in Martinique and France enables a more balanced and nuanced investigation into whether perceptions

of images of male to female cross-dressing challenge, or merely uphold, prevailing neo-colonial discourse on gendered Antillean bodies and their desires, circulating both within the Caribbean region as well as in Metropolitan France.

As becomes evident through patterns emerging from the audience talk around Sturm's play, it would be reductive to limit the discussion here solely to the gendered or even sexual identities being (re)enacted through acts of viewing. Marjorie Garber highlights how the act of cross-dressing, as viewed in a Western context, comes to symbolize not only fears around destabilizing the fixity of gender but also the crossing of a range of categories and binary ways of thinking (9). The mobility of crossing has even more pertinence in Antillean society where, as Stéphanie Mulot and others have argued (and as I show in chapter two), social categories inherited from colonialism and slavery are (re)performed and contested on a regular basis in the contemporary neo-colonial context ('Redevenir' 122; 'Chabines'). My approach will encompass not only how spectators read performances of gender and sexuality, but also how these readings are inflected by wider considerations of race, social class and community. The following discussion thus reflects upon the diverse influences impacting spectatorship at an individual and communal level and across translocal and transatlantic axes. Elaborating on the theories of Fiske and Dennis Kennedy in his book, *The Spectator and the Spectacle*, I argue against an essentialist, monolithic understanding of the audience, and instead favour a complicated, contradictory and uneasy study of audience subjectivities.

The final part will examine more specifically the viewer as pleasure seeker and the contexts and strategies through which audiences gain access to such pleasures if at all. The extent to which the viewer is able to take pleasure from the Other is addressed in further detail through my reading of Claire Denis's film, *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994), in the final chapter of this thesis. For the moment I am concerned with how the bodies focalised onstage by Sturm are coded and exoticised for different audiences. I will be questioning whether the same tools of masquerade employed by the cross-dresser onstage may be employed metaphorically as a critical tool to examine how the spectator gains entry into an Other world. In doing so I also speculate as to whether temporary audience transgressions can account for the continued appeal and popularity of the play amongst both metropolitan and home audiences. The negotiation of mobile viewing positions and the degree to which

these constitute mobile identities vis-à-vis this popular comedic text are also locked into the particular, yet constantly changing social context beyond the viewing environment. The audience responses will therefore dialogue with critical reviews surrounding the live performance in 2005, as well as more recent social and political issues in French and Antillean culture.

Critical and conceptual framework

In a qualitative empirical investigation into audiences of contemporary queer French cinema, Darren Waldron critiques the reticence of some scholars (notably Doty 1993; Whatling 1997) to engage with audience study, based on the impossibility of analysing emergent patterns from the various, and often shifting, views of one sample of spectators. As Waldron argues:

Audience research does not have to be representative of broader collective shared readings, nor is it necessary to incorporate every specific spectator position identified within complex theory-based textual analysis. On the contrary, it can yield small-scale instances of the potential diversity [of audiences] and these, in their own right, can provide adequate evidence of the hiatus between the theorized spectator and their social equivalent. (*Queering* 82)

It is these ‘small-scale instances’ that I am interested in drawing out here. Less concerned with presenting a single, conclusive story, my focus is on the small moments of pleasure, the gaps and fissures, and the narratives that surround a text as they are communicated and embodied by the spectator. A qualitative as opposed to a quantitative approach is therefore much more suited to this type of investigation, as it allows for spontaneous talk, gesture and telling omissions. However, as I will discuss later, the anonymity that a quantitative survey provides also has certain advantages when researching themes of gender and sexuality in the Caribbean.

If it is accepted that a spectator’s interpretation of a visual work is influenced by diverse contextual and social factors, then there is no guarantee that audiences occupy the place ‘inscribed’ for them within the production. This assertion represents a shift away from the text-centred static model of what is commonly

referred to as ‘Screen theory’ in film studies, whose strongest proponent was Laura Mulvey in the 1970s.¹ This approach equally challenges Jean-Pierre Oudart’s (1977-8) use of Lacan’s notion of ‘suture’, which, when applied to film, could account for how the spectator is ‘stitched into’ the fabric of the film through the imposition of different viewing points. Influenced by sociological methodologies adopted in the analysis of media audiences, the more recent trend among film scholars, such as L. Thomas (2002), Austin (2002) and Waldron (2009), is to speak of flexible forms of spectatorship and oscillating viewing positions. The spectator is not so much ‘stitched’ as temporarily tacked and re-tacked into varying stances during the viewing process. Similarly influenced by approaches in cultural studies, scholars (Morley 1992; Austin 2002) have elaborated on Stuart Hall’s 1973 concept of ‘encoding/decoding,’ which allows for fluctuating, socially contingent, even resistant, readings that are not predetermined exclusively by the text and the intentions of its author. Yet as Austin explains, it is important to remember that not all audience responses are oppositional:

Hall assumed a ‘reactionary’ text, oppositional readings of which would be ‘progressive’, in truth media users’ resistance is not necessarily politically desirable. It may equally entail ‘reactionary’ responses to the preferred meaning of a ‘progressive’ text. (18)

Spectator reactions and forms of resistance to a text may fail in this respect to meet certain expectations even of the researcher, generating gaps in understanding, and deviations from intended interpretation.

The process of identification, therefore, as Chris Straayer explains, ‘engulfs not only those parts of a film [or play] the viewer endorses, but also those that they reject’ (78). As Lyn Thomas states:

In “normal” social life (i.e. social interactions which take place outside a research context) media texts clearly play a role in the claiming and

¹ ‘Screen theory’ was named after the British journal *Screen*, that published Mulvey’s 1975 seminal essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. Building on the early work of Christian Metz in the 1960s, which claimed that the divergence of a spectator from what he considered to be an inscribed subject position would result in ‘failed reception’, Mulvey’s path-breaking argument, centred around theories of the ‘male gaze’, posited the notion that spectators were constructed in the male subject position, thus excluding the female spectator. This theory was based however on the premise of the filmic text’s assumed authority.

performance of identities, providing a shared culture and a focus for the crucial expressions of likes and dislikes, allegiances and rejections.

(*Feminism 8*)

Direct responses may not correlate with actual opinions, which often remain private and internally contestatory, rendering them impossible to 'know'. Research on media audiences by Buckingham (1993) and L. Thomas (2002), rejects the view that responses are necessarily an accurate reflection of actual thoughts of participants. The effect of the inevitably partial presence of the researcher with their own set of aims and expected outcomes, not to mention the recording equipment required during the discussions, are also important factors to consider when thinking through the possibility of acquiring 'true' opinions. There is a danger therefore of attaching too much importance to deciphering and gaining 'authentic' views through sociological methods of investigation.

Given that this section of the study is focused on audience reactions to a performance, albeit a recording of a play for some viewer-informants, it seems all the more relevant to look beyond the models mentioned above, which tend in their emphasis on ways of 'decoding' signs to privilege the visual and maintain the binary of spectator as recipient. This semiotic focus neglects the immediate affective and physical responses produced through the act of watching. In a similar vein, Graham Murdock, in a critique of Hall, warns of an over-reliance on the cognitive: 'The role of pleasure and desire in audience-text relations is marginalized by the way the central metaphor of code-breaking privileges cognitive operations' (237). While Waldron's study rightly incorporates intertextuality and other social significations that crucially inform how spectators construct and reconfigure their identities as a result of viewing, its emphasis remains on the spectator as reader (of signs) and ultimately as 'receiver'. This leaves little potential for the spectator to also *act* as performer, with the equal possibility, even for a limited amount of time, of undergoing transformation. Whilst my approach is heavily informed by Phelan's writings on the indeterminacy and ephemerality of performance and its signifiers, I am also cognisant that theatre audiences may still conform to a sender-receiver model.

To put it differently, Garber highlights a tendency amongst critics to look ‘through’ rather than ‘at’ the cross-dresser, using the transvestite for particular political ends (9). This study will thus not only concentrate on cognitive forms of interpretation and semiotic processes, attempting to look ‘through’, but will also look ‘at’ the physicality of space, the possibilities of mobility and the formation of bodies and subjectivities from the perspective of the spectator. As Kennedy suggests in his introduction, aptly entitled from the French, ‘assisting at the spectacle’:

For a spectator, legibility may not be the primary concern. A good deal of the history of audiences, especially after records improved in the eighteenth century, reveals that spectators often attended the theatre without attending to the play. They came to ogle an actress or another spectator, arrange an assignation, be with friends, create a ruckus, be noted at the event, watch a new scenic device, or for the sake of companionship, or simply because they were given a free ticket. (12)

In other words I am concerned not only with reception in the narrowest sense of the word, but also the processes of reception, whether social or affective, that contribute to the experience of viewing. As Fiske states, ‘There is no text, there is no audience, there are only the processes of viewing’ (*Moments* 57).

Methodological Issues

The study I am carrying out, informed by Waldron’s case for combining text-based readings together with an audience-text enquiry, focuses on connections between and around the image and the viewer’s lived experience as much as possible, through talk around Sturm’s comedy *Ma commère Alfred* and Denis’s film *J’ai pas sommeil*.² The individual stories collected are part of an ongoing conversation between myself, the researcher (also observer and foreigner), and the participant-viewer of the study, as well as amongst and between other informants. Responses and reactions are sought through a series of semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions, conducted in person and/or via email correspondence or online chat facilities. These conversations were organised around an introductory screening, which in some cases

² This project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the department of Drama at Royal Holloway on 13 October 2011.

was followed by a larger audience discussion.³ Those who volunteered to participate specifically in the audience study could choose to take part via one or a combination of the aforementioned formats. This mixed method approach is designed to allow for an on-going dialogue between researcher and respondent, as well as to provide different ways to engage with the project.

The aim of my recruitment has been to target, specifically but not exclusively, Francophone Antillean and Metropolitan respondents, and secondly to include some individuals identifying with a range of sexual and gendered practices. One of the difficulties I faced was ensuring I included same-sex loving Antilleans within the sample, who may not openly self-identify with Western notions of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian.’ While I began my recruitment through organisations involved in defending sexual minority rights in Martinique, I was also aware that many gender-variant individuals and communities may not be integrated into the island’s official support networks. For this reason, as the study progressed, I became more reliant on the internet and social media networks to reach the diverse range of informants required. Fred Cronard, president of AIDES Martinique, the largest association involved in AIDS prevention and LGBT rights on the island, identifies the following meeting places for sexual and gender minorities in Martinique:

- Outdoor meeting places, which are often frequented the night in Fort-de-France (the capital of Martinique) and on the beaches. The absence of security makes these places dangerous places, favourable to attacks.
- The private dances are also meeting places.
- Internet networks.⁴

My first attempts at publicizing the project via various chat groups online, many of which had been set up for LGBT communities and men who have sex with men in

³ The screening of *J'ai pas sommeil* at L'université des Antilles et de la Guyane on 6 March 2012 was followed by an audience discussion involving approximately 12 of the audience of 40 present. While consent was sought to use discussion from this screening in my thesis, this event was primarily an opportunity to introduce my project and I was subsequently able to arrange one smaller group discussion and several interviews.

⁴ This interview with Fred Cronard, conducted by Angelique V. Nixon, was published as part of the ‘Theorizing Homophobias in the Caribbean’ project and can be found at: <www.caribbeanhomophobias.org/activist/martinique>. Cronard, along with a group of others, founded the Association Martinique Vivre Ensemble (Martinique Living Together Association) (AMVIE) in 2004 which in 2011 merged with the French organisation AIDES, the largest association fighting AIDS and hepatitis in France.

Martinique and Guadeloupe, only generated spam responses.⁵ I later learnt that forums such as these are quickly abandoned.⁶ I also contacted the vice-president of the now-defunct LGBT rights association, *An nou allé*, Alain Oncins, inviting him and other interested members of the group to the first screening to be held on the campus of the *Université des Antilles et de la Guyane* (UAG), where I was working as an English teacher at the time. Oncins invited others involved in sexuality or gender activism whether through AIDES or *An nou allé* to this screening of Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil*. Other audience members included: students who had seen posters and flyers around the university campus, students/staff who had been invited through the UAG ciné club via email or social network sites such as Facebook, and members of the 'Gender and Culture' research branch of the *Centre de Recherche sur les Pouvoirs Locaux dans la Caraïbe* (CRPLC), who, interested in the project, came to observe and take notes.

For two subsequent screenings held at the Atrium arts centre in the capital of Fort-de-France⁷, recruitment was widened to include the local arts community: including the local art school, the *Institut régional d'art visuel de la Martinique* (IRAVM) now part of the *Campus caribéen des arts*, contacts I had made at the *Directions régionales des affaires culturelles* (DRAC; Regional Cultural Affairs

⁵ The online groups targeted tend to use Anglo-American influenced 'LGBT' terminology for self-naming, as do the majority of advocacy groups working locally. The differences between online and offline self-referents are elucidated in a conversation with audience informant, Fabrice (52, Martinique): 'Dans la famille je dis cousin ou bien je dis qu'il est branché. J'emploie peu le mot gay...ou bien, sur le net oui, je vais mettre je suis gay, dans une dialogue avec quelqu'un je dis que je suis gay ou bien je suis branché' (*Within the family I say cousin or I say that he is 'linked'. I hardly use the word gay...or else on the internet yes, I write that I am gay in a dialogue with someone, I say that I am gay or that I am 'linked'*).

⁶ I have since identified the main site used by sexual and gender minority communities. Although mostly used to organise soirées, I posted a recruitment notice for the project which has generated some responses, including interest in a screening in Guadeloupe, which unfortunately, due to time and financial constraints, has for the moment been put on hold.

⁷ The screening was organised in association with the *Centre d'Actions et de Développement d'Initiatives Culturelles et Educatives* (CADICE), a regional arts and education organisation, and *Cine woule* and took place in their small 65 seat *salle*, known as the *Case à vent*. With the slogan: 'Si tu ne vas pas au cinéma, le cinéma viendra à toi!' (*If you don't go to the cinema, the cinema will come to you!*), the *Cine woule* association was founded in 1995 by Aimé Césaire's grandson, Jean-Marc Césaire, with the aim of bringing cinema to those who could not easily access it in Guadeloupe, initially through the organization of outdoor screenings. In a mission statement published on the website, he states: 'Sa volonté est de démocratiser la culture cinématographique et, par l'éducation à l'image, de favoriser le développement du sens critique des spectateurs' (*Its aim is to democratize cinema culture and through an education in images, promote the development of sense of critical spectatorship*). Since its inception, the organization has organised screenings in different communes of Guadeloupe, Martinique, on the beaches of St Barthes and in 2009 organised screenings for young offenders, detained in the Remire Montjoly prison in Guyana.

Offices), and the performing arts community of the Service Municipale d'Action Culturelle (SERMAC; Cultural Action Centre).⁸ Through my collaboration with *Cine Woule* I was also invited to give an interview on their associative radio station *Super Radio* to advertise the screenings.⁹ These screenings outside of the university context were much less successful in terms of numbers. Problems of mobility were cited by some who had confirmed attendance, but who were subsequently unable to make the journey in the evening.¹⁰ Another consideration was the venue itself. Whilst the screening room was small and quite private, the Atrium itself is a large space and a cultural hub of the capital, where the likelihood of meeting an acquaintance is high. There are also class associations with this French-funded venue. Despite having advertised the screening as free to the public, some Saint Martinois and Saint Lucian residents I spoke to explained that in all the time they had lived in Martinique they had never once been to the Atrium, citing high ticket prices as the main deterrent. These comments reinforce Glissant's claim in *Le discours antillais* that in Martinique 'la masse du peuple n'a généralement pas accès aux salles de théâtre' (*the masses do not generally have access to theatres*) and that 'le théâtre "reste" folklore' (703). As those unable to attend told me, they usually prefer to support cultural initiatives in their local *communes*.

In the Antilles I have been involved in ongoing correspondence with 14 participants: 2 Guadeloupean, 2 French metropolitan and 10 Martinican, 4 of whom are male and 10 female. The predominance of young women both in the audience and volunteering to talk about same-gender relations may suggest what Kamala Kempadoo acknowledges as 'a greater continuum among Caribbean women between homosocial and homosexual bonds than among Caribbean men' (48). Whilst the pejorative *makomè* is employed to designate same-sex loving men in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the much softer *zanmi* is used to refer to same-sex loving women.

⁸ Founded by Aimé Césaire in 1976, this former cultural hub is still funded by the Conseil Régional and the municipality of Fort-de-France, and while the workshops are not as popular as they once were and some of the buildings situated in the *quartier populaire* of *Bo kanal* are in a state of disrepair, the centre is currently undergoing renovation. I put up posters outside the SERMAC *ateliers*, where I was part of a *Bèlè* (traditional Martinican dance) group.

⁹ Formerly *Kayali Radio*, this is a community station aimed at a public between the ages of 13-45 and run by CADICE in Martinique.

¹⁰ Although the screenings were held in the capital, Fort-de-France, public transport is limited in the evening and it is virtually impossible to travel from outer *communes* without private transportation.

Significantly, this is also the Creole word for ‘friend’ and can be employed as a non-gender-specific term.

The experience of bodies watching next to each other in a public setting, with the affective responses they produce – a laugh out loud, a comment uttered or even a feeling of tension in the back of the neck - versus the act of watching in the relative privacy of one’s own home is an important consideration when accounting for gender balance in the audience. One audience member, also a student at UAG, when asked about the female majority within the audience of the screening at the university, responded that if more young men of her own age had been present: ‘Ils auraient sûrement parlé de ça, plus que nous, parce que nous on voit mais eux...ils vivent pas tous, mais il y a ceux qui (le) vivent’ (*They would have definitely had something to say, more than us, because for us we see it but for them...not all, but some live it first hand*; Véronique, 25, Guadeloupe). Such an assertion suggests the belief that there is more at stake for men to be affiliated with images of male-to-female cross-gender and same-sex desire than women. Resistance through performed talk (*pawol*) is noted here by Véronique as one means by which male spectators would attempt to distance themselves from the images and display their gender identity on their sleeve. The suggestion of a risk posed to the very bedrock of the structure of male masculinity through such spectatorship further emphasizes the connectedness between gender and sexuality in the Antilles. This also signals, to reiterate the point made by L. Thomas, the importance of visual representation in influencing the claiming and rejecting of identities. To return to Véronique’s comment, it is important to note that while I only counted two male students present at the UAG screening, there were approximately eight other male spectators (teachers and other members of the public) in attendance.

The gender ratio of participants who volunteered to give their views on either of the productions might also be connected with a preference on the part of informants for talking to a female researcher about issues of gender. It could equally be suggested that in the role of the researcher I also show greater feelings of empathy towards female than male participants. Multiple affiliations, including my gender, cultural background and social position conducting research in an academic field, certainly need to be factored in to the dynamics of the exchanges taking place. However I hesitate to make assumptions around this range of identifications, in recognition of the danger of essentializing researcher/spectator categories based on social category.

Participation methods

One aim of taking on board different audience perspectives in a multivocal collage was to help mitigate my own authority as researcher in the wider project, yet, as identified above, certain socio-structural factors, together with the methodological design and the desired outcomes of the study, will forcibly impinge on how spectators approach the images. While I do not wish to assume my own bias away, the fact that I am neither Antillean nor French, for example, could encourage responses freed from certain social and political restraints or even the moral rules governing a small island community. Anonymity is an important consideration, particularly as I have conducted the study both in the contexts of Martinique and France. In a comparison of the two contexts in a discussion of attitudes to gender and sexuality in the Antilles, audience respondent Véronique has this to say:

Peu importe la personne ... on a des choses à cacher. C'est pas parce qu'on se sent mieux en France, c'est qu'on sera pas jugé en fait...ici on dit *makrélé*. Les gens vont pas surveiller vos affaires [en France].

Whoever the person ... we all have things to hide. It's not that we feel more at ease in France, rather it's that we won't be judged ... here we say makrélé. People aren't going to care for your business [in France].¹¹

Despite these limitations, on embarking on the audience study I was convinced that qualitative methods were best suited to this research. As L. Thomas argues, '[i]f the researcher is conscientious enough to engage with these complexities, the research may acquire a depth of analysis which the study of letters and questionnaires cannot aspire to' ('Feminist' 122). While written forms of data collection have developed over the last ten years, due to the immediacy and simulated proximity of the internet, verbal communication between bodily present participants can still offer many advantages for a study such as this. It can provide opportunity to analyse the use of Creole, the orality of which is better suited to face-to-face discussion; relational factors emerging between members of a group discussion as well as between

¹¹ *Makrélé* refers here to the act of *makrelaj*, which, as signalled briefly in the introduction to this thesis, denotes the public practice of gossiping and talking about someone else's business in Creole society.

participant and researcher; or gesture and other forms of emphasis, undetectable in a written questionnaire. If, as McCusker points out, written language has had associations with the ‘threat of capture and containment’ in a French Caribbean context (55), then oral language might provide a greater fluidity of self-expression, enabling the articulation of more complex crossings and contradictions of identity.

Nevertheless, given the choice, some respondents who had attended a public screening, citing practical reasons, preferred to share their views on the film or play via email or electronic questionnaire. Others requested to view the film or play on DVD in the comfort of their own home, thus domesticating the experience and allowing them the privacy and discretion of watching alone. The expression of such preferences, along with the observation of audience members arriving late and leaving early, before the lights went up during public screenings, have forced me to reflect on and reconsider the usefulness of surveys and questionnaires in protecting audience identities and guarding anonymity. The range of ways to participate in the study along with the different experiences of watching, whether alone or in a group, at home or in a public space, will therefore be attended to in detail as I interpret the data.

Conscious of the intellectual trouble audiences bring, I still believe that a film or play can be used to elicit talk and to alleviate silences around certain subjects. Having not collected sociological data either before the release of the works or before the screenings, the study tests the usefulness of a cultural production as a starting point for discussion. Taking into consideration the cross-cultural nature of the study, with Metropolitan participants responding to both Antillean and Metropolitan authored representations and vice versa, the objective is to investigate how spectators locate their own identities, bodies and social status in relation to the representations offered and to what extent their views diverge from (the problematic notion of) authorial intention, which I acknowledge is already always limited. Responses collected may also deviate from contemporary images and discourses of gendered norms in circulation both within the French Caribbean *and* metropolitan France, as discussed throughout this thesis. Finally I question audience reception of the materiality of costume onstage: whether the viewer sees through the garb to some core being or whether it is indistinct from the actor’s body, constitutive of a body that can be removed and hung up in the dressing room once the performance is over.

Construction of Gender in the Antilles

Vanessa Agard-Jones's essay 'Le jeu de qui,' in its interrogation of French media representations of gendered subjectivities and sexual practices on the islands that challenge what Kempadoo identifies as the regime of colonial heteropatriarchy embedded within Caribbean society (7), has informed the cross-cultural design of this audience study. Agard-Jones examines articles disseminated by metropolitan-based LGBT advocacy movements in a critique of how discourse between the Caribbean and the Métropole frames queer Antillean subjects as *victim* within the violent, ultra-religious Caribbean space and *free agent* able to exercise French rights in secular France, the mobility of which is highlighted in Véronique's point on movement and surveillance cited above. Such a dichotomy sustains the ideology that the non-independent Martinique and Guadeloupe are lagging behind when it comes to sexual politics and dependent on France to educate and develop attitudes on a local level. This discourse suggests a continuation of the static and subordinate colonial relationship between France and the islands. As examined in chapter two, up until 1945, the latter were commonly referred to as 'les filles', while the Métropole was known as 'la mère-patrie' (Burton, *La famille* 14). This imbalance symbolically corresponds with the socio-economic bind of the islands' *départementalisation*, as Fabienne Federini explains, 'Le discours de la métropole masque la permanence des relations de dépendance et des inerties pour la plupart issues de sa politique coloniale' (*Metropolitan discourse masks the permanence of the relationships of dependency and inertia stemming from colonial policy*; 16). The maintenance of this tradition/modernity binary only serves to sustain the myth that alternative sexualities and gendered behaviour are foreign to the Antilles, engendering the often heard view of 'la-bas d'accord, mais pas ici' (*over there maybe, but not here*). My aim in eliciting audience talk and dialogue between an authored representation on the one hand and the day to day lived realities of spectators on the other, is therefore to trace how a nuanced, culturally specific examination of gender and sexuality within Creole society negotiates universal power structures of colonialism and globalisation.

Critical Reception of the Play

Jean-Pierre Sturm's 2004 comedy was one of the first plays to be produced by *JP Show*, the writer's Guadeloupe-based production company. Originally entitled *Alfred, la folle*, the name was later changed to *Ma Commère Alfred*. *Ma commère*, as the narrative confirms, refers in this context to the fact that Alfred is the *marraine* (godmother) to his best friend's child therefore he is *sa commère*, but what is significant in the title is that from this term originates the Creole *makomè*, an insult which loudly and publicly interpellates traits or behaviour that do not conform to masculine gender norms in the French Antilles. These conventions, explored in the first part of this thesis, require men to act out their virility regularly and publicly as a reminder to those around them (particularly their mothers and circle of male friends or *boug*) of the dominance and activity of their sexual power. The term also implies homosexuality. Sturm's comedy tells the story of Alfred, a same-sex desiring man who performs as a female impersonator in a weekly nightclub routine. One evening he arrives home in his female costume, as Sophia, and comes face to face with a burglar, who mistakes him for a woman. The effect is a visual play, which creates and controls same sex desires and possibilities both on and off-stage. Costume is used in the narrative of the play as a comic prelude to the reinstatement of an image of Alfred's 'true' sex, yet does not maintain, as audience responses show, an inner body/outer costume distinction nor does it ensure a reassertion of a Western paradigm of heterosexuality in the end. Alfred's costume instead is identifiable as his social body encoding the recognisable figure of the 'makomè' as a motif of pleasurable spectacle within Creole society. Furthermore his onstage dressing up makes visible the multiple costumes or bodies within this single figure, which might suggest both character and actor are involved in a transformative process, just as metaphorically, social actors in real life rehearse their own bodies by wearing and trying on different costumes.

Spectatorial fulfilment, here, does not reside in seeing through the costume to a 'true' inner identity, nor is it necessarily shown to be preoccupied with the materiality of the mask itself. As theatre scholar Aoife Monks argues, 'costume is [not] only surface, nor [. . .] is it composed of layers of meaning to be unpeeled – like an onion – with a kernel of 'truth' at the centre.' Instead she compares watching costume to a kaleidoscope, in that 'the same ingredients creat[e] new effects and

outcomes depending on how it is viewed' (11). A range of costumes or social bodies come into focus or recede into the set at various stages of *Ma commère Alfred*. Thus by watching the performance, meanings derived from the different costumes shift from being an illusion, which blends into the scenography, to a spectacle, which allows the spectator to consider the actor's relation to their costume.

An unexpected box-office success, the play premiered at the Comédia theatre in Paris in 2004 and remained on the bill for five weeks. The production, which went on to tour at the Atrium in Martinique and the Centre des arts in Guadeloupe the same year, coincided with the withdrawal of a proposal in November 2004, drawn up by the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, for a law against homophobia. The social climate was therefore very different to the one experienced by audiences viewing the play in 2012, the year of the first ever march organised in Martinique to commemorate the International Day Against Homophobia on 17 May. 2012 was also the year in which the new French socialist-led government put forward proposals for the legislation of same-sex marriage, which would consequently be implemented in its Caribbean *départements*, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyana. The play featured an Antillo-Guyanese cast, comprising Guyanese actor Rudy Icaré in the lead role of Alfred, Guadeloupean comedian Pascal Moesta as the burglar and Martinican Eddie Soroman playing Alfred's best friend. While I do not have insight into the opinions of the wider audience viewing the production in 2004, the admittedly limited published views of critic-spectators at the time may contribute to an understanding of the wider set of values and contradictions shaping the history of the character's body on stage in Creole society. Critical reception of the play in the Martinican edition of the *France-Antilles* newspaper (11 November 2004) highlighted the cast as 'une fine équipe pour un sujet sensible' (*an excellent cast for a sensitive subject*). Marie-Line Ampigny, the author of the article, also emphasised the duality of the character of Alfred as a 'terrible désillusion', which sees Alfred oscillate between 'cadre bourgeois le jour et travesti "folle" la nuit.' Like the Caribbean folkloric figure of the *soukounian* who by night hangs up her skin, turning into a firebolt and travelling around, visiting her victims, this reviewer sees Alfred's threat lies in his ability to

deceive by moving between gendered and classed identities, by hanging up the associative clothed bodies at the end of each performance.¹²

The reasons for the continued success of *Ma commère Alfred* need further investigation. The *makomè*, as a recognizable Other in Creole society, is marked, thus rendered powerless. The staging of the *makomè* might therefore merely serve to reproduce normative gendered and sexual identities: spectator-tourists pay to view the Other, who becomes an exoticised spectacle. The play has sustained popularity even with younger audiences, thanks to what theatre scholar Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux refers to as a ‘memory repertoire’ (237), in other words a DVD with special features. More recently, a new generation of viewers, many of whom missed out on the 2004 live performance, interact, sharing their admiration for the play via Facebook groups and forums where members regularly quote comic lines showcasing their adoption of a range of gendered and sexed roles from *Ma commère*’s narrative.

The opacity of the Creole spoken intermittently in the play also disrupts authoritative viewing positions, creating gaps and desire for both Metropolitan and some Antillean audiences, who are not likely to understand this mostly Guadeloupean variant of the language. When I showed the play at a screening in Paris on 26 March 2013, one spectator, Alex (French, 19), wrote on a questionnaire handed out at the end: ‘Some characters talk creole and we can’t understand. It’s a creole play for creole people with a creole humour.’¹³ However when asked about which character he preferred, he identified Hyppolite, ‘because he was the only character that I found genuine because he talks creole and he is a victim.’ The desire for authenticity contradicts the alienating effect of the Creole language which is associated here with ‘another type of humour,’ as one respondent called it, ‘which does not fit with French humour.’ The vulgarity of the Creole humour, as noted by

¹² Connections between cloth, myth and spirituality can be traced to West African traditions (Thompson; Buckridge; Tselos). One of the methods of protection against the *Dorlis* figure in Martinique, a spirit who visits women as they sleep, is the wearing of black knickers, in other words *putting on* layers of clothing as a barrier against forms of ‘possession.’ Martinican-born author Fabienne Kanor explores the phenomenon of the *Dorlis* in Martinique and West Africa in her 2012 documentary entitled *Maris de nuit*.

¹³ This final screening took place at University of London in Paris in collaboration with the Lycée Victor Duruy, who provided a group of *préparatoire* students, with an average age of 19, interested in gender and wanting to practise their English. The screening was followed by group discussions with written questionnaires used first of all to stimulate talk.

several audience members, contrasted with what was perceived as more ‘sophisticated’ French cultural taste. The class background of the group clearly inflects their responses and when I mentioned the play’s success in Paris at the Comédia theatre, the students’ teacher justified this by commenting: ‘it’s a black area for black people . . . a lot of black people living there.’ The ghettoization implicit in this comment is undercut by the presence of black students in his class, who, we can speculate, either live in the centrally located and affluent 7th arrondissement where the lycée is located or travel within the city. In the same way, Caribbean audiences cannot be confined to the metropolitan stigma of a ‘black area.’

The staging of the play in both the Antilles and France creates different conditions of reception as well as different attitudes towards the impenetrability of certain elements of the language and humour within the play. An effect of this opacity is the closer scrutiny of the bodies in question, rendering visual clues and corporeal illusion a crucial part of the viewing experience. Caution must be applied in considering how the particularity and ‘difference’ evoked by this density among non-Caribbean, non Creolophone audiences, teeters precariously close to orientalist representation of ‘Other’ cultural practices.

Temporary Transvestism

The stereotypical characterizations in *Ma commère Alfred* are enacted from the very outset of the narrative in order to ensure the comic effect of the eventual *rencontre* between two very separate worlds: that of the homosexual, feminine-coded, cabaret artist displaying bourgeois pretensions and ideals and that of the homophobic, masculine-coded, burglar recently released from prison. Sturm’s play initially appears to follow the model of the temporary transvestite narrative proposed by Straayer in his *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*. The appeal of such a formula lies in audience attraction to the brief transgression of sex and gender boundaries, the ambiguity of which is later corrected through the narrative (often through a visual and sometimes violent unmasking of the character). Those who come to watch partake in a ‘double regard’: they see an actor dressed up as Alfred dressing up as a woman. They come to see a mask but more importantly to check that it is indeed only a mask worn by an actor. Using the results of the small-scale audience study I

have been carrying out in Martinique over the past year, I would like to challenge the relevance of Straayer's generic model to *Ma commère Alfred*, based on the assumption that the narrative of the play is fuelled by a desire, on the part of the audience, to unmask the multi-layered character of Alfred. This desire to distinguish between 'real' actors, or sexed characters, and the gendered roles that they play does not seem relevant to Sturm's production. Instead the spectator in a Caribbean context seeks to maintain the mask which conceals Alfred's originally assigned gender identity in order to explain the passivity of his sexuality and to fix his specific role within Creole culture. Pleasure is therefore granted via the character's continued success in performing in masquerade.

The legitimizing audience appreciation of the 'successful' manipulation of the surface of the body through material pose is concomitant with a privileging of surface beauty and the importance of *makrelaj* or 'maniè moun ka gadé'w' (*the way one is perceived by others*) in public spaces where the body on display becomes a canvas for projections of social status in the Antilles. What Rochais and Bruneteaux refer to as 'le jeu de l'esthétique' within the peculiar context of carnival can also encompass the 'mise en spectacle du beau' within the Caribbean region throughout the rest of the year, producing 'un public qui vit une théâtralisation de sa vie quotidienne' (*a people who live a theatricalisation of their daily life*; Jones 35). The body in view may be fixed by the gaze of the spectator in a particular moment yet this does not constitute a direct correlation between body and gender identity nor does it guarantee an 'authentic' understanding, the desire for which, described by de Certeau as a contemporary position (187), is based on the belief that the real is visible. Clothing as performance here disrupts the assumption that appearance can be read smoothly as essence. Unlike in traditional Western discourses of the visual, the 'seen body' is not therefore commensurate with the 'known body' in Creole culture. Yet its envelope must be identifiable, just as the *makomè* on parade during carnival 's'individualisent et se particularisent tout en demeurant reconnaissable' (*develop their own individual and particular look whilst remaining recognizable*; Rochais and Bruneteaux 38).

Costume as Body/Body as Spectacle

It would initially seem that the spatio-temporal transgressions of gender boundaries and sexual norms are curtailed in the play's narrative through its use of humour, to continually remind the audience of the characters' original prescribed gender role. Yet Alfred's ability to pass successfully as a woman is foregrounded in participant responses to my question of whether it was possible to forget through the course of the play that Alfred is a man:

Je me suis dit c'est pas possible! Il joue vraiment bien. Moi j'avais dit mais c'est un gars ! Il fallait me rappeler parce que, ouais, franchement au niveau du visage et tout...C'était vraiment très efféministe. C'était vraiment convaincant en fait. (Lionel, Martinique, 22)

I thought to myself I don't believe it! His acting is really good. I said but it's a guy! I had to remind myself, because, seriously with his face and everything...It was really very effeminate. It was really convincing actually.

Lionel's response measures belief through the visuality of Alfred's gender identity as an important aspect of the actor's ability to perform as a woman. The ambiguity of Alfred's disguise on a visual level forces the spectator to identify with a range of viewing positions, the hybridity of which, temporary though it is, opens up possibilities for appealing and disruptive reconfigurations of normative gender and desire.

In response to the same question, audience respondent Josephine has this to say:

Je n'ai jamais vu Alfred en étant un homme. Le personnage étant bien campé et bien joué, la crédibilité de sa féminité même en vêtement masculin n'a jamais failli. (Martinique, 41)

I never saw Alfred as a man. The character was portrayed well and well played, the credibility of his femininity even in masculine clothing never faltered.

The credibility of the characterization is attributed here not only to the gestures or physiognomy of the actor but also to the paradoxical invisibility of costume. As Jane

Gaines observes: 'Costume assimilates bodily signifiers into character, but body as a whole engulfs the dress.' Thus costume is so tightly bound with the body on stage that it recedes into the set design, indistinguishable from the actor's body, and is no longer discernible as a signifier of gender identity for the spectator. 'Bound to character and body, it is socialized, conventionalized, tamed. Like make-up on the face, costume is invisible as it is present' ('Costume' 193). Fundamental to the relationship between the actor and the audience, the costume produces Alfred's body or bodies, ensuring the success of his character.

Lionel's view supports this observation when he concludes:

Dans l'interprétation on sent qu'Alfred...il est...en fait si on surveille de plus ce côté sa complicité dans l'acte, il joue pas vraiment dans l'interprétation en fait...Il s'exprime comme ça ! Alors qu'on voit que Georgie quand il met les talons et tous il a la démarche d'un gars. C'est pas paisible.

In the performance you feel that Alfred . . . he is . . . in fact if you look more closely at this aspect, his complicity in the events, he doesn't really act in the performance actually . . . that is how he expresses himself! While we see that Georgie when he puts on the heels and everything, he walks like a guy. It's disturbing.

Alfred's costume melds into his gender-coded characterization; it is part of his gesture, rendering him as Lionel specifies later in the conversation, 'plus vrai'. Conversely within the same space, the dress worn by Georgie, the über-masculine cross-dresser, appears awkwardly present *as* costume, ensuring that the viewer is acutely aware of a separation between his clothing and what lies beneath.

In the promotional package for the play, the spectator is asked, 'Que se passera-t-il quand le cambrioleur s'apercevra de la supercherie?' (*What will happen when the burglar realizes he has been tricked?*) This extra-textual address to the viewer signals the anticipation of masquerade but also the expectation of a moment of unmasking and thus knowing an 'original' sexed body. Rupturing the smooth relationship between textual assumptions and actual reception, the audience responses do not dwell on the moment of revelation of Alfred's 'true' identity. Contrary to Straayer's temporary transvestite pattern, the removal of the wig, a marker of Alfred's female disguise, in the stark light of the morning, is not

privileged by viewer-participants as the absolute visual testament of the original maleness of Alfred. The pleasure granted to the spectator is therefore not confined to this specific diegetic moment of visual exposure and confirmation. As opposed to a violent unveiling, there is a more fluid continuum between the varying clothed bodies of Alfred's persona. The smoothness of this shift is underlined by Josephine in her remark: 'la crédibilité de sa féminité meme en vêtement masculin n'a jamais failli' (*The credibility of his femininity even in men's clothing never failed*).

Nevertheless it cannot be assumed that the spectator will not experience moments of consciousness of the relation or separation of the actor from their costume, as Lionel's observations of the third intermediary cross-dressing character, Georgie, confirm. Constituting a different form of performativity, a costume masquerade, which in fact could be considered a deliberately failed interpretation, Georgie's inadequate disguise is reminiscent of the Martinican carnival *travesti* in its parody of the female body through costume. Sturm's character postures an unshaven beard and unconvincing costume made up of carelessly composed feminine signifiers to perform with Alfred in his weekly nightclub routine. Allusions to Georgie's virility are further reinforced as his possession of wife, children and a string of mistresses is repeatedly projected through *pawol* (his performative oratory skills) and theatrical gesture. This verbal boasting and storytelling is characterized in Edmond and Marie-Cécile Ortigues' *Oedipe Africain* as 'engluée dans le spectacle que le groupe se donne à lui-même' (*engrained in the performance the group gives of itself*).¹⁴ As one audience member commented following the projection of the recording of the play at the Atrium in Martinique on 25 April 2012:

...[Georgie] a des pratiques à l'opposé de l'image qu'il veut renvoyer à la société, c'est-à-dire un homme marié, père de famille, et pour mieux coller au stéréotype antillais, a beaucoup de concubines, à certains égards on pourrait croire qu'il a une vie de dépravé, il fait des va et vient entre des pratiques de travesties et des méthodes de machistes. (Josiane, 23, Martinique)

[Georgie] has certain practices that are in opposition to the image he wants to send out to society, that is: a married man and a family father, who, in keeping with the Antillean stereotype, has lots of sexual partners. In some

¹⁴ See also Wilson 154-157 for more on male boasting in the Caribbean.

ways, we are led to believe that he leads an immoral life, coming and going between transvestite practices and macho ways.

This image of the hypermasculine Caribbean male, whilst seemingly contradictory in the context of the play, as Josiane suggests, serves to reinforce the regime of colonial heteropatriarchy embedded within Caribbean society. As I have discussed in chapter two, francophone studies by the likes of André (1987), Bougerol (2002) and Mulot (2000; 2009) have highlighted the importance of ‘reputation’ as a social control mechanism in Creole society, inherited from colonial policing of peoples and used for distinguishing individuals. For Mulot,

La discrétion sexuelle, l’inhibition, la moralité et la fidélité attendues chez [les femmes] tranchent avec la liberté sexuelle, la gouaille, l’exhibition et le multipartenariat attendus chez les hommes... Une emphase importante de la virilité contribue à favoriser le multipartenariat masculin afin d’effacer le spectre de l’homosexualité et d’apporter (aux autres hommes, à la mère, aux femmes) des preuves régulières des capacités de conquête. (‘Redevenir’ 119)

Sexual discretion, inhibition, morality and fidelity is expected of women in contrast to sexual liberty, effrontery, exhibition and polygyny expected of men . . . A considerable emphasis on virility helps encourage male polygyny in order to erase the spectre of homosexuality and to provide regular proof (to other men, to one's mother, to women) of one's capacity for conquest.

As André attests: ‘l’homme n’est pas libre de ne pas avoir de maîtresse. [. . .] Que l’homme déroge à cette obligation, qu’il affiche une fidélité trop voyante, il encourt le risque de la dérision (*boug-la cé zalumet sans danger*, "cet homme-là c’est une allumette sans danger"); voire de l’insulte : *makomè !?* (*a man is not free to not have a mistress. If a man goes against this obligation, if he appears to be too noticeably loyal, he risks being ridiculed (that bloke is a blunt match); or even called a makomè!*; *L’Inceste* 301)

Audience participant Josiane’s recognition of the Caribbean male’s involvement in multipartner unions demonstrates a critical distance and a disapproving stance as a Martinican woman, whilst also validating this practice as normative in French Caribbean society. Her mention of ‘une vie de dépravé’ suggests that there is a moral lens of ‘reputation’ through which bodies are managed

and she adds that it is the inbetweenness, or comings and goings (*les va et vient*), of certain bodies that is disturbing. Georgie is shown to lead a dual lifestyle, as he conforms to macho expectations on the one hand yet secretly dresses as a woman and performs onstage with his homosexual friend on the other. This duality is what Stephanie Mulot has identified as ‘la compétence creole,’ in other words, the specific ability in Creole culture to adapt and take on board a double schema of norms, reinforced since *départementalisation*, reflecting Martinique and Guadeloupe’s political situation as ‘à la fois créole et française’ (*both Creole and French*; Burton, *La famille* 235).

Glissant reminds us of the history of the social formation of this specificity:

La Traite, qui a peuplé en partie les Amériques, a discriminé parmi les arrivants ; le désintéressement technique a favorisé dans les petites Antilles francophones, plus que partout ailleurs dans la diaspora nègre, la fascination de la mimésis et la tendance à l’approximation (c’est à dire, en fait, au dénigrement des valeurs d’origine). (*Le discours* 29)

The slave trade that populated parts of the Americas, differentiated between arrivers; technical disinterest has favoured in the French Lesser Antilles, more than anywhere else in the black diaspora, a fascination with mimesis and a tendency for approximation (that is, in fact, to the detriment of original values).

The effect of this legacy of a forced renouncement of origins is an openness to the assimilation of new schema, as well as a suspicion, as Glissant goes on to argue, of the transparency of universal, global formations. The complex values of Creole culture can be observed by the spectator as concentrated in the performing body. The performer’s body therefore represents the negotiation of this double identity, which involves the wearing of two or more masks at any one time, enabling the social performer to operate on and play within multiple, contextually contingent and sometimes global registers.

Spectatorial *travestisme*

To borrow Mulot's notion of a 'compétence creole', it may be useful to theorize a concept of spectatorship that takes into account historical and cultural specificity in constructing a localised model of visibility. If the subjectivities of the audience within a Creole context are 'inherently' hybrid and simultaneously capable of negotiating upon multiple registers, as Mulot suggests, then authentic spectating positions are ever elusive and the views they provoke or equally fail to provoke become a contested terrain of negotiation, rife with contradictions, gaps and to use Josiane's expression 'va et vient'. It is this potential for oscillating liminality in spectatorial responses that I will examine in this section. What Linda Williams refers to as the 'pleasures of mobility' in the introduction to her book *Viewing Positions*, can be employed to describe how within the enclosed auditorium and a specific time frame there are pleasures to be found in moving in between a range of desiring and identifying positions (14). The viewer is thus involved in a form of spectatorial *travestisme*.

The Creole expression 'Fou ce boug-la bel' (*I don't care if he's a man, he's beautiful*), heard during the carnival period in Martinique, suggests a claiming of the re-designed *corps travestis*, which serve as exotic spectacles, enabling moments of pleasure for the spectator within the perimeters of this protected realm. Within the context of my study, the auditoriums and small *salles* in which 'Ma Commère' was viewed by audiences constitute darkened comparatively 'safe zones'. In other words the organisation of the audience space needs to be taken into account when considering the enabling of a range of identifications and desires on viewing the play. Mervant-Roux points out that the space reserved for the audience in a French context is known as 'la salle', the meaning of which is both 'the container as well as the contained: the audience as well as the auditorium' (225). Within this contained space lies potential for transgressive forms of spectatorship that mirror the permutations of gendered and social boundaries being played out on stage, the pleasure of which lies in a temporary suspension of absolute and binary categories.

Stella Bruzzi makes the point that male transvestites in film are often desperately conventional in their dress: 'iconographically coded as undesirable, their clothes are excessively prudish and unrevealing, and if they dress up they are usually

painfully *démodé*' (162). This is not the case in *Ma Commère* which employs stereotypical costuming drawn from the predominantly homosexual performance world of female impersonation or to use the French term in vernacular usage in Martinique, 'transformisme.' Fashioned in stretch black velour with matching cabaret-style evening gloves, Alfred's costume is reminiscent of the clothing worn by the character of Camille in his drag performance in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994), which I discuss in the following chapter. The organised and lengthy rituals of preparation and 'dressing up' onstage also echo scenes from Laurence and Magloire's *Des Hommes* (2004) and Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) and, in the narrative, are shown to be linked to both gay culture and more personal choices of gender expression. Alfred's dress in particular displays the contours of his form, restricting his movement, ensuring short 'feminine' steps around the stage.

C'est vrai que j'ai regardé l'interview à la fin . . . il disait qu'il était sûr en fait que son rôle était pour lui par rapport à sa physique et j'avoue il a vraiment bien interprété . . .

It's true that, watching the interview at the end . . . he said that in fact he was sure that his role was for him due to his physique and I agree that he played it really well . . .

Lionel's remark seems to favour the physical success of the credibility of Alfred's character, yet in the same sentence this is blurred with the actor's interpretation or performance, which paradoxically underlines the body *as* social performance, as posited by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (136). Clothing is an important corporeal language in the illusion constructed as well as in the process of reading that illusion, allowing the spectator mutable aspects with which to identify and engage in mutable ways. Costume might determine gendered character, a crucial element of the onstage illusion or at other moments it might be viewed in terms of its relationship with the actor. The latter involves a double vision and encourages such spectator reflections as how the actor is feeling wearing a particular costume.

While my focus is on the perceptions of audience members, it may be useful to imagine briefly the point of view of the actor cross-dressed and their reception of the 'authoritative' look of the audience. French actor Olivier Py says this: 'lorsque je chante en femme, je sens bien les deux regards...Le regard de libération, et l'autre,

oppressif.’ There are those, on the one hand, who regard the work as liberating and others who, according to the actor, while paradoxically present, are homophobic in their attitudes towards the onstage representation. The ambivalence of this double look is described by Py as being situated somewhere ‘entre l’admiration et le crachat’ (*between admiration and disgust*; 14).

In the comments section of an online review of *Ma commère Alfred*, one spectator wrote the following:

Pour tous les gars qui pense ke c’est une pièce de macomè et ki refuse d’aller la voir pour cette stupide raison : Ay chié ba zot ! Cé zot ki macomè!¹⁵

For all those guys who think that it’s a macomè play and who refuse to go see it for that stupid reason: Go fuck yourself! It’s you who are macomè!

This contradictory call to view the play echoes the sense of an audience ‘entre admiration et crachat,’ who harbour both a sense of fascination and an anxiety at being associated with (whilst perhaps paradoxically distanced from) the figure of the *makomè* through the activity of theatre-going. The insult directed at those who choose not to attend the production also evokes the question of whether the play merely represents *makomè-ism* as comic spectacle to be ridiculed, simultaneously reinforcing the dominant heteronormative position of the spectator. It seems relevant to examine the possibility of more lasting social consequences for the spectator, who crosses into the space of the theatre in a society where sexual and gender divisions have traditionally been drawn along ‘idealised’ spatial (feminine inside vs masculine outside) intersecting lines. The collective belonging of being present, but also on display, in the auditorium, looked *at* as a gendered member of an audience community has implications for one’s wider social identity. The gaze is therefore not only directed towards the performance onstage but also between spectators in spaces around the stage. This exchange of looks in the car park, at the ticket desk or in the auditorium is part of an intricate social performance. Being seen by others, on the small islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe where the identity of the collective holds far more importance than that of the individual, threatens to tarnish one’s reputation and membership of that collective.

¹⁵ The comment was published by a Paris-based spectator on the Forum de Kreyol’s which can be accessed at: <<http://kreyolsp8.forumactif.com/t52-theatre-ma-commere-alfred>>.

Yet I would argue that audience attitudes are not as binary as Py's testimony of 'liberation' and 'oppression' would lead us to believe. They are surely more complex in a society which has been forced throughout history to operate and perform within multiple frames of register and internalise multiple cultural referents. As Glissant suggests, there is a mimetic tradition particular to the French Caribbean, whose people continue to negotiate the dominance of France and its hegemonic forces of assimilation. The continued popularity of the play suggests a sustained audience engagement with its themes. Audiences therefore cannot simply be reduced to oppositional either/or positionalities, as they perform complex 'responses' to the 'calls' onstage and in doing so alternately underscore and undermine their identities. Further research is needed to address why new and old audiences are still viewing the play, creating Facebook fan groups in which they cite comic lines and regularly assume the roles of its various protagonists in these new media performances. It can be said that such platforms, like the carnival performances discussed in the introduction to this thesis, open up spaces where participants can 'try on' identities in a relatively anonymous environment.

Inbetween Characters

As I have suggested, an inbetween spectatorship mirrors an inbetweenness of category within the narrative of the play. On the character of Alfred, participant Josiane explains: 'C'est Alfred qui retient toute mon attention, quand il est en femme, il n'en fait pas trop, et en homme, on voit juste ressortir des mimiques féminines' (*It's Alfred that captures my attention, as a woman he is not too much and as a man, we just see his feminine mimics emerge*). This response is sensitive to the subtleties of the composition of this subject, whose performative 'realness' seems to be important to Josiane's judgement of the actor's interpretation. The actor onstage is always at risk of failing to convince the spectator to believe what they're seeing is 'real'. Such a failure to produce the desired effect on the audience, prevented in theatre through dress rehearsal, constitutes, as Ridout explores, a form of 'dying onstage' (134-5). For the 'passing' subject in the French Caribbean, both onstage and offstage, this could involve forgetting one's lines, the steps to a particular choreography, or giving off indecipherable visual codes, all of which

equates to ‘coming out of character’ or in real life, could constitute a forced ‘coming out’ that reveals one’s personal identity to a particular ‘public.’¹⁶ In the performance of everyday life, this unidirectional ‘non-performance’ can have life-threatening consequences. A failure to ‘pass’ as other could ultimately cause a ‘passing away.’¹⁷

The audience responses demonstrate that the interstitial social identities of all three characters in the play are inflected by and constructed through intersecting implications of class and race, thus gender is assembled into ‘contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly’ (Stryker et al. 13). Alfred is described as a ‘belle chabine’ in the promotional material on the play, in other words light-skinned of mixed black and white heritage and occupying a privileged place within both social and sexual hierarchies of the Antilles. In blurring lines between distinct social orders, black-white, feminine-masculine, the *chabine* and the *makomè* have often been compared for the threat they pose to the stability of sexual and racial categories (Pourette 208-10; Mulot, ‘Chabines’ 4). Their interchangeable liminality, reflecting colonial fears around racial mixing and sexual transgression, is discussed further in relation to Denis’s *J’ai pas sommeil* in the final chapter. Desired and feared by men, the *chabine* ‘porte une part de masculinité: c’est une “mal fanm,” une “femme mâle”’ (has a masculine side: she’s a “mal fanm,” a “male woman;” Pourette 209). Both read and encoded, via the surface appearance of their bodies (distinguishing the *chabine* from the *métis*), the masculine-like active sexuality of the *chabine* is singled out for scrutiny in the same way as the *makomè*’s passive femininity is ridiculed and incites a certain fascination.

The class component of Alfred’s reassembled self is raised during several conversations around the play. At the discussion in Paris, one student pointed out the particularity of ‘naming’ in the characters’ deception. Hyppolite, when asked his name in French by Alfred (in the guise of Sophia) tells her his name is the more French-sounding Jérémie. Names do not correspond directly to identities in a French Caribbean context, where historically, French names were given to African slaves by

¹⁶ See the example of the forced exposure of sexuality via Facebook discussed in the opening to this thesis.

¹⁷ This is the case in Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* which ends with the murder of cross-dresser Venus Xtravaganza when she is discovered to be biologically male.

the master, and so identification with a French name here can be seen as a form of ideological transvestism. Martinican respondent Lionel contends that Alfred,

Il est architecte, on sent qu'il a . . . il est très élégant, il a de la classe, il a de belles choses . . . voilà . . . Hyppolite, il est voleur, il est un petit peu . . . un petit peu plus . . . je sais pas . . . ça fait un peu moins . . . comment dire ça . . . pas moins éduqué mais moins civilisé en fait. Et je pense que ça . . . de la part de l'auteur parce que c'est vrai que ça se retrouve souvent comme ça . . . on parlait pas beaucoup de créole dans certaines familles parce que c'était mal vu. Maintenant ça revient mais bon c'est plus entre les gens je pense. C'est un peu habituel mais je pense que c'était pas mal parce qu'il y avait des moments aussi où Alfred répondait 'ou komprann non ?'

He is an architect, and you get the impression that . . . he is very elegant and classy, he has nice things . . . there you go . . . Hyppolite, he is a thief, he is a little bit . . . a little bit more . . . I don't know . . . he's a bit less . . . how to say it . . . not less educated but less civilised in fact. And I think that that . . . for the author, because it's true that it's often like that . . . in certain families Creole wasn't really spoken because it was badly perceived. These days it's coming back but it's more between people I think. It's quite standard but I thought it was good that there were moments where Alfred responded in Creole, 'you understand don't you?'

Josephine also makes the point about reiteration of language clichés:

L'usage du français semble vouloir policer Hyppolite qui voit en Alfred quelqu'un de la classe supérieure ne pouvant s'exprimer en créole. Je n'adhère pas aux stéréotypes de la pièce puisque de toute façon Georgie et Alfred laissés seuls s'expriment en créole.

The use of French seems to try and police Hyppolite who sees Alfred as someone of a higher class, unable to speak Creole. I don't agree with the stereotypes of the play because, in any case, Georgie and Alfred on their own speak in Creole.

This comment highlights the normative social and linguistic mechanisms of control and 'education,' demonstrating a consciousness of the double-bind of the Martinican

colonial predicament, in which the Martinican mother is assigned the role of being, according to Burton:

à la fois ‘créole’ et ‘française’, ce qui fait qu’elle transmet à ses enfants à la fois une culture créole étonnamment riche et une série de valeurs et de normes (religieuses, linguistiques, pédagogiques, quelquefois somatiques et esthétiques) essentiellement française. (*La famille* 235)

Both Creole and French, which means that she passes on to her children an extremely rich Creole culture and a series of values and norms (religious, linguistic, pedagogical, sometimes somatic and aesthetic) that are essentially French.

Despite the representation of Alfred’s gender ambivalence, Lionel defines Alfred’s ‘normative’, educated social position with relative ease, yet demonstrates a consciousness of his own privileged status (as an educated Martinican university student) when struggling to avoid reducing Hyppolite to the Creole, racially-defined stereotype of ‘le nèg’ mal élevé’.¹⁸ The gaps and pauses in his speech are telling in this respect, a further indication of his unease at having to define Hyppolite’s social status. The instability of these fractures can be seen to reflect the language problem in the French Caribbean, namely which language to use and what this choice signifies in terms of identity. However, like Josephine, Lionel is quick to add Alfred’s subversively counter-stereotypical articulation in Creole, which confounds hegemonic gender divisions of language that align Creole with masculinity and French with femininity. This transgression in turn, though small in the narrative, is extended by the audience talk around the play and disrupts the reputation/respectability binary discussed above that associates Creole with vulgarity, masculinity and sexuality (André 64; Schnepel 210).

¹⁸ The fact that Lionel is a Martinican talking about a Guadeloupean character is significant, considering the image of Guadeloupe as ‘less developed,’ sometimes promoted in Martinique. In reference to the Guadeloupean Creole spoken in the play, Lionel describes it as ‘assez brut’.

The Role of the *Makomè* as Diversion

Alfred's privileged class position is not remarked upon as unusual and may therefore be read as symbolic of the place assigned to the figure of the *makomè* in Creole culture. *Makomè* as a category infers a man who has sex with men, but who crucially is performatively and publicly feminine in his outward behaviour, his language, dress and bodily gesture. Fabrice, a volunteer for AIDES Martinique, who self-identifies on the internet as gay and in everyday life as *branché*, described the harassment he experienced on a day-to-day basis in our interview:

Tu vas passer dans la rue, notamment si moi je passe, il y a des gens qui sont encore fermés dans leurs esprits, en plus ce sont des gens dont la culture n'est pas ce qu'elle doit être, très peu de culture...ils vont dire 'c'est un makomè,' ils vont pas dire...ils vont dire 'sa on makomè.' Dans d'autres machins ils vont dire 'il est gay', mais quand on dit qu'il est gay, ça veut dire que les gens ont le respect [. . .] mais quand on dit 'c'est un makomè' il y a déjà tout un refus de cette personne.

You're going to walk by in the street, especially if I go by, there are still narrow-minded people, who are ignorant, very little culture [...] they will say 'it's a makomè' (in Creole). Elsewhere they will say 'he is gay,' but when they say he is gay, that means that people have respect [. . .] but when they say 'it's a makomè' there is already a rejection of that person.

Despite its deployment as a means of tarnishing the reputation of the person to whom it is addressed by questioning their masculinity publicly, the verbal Creole epithet has also come to connote a particular social function in a more private, domestic context. As André states:

Reconnu, il n'est pas lynché ou expulsé comme il peut éventuellement l'être dans une société véritablement 'machiste', mais trouve sa place dans le quartier: on lui porte à faire la cuisine, en matière de 'cancans' il n'a pas son pareil ; il prête à rire, à plaisanterie mais l'ironie est plus complice, voire affectueuse, que méprisante. (168)

Recognized, he is not lynched or excluded like he could be in a real 'macho' society, but finds his place within the neighbourhood: he is made to do the

cooking, is second to none at ‘gossiping;’ he causes laughter and joking but the irony is it is more complicit, even affectionate, rather than contemptuous.

André also points out, along with Mulot (‘Je suis’ 299) and Pourette (213), the important role of the *makomè* in the education of young boys, as a measure or boundary marker in the construction of masculinity, over which mothers and women prevent their sons from crossing. Confiant’s endorsement of *makomè*-ism, examined in the introduction to this thesis, echoes André’s analysis: by serving a particular social purpose the *makomè* is counted and perhaps even tolerated (though still not accepted some would argue) within Creole culture.

Les injures et les discours discriminants dont fait l’objet le ‘makomè’ patenté détournent l’attention sur lui et épargnent les autres hommes qui ont des pratiques homosexuelles. Le regard social étant focalisé sur le ‘makomè’, les hommes sont libres d’avoir des relations homosexuelles dans le secret, sans que l’on y prête attention. (Pourette, 213)

The insults and discriminatory discourse, which the makomè is subjected to, diverts attention onto him sparing other men with homosexual practices. With the social gaze focalised on the makomè, men are free to have homosexual relations in secret, without anyone noticing.

The *makomè* is singled out as an entertaining diversion, a focal front, allowing those with not such outwardly visible cross-gendered traits to move with relative freedom in a small island society, known for its *makrelaj*. Such a strategy seems to imply an active/passive dichotomy whereby homosexuality is only recognised if the man in question displays feminine traits and is branded a *makomè*. In a Guadeloupean context, Pourette argues that if the *makomè* is the only publicly sanctioned homosexual, then homosexuality does not exist in the Antilles, since the *makomè* is not perceived as a man (213). This assertion, in its echo of Fanon’s denunciation of Western understandings of homosexuality transposed to the Caribbean region, remains problematic, as I have mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, in its complete erasure of how queer masculinity and all the itinerant variations in between (which may be unnamed) are played out in Creole culture. In the context of *Ma commère* the representation of alternative configurations of gender and sexuality in

the play proposed by the characters of Georgie and Hyppolite problematize this assertion.

The ambiguity of the character of *Makomè* Alfred lies in his straddling of positions within, between and outside of gendered and classed strictures, disrupting the inherited system of colonial heteropatriarchy by threatening the very authenticity of its lines of authority. Comparisons with the *chabine*, successor to the *mulâtresse* discussed in chapter one, and who is celebrated as a local product of creolisation, reveal a process which has historically involved an authenticity-undermining project of colonial mimicry. For the *chabine*, the markers of identity and belonging still in use, inherited from nineteenth century anatomical and anthropological descriptions, no longer fix an individual within a body, but instead are shown to be porous and negotiable classifications. ‘Etre tour à tour chabin, métis, mulâtre, nègre et français relève de "la capacité à mêler ou à multiplier les masques et les appartenances."' (*To be alternately chabin, mixed, mulatto, black and French pertains to the capacity to mix or multiply masks and appearances*; Mulo, ‘Chabines’ 8; Bernard et Gruzinski 622). The *chabine*, like the cross-dressers shown in Sturm’s play and Denis’s film, confounds limited labels, as she not only challenges distinctions between black and white, but furthermore transcends the surface categories assigned to her, by performing according to context and playing within the multiple costumes of her hybrid identity.

The formula in most mainstream transvestite narratives is one where the anxiety of same-sex desires, brought about through cross-dressing, is softened through the use of humour and the knowledge that true gender and heterosexuality will eventually be restored (Straayer 38; Waldron, ‘New Clothes’ 350). The audience responses collected during my study have revealed that the separation of the ‘real’ from the ‘performed’ image is made redundant in the play. The audience discussion around the play confirms a vision within the persona of Alfred, and maybe even Georgie, of diverse and contesting bodies. The costume of the *makomè* is foregrounded as one which is cut from the social fabric of Creole society, but which evades narrowly rigid categorisation and thus cannot be easily marginalised. While moments of anxiety do occur, these are subsumed by the overriding pleasure of the encounter between the two characters and the return of Hyppolite to perform

alongside Alfred in the final scene. Lionel in our conversation transfers his own anxieties onto ‘certaines personnes’:

C'est vrai qu'au moment qu'il était avec Hyppolite c'était très convaincant et peut-être pour certaines personnes . . . peut-être ils pourraient pas regarder peut-être ça y est je dis tout c'est très rare, mais j'ai bien aimé quand même.

It's true that the moment he was with Hyppolite it was very convincing and perhaps for some people . . . maybe they couldn't watch . . . there you go . . . I'm saying it, it's very rare, but I really liked it all the same.

While the act of spectatorship only constitutes a temporary and playful foray into another realm, the return of Hyppolite to Alfred in the final scene onstage might ultimately mirror a desire of the viewer to return again and again to this scenario, all be it as a paying patron in the ‘safe zone’ of the auditorium.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dressed to Kill: Opacity and Masquerade in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil*

The previous chapter explored the ways in which Antillean and metropolitan spectators are influenced by their experience of viewing a 'boulevard' Caribbean comedy, specifically Sturm's *Ma commère Alfred*. This final chapter takes, in contrast, an art house film by acclaimed French film maker Claire Denis, and proposes a theoretical and historically informed study of its style, narrative and reception. Denis's 1994 film *J'ai pas sommeil* is loosely built around the events of the controversial 'Paulin Affair', arguably the most famous French fait divers of the mid-1980s. Thierry Paulin, dubbed the 'monstre de Montmartre' in the French press, was a homosexual man from Martinique who, along with his Guyanese lover, Jean-Thierry Mathurin, was arrested and charged with the murder of twenty-one elderly women in the eighteenth arrondissement of Paris. Paulin, who was HIV-positive, died from the virus in prison before the conclusion of the trial. In the film, Paulin inspires the character of Camille (Richard Courcet), a transvestite cabaret performer from Martinique who, with his white lover and accomplice, robs and murders old women. However, *J'ai pas sommeil* does not seek to explain the psychological compulsion behind such crimes nor does it directly attribute the motive for the murders to Camille's marginal position as a homosexual man of colour. In fact the murder plot is not central to the film's focus, but rather is incorporated as one of many connecting strands in a web of ambivalent marginalised identities, which in turn expose the tensions surrounding race and security which the Paulin Affair brought to light in an era of rising cultural paranoia in France.

In this chapter I will firstly examine the paradoxical diasporic status of Martinicans living in France, emphasized in the film by the intermittent visibility of Camille and his family. By contextualising my argument in France's colonial policy of assimilation, this chapter explores opaque forms of cultural resistance to the transparency of France's 'civilizing' project, made manifest in Denis's film. In my analysis of *J'ai pas sommeil* I focus on strategies of formal and thematic masquerade, narrative 'screening' and unveiling, and how 'performative'

identification within the film itself affects the visibility of the minoritised protagonists. Beyond the boundaries of the film, the chapter will furthermore address extra-textual factors such as the media representation of the crime, the blurring of the actual crime with the fictional version and the impact of the film on audiences in both the Caribbean and France at the time of its release. In my analysis I will integrate reactions to the film gathered during the audience reception component of my study, the methodology of which is discussed in the previous chapter. After a pilot screening organized in October 2012, which involved a small group discussion of *J'ai pas sommeil* at my home university in the UK, I decided to include Denis's film in the qualitative audience study I carried out in Martinique and Paris over the period of 2012 - 2013. The screening of *J'ai pas sommeil* at L'Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (UAG) in Martinique on 6 March 2012 incited the most interest with approximately 40 audience members. This led to a series of interviews and a smaller group discussion. Consequently, in this chapter, audience reception analysis dialogues with my own reading of the film, as well as its 'official' press reviews, in order to provide an exploration of the identities represented that is nuanced by Martinican specificity and a critical awareness of shifting attitudes and perceptions that challenge prevailing images of gender and otherness both inside and outside Martinique.

Denis, who grew up in colonial Cameroon, makes films concerned with experiences of displacement and alienation and often portrays individuals who find themselves excluded from society and located at the margins of representational visibility. In the opening sequence of *J'ai pas sommeil*, Lithuanian immigrant, Daïga (Katia Golubeva) arrives in the city by car via the *périphérique*, the ring road that encircles Paris, with aspirations to pursue an acting career in the capital. As she arrives in the city in a dilapidated Eastern European car, her passage through the *périphérique* is symbolic as the road encircles and contains Paris's *arrondissements* and in some ways acts as a frontier between *l'île de France* and the provinces. Juxtaposed with the initial image of the police helicopter surveying the city, the idea of penetrating the city and crossing the periphery to the centre seems all the more meaningful as her character highlights Paris's changing communities and the new wave of immigration from the east in search of a better life in the French capital. As the film moves to the setting of the eighteenth arrondissement of Montmartre,

between the façades of the Parisian apartment blocks, we gain glimpses of iconic sights of the capital. Spliced images of the Sacré Coeur for example, though fleeting, subtly reinforce a notion of Frenchness at a time of diminishing French cultural domination and identity.

In the film, Denis disrupts margin and centre by making minority identities the focus of her narrative. The main protagonists of *J'ai pas sommeil* are all peripheral within French society and thus alienated in some way, whether due to race, class or gender. Lithuanian immigrant, Daïga, portrayed as a 'disobedient visitor,' resists French assimilation and as a woman experiences sexual harassment on the streets of Paris. Black Martinican, Théo (Alex Descas), is perceived as a 'temporary resident', who, through his desire to return to live in Martinique, displays a strong *enracinement* in his island and thus like Daïga, refuses to subscribe to French culture and its values. His lighter-skinned brother, Camille, on the other hand is shown to be a 'welcome stranger' whose inculcation of Frenchness creates a guise which ensures his survival.¹ Often performing as if possessed, he is, like the island of Martinique, a 'possession' of France.

Martinican Status in Metropolitan France

An examination of the visibility or invisibility of the protagonists in the film calls for a consideration of Antillean status in metropolitan France. In 1946, Martinique, like France's other colonial possessions in the Caribbean basin, Guadeloupe and French Guyana, was reclassified as a *département* of France, granting Martinicans the ambiguous status of French citizens.² Due to its history of colonization, slavery and departmentalization, Martinican identity is formulated through an enduring binary of otherness. France's colonial policy of assimilation has also meant that, paradoxically, Martinicans view themselves culturally and politically both as other and the same, to the extent that they have interiorised the language and values of France (B. Thomas 2). As a consequence a distinct Creole culture and history has

¹ These terms are inspired by a talk given by Sara Ahmed on 'Welcoming Strangers.'

² For an overview of Martinique's complex political relationship with France see Fabienne Federini, *La France d'outre-mer* and Richard D.E. Burton and Fred Reno *French and West Indian*. The psychological effects of this political relationship are examined by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

been preserved and sustained with greater force in Martinique and Guadeloupe compared to their independent neighbours in the Anglophone Caribbean. At a time when other colonised countries were beginning to fight for their independence, Aimé Césaire, the then representative of the National Assembly of France, chose instead to grant Martinique civil equality. On paper Martinique is no longer a colony and shares the same educational and welfare system as any other French department. It may be argued that Martinicans consequently enjoy a more comfortable standard of living compared to other islands in the Caribbean. However, departmentalisation has been severely criticized for prolonging colonial ties between Europe and the former sugar islands. Political awakening in the light of a severe unemployment problem and the high cost of living, culminating in the strikes of 2009 on the island, revealed once more France's social protection as mere simulation, beneficial to the *béké* and the *métropole* alone.³ While white metropolitan civil servants enjoy financial compensation for living and working in Martinique, unemployed Martinicans who move to Paris in search of work are often forced to take on unskilled, low-paying jobs.⁴ France's continued failure to confront its colonial legacy and the assumption that the reclassification of the islands as départements in 1945 would somehow 're-dress' or disguise the unequal relationship between France and its overseas colonies, is shown through the insider/outsider status of Martinicans in the film and reactions to the film from Martinican audiences today, influenced in some cases by personal experiences in the *métropole*.

The paradoxical intricacies of the in/visibility of Camille and his family in *J'ai pas sommeil* underscore the paradoxical status of Martinicans in France, often

³ *Béké* is the name given in Martinique and Guadeloupe to the native born descendants of the white Creole plantation owners of the islands. What many consider to be the failed general strike of February 2009 was inspired and originally organised by the Guadeloupe-based LKP movement, the 'Lyannaj kont Pwofitasyon' (*linking against exploitation*). The protest started as a petrol strike and culminated in political deadlock and mass demonstrations first in Guadeloupe, then in Martinique, for a period of 44 days. Militants took to the streets, armed with a list of 120 claims, covering issues such as wages, environmental concerns and disability rights, and chanted the slogan: 'La Matinik/Gwadeloup sé tan nou sé pa ta yo' (*Martinique/Guadeloupe is ours, not theirs*). For more on these mass strikes see Bonilla 'Guadeloupe is Ours' or the web page for the movement: <www.lkp-gwa.org/revendications>.

⁴ In 1963 the French government set up the BUMIDOM, or Bureau pour le développement des migrations dans les départements d'outre-mer (*Office for the Development of Migration in the Overseas Departments*), as a solution to high levels of unemployment in the former colonies and the lack of workforce in the *métropole*. The package included a one-way ticket, accommodation and a job position. Over 160 000 young men and women in search of a better life signed up. However the reality was not as promised and many felt deceived and exploited by this exchange. See Jackie Bastide's 2010 documentary, *BUMIDOM*.

mistakenly considered to be a temporary and thus unstable community: ‘Quarante ans où il a été difficile de se compter, quarante ans à avoir eu le sentiment qu’on ne comptait pas’ (*Forty years where it has been difficult to count ourselves, forty years of feeling that we haven’t counted*; ‘Les Antillais’ 102). Here, Martinican demographer Claude-Valentin Marie refers to forty years of mass migration to the métropole and the lack of representation of Antilleans in France since *départementalisation*. The camouflaged representation of Camille differs from that of his brother Théo, whose invisible (yet classifiable) status and subterranean existence in Paris is highlighted in the scene of the film where he fits furniture for a client who subsequently comments on the clandestine nature of his work, projecting on him the precarious status of illegal immigrant. The scene represents a common mistaken identification on the basis of skin colour experienced by many Antillean citizens in France. It is this concealed, uneasy form of racism that lingers within the recesses of Denis’s film. The composed yet violent calm of Théo’s response implies that this is not the first time he has experienced underlying racism of this kind. Camille and Théo each respond to their disenfranchised standing as Martinicans in Metropolitan France with opposing strategies, yet it is clear that in both cases, visibility and legality are important, interconnected themes. In the case of Camille it is the series of convincing guises he presents and his appropriation of metropolitan culture which enables him to maintain a concealed underground existence, manoeuvring silently and invisibly as a serial killer.

As a ‘feminine’ marked, gay ‘performer’ he is able to assimilate and ‘pass’ into French society with relative success yet as a Martinican, while his body is visibly marked, his racial difference is never seen to be scrutinized in the film. In the murder scenes he is a welcome stranger, invited inside the victims’ homes seemingly by the old women themselves, who show no signs of the racism experienced by his brother Théo. Camille personifies France’s colour-blind Republican model, which does not acknowledge group identities in the public realm of politics. As a consequence such differences belong to the private sphere. The colour-blindness towards Camille in *J’ai pas sommeil* is a reminder of the unique way France has dealt with difference: by producing a public policy which has denied the premise of race as a grounds for prejudice, instead highlighting factors such as religion, language or national origin. This approach has proved particularly problematic for

Martinicans, whose status as French citizens cancels out these defining factors, inevitably placing greater emphasis on their racial difference.

Entangled Otherness

The characters of the film cross normative boundaries in more than one way. As discussed in previous chapters, sexuality was crucial to colonial constructions of race and gender and Denis's postcolonial revenants reveal how different forms of transgression are persistently entangled and inter-dependent in contemporary discourses of otherness.⁵ The character of Daïga presents an androgynous image, while she simultaneously refuses to meld into French society. Similarly the 'unassimilable' Antillean, Théo, crosses gender roles as he acts as the maternal *potomitan* of his family. Camille, besides crossing gender categories as a transvestite cabaret performer, is also an urban border-crosser who is driven around in the Mercedes of his doctor friend, then in the next scene is asking his brother for money as he boards the Paris metro. In refusing to be labelled or fixed in any straightforward fashion, the characters constitute indecipherable and complex postmodern identities. In an interview on the subject of the real-life killers, Paulin and Mathurin, Jean Baudrillard described them as 'exposants du système', (*exponents of the system*; 'Cool Killers' 144), whose role it is to expose the instabilities of a corrupt social system. In Denis's film, protagonists follow their own individual trajectories in a series of overlapping yet self-contained subplots. It is via these strands, seen to be both distant and at times interwoven, that tensions are unravelled and exposed which trouble coherent binaries of self/other, black/white and masculine/feminine.

The merging of both racial and sexual desires and the act of their projection onto bodies within the film reveals the arbitrary nature of difference and society's inherent need for recognizable difference. New configurations of otherness may emerge, highlighted in the film by the 'new racism' towards Lithuanian immigrant Daïga, yet the old constituent parts forming a web of gazes, desires, anxieties and

⁵ For general analysis of the interwoven modalities of sexuality, race and colonialism, see Sander L. Gilman *Difference and Pathology*; Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*; Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean* 19-32.

transgressions crucially originating in the colonialist imagination remain the same, regardless of whether the deviance is sexual or racial. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen discusses how a single monstrous body may be made up of composite elements of our fears surrounding culture, gender and race, as he maintains, ‘One kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the center that which becomes the monster’ (11). On the one hand Camille represents a postcolonial monster or *zombi*, who passively wanders the streets committing his crimes in the half-lit opacity of Paris. On the other, he is framed as a wilful and carnivalesque *diab* (devil) in the black and white photographs that decorate his room. His métissage, according to colonial histories of visibility, signifies the ‘threat’ of cultural and sexual hybridity and appropriation. As Kempadoo writes, ‘The mulatto, mestizo, or metis who embodies racialized sexual transgressions (. . .) is commonly defined as a tragic figure, a ‘hybrid’ – who inhabits the outer margins of respectable and civilized society’ (33). Camille’s mutability signals the psychic and sexualized racial stereotypes examined by Fanon and perceived as ‘ambivalent’ by Homi K. Bhabha due to their shifting fluidity and fixity (107-109). Nineteenth century colonial concerns over the perpetuation of racial purity and ‘civilisation’ through reproduction are alluded to in the final scene of the film when the mother says to her son, ‘J’aurais dû te tuer dans mon ventre’ (*I should have killed you in my stomach*).

The film’s relationship with the real-life story of Thierry Paulin is influenced by what Baudrillard refers to as ‘l’effet Le Pen’. Media reports of the Paulin case at the time focused on his otherness: ‘Mulâtre, décoloré, homosexuel, travesti, et drogué, Thierry Paulin’ (*Mulatto, discoloured, homosexual, transvestite, and drugged, Thierry Paulin*), reads an article published in *Paris Match* in 1987 (Qtd in Reisinger 89). According to a film review for *J’ai pas sommeil* by Jacques Siclier, published in *Le Monde* in 1998, ‘Un Antillais, Thierry Paulin, homosexuel, dealer, travesti, prostitué à l’occasion, fut arrêté et inculpé en décembre 1987 . . . Le complice (un blanc, celui-là) fit jugé’ (*An Antillean, Thierry Paulin, homosexual, drug-dealer, transvestite, occasional prostitute, was arrested and charged in December 1987 ... The accomplice (a white man) appeared in court*; 13).

Interestingly the review, with its noticeable accent on the visible, fuses the real case

with the fictional film, as Paulin's accomplice, Jean-Thierry Mathurin, was an Afro-Guyanese man. Both publications overtly stress the killer's difference, with particular emphasis on visual manifestations of racial and sexual identity. His *travestisme* is listed in these examples as an emblem of his 'criminality' and emerges as a metaphor to articulate other forms of transgressive and dangerous behaviour.

The trial was not only reported in the media, but its reverberations were also felt in the domain of politics. Leader of the far-right party, le Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen exploited the Paulin affair and used it as a form of propaganda, accusing the Socialist party and their deployment of anti-racist campaigns of hindering Paulin's arrest. Such accusations were based on the premise that the campaigns worked as an added protective screen for the killer, making the police involved afraid of being accused of racism.⁶ The racism in the film is relatively veiled in comparison, yet the plot unfurls against a backdrop of radio broadcasts warning of *in/sécurité*, newspaper headlines announcing 'La France a peur' (*France is afraid*) and talk of the murders by the entourage of people surrounding the case.

Film critic Michel Pascal compares the film to Fritz Lang's *M le Maudit* (32), as like *M* its central characters are marginal, and at times lethargic in their actions. However, unlike *M* the natural compulsion of the killer or the psychological argument that relieves him of the responsibility of his actions is not taken into account in the final verdict of *J'ai pas sommeil*. Furthermore its plot structure of narrowing concentric circles does not lead us directly to the murderer in the style of film noir. The events are thus not unfolded and advanced like a traditional thriller plot but rather intrigue is created through the possible connecting, winding trajectories of the characters, which eventually lead to Camille's chance arrest at the end of the film. The passivity and disinterest of the police further accentuates this effect, as they are shown to play a very marginal role in the proceedings. It is only when one of the old ladies is able to give an accurate description of the murderer's appearance, allowing an identikit image to be drawn up, that we are led to Camille's arrest, further highlighting our natural tendency to rely on the visual as authoritative.

⁶ For more on media representations and responses to the Paulin affair, see Deborah S. Reisinger, 'Murder and Banality' 89-91.

Both the police and the old ladies seem to embody the tensions and fears surrounding French identity at this time. The old ladies are a reminder of the original habitants of the neighbourhood before shifting patterns of immigration (although Ira herself is a Lithuanian immigrant), while the police seem more concerned with insisting Daïga changes her Lithuanian license plates than with solving the murder. It could be argued that the ostensibly accidental arrest by the police mirrors the fortuitous way in which Camille carries out the murders. Still the inefficiency of the police clearly demonstrates the efficacy of Camille's costumes, guises and his body itself to conceal the crimes.

Formal and Narrative Opacity

J'ai pas sommeil has evoked comparisons with film noir due to the stylistic choices made by Denis; the use of the femme fatale character; and as I shall discuss in this section, the opacity of the narrative structure, which resists and inhibits confident and conclusive readings that conform neatly to homogeneous discourses of race and gender. 'By offering images of the real, in all its spatial and voluminous banality', film noir proposes, according to Docherty, 'the possibility of arguing that the world is not immediately available as text, and hence not always immediately available for understanding' (168). The viewer attempts to understand the murder case from the outside by peeling away the surrounding layers of associated figures. Yet the opaque banality of the images presented confounds expectations, epitomized in Camille's disengaged acceptance of his crimes at the end of the film, when he is uncertain even whether some of the crimes listed by the police are his own. The film leads us to question the stability of our knowledge of others and our reliance on visible 'real truths' as authentic.

As I have mentioned, the police do not play a pivotal role in the film and instead it is the people around the murderer, in the formation of concentric circles, which lead us to his identity. Denis herself remarks that, 'Dans les faits divers, même quand on lit les comptes-rendus du procès, l'opacité reste... et c'est à travers ceux qui l'entourent qu'on parle le plus souvent du criminel, les témoins, les policiers, et surtout les membres de sa famille' (*Even when you read reports of the trial, in such cases, the opacity remains ... and it is through the bystanders – witnesses,*

policemen, and most importantly the family- that the criminal is discussed; Denis, Interview 27).

In *J'ai pas sommeil* the spectator attempts to identify and decipher Camille's character as a stable and central reference in the film. Yet Denis does not permit such a conventional entry into the film's narrative and weaves instead a complex web of elusive, contradictory figures who move around Paris in parallel, almost colliding and connecting, with little exchange or communication between them. When I posed questions about the film's characters, following the screening of the beginning section of the film (40 minutes in) on the campus of L'université des Antilles et de la Guyane in Martinique in 2012, one audience member remarked: 'On connaît pas encore très bien les caractères en fait' (*We don't yet know the characters very well in fact*). After having viewed the film to the end, audience member Raphaël (Martinique, adult),⁷ commenting on the lack of dialogue, remarked upon the persistent unknowability of the characters:

En fait on dit que Camille est extraverti mais il ne parle pas beaucoup. Les personnages ne parlent pas beaucoup uh... ils sont très lacunaires et ils ont une espèce de violence qui est très sensible et qui d'ailleurs donne force aux personnages je dis au jeu d'acteurs. Mais ils ne parlent pas. [. . .] Tous ces personnages portent leur porteur de mystère uh. Cette fille qui sort d'où . . . bon.

In fact Camille was described as extraverted [in response to an earlier comment] but he does not speak much. The characters don't speak much uh... they are very partial and they have a sort of violence which is very sensitive and which furthermore gives strength to the characters, I mean to the performance. But they don't speak. [. . .] All the characters bring their element of mystery uh. This girl that comes from who knows where . . . right.

Complete and conclusive reactions to the film are impeded by the characters' lack of communication and the kaleidoscopic viewpoints offered by the camera. Denis's characters subtly confound in their display of opposing traits of gentleness and violence, warmth and cunning. Daïga, for example, is often depicted at the edge of

⁷ Names of all audience participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

the camera shot, as if to confirm her peripheral position in her new locality. She is shown to be silently observing the action, alienated through the language barrier she faces. However we witness a more passionate side to her character when, in a sudden outburst of rage she pursues the director who promises to hire her and purposefully drives into the back of his car. Théo, similarly, seems to be a responsible, reliable father, a relatively stable figure compared to Mona (Béatrice Dalle), the mother of their child, who drifts in and out of their lives. Yet even Théo is pushed too far and flies into a fit of rage, aggressively handling Mona when she reacts badly to news that he has finally bought tickets to return to Martinique.

As spectators we are implicated in the system of observation which seeks to control the subjects of the film as Other. Spirally reassembled, the strands we do glimpse contribute to a strategy of creolisation that questions totalising, overseeing and all-knowing representations of the Other. The characters challenge the repetition of binary-based colonial representations in their promotion of complex Creole identities that alternate between moments of connected relationality and disconnected *lyannaj* (linkage). In this process the viewer (or ‘Plantation overseer’) gains just small portions of these itinerant and contradictory characters, which prove difficult to discern and recognize in any monolithic way.

These heterogeneous fragments, through their rhizomatic connections and relationality, to borrow Glissant’s terminology (*Poétique*), explode and decentralise French metropolitan concepts of rootedness and origin, offering the possibility for multiple rooted identities.⁸ The discontinuity of stylistic, thematic and representational mechanisms employed by Denis disturbs clear-cut oppositions of Otherness based on dominant cultural norms by rerouting inflexible and ‘legitimate’ lines of gender and race in the film. Spectator identification with the different characters is rendered difficult, and as the audience study showed, this is the case for both metropolitan French and Antillean respondents. A collage of incongruent elements are shuffled together or, as one review claimed, are dancing ‘un terrifiant ballet de la solitude et de la mort’ (*a terrifying ballet of solitude and death*; Mérigaux). As audience discussant Rachel (Martinique, 35) recognizes, the protagonist ‘tue du façon tout aussi normale qu’il danse avec sa mère’ (*kills in just as*

⁸ This refusal from within the imposed hegemonic structure relates to Glissant’s notion of *l’anti-famille* discussed in chapter two of this dissertation.

normal a way as he dances with his mother). The continuity of the character's paths are often parallel and although they draw nearer towards the film's end, like the warp and the weft of woven fabric, on closer inspection, still remain individual strands, independent of one another.

Through tactics of mimicry and masquerade the characters of the film buy into and resist stereotypical labelling, as a series of visibly recognisable, 'reliable' representations are established then subsequently contradicted and refracted. In their non-literal cross-dressing they subvert the power of the metropolitan/colonial gaze and disrupt the desire of the film viewer to experience that which is other. This technique is consistent with Mireille Rosello's observation of 'the necessary mimetic energy of all counterstereotyping narratives' (11). In order to 'decline the stereotype', its binary sign system is first appropriated, in order to dismantle its tenets from within the dominant power structure. Just as Camille's cross-dressing deconstructs the binary of male and female, border-crossers Théo and Camille critique power relations and refuse firmly fastened categories of national identity in their multiplication of subjectivities.

An ambiguous duality is performed most markedly throughout the film by Camille, who alternates between violence and kindness, generosity and cruelty, and his roles as a loving son and as a cold-blooded killer. Even in the initial scenes we see him aggressively abuse his lover in a Parisian street, which is juxtaposed in the next instance with an image of him doting on his young nephew in Théo's flat. In the love scene with his accomplice Raphaël, the dividing line between the two sides of his masquerade seems to blur as he evokes both a loving tenderness and a fearful menacing. While Raphaël lies on the bed submissively avoiding eye contact and explaining that he wants out, the oppressive figure of Camille leans over him, slowly caressing his body. Camille unnervingly quells his misgivings as he whispers with menace, 'tu peux pas te débarrasser de moi. Tu le sais ça, tu peux pas' (*you can't get rid of me. You know that, you can't*).

The potential irony of the deception such duality conceals is best illustrated when Ninon is warning Daïga of the dangers of Parisian streets, advising her to take care, then at the sight of Camille and his accomplice Raphaël, exclaims, 'Ils sont gentils, mais gentils!' (*They're lovely boys, lovely!*) Camille therefore succeeds

through masquerade and re-configuration of artifice to 'pass' (in between black and white and arguably between male and female roles), and performatively play metropolitan culture, unsettling simple presumptions of his identity and cancelling out his invisibility as an 'unseen' Antillean. On the surface it would seem he has the power to self-fashion his image, which is surely where the appeal of cultural and gender transvestism lies. Yet whether he intentionally chooses and designs these appropriations and imitated gestures is unclear. Perhaps they are symptomatic of the constraints of the metropolitan French society into which he is expected to assimilate. The dominance of France's colonial policies of reproduction and internalisation of its cultural norms did not always provoke resistance to the white oppressor, creating instead what Fanon theorizes as a desire to don a 'masque blanc'. Through his subversion (whether conscious or not) of one set of expectations, Camille renders himself complicit to another set more in line with French metropolitan ideals and thus in doing so is 're-marked' with social value, experiencing heightened visibility and equality in comparison with the other marginalised characters in the film. The binary of the visible and the invisible, the seen and unseen and Camille's slippage between the two are crucial to understanding his survival in French society at this time. Rather than attracting attention, his masquerade acts like a mirror ball that disperses the rationalising light (of enlightenment transparency) and allows him to elude surveillance.

The urban setting shot at night or during the early hours of the morning, along with the growing sense of paranoia and hidden threat, conjure further comparisons to film noir:

Film noir au sens où, à partir d'un canevas policier, il propose une vision urbaine très originale, faite d'intensité et d'invisibilité, et qu'il est mû par les rythmes décalés des jours et des nuits qui s'échangent et finissent par s'abolir. Film noir encore, puisque Claire Denis cherche à cerner les zones d'ombre du social, cette part maudite habitée par les reprouvés, ceux qui hantent les coins et les recoins de la cité. (Jousse 22)

Film noir in the sense that, based on a murder mystery, it proposes a very original urban vision, both profound and transparent, and that it is transformed by the shifting rhythm of interchangeable days and nights which

end up cancelling each other out. Film noir also because Claire Denis seeks to penetrate society's dark shadows, that cursed section inhabited by outcasts who haunt the city's corners and deepest recesses. (Marker 145)

In one scene Daïga leaves the comfort of the hotel in an attempt to penetrate the 'dark shadows' of the city and finds herself lost in a labyrinth of Parisian streets, thus emphasizing her solitude and status as an outsider. The artificial lighting is prominent against the dark night and the glaring neon street signs seem to represent the comfort of being surrounded by the bustle of other strangers. When pursued by an unrelenting admirer she is forced to duck down a poorly-lit side alley straight into a porn cinema full of men, revealing a seedy Parisian underworld, kept well hidden from the throngs of tourists. In the scene shot on the roof of Théo's apartment, we see Paris lit again with intense neon light which bleeds from the Montmartre street signs. The neon again demarcates the safe spaces of the outside as Théo takes his son on to the open roof to escape the noises and cries emanating from their neighbours' apartment. They are joined by Mona for a rare moment of tranquillity between the couple. Spaces of inside and outside are reversed, as the artificial light draws them into the open, safe area of the roof blurring the 'light of binarism.' In comparison, buildings and walls are set up as façades in the film, screening the 'immoral' activity within. The effect of this reversal is its disruption of our moralistic expectations of the different communities depicted, as Parisians or 'insiders' are shown to be deceptive in harbouring hidden 'wrongs' (Théo's neighbours) and those considered 'outsiders' (Théo himself) are comparatively reliable, honest members of the community.

The soundtrack of the film also evokes film noir comparisons, from the upbeat and optimistic opener of the mambo-jazz Cancion accompanying Daïga's drive into Paris in the early hours of the morning to the nostalgic evening performance of Théo's Creole-style violin playing at the close of the film. Music and dance accentuate the outsider status of the characters and their multi-rootedness, representing an 'escape' from the realities of Parisian life. Daïga and Ninon finally bond to the sound of Procol Harum's 'Whiter Shade of Pale'. Even Camille momentarily seems to forget his worries, while dancing with his mother at the family party. The music throughout the film is interspersed with radio announcements and television news heard through the walls of the neighbourhood, broadcasting news of

the murders and warning listeners to be cautious. The announcements remind us that the killer is close by, yet for Daïga, the foreign words are no more distinguishable than the music on the radio.

Mal-Fanm Fatale⁹

From the moment of her arrival, Daïga immediately resists conventional representations of the vulnerable foreign woman. When two men stare at her in the adjacent car she defiantly stares back. When policemen harass her for having illegal license plates she swears at them in Lithuanian. Audience respondent, Cécile (Finistère, 34), when asked which character remained with her following the projection, wrote:

Après la projection du film j'ai surtout pensé à Daïga. C'est le personnage féminin le plus présent du film, et, pour moi, il est plus facile m'identifier à une autre femme, d'autant que c'est une femme forte et séduisante: elle traverse toute seule une partie de l'Europe pour se rendre à Paris [. . .] Elle peut paraître fragile, mais elle ne cesse de démentir son apparence diaphane. Daïga est peut-être une femme forte comme un homme.

After the projection of the film I thought about Daïga in particular. She is the most present female character in the film and, for me, it is easier to identify with another woman, especially as she is a strong and seductive woman: she crosses an area of Europe on her own in order to get to Paris [. . .] She can seem fragile, but she continually contradicts her translucent appearance.

Daïga is perhaps a strong woman like a man.

As a metropolitan woman living in Martinique herself, Cécile might identify with Daïga's courage as a lone female traveller. She names Daïga as the principal female character, yet also suggests her strength connotes masculinity. Cécile is therefore conscious of the prevailing gender norms in a metropolitan French context, which mark Daïga's difference. Her reference to translucency also hints at Western traditions of male spectatorship that involve attempts to look through rather than at

⁹ *Mal-Fanm* connotes masculine femininity in Creole society and is used to describe powerful women.

(Garber 9) an opaque object of scrutiny (or ambivalent cross-dresser). Daïga's androgynous image (to which Cécile also alludes) contrasts with Camille's seductive and glamorous image as a drag performer. This framing sets up Camille as 'a relative insider, a native French citizen well-versed in the ways of the capital. Handsome, exotic, and dressed 'to kill,' Camille seems to be performing even when he is not on stage' (Dobie 175). In his performance opposite Daïga, Marker compares Camille to the figure of the femme fatale, who though seemingly an insider turns out to be a 'stranger in our midst' (146). The deceptive nature of the femme fatale with her multiple masks underscores the belief that the 'truth' about women is heavily reliant on vision, which, as Marker has observed, seems particularly applicable to Camille's character. As Doane points out, 'The femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. Her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbours a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable' (1). As a cross-dresser Camille therefore symbolizes a threat, a figure who dares to overstep the confines of his social role, refuses to be classified and eludes the fixity of cultural and gendered discourses. As for the people who surround the femme fatale, Hirsch describes them as 'the playthings of designing women' (4), a description which corresponds well to the weak accomplice Raphaël, depicted as an object under Camille's control, who continues to return to his side against his better judgement.

This comparison to a femme fatale with a 'design' suggests a sense of scheming behind Camille's project, a mimetic drive which motivates him. The lone and peripheral trajectories of each of the protagonists in *J'ai pas sommeil* implies their alienation in modern French society, therefore it seems logical to attribute Camille's apparent conformity through a series of guises and costumes to an existential lack, encouraging an ambition to mould his self to the stereotypical requirements of French society. Audience participant Fabrice (Martinique, 52), responds to the question of Camille's integration into French society thus: 'Sa vie à lui c'est celle d'un homosexuel, c'est la vie nocturne, c'est la vie des rencontres, la vie des clubs, la vie des restaurants, la vie de tout ce qu'un homosexuel peut vivre pleinement qu'il n'aurait certainement pas pu vivre chez lui' (*His own life is that of a homosexual, it's the nocturnal life, the life of hook-ups, the life of clubs, the life of restaurants, the life of everything a homosexual can experience freely that he*

wouldn't be able to do at home). Fabrice self-identifies as *branché*, a French term which literally means 'connected'. *Branché* is used in France to denote a fashionable, 'switched on' person or place and, from my experience, is occasionally used in Martinique to name men who desire men. According to Fabrice, the anonymity of the *métropole* provides the space to perform more freely one's sexuality and pass unnoticed. He seems to suggest that to be *branché* in France, Camille must leave behind his Antillean identity, rendering him *débranché* from his 'origins'.

On cross-dressing, Fabrice, who dons a dress every year during carnival, explains:

Au niveau de l'île c'est vrai que c'est assez difficile de pouvoir s'exprimer en tant que travesti. Ce n'est que pendant cette période du carnaval et encore à l'intérieur de la communauté gay au cour des soirées, puisque certaines soirées il y a des prestations de spectacle de travesti, de transformiste on peut dire.

On the island it's true that it's quite difficult to be able to express oneself as a transvestite. It's only during the period of carnival and within the gay community at parties, since at certain nights there are drag shows or should I say transformiste shows.

The privileged sites Fabrice describes, such as the drag cabaret, where one can 'openly' cross-dress are, however, strikingly similar to those spaces depicted in the film. Cécile (Finistère, 34) responded to my question on connections between transvestite practices and the fact Camille lives in France thus:

La société française est sans doute plus permissive que la société martiniquaise (ou plutôt, la Martinique est une province de la France profonde, comme la Picardie . . .). Mais je suppose qu'en Martinique on doit pouvoir trouver des clubs dans lesquels se déroulent des spectacles tels que celui de Camille, en dehors de Carnaval (mais je ne sais pas)!

French society is without a doubt more accepting than Martinican society (or rather Martinique is a province of rural France, like Picardie . . .) But I imagine that in Martinique it's possible outside of carnival time to find clubs

where there are shows like the one performed by Camille (but I don't know)!¹⁰

While Cécile's regional comparison is problematic given the political and cultural context of Martinique as a Caribbean 'entity' of France, it illustrates her point that French society may be no more accepting of homosexuality and cross-gender identification performed in the public sphere than Martinican, and thus challenges conceptions that the island is 'lagging behind' when it comes to attitudes towards same-sex desire.

While Daïga and Théo recognise the hopelessness of their peripheral status, it has been argued that Camille, by contrast, fully adheres to the dominant materialistic system. Martine Beugnet stresses this drive to conformity in her monograph on Claire Denis: 'Camille and Raphaël are not in revolt against the dominant system of value. Their killings do not bear a symbolic, subversive or nihilistic meaning. Rather they seem like gruesome but logical expressions of a desire to participate fully in a materialistic system, of an overriding drive to conform' (97). While previous chapters have dealt with spiritual possession, Camille's is a material form of possession here, manifest through his desire to become branché and immerse himself in the 'hexagonal' scene. The killings are therefore an understandable response to a modern capitalist society and the killers themselves symbolize the lethargy of the postmodern condition, not so much 'driven' but rather drifting in a 'somnambulique' (hence the film's title) state of uncertainty and indifference. Beugnet argues that the killer in *J'ai pas sommeil* is 'not so much an immoral as an a-moral figure, who uses crime to participate fully in a system where wealth, appearance and consumption have become ends in themselves' (101). The killings can therefore be read as a response to a certain depravity or absence, motivated by an overarching desire for economic and material inclusion.

Yet Beugnet's argument for a materialistic reading of Camille's character is questionable. Although she identifies some minor indicators of his participation in a lavish lifestyle – the expensive costumes, the champagne, the money exchanged – these remain fairly subtle within the film's narrative. After all, in this era of

¹⁰ In Martinique for example the network *JM Concept 972* regularly organize *soirées* and club nights with *transformiste* competitions. See their website: <<http://jmconcept972.com/>>.

democratized luxury where social order is based on simulation, such things are no longer out of reach for the average consumer (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*). Beugnet's analysis also seems to confuse fiction with reality; in other words it is influenced by the real-life 'Granny killer', Thierry Paulin, who was reportedly fascinated with the celebrity world and liked to lead an extravagant, highly fashion-oriented lifestyle. While it is true that originally Denis had considered incorporating a celebrity thread to Camille's character, in the end she decided against such a depiction of the protagonist. As she explains to film critics, Thierry Jousse and Frédéric Strauss, 'Ce qui intéressait Paulin, c'était d'aller dans des lieux dits branchés pour côtoyer des gens célèbres. Je me suis demandée s'il y aurait une scène pour montrer ça dans le film' (*Paulin was interested in frequenting fashionable places in order to rub shoulders with famous celebrities. I did wonder whether to show that in a scene of the film; Denis, Interview 26*). After asking both French pop star, Mylène Farmer, and designer, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Denis chose to drop the scene, favouring instead, 'des scènes plus quotidiennes, comme celle de l'anniversaire de la mère. L'idée même d'une jeunesse qui ne sait pas ce que c'est que la mort et tue pour trouver les moyens de s'amuser est opaque' (*more everyday scenes, like that of the mother's birthday. The very idea of young people who don't know what death is and kill for the fun of it is opaque; Interview 26*).

It is difficult to determine whether Camille is concerned at all with establishing himself within the Parisian métropole. Denis's avowal to the opacity of the film, underscores this uncertainty. Like the femme fatale of film noir, Camille offers a series of false surface images and nothing more, compelling a feeling of fascination on the part of the spectator. On such magnetic figures, Doane states, 'Her power is of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will, hence appearing to blur the opposition between passivity and activity' (2). If Camille represents a femme fatale in this film noir, he is not the agent of power, but merely its 'carrier', possessed by the economic and cultural dominance of French society. It is by no means insignificant that Afro-diasporic spiritual practices such as Vodou possession arose as an embodied sublimation of the violent disembodiment and dispossession of slavery and the Plantation, whereby the concept of the individual is emptied out. The postcolonial revenant Camille is therefore merely a receptacle that serves as a vehicle for the dominant forces in society. He possesses a certain force, a

will, but not of his own doing, thus his autonomy is always in relation to a dominant other, subject to someone else's rules. That someone else can be said to be the white male self who, threatened by the 'unknowability' of the white female other, compensates by projecting his own fears onto the femme fatale in order to regain stability. Camille's reworking of the femme fatale echoes this schema as, on the one hand, he seems willing to be controlled within the normative sphere of power. On the other hand, whether consciously or not, he complicates the traditional reassertion of power, symptomatic of white male fears, by demonstrating the tensions between discourses of race and gender. The opacity of his gender and cultural transvestism disturbs white male selfhood, as he is never seen to 'pass' seamlessly in both domains. The invisibility of one form of subversiveness (the killings) seems dependant on the visibility of the other (gender performance) and thus its function as mask. As we see in the film, overseen and undetected, Camille's physical monstrosity as a transvestite disguises and detracts from his moral monstrosity as a serial killer.

La prise de corps: Opacity and Masquerade

Disguise is an important device in *J'ai pas sommeil*, particularly for Camille's character, whose body is closely surveyed by Denis's camera throughout the film. As Denis explains:

. . . la prise de corps c'est vraiment la seule chose qui m'intéresse. C'est assez intimidant, surtout quand c'est le corps des hommes . . . Le corps du délit, le corps de Camille, a été évidemment un objet d'observation, un mystère. Et il fallait le regarder comme ça. (*Interview 25*)

. . . *capturing the body is really the only thing that interests me. It's quite intimidating, especially when it is men's bodies . . . The body of evidence, the body of Camille, had obviously been an object of scrutiny, a mystery. And it was necessary to look at it in that way.*

This statement might seem to exoticise the body of the actor as an 'object of scrutiny' but crucially Denis not only considers how she wants Camille's body to be 'captured' in the film but also the place of the spectator. For the film-viewer it seems

the more we attempt to observe the subject (and fix him as object) the more the character of Camille eludes our field of vision and we are teased with glimpses of the view, limiting our understanding of the character.

It is in one of the rare scenes which Camille and his brother Théo share at the beginning of the film that we are first introduced to the opacity and ambivalence of Camille's character and the corresponding style in which he is filmed. Shot from close range Camille is sleeping fully clothed on Théo's sofa, guarding a pillow over his face to mask the daylight streaming into the room (of significance considering the rest of the film's film noir style night-time/dawn setting which we discussed earlier). The camera pans over his body slowly revealing painted nails, and sensing that he is being watched, his hand suddenly pushes away the pillow to reveal another mask in the form of his made-up face, stained with black lipstick and eyeliner from the night before. He is met with the innocent look of Théo's son, which seems to amplify the equivocality of these small signs of 'femininity'. As he returns the gaze, Camille simply asks, 'Elle est là maman?' (*Is mama there?*) The camera moves laterally from one brother to the other, through the wall to reveal Théo in bed in the adjacent room. So for a brief moment the brothers share the frame, yet still remain separated by the dividing wall, confirming their separate paths through the film.

The three gather in the bathroom and as Camille, described by Jousse as 'un homme très féminin . . . d'une sensualité immédiate et troublante' (*a very feminine man . . . with an immediate and troubling sensuality*; 20), reaches to use Mona's beauty products Théo's son exclaims, 'C'est à maman!' (*That's mama's!*). While the child didn't seem to remark upon the feminine make-up Camille was wearing, he is aware of the products his mother would normally use. Although both characters seem to be involved in traditionally assigned 'feminine' activities, Théo, in the task of getting his son ready for the day, seems to take on both the role of mother and father in caring for his son. In the audience discussion at UAG, a younger female participant, Véronique (Guadeloupe, 25) describes Theo as having 'le comportement d'un antillais.' When I ask what sort of behaviour she replied, 'Je sais pas . . . le père de famille' (*I don't know . . . the family father.*) This comment provoked some laughter amongst the older spectators in the room and Rachel (Martinique, 35) responded: 'Il s'occupe de son enfant comme la mère [rires] . . . ce n'est pas l'image que moi j'ai de l'Antillais je dirais, surtout à cette époque.' (*He looks after his child*

like the mother [laughter] . . . it's not the image that I have of the Antillean man I would say, especially at that time.) This comment and the laughter of the audience reinforces the famous stereotype of the absent Caribbean father. As Livia Lésel states in the introduction to her study, *Le père oblitéré*, 'L'irresponsabilité du père, en opposition à une mère magnifiée, assumant seule la charge de l'éducation des enfants est une assertion socialement et culturellement acceptée' (*The irresponsibility of the father, in opposition to the magnified mother, taking on single-handedly the responsibility of the children's education is a socially and culturally accepted fact*; 7). The film therefore offers an inverted image of the traditional mother-father opposition. Véronique's response to the film's representation of the father also suggests that gender roles within the Caribbean family may offer more flexibility than those ascribed by conventional metropolitan models.

In the bathroom, the camera in close-up shows Camille undressing, shedding the costume of 'masculine' suit trousers to reveal the 'feminine' black fishnet tights shaped by his muscular 'masculine' legs, troubling normative codes through a series of appearances, which disperse straightforward readings. This range of readings is reflected in audience responses. Cécile claimed, 'Je trouve que le personnage dégage beaucoup de virilité, bien qu'il se travestisse dans son spectacle' (*I think the character comes across as very virile, even though he cross-dresses in his show*). Dhany (Martinique, 58) agreed, describing him as 'indiscutablement masculin' (*undeniably masculine*). Josiane perceived him as 'à la fois homme, à la fois femme dans ce film' (*both manly and womanly in this film*). Fabrice also emphasized his inbetweenness: 'je dirais qu'il n'était ni trop masculin ni trop féminin . . . par contre on peut dire qu'il avait un côté très sensuel' (*I would say that he was neither too masculine nor too feminine . . . on the other hand we can say that he had a very sensual side*). Finally, Fabienne asserted:

J'ai trouvé Camille assez masculin. Le féminin ne ressortant à mes yeux que lorsqu'il se met en scène vêtue d'une robe dans ce qui m'a semblé être un bar gay. Sa masculinité ressortant à travers son rôle dominant dans le couple amoureux et dans le couple criminel . . . sa violence . . . ses difficultés de communication avec son frère'

I found Camille quite masculine. His femininity only coming out as I saw it when he was on stage wearing a dress in what seemed to me to be a gay bar. His masculinity coming out via his dominant role in his relationship with his boyfriend and their criminal relationship . . . his violence . . . his difficulties in communicating with his brother.

Camille's masculinity, according to Fabienne, is attributed through his actions and dominant behaviour (not how he looks). Conversely his femininity is related to vestimentary codes, in other words the superficial layers with which he identifies and fashions the self. In his appropriation of the accoutrements of a woman (herself already a 'figure of disguise'), cross-dressing Camille exhibits his own desire to become disguised (Phelan, 'Crisscrossing' 161).

In his performance in the nightclub scene Camille overtly plays out an external artifice of both masculinity and femininity to the onlookers, displaying his body to the male, predominantly white gaze of the spectators. As part of the show he lip-synchs to the backing track of Jean-Louis Murat's 'Le lien défait' (*The Broken Link*) while an audience of men watch transfixed in silence. Dressed in a long velvet dress with long velvet gloves and head-wrap he carefully gestures a series of choreographed moves and as the sequence progresses his dress slowly slips down to expose his male chest (fig. 9). The body is shown in full only once with a slow pan downwards, revealing the silhouette and a momentary flash of naked feet, yet never is it presented as an entire image to discern. The mise en scène of this performance, alternating between images of the body and conferred looks, emphasizes Camille's outward physical appearance and in particular the tensions of gender identity his image evokes. Jousse has attributed Camille's 'femininity' less to the physicality of the character's transvestism, his performative gesture or even the ambiguity of his 'feminine' name (to which the police make reference in the course of the film), but instead ascribes it to the effects of Denis's mise en scène and the camerawork used. He therefore suggests that it is not Camille's body itself which troubles representations of masculinity versus femininity but rather the way the body is filmed, which he likens to the way the 'feminine' body has traditionally been filmed. In other words it is not only the spectatorial desire within the scene of the film but also our voyeurism as viewers of the film which narrates Camille's 'femininity'.



Figure 9: Richard Courcet as Camille in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil*, 1994

I would argue that masquerade is used in the performance, its *mise en scène* and the stylistic choices of the film. To build on Jousse's theory, the camera is performing as male subject in this scene; its gaze intensifies Camille's mysterious allure. The camera remains close to 'le corps du délit' (*body of evidence*; Denis, *Interview* 25), as Denis refers to it, and at times it is as though Camille's body is obscuring the view, rendering his gender indiscernible, which evokes the stylistic 'opacity' of film noir discussed earlier. While I have used the metaphor of a fragmented mirror to describe the effect of a cross-dressed body in this thesis, Camille's body in this scene operates as a screen, which prevents the light from entering. Rather than reflecting, the body deflects as in Laurence Senelick's conceptualisation of a funhouse mirror, where:

Elements of masculine, feminine or androgyne observed in life become refracted through the theatrical presentation: if the stage is a mirror, it is a funhouse mirror, magnifying, distorting and ultimately sending out an image in which the shock of recognition is promoted by an alienation effect. (7)

The camera lens seems to create a further distortion in Denis's film, as we are prevented even more from gaining a totalizing vision of the performer and are left unable to strip away the layers of Camille's disguise. The sensation for the viewer is similar to that of being at the cinema and having to sit too close to the screen. The resulting obscurity of this proximity increases the effect of alienation and ensures that the viewer cannot revert too readily to binaristic stereotyping. The camera is so close that it becomes difficult to focus on or 'know' the bodies of observation. Like a photograph blown up to the point of pixilation, the body as mask both reveals and conceals, creating a separation between viewer and object. A further effect of the added cinematic layer is that through the distance it creates between the spectator and the image, it encourages a voyeuristic desire for the 'feminized' body in question. The distance of the cinematic screen together with the closeness of the 'object' being filmed both invites and uninvites the spectator to examine closely the 'defects' and 'imperfect' body of Camille as 'feminine', teasing the viewer with stereotypical ideals of beauty. Unlike other live art forms such as theatre or opera, the absence of presence which cinema evokes ensures a further lack, which in turn triggers desire. The fragments we do glimpse, in our attempt to gain a complete image of Camille, incite a certain desire for more in order to decipher the visible and satisfy our natural compulsion to identify and categorize the image.

The camera's forestalled unveiling of Camille's body, filmed as 'feminine' according to Jousse, mirrors the narrative strip-tease and suspense of the film, which avoids predictable revelations in its fractured structure. In fact Camille eludes complete control as he never fully exposes himself, creating fissures and gaps in our 'knowledge' of him. On the unravelling of textual pleasure, Barthes claims,

L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas 'là où le vêtement bâille'? . . . c'est l'intermittence . . . qui est érotique: celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entreouverte, le gant et la manche); c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore: la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition. (*Le Plaisir* 19)

Is not the most erotic portion of a body 'where the garment gapes'? . . . it is intermittence . . . which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-

necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve): it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. (The Pleasure 9)

Barthes stresses the importance of breaks, ruptures and fading in his discussion of the dialectics of desire. The characteristic of ‘fading’ and faintness recalls media reports of the Paulin Affair, which described the killer as ‘discoloured’ or Baudrillard’s discussion of his ‘disappearance’ from the public eye.¹¹ Although ‘disappeared’, the teasing construct of ‘apparition-disparition’ ensures the resurfacing of the killer, in new and more dangerous forms. Testament to this process of ‘revenge’ is the release of Denis’s film, a fictional ‘sequel’ or reappearance of the real life affair. Within the film itself Camille’s body could be seen to represent the Caribbean myth of the *loup-gawou*, a shape-shifting creature used to connote members of the community who confound the boundaries of categorisation and who in turn emphasizes the interdependence of those same categories. Like the *loup-gawou* he refuses to disappear from the social stage completely. Furthermore it is the fading and evasiveness of both the style and content of the narrative, which constitutes a violent severance or absence of subject for the viewer compelling us even more to the figure of Camille. As Barthes maintains, it is ‘la faille, la coupure, la déflation, le ‘fading’ qui saisit le sujet au coeur de la jouissance’ (*the seam, the cut, the deflation, the ‘dissolve’ which seizes the subject in the midst of bliss ; Le Plaisir 15; The Pleasure 7*).

In her interview with Jousse, Denis confirms, in reference to the club scene, ‘Oui, il y a du désir. C’est une scène où un homme s’offre aux regards, il faut que ce geste soit senti. Je pensais qu’il fallait aussi qu’il y ait un peu de danger, qu’on sente que dans l’offrande du corps, il y a la possibilité des coups’ (*Yes there is desire. It’s a scene in which a man offers himself to be looked at, this gesture had to be felt. I thought that there also had to be an element of danger, that offering the body made physical violence a possibility; 28*). The proximity of the standing audience, their silent fixation with the body offered to them and their abstention from touching that body is indeed striking. As are the looks directed at Camille from various different angles, including from the perspectives of a group who observe from an overhead

¹¹ See the interview with Baudrillard printed in *Autrement* in February 1989, ‘Cool Killers,’ where he discusses the Paulin affair and Reisinger’s analysis of this in ‘Murder and Banality.’

balcony level and a group pressed up against prison-like bars watching the spectacle from below, which add to the menacing atmosphere.

The lyrics and mood of the staged dance to Murat's 'Le lien défait' seem to convey a sense of the detachment and solitude of urban existence and the violence which lurks within all of us:

On se croit d'amour

On se croit féroce enraciné,

Mais revient toujours

Le temps du lien défait.

You think you've come from love

You think you are well-rooted,

But it always comes back

A moment of broken connection.

Camille's disconnection with his roots is highlighted even further by the contrasting dance scene of the birthday party for Camille and Théo's mother. The importance of including the family party in the film is highlighted when Denis talks of Alex Descas and metropolitan life experienced from a Martinican perspective in an interview with Jousse included in the DVD of the film: 'Ils se sont jamais senti français en France, ils ont du mal à exprimer certaines choses quand ils sont pas en famille' (*They have never felt French in France, they find it hard to express certain things when they are not among family*). The scene shows the brothers surrounded by their family and for a moment they seem to relax and forget the worries of the outside world. Lost in an atmosphere of animated familiar warmth, they compete to dance with their mother to the zouk-cadence rhythms of Jeff Joseph's 'Oh Africa'. When asked about identifications with the characters UAG audience member Fabienne (Martinique, 23) cites the party scene: 'J'ai pu reconnaître mes frères, mes cousins, mes amis garçons avec leurs mères respectives. Rapport mère/fils particulier: le fils toujours petit garçon de sa maman 'doudou', enfant câlin et chaleureux avec celle-ci' (*I could recognise my brothers, my cousins, my male friends with their respective mothers. Relationship mother/son in particular: the son always the little boy of his dear*

mother, affectionate and warm with her). When asked about the representation of Martinicans in the film, participant Cécile (Finistère, 34) responded:

Je ne sais pas si la scène de la fête d'anniversaire dans la famille des deux frères est représentative des Martiniquais en France. On y voit en tout cas une petite communauté qui se regroupe pour fêter un anniversaire: sont-ce seulement des membres de la famille des deux frères? [. . .] En tout cas, on écoute du zouk et on boit du ti-punch dans cette fête et c'est peut-être une façon de représenter les Martiniquais comme des immigrés qui n'oublient pas les produits de leur île.

I don't know if the scene of the birthday party with the family of the two brothers is representative of Martinicans in France. All the same in it we see a small community who get together to celebrate a birthday: is it just the members of the family of the two brothers? [. . .] In any case there is zouk playing and ti-punch is drunk at the party and it is perhaps a way of representing Martinicans as immigrants who have not forgotten the produce of their islands.

Cécile's questioning of the family affiliation of those present at the party points to Glissant's 'famille étendue' of Caribbean society and its inclusive flexible structure, which opposes the linearity of a French nuclear model. She also identifies certain cultural clues: they dance to zouk and drink ti-punch. Still Camille arrives with a crate of champagne and there is no rum (the main ingredient for ti-punch) in sight during the scene. Cécile's own associations with Martinique (which along with Guadeloupe is the largest consumer of champagne in the world) intermingle with the diasporic setting filmed here.¹² The predilection for champagne also gestures towards the increased importation of French goods to the Antilles and the decrease in rum imports flowing in the opposite direction towards France since departmentalisation (McCusker 24).

The stylistic masquerade continues in the party setting as the camera remains close to the subjects' bodies, particularly scrutinizing that of Camille. The party

¹² Statistics to support this much heard fact are here taken from an article on the Martinique 1ère website on 17 September 2013: <<http://martinique.la1ere.fr/2013/09/17/les-ravages-de-l-alcool-la-martinique-70233.html>>.

ambiance is undercut however with the menace of a 'lien défait' (Bergstrom 80), a potential for the hidden betrayal of 'one of their own' and the scene is therefore important in highlighting the irony of the mother's naivety regarding the double life of her son. There are clues in the scene that suggest Camille's other existence, such as the presence of his partner and accomplice Raphaël, sat excluded in the corner of the room. If Camille's body masks our view in its opacity, then the body of Raphaël which never leaves his side, as Beugnet suggests, is seen to be 'mirroring Camille's movement like a white shadow' (103).

Another indicator of Camille's hidden side is the portrait he presents to his mother as a birthday gift. The image depicts him wearing the Batman mask, which echoes the narcissism of his character implied in the scene where Daïga, on entering his hotel room, discovers black and white modelling photos of Camille in nude poses wearing similar accessories of mask, gloves and horns. Certain photos are mounted on the wall, while others have been left scattered, covering the floor space (fig. 10). Photography's link with death and the power it yields to indelibly fix its subject in the past pre-empt Camille's tragic path through the film. In Barthes' comparative analysis of photography and theatre, he states, 'Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead' (*Camera*, 32). The way Camille surrounds himself rather narcissistically with these staged images and frozen poses, which, as Barthes suggests, could never be repeated existentially, may be considered a means of self-authentication, an appeal to legitimize his existence within French society. By visually capturing himself, or styling multiple bodies for himself, through the medium of photography, he is therefore asserting and 'working on' his own identity through self-imitation. It may be useful to consider Lacan's theories of the 'mirror stage' here, when a child sees itself for the first time as 'other'. In the application of Lacan to photography, it can be said that the subject of the photograph is forced to consider himself as 'other'. Camille's photographic cross-dressing here signifies a more desirable and socially valuable double of the Self which is not quite the same, thus constituting what Bhabha identifies as 'at once resemblance and menace' (86). This copy of a copy enables the viewer (as discussed in chapter three of this thesis) to examine the subject of the photo differently.

The notion of a doubling is further emphasized in the film's use of mirrors or even the police's dependency on techniques of visualization with the 'portraits-robots' (identikit images), which eventually result in the killer's arrest. The scene where Camille and Raphaël descend the hotel stairs and pause to examine their own image in the reflection in the mirror illustrates the importance of artifice to the characters. The detail of their costume appropriates an aesthetic of a 'dangerous dandy' (or his colonial counterpart, the *Candio*, discussed in chapter one of this thesis), as both are immaculately dressed in black silk, leather, top button fastened and in place of a tie Camille wears a heavy-looking silver cross.



Figure 10: Film still. *J'ai pas sommeil*. Claire Denis, 1994.

This dandified look, reminiscent of the new romantic fashions of the 1980s, creates a stark, menacing silhouette against the swirling baroque wallpaper of the Paris hotel. On viewing the film it seems that the pair are looking into the camera lens, or returning our spectatorial gaze, however once they reach the hallway it becomes clear the look was directed at a mirror. Although the mirror embodies the space of the spectator, it does not fulfil the same role. Instead it is the axis by which a new self is created and exhibited, at once visible for the pleasure of the self and others. The intersection of gazes is crucial to both mirrors and photographs, as Lutz and Collins argue that both create 'a second figure that can be examined more closely

than the original – a double that can also be alienated from the Self – taken away, as a photograph can be to another place’ (207). While Foucault stresses the ability of photography to ‘establish over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them’ (*Discipline* 25), Camille, like Narcissus, is genuinely attracted to the fictional simulation (of a simulation) seen in the reflection or photograph. He seems to willingly subscribe to this power system, welcoming its potential for illusion and thus its ability to fix a momentary *trompe l’oeil* as apparent ‘truth’ or a substitution for the real, even to the point where the reproduction is preferable to the original source.

Foucault’s suggestion of unequal power relations on either side of the lens emphasizes the power of the photographer. Yet Camille’s incessant need for visibility and the control of his own image demonstrates the potential performative power of the subject. The Creole dandy, or *Candio*, of colonial Saint-Domingue, mentioned above and discussed in chapter one, re-emerges in Denis’s film through Camille’s desire to see and be seen and the techniques of self-fashioning involved in his postcolonial project. Yet whether Camille’s passive ‘sleepwalking’ can be interpreted as a conscious tactic of anti-colonial mimicry and resistance is questionable. This proffering of himself as object, reiterated most notably in the transvestite dance scene, illustrates the character’s desire for the gaze of others, or rather a desire in particular for the white gaze. As an effect of alienation, or an internalisation of the dominant conceptualization of French culture, Camille’s performance echoes Fanon’s theories of the neurosis of the black man’s experience in the métropole, whose self-determination is dependent on continual confrontations and interactions with white culture. ‘Quand il arrive au nègre de regarder le Blanc farouchement, le Blanc lui dit: ‘Mon frère, il n’y a pas de différence entre nous.’ Pourtant le nègre sait qu’il y a une différence. Il la souhaite’ (*When it comes the time for the negro to look fiercely at the White man, the White man says to him ‘Brother, there is no difference between us.’ However the negro knows that there is a difference. He wants it*; 179). Camille’s contradictory desire to be ‘seen’ seems to reinforce established Manichaeian oppositions of black/white, which render the white man invisible; by contrast the black man is subject to what Fanon refers to as constant visibility and surveillance. Yet it is Camille’s identification and integration with his environment and thus with white culture that grants him the freedom and

agency to perform with ease around the streets of Paris. This paradoxical convergence of visibility and invisibility is examined by Dobie, who suggests that ultimately it is Camille's hyper-visibility as a transvestite of colour that diverts attention away from his hidden life as a serial killer and allows him to move freely and without arousing suspicion (175). *J'ai pas sommeil* therefore does not allow the viewer the privileged and customary gaze toward the Other and hinders the search for a facile visual identification of the killer in an era where the power of the visual supersedes that of words.

The killer's highly individualist, narcissistic project seems in opposition to the alliance of his Antillean family shown later in the film. It could be argued therefore that Camille is suspicious of the communalism of his Creole culture and the dangers it represents in metropolitan life. As if highlighting this resistance, Daïga reaches through the array of professional studio shots, preferring to examine the few faded photos of Camille's mother shot in front of the family *case* in Martinique, which lie in contrast to these images, and are similar to the photos we see decorating the family home in the scene of the mother's birthday. Denis deliberately frames Camille as a 'welcome stranger' in contrast to the figure of Daïga, a 'disobedient visitor', lured to Paris by an empty promise of work and who is shown to speak barely a word of French. Daïga's path seems to run parallel to that of Camille in the film. Both characters are alienated, and although Daïga's skin colour does not constitute an immediate marker of difference, like Camille she experiences pressure to use appearance as a means to escape her situation. Daïga's aunt Ira and Ninon, the hotel owner, encourage her to use her beauty for social mobility. Ira comments, 'La beauté ça sert, quand on ne sait rien faire' (*Beauty is useful, when you don't know how to do anything else*). Yet, despite the normative pressures of French society and attempts made by her aunt to integrate her at least into the Russian community in Paris, Daïga refuses to conform. She shows little effort to learn the language, responding instead in Lithuanian and continues to drive around in her car with Lithuanian license plates.

Daïga's defiance echoes that of Théo, who, unlike Camille, is shown to maintain strong connections to his cultural roots. At the beginning of the film Camille asks, 'Tu pars toujours à la Martinique? Y'a rien là bas' (*Are you still leaving for Martinique? There's nothing there*), thus affirming his own assimilation

into French society. As a jazz musician, Théo's music is infused with Creole influences and at the end of the film he performs with the Martinican artist Kali and his group. Camille's presence at the concert, together with the sentiment of Kali's song 'Racines', connects both brothers to each other, highlighting their cultural roots. As Théo's gaze searches for his younger brother in the crowd, we are reminded of the protective maternal role he plays throughout the film, as Kali sings in Creole: 'Gadé timanmay ka mò. Nou ka fè wol pa wè yo' (*Look at these children who are dying. We pretend not to see them.*)

The invisibility of Camille is evoked in the words and as we see in the next minute, as Théo's eyes scan the audience, through his withdrawal into the Paris night. Unlike Camille, Théo is determined to return to Martinique with his son, much to his wife Mona's disapproval. When asked by Mona's mother how he will 'survive', he responds with irony, imitating the complacent and lasting exoticism of colonial images of the island:

Le matin je prends ma pirogue pour aller à la pêche. Mona pilera le manioc pour faire me bouffer. Elle s'épuise à avoir de l'eau dans la ravine. Il y a une source à une kilomètre. Vous voyez, on aura tout à porter à la main, la case en bambous, les bananiers, l'avocatier... Des fringues? Pour quoi faire? Là-bas on vit à poil toute la journée. Du fric? C'est pas la peine, je ferai du troc. C'est le paradis non?

In the morning I'll take my canoe to go fishing, Mona will pound manioc for my lunch. She'll wear herself out fetching water from the river, one kilometre from the house. It's all there for the taking, the bamboo hut, bananas, avocados... Clothes? Why bother? You live nude all day there. Money? No need. I'll barter. It's paradise.

Audience responses to this scene in Martinique underscore my argument that opinions of a film may not be securely aligned with the director's intention. When asked about the representation of Martinicans in general in the film, Dhany (Martinique, 58) considered it to be, 'ridicule de méconnaissance: le summum, le frère du héros parle de sa pirogue, de sa case en bambou, de vivre tous nus comme tout le monde là bas . . . et il use de mots du créole guadeloupéen, bitin au lieu du Martiniquais bagay' (*ridiculously ignorant: the high points, the brother talks about*

his canoe, his bamboo hut, living completely naked like everyone over there . . . and he uses words in Guadeloupean Creole, bitin (thing) instead of the Martinican bagay). Dhany's failure to detect Théo's irony suggests the continued pervasiveness of racist colonial stereotypes of 'backwardness,' and specifically, misrepresentations of black people in cinema. Denis's hyperbolic treatment of stereotypes is further accentuated by Mona's mother, who in contrast to Théo, is styled as a futuristic cyborg in this scene, in her uniform of a metallic blouse and sharply bobbed hair. The film's mimicry of images of a backward, static Martinique, as a reappropriative technique to 'decline the stereotype' risks drawing attention to, and in turn reinforcing, the continued domination of this narrative. Yet this tactic involves what Mireille Rosello among others, highlights, as 'ironic repetitions, carefully framed quotations [and] distortions and puns' as 'a way of depriving [the stereotype] of its harmful potential by highlighting its very nature' (11).

Dhany's criticism also reveals a desire for 'authentic' representations of Martinique and an obsession with origins and essences that the underlying opacity of Denis's film does not satisfy.¹³ When questioned about the fact that *J'ai pas sommeil* was not diffused in cinemas in Martinique on its release, one audience respondent puts it simply, 'Ce type de film passe mal en général ici: un travesti assassin de vieilles dames? C'est trop d'un seul coup. Et sa famille qui vit ici?' (*This type of film doesn't go down well here: a transvestite murderer of old ladies? It's all too much. And what about his family who live here?*; Sonia, Martinique, adult). This response emphasizes the proximity and impact of the real life affair as the basis for the film, a story that a Martinican public had read about in the 1980s. Whilst many Martinicans remember reports of the real-life affair in the French press in the mid-1980s, few have seen Denis's film. In an article published in the newspaper *France Antilles* following the film's nomination at Cannes in 1994, Alex Descas, who plays the role of the killer's brother in the film, insists,

Il n'y a aucune raison que la communauté le juge de manière négative.

Aucune raison. Le regard que Claire porte sur les deux personnages antillais qui tiennent les deux rôles principaux, Camille et Théo, est humain. Ici, il n'y

¹³ The box-office success of Lucien Jean-Baptiste's second film, *30° couleur* (2012), with its classic 'negwopolitain' or returnee narrative, underlines the persistent preference of French Caribbean audiences for stories of 'retour au pays' as opposed to tales of errance.

a pas des vrais ou des faux semblants. Cela correspond à la réalité de ce qui nous entoure quotidiennement. (Malet 8)¹⁴

There is no reason for the community to judge it negatively. No reason at all. Claire's vision of the two Antillean characters, in the two lead roles, Camille and Théo, is human. There is no imitation or deception here. It corresponds to the reality of what surrounds us on a daily basis.

Denis's film is therefore necessarily conscious of the historicity of cinematic representation and issues of visibility, analysed by Fanon with regard to racial politics:

Au Noir on demande d'être bon négro; ceci posé, le reste vient tout seul. 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. Et naturellement, de même qu'un Juif qui dépense de l'argent sans compter est suspect, le Noir qui cite Montesquieu doit être surveillé. (*Peau noire* 27)

*The black man is supposed to be a good negro; once this has been laid down, the rest follows of itself. To make him talk pidgin is to fasten him to the effigy of him, to snare him, to imprison him, the eternal victim of an essence, of an appearance for which he is not responsible. And naturally just as a Jew who spends money without thinking about it is suspect, a black man who quotes Montesquieu had better be watched. (*Black Skin* 35)*

Denis's film first seems to identify these colonial 'essences of appearance' and play up to them, demonstrating the grammar deployed in sustaining their power as markers of difference. Always shown dressed up to the hilt, Camille's economic situation confounds the viewer; he is unable to pay his rent and exchanges sums of money throughout the film. This suggestion of prostitution evokes Fanon's stereotype of the Martinican who may become homosexual once in Europe and who

¹⁴ Accessed in the Archives départementales in Martinique.

is ‘toujours passif.’ He says of such men, ‘Ce n’était point-là homosexualité névrotique, c’était pour eux un expédient comme pour d’autres celui de souteneur’ (*It was not at all a neurotic homosexuality; for them, just as for others, it was a means to support oneself*; 146). Denis’s parallel with Fanon’s socio-economic homosexual repeats, magnifies and plays up to this stereotype. The character of Camille seems to be asking provocatively, ‘how do you want me?’ as if posing for a photo shoot and then performing to (and against) the perceived expectation.¹⁵ Thus rather than aiming to simplistically reverse the dominant regimes of representation in the disillusioned hope that greater visibility of the once under-represented can lead to greater political power, Denis opts instead to push representational ‘truths’ to their extreme limits in order to reveal the cultural forces at work in the maintenance and perpetuation of cultural stereotypes.¹⁶

In deconstructing these images and dismantling viewer assumptions Denis seeks to denounce their claims to legitimacy and authenticity. The revelation of their illusory nature ensures representation that avoids simplification and reductionism. Binary structures based on active/masculine/white in direct opposition to passive/feminine/black are not just simply dissolved, but consciously performed and transformed in order to test their limitation, constituting, as Denis sees it, an important challenge to ‘ce que doivent être les personnages noirs au cinéma selon les schémas du “politiquement correct”’ (*how black characters are portrayed in cinema according to the norms of what is considered ‘politically correct’*; Interview 28). Colonial representations and stereotypes of male effeminacy; what audience respondent, Fabienne, identifies as ‘une sorte de violence “nègre”’ and moral inhumanity, that were once used to define the Other’s inferiority, are not circumnavigated but intensified by Denis. Such a treatment of stereotypes, as my audience study has shown, is not always well received by Caribbean audiences. Furthermore, when Denis released her 1990 film *S’en fout la mort* (No Fear, No Die) in the U.S., she received criticism from African American audiences for presenting

¹⁵ *How do you want me?* is a reference to a series of staged photographs by Guyanese artist Hew Locke. Locke recreates stereotypical characters from colonial representation, including witch doctors, corrupt African kings and army generals, and dressing himself up in their associated garb, questions the roles adopted in order to participate fully in society. The work also addresses notions of authenticity and violence. For images and further discussion see: <<http://www.hewlocke.net/hdywm.html>>.

¹⁶ Peggy Phelan challenges this visibility/power relation in the introduction to her book *Unmarked*.

weak and humiliating images of blackness, yet she maintains that this was for her ‘la chose la plus proche de Frantz Fanon’ (*the closest thing to Frantz Fanon; Interview* 28).¹⁷

Masking and Unmasking

In *J'ai pas sommeil* the errance of Théo and Daïga, their refusal to integrate and their lack of compliance within the prevailing system, ultimately compels them to pack their bags and leave the city. Camille's identification with the role he clothes himself in, forces him on the other hand to reject his cultural heritage in his desire to integrate into French society, which constitutes another form of errance for Martinican audiences. This split disidentification further emphasizes the sense that he is a ‘stranger in our midst.’ In the warmth of the scene of his mother's birthday celebration it is difficult to perceive him other than as a generous and loving son. As a result of Camille's crimes, however, the family are suddenly thrust into the glare of the public eye and experience hypervisibility. After his arrest at the end of the film Camille's mother expresses her horror and dismay at how such acts could have been committed by her beloved son, speaking to Camille in Creole. However Camille responds detachedly in French, merely asking to be brought his ‘effets’ (belongings).

As we desperately try to read Camille, it becomes apparent that the mask and what lies beneath are not distinguishable. Cynthia Marker conveys the point that:

The ultimate implication of the thematic and stylistic masquerade in *J'ai pas sommeil* is that there is no possible separation of the mask and the identity the disguise conceals. There is, therefore, as the ‘mise en scène’ attests, no distinguishable boundaries between inside and outside with regard to identities the film imagines. (147)

¹⁷ *S'en fout la mort*'s themes of superstition, sacrifice and the illegal sport of cock-fighting could be perceived by some as making exoticising colonial associations between black culture and sorcery, magic and ‘voodoo’ particularly when compared with the popularity of other films that preceded *J'ai pas sommeil*, including Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* (1992) and Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), both featuring Denzel Washington in a strong black male role. Such films were billed as ‘films à voir’ according to film reviews consulted in the Archives départementales in Martinique: *France-Antilles* 7, 9, 10 and 16 August 1993.

The effect of Camille's masquerade is its ability to complicate a facile labelling of his identity and thus blur the boundaries between inside and outside. In her depiction of the monstrosity of Camille's character, Denis seems to be examining a wider, collective social malaise in the vein of Baudrillard when he claims that the killers 'ne sont pas des héros, mais des exposants du système' (*are not heroes, but exponents of the system*; 'Cool Killers' 144). When Daïga and Camille meet in the café at the end of the film there seems to be a momentary exchange of human solidarity and silent understanding between the two characters. However this moment is subsequently undercut when, in the next sequence, we see Daïga raiding Camille's hotel room for money. The warmth of their encounter is immediately undercut by the inherent monstrosity of human nature.

When questioned about lasting images of the characters, audience respondent Josiane (Martinique, 23) explained that:

A la fin du film, je ne pouvais toujours pas lui mettre cette étiquette de 'monstre'. Ses changements de "masques" se font sans transition, à certains égards cela est choquant, mais à d'autres, je le trouve fascinant. Et cette capacité à changer de rôle sans changer d'expressions, c'est ce qui trouble, ce qui fait peur.

At the end of the film, I still couldn't give him this label of 'monster'. His changing of masks is done without transition, in some respects it is shocking, but in other ways I find it fascinating. And this ability to change roles without changing expressions, that is what is disturbing, what makes it scary.

The spectator is at no point in the unravelling of the *fait divers* allowed the privilege of an 'unmasking' of this multi-layered character. The web of strands that make up Denis's film ensure our continued non understanding. Denis's approach to filming otherness in the metropolitan centre of Paris troubles a straightforward inside/outside, subject/object power dichotomy by exposing the workings of such a binary logic. This challenge to 'knowable otherness' counters the centrality of

French universality and constitutes what Glissant termed ‘la trame sans cesse’ (*the ever-growing network*; *Le discours* 245; *Caribbean* 144). In favouring expansion over neat binarisms, Denis ruptures the linearity and purity of genealogy and the notion of essences that legitimized the colonial project.

The murders themselves are not especially calculated or deliberately subversive but rather imbued with a sense of resignation and passive apathy. This recalls Baudrillard who emphasizes the ‘banalité absolue’ of the modern *fait divers*: ‘Ça n’est plus spectaculaire au sens où il n’y a plus de scène ni de scénographie’ (*It’s no more spectacular in the sense that there is no longer scene nor scenography*; ‘Cool Killers’ 143). According to Denis, crimes such as Camille’s ‘ne peuvent venir que d’une forme de passivité, une acceptation presque morbide de l’état social où l’on est . . . C’est pour ça que je parle de douceur, c’est une forme de soumission’ (*can only come from a certain type of passivity, an almost morbid acceptance of one’s social condition . . . That is why I talk about gentleness, it’s a form of submission*; 28). Just as in the many Vodou seremoni documented by Lescot, Magloire, Gordon and Deren, and analysed in chapters two and three of this thesis, the masks that Camille ‘puts on’ function as tools with which to critique society, whilst the viewer learns what he is capable of doing whilst under their possession. Camille’s body is therefore stripped of agency, a passive vessel, with the potential to play a multitude of roles. Like the *Candio Gede* of Vodou culture who recombines incongruent elements in his shifting and composite ‘guises,’ it is Camille’s performance as ‘divine horseman’ at the crossroads of these identities that assigns him the threatening role of the ‘monster’ in French society. The willingness with which he accepts his defeat at the end of the film illustrates that Camille is simply caught up in a wider social system, as his final comment illustrates, ‘Je suis un type facile. Personne a envie d’aller mal. C’est les choses qui déconnent’ (*I am an easy-going guy. Nobody wants to go astray. Things get messed up*).

The real-life Paulin was described to me by his family in Martinique as ‘hexagonale’ and in the film we see Camille’s willingness to participate fully in French society. Denis shows the character’s internalisation of French culture, but she also reveals how he resists classification of his identity whilst positioned on the inside (or at least never fully on the margins). Camille embodies the metaphoric transvestism of Martinique. On the one hand he seems to fully subscribe to French

assimilation, yet on the other he uses transvestism to create an illusion of opacity. In doing so he is paradoxically neither fully in opposition to, nor fully able to identify completely with, Frenchness. The ambivalence of his Creole cross-dressing recalls Kamau Brathwaite's conceptualisation of early creolisation in Jamaica:

“Invisible”, anxious to be “seen” by their masters, the elite blacks and the mass of free coloureds conceived of visibility through the lenses of their master's already uncertain vision, as a form of “greyness” – an imitation of an imitation. (*The Development* 22)

Formal and narrative techniques of creolisation and opacity succeed in masking any ‘truth’ about Camille, so that Denis is able to emphasize the imitative, constructed nature of difference. The film itself can be read in terms of Baudrillard's obsession with the reappearance of the monster, as invigorated through new configurations, new desires and fears: ‘le fantôme des exclus commence de hanter nos sociétés conventionnelles’ (*the ghost of the excluded starts to haunt our conventional societies; Le crime* 203). *J'ai pas sommeil* is a cross-dresser that plays at re-veiling and revealing the inherited colonial ‘category crises’ of its excluded protagonists. Its transvestism blurs symmetries of inside/outside, feminine/masculine, light/dark and margin/centre and in doing so disrupts the all-seeing, all-knowing transparency of the post/colonial gaze.

CONCLUSION: THE REGARDED SELF

Having begun this dissertation with Frantz Fanon, I wish to return to his words in my concluding remarks through the visual work of artist Lyle Ashton Harris, whose black and white photographic print, *In the world through which I travel I am endlessly creating myself* (1990), encapsulates several elements of my overarching argument. As an African-American artist, Harris is interested in the fragmented memories and conditions born of New World plantation economies and slave societies that connect his own people's experience with that of African diasporic communities across the Americas. Such conditions necessitated acts of resistance using the body as a surface to repossess and remaster the self. The aforementioned image depicts an ambiguously gendered solo figure in the distance, walking along the middle of a winding mountain road. The quotation from Fanon from which the picture takes its title is loosely handwritten at the bottom edge of the print along with his name. The depth of the shot suggests a long journey and the blurry figure walking in the middle of the road evokes a mobility of self, born out of the conditions of forced and voluntary global migration that refuses to be rooted in any singular way.

Harris, described as a 'dandy artist' by Monica Miller (247), is perhaps better known for his series of self- and family portraits, which reassemble images of black identities from the past and present, merging them with his own self-styled subjectivities. In 1994 he exhibited 'The Good Life' at the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York, which included a portrait of himself dressed as Haitian revolutionary leader, Toussaint Louverture, clad in a sharp military jacket with epaulettes and gold buttons and staring defiantly at the camera whilst seated on an elaborate gold throne. The image echoes the collective memory of contemporary Haitian cultural expression: the self-conscious military display and parade of the Vodou rara bandleaders or even *les invisibles* who wear Napoleonic garb to pronounce leadership and mastery of the ability to 'perform the enemy'. In Haiti these performances of memory reconjure and externalize on a regular basis the revolutionary military leaders, referred to by Napoleon Bonaparte himself as 'Africains dorés' (*gilded Africans*; Dubois and Garrigus 175-6), who defeated Bonaparte's French troupes and

dared to have pretensions to the same uniform and the same rights as citizens in France. As André has noted, ‘Quand Toussaint Louverture en Haïti, ou Delgrès en Guadeloupe, parlent d’esclavage, c’est avec les mêmes mots que Rousseau ou Marat. Il y a peu, on pouvait lire cette inscription sur les murs de Pointe-à-Pitre : « La résistance à l’oppression est un droit naturel. »’ (When Toussaint Louverture in Haiti, or Delgrès in Guadeloupe, speaks of slavery, it is with the same words as Rousseau or Marat. Not long ago the following inscription could be read on the walls of Pointe-à-Pitre: “Resistance to oppression is a natural right;” 256) Clothing too became an important political language of the eighteenth century in the French Caribbean islands, and so when Toussaint spoke of freedom, his dress and demeanour mirrored that of French military leaders. This dialogic process on the one hand reinscribed Republican ideals as origin yet, on the other hand, rendered visible and thus symbolized the ‘L’ouverture’ (‘opening’) of the rigid seams of the enemy within the constraints of the expressive form.

In Bakhtinian terms, during this emancipation period in the French Caribbean, formerly enslaved peoples of African descent demanded the ‘right to be “other” in this world’ or, at least, the right to be other than what they had never consented to be in the first place (*The Dialogic* 159). This entanglement and unravelling of an other-self included the (re)construction and (re)assignment of gender identity, which was also intimately imbricated in revolutionary claims to Universal rights. In this ongoing story, the post-emancipation period invoked a ‘fear that blacks may never master hegemonic gender in the way that whites once mastered blacks’ (Tinsley 179) and masculine gender ideals, in particular, became the mirror image of those advocated by the colonizer. Furthermore, as I have discussed in chapter two of this thesis, in post-revolutionary Haiti the renegotiation of manhood had a military bearing. Newly made citizens were represented as newly made soldiers. Military dress was therefore not only an important means of claiming political agency, but also of performing manliness, signifying the emergence of new masculinities and national identities.

Emblazoned on Haitian banknotes today, Toussaint, Dessalines and even Sanite Belair, the young woman who adorns the ten Gourdes note with a determined expression on her face, share a stock uniform: full military regalia, a Napoleonic bicorne hat and a hooped earring, a detail famously used to represent Toussaint

Louverture in early nineteenth century lithographs of the slave leader.¹ The role of the (French and Spanish) military uniforms as performative strategy, worn by both male and female insurgents, should not be underestimated. Perceptions of this military garb, with its associations of pomp and parade, for both the enslaved and colonizer, contributed significantly to the slave uprising and visibly disrupted the colonial laws, examined in chapter one, that denied the performance of both whiteness and blackness. One political function of cross-dressing in pre-revolutionary Haiti was to provide a means to pass unnoticed, proving particularly useful for enslaved persons who chose to cross or escape the boundaries of the plantation system (*marronaj*). Colonial newspaper archives, such as those of the *Affiches Américaines*, offer textual evidence in the form of advertisements seeking to track down ‘passing’ *marrons*, and suggest that this was common practice in Creole society. Furthermore, as we have seen, even highly mediated archival documentation – plantation records, the notes of Moreau de Saint-Méry and colonial periodicals – give some indication of how enslaved populations were seen and in turn reveal how stereotypes were constructed. When read together with fictional accounts, such documents can provide new perspectives on the importance of the deviance of *marronaj* and the looting of plantations to provide the props necessary for the aforementioned self-conscious and self-fashioned displays. This interplay (and tension) between history and fiction is all the more important in a Caribbean context where, as Trouillot (1992) has demonstrated History has been subject to silencing and falsification. The concerns these mimetic dress acts invoked for the colonizer, are elucidated in the texts of colonial commentators such as Moreau de Saint-Méry, discussed in chapter one of this thesis. As Michael Bristol argues, ‘mimicry or ‘seeming-to-be-other’ is inadmissible because it is socially debased, and because it confuses the categories of identity and difference’ (21). Appearances and realities were broken down and no longer distinguishable, rendering the visuality of the racial lines used to legitimize colonisation and the slave trade arbitrary. The knowledge the eye assumes in Western traditions is therefore denied.

¹ For more on the varied interpretations and distribution of images of Toussaint Louverture, see Sylvain ‘Is this the Authentic Face’ 2011; and Forsdick ‘Situating Haiti’ 2007. Also see in connection to Harris’s artistic representation African-American artist Jacob Lawrence’s re-working of French lithographer, Nicolas Eustache Maurin’s controversial depiction of Toussaint in his *Toussaint Louverture* series (1938).

Much of Harris's work is influenced by Fanon's writing, particularly his *Peau noire, masques blancs*. For Harris, Fanon's 'fierce decolonization of interior spaces provides an elasticity, a return to the self as a site of interrogation' (Miller 246). Fanon's illumination of the techniques of power underpinning the gaze as well as the legacies of colonial interiorisation has provided a prism through which to discuss modern Caribbean expressions and crossings of gender and racial binaries in this thesis. In chapter four, 'Spectators *en travesti*', we have seen how the act of watching, as both a collective and individual experience, can constitute an incursion or crossover into an alternative realm and allow a broader scope for mobile viewing positions and gender identification. In the following chapter, 'Dressed to Kill: Opacity and Masquerade in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil*,' the film itself, with all its visual power mechanisms, is identified as a cross-dresser that disrupts a Eurocentric, totalizing gaze. The tensions between the film, the performance and the camera echo earlier discussions of the technologies of these overtly Western visual codes of mediation.

Cross-dressing, using dress and other accoutrements which have visually shaped and come to represent the black body through history, is an important tool in Harris's own interrogation of identity. It is hardly surprising then that Fanon's theorisation of the importance of visibility and visuality in constructing and maintaining difference along colonial lines of race, gender and desire has informed the work of this photographic artist. Harris, like Camille in Claire Denis's *J'ai pas sommeil* or the family of *vodwizan* depicted in Lescot and Magloire's *Des hommes*, uses mirrors to create fluid self-portraits, rather than merely as a means of fixing a display, or as an instrument of narcissism. The mirror also offers an almost palpable body which can be transformed and, most importantly, controlled by the subject. Links between clothing and spirituality are tightly thread through this thesis, from the clothing worn as protection against malevolent forces in Martinique and Guadeloupe, discussed in chapter four, to the regalia of rara band members in Haiti, examined in chapter three, honouring a spiritual alliance between the indigenous Taino and African slaves (Beauvoir-Dominique, 'Underground Realms' 157). Metallic cloth, mirrors and sequins are often used in ritual garments and textiles in Haiti to visually render the powers and attributes of each spirit. The reflective quality and brilliance of these materials is thought to attract and call the ancestral spirits to

descend, what Robert Farris Thompson refers to as the ‘flash of the spirit’ (184). The dotting of their points as Thompson has suggested, acts, according to Congo belief, to mediate secrets and spiritual power (186). The distortion of mirrored symmetry and categories of person also allows for an asymmetry of power configurations.

The literal mirror or the camera, together with the symbolic mirror that is Vodou or carnival, offers for its performers a cathartic, alternative vision. Film like the technology of spirit possession in Haitian Vodou allows for the presentation of a second existence or reality. As explored in chapter three, the subjects in front of an ethnographic film lens are possessed, unable to see themselves exactly as the filmmaker sees them. Yet this does not rule out potential to resist filmic possession: one strategy being to cross-dress and modify one’s body in order to infiltrate ‘other’ spaces or undermine established borders. The effect of a carnivalesque performance has been described in this thesis using Benítez-Rojo’s metaphor, as a ‘travesty mirror’, reflecting, dissimulating and refracting representations of the self. Clothed as if in mirrored costume that disperses a web of overlapping shards of gender, racial and social signifiers, the actor plays with this sign system in the (post)colonial space to shift Western boundaries of representation. As Harris states, ‘I see the mirror not only as a site of trauma and death – Narcissus falling in to drown – but as a space for rigorous meditation, cleansing and recuperation’ (Miller 247). Rituals of dressing up, down and across rigid social boundaries, inherited from French colonial discursive regimes, offer the possibility for personal and collective social healing and transformation. Stuart Hall noted the importance of the styling of black bodies as ‘canvases of representation’ (‘What is this “Black”’ 109) and for enslaved populations, stripped of all material goods in their enforced transportation to the Americas, the body became one of the only means left with which to exercise any measure of social agency. The disavowed, invisible citizens of the Caribbean, ‘the relics and scraps of bodies bought, bartered, and sold as in cattle, coins, parcels of land, or pieces of furniture,’ as Colin Dayan suggests, ‘tak[e] vengeance as *lougawou* or vampires, *soucriants* or suckers, shape-shifters known to shed skin and suck blood’ (*The Law* 130). It is against the imperial laws and codes of conduct controlling bodies, dress and mobility in the colonial space discussed in the first chapter, that I have then revealed the modern day skin-shedders and shape-shifters who gain visibility in the works examined here by both Caribbean and non-

Caribbean performance and film makers. These originators and creators, both behind and in front of the camera, have found ways to become the ‘authors’ within ‘authority’ (Bristol 22), and their endeavours are no longer written off as mere emulation of the colonizer but are understood as complex articulations of creolised local and global identities, performances of memory and resistance. These kaleidoscopic, mirrored identities recall Walcott’s broken vase whose *rasanblaj* (reassembled parts) is the ‘care and pain of the Antilles’, restoring the memories and the fragments shipwrecked during the passage from *Ginen* (*The Antilles* 9).

The performances and images produced by Caribbean subjects (both at ‘home’ and in metropolitan France), discussed in the preceding chapters, symbolize the formation of self- and group subjectivities as resistance to hegemonic social binaries. In questioning to what extent these varied and embodied expressions of, and between, masculinity and femininity challenge the historical stereotypes of gender, race and social class that have been consolidated as ‘origin’ and that continue to shape Caribbean society today, this thesis has revealed the complexities and crossings that take place in order to gain agency in-between the seams of slavery and its afterlives. This repertoire of acts sometimes even forges communities that function as support systems (such as in Vodou), challenging the continued idealisation of Eurocentric familial arrangements. While there may be a danger in over-romanticising the Creole specificity of these communities and the invisible performances they enable, the everyday experiences of non-gender conforming Antilleans are much more complicated and contingent, as my conversations with different interlocutors has highlighted.

Caribbean and Black Atlantic societies, connected and haunted by what Glissant calls a *piste sous-marine*, or the submerged routes of drowned bodies, that link *l’île de Gorée* with *les îles antillais* and beyond, share a collective experience of trauma, humiliation and enslavement. The focus of this thesis on French Caribbean society has revealed the particularity and thus importance given to the regard of the collective in this context. Perhaps even more so than in the Anglophone Caribbean, this observation system and its power mechanisms are more markedly pronounced in Martinique and Guadeloupe since, as I have discussed in chapter two, these societies still look towards France ironically as both liberator from slavery (*le bon père blanc*) and maternal/paternal nurturer (*la mère-patrie*). France symbolizes the paternalism

of the white plantation master who was (and remains), according to Fanon (*Peau noire* 42), a figure of authority and desire for both the enslaved mother and the black male, excluded from both paternity and masculinity during slavery. The humiliation of slavery caused not only hostility towards the white male coloniser but also a desire on the black male colonised's part to imitate him and to 'possess' what he has, including the women of the household. In *Les Damnés de la Terre*, written several years after *Peau noire masques blancs* in 1961, Fanon describes this contradictory relationship: 'le colonisé se trouve dans un état de tension permanente. Le monde du colon est un monde hostile, mais en même temps c'est un monde qui fait envie. Nous avons vu que le colonisé rêve toujours de s'installer à la place du colon. Non pas de devenir un colon, mais de se substituer au colon' (*the colonised is in a permanent state of tension. The world of the coloniser is a hostile world, but at the same time it is a desirable world. We have seen that the colonised dreams always of putting himself in the place of the coloniser. Not to become the coloniser, but to substitute the coloniser*; 83) The strategies and aesthetics proposed here, including adopting Napoleonic-style military dress or even the cross-gender dressing explored in chapter one of this thesis, can be explained in terms of the psychological problems and fragmented identities resulting from slavery, evoked by Fanon in both *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les Damnés de la terre*. What I have shown in this thesis is that, in a colonial context, cross-dressing may be more complex than straightforward self-othering or a desire to 'become' one's other. Dressing across and in between colonially inscribed boundaries is not about a desire for whiteness per se, or a desire for femininity or an elevated social status, but rather constitutes a self-conscious re-negotiation of the fixity of historic and economic categories, revealing the instability of colonially inherited constructions of race, class and gender.²

² Such performances are comparable to the skin bleaching undertaken by dons in contemporary Jamaican society, the purpose of which was originally to mask identity in order to evade surveillance by the police. The evolution of this practice is documented in the collages of Jamaican artist Ebony G Patterson, which depict how more recently bleaching has been recuperated as a fashion statement by young downtown Kingstonians. For more on the practice of skin bleaching in the context of Jamaican dancehall, see Donna Hope ('From Browning'), Petrine Archer ('Accessories'), and Carolyn Cooper (*Sound Clash*, 135-139). Artist Ebony G. Patterson's perspective on the phenomenon of bleaching is provided in Mel Coke's article of 8 August 2010 for *The Jamaican Gleaner* entitled 'Bleaching gangstas? Artist interrogates dancehall's expressions of masculinity': <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100808/arts/arts1.html>>. See also Annie Paul's blog post on the Jamaican gangster Christopher 'Dudus' Coke, who was found clad in women's attire when finally hunted down and arrested by the police in 2010. The post from 25 June 2010, published on Paul's *Active Voice* blog is entitled 'Crying out for Peace in Jamaica: The Extradition of Christopher 'Dudus' Coke' and

France's authoritative and protective gaze in return, with its obsession with Enlightenment transparency, confirms that the myth of its status as *mère-patrie* is not just a forgotten legacy of slavery, but a defining factor in how bodies, in particular black male bodies, continue to be imaged, performed and viewed in French Caribbean society today. Masculinity as a performance in the Butlerian sense is burdened with the weight of former exclusions in the plantation societies of the Caribbean. The persistent peripheral role of the black man in French Caribbean society must therefore not only be understood in terms of French colonialism and slavery but also contemporary neo-colonial social structures that maintain gendered and racial power relations between France and its former colonies.

The overseeing eye of the collective in French Caribbean society ensures that each individual is observed and regarded and thus must master a masquerade of hegemonic gender and sexual configurations in order to 'pass' unmarked within this system of observation. Yet as I have shown in my investigation of cross-dressing and cross-gendered individuals and communities in French Caribbean culture, 'passing' does not always equate to passivity and there may be agency to be found within the interstices of such performances. Tactics of creolisation, for instance, and the dialogic narratives they form, not only blur the demarcated relationship between performer and spectator, but also enable opportunities to rearrange audience perceptions and expectations. To this end, individuals who do not deny the specificity of Antillean culture but who are also willing to draw on French universalist principles for particular outcomes and remain open to global and 'translocal' influences, seek to perform and potentially *transform* gender identity in truly syncretic Creole contexts.

While Glissant emphasizes the specificity of French Caribbean gender politics, Glissant's theories on *créolisation* (*Poétique de la relation*, 103) can be applied to Caribbean gender identities in order to think through their construction and articulation in terms of wider global relations. *Créolisation* for him does not mean a one-size-fits all universality or totality and he compares it to 'la "créolité"', which 'dans son principe, régresserait vers des négritudes, des francités, des latinités, toutes généralisantes – plus ou moins innocemment' (*essentially regresses towards*

can be accessed at: <<http://anniepaul.net/2010/06/25/crying-out-for-peace-in-jamaica-the-extradition-of-christopher-%E2%80%98dudus%E2%80%99-coke/>>.

négritudes, Frenchness, latinity, all generalizing – more or less innocently; 103).

The rhizomatic nodes of *créolisation*, the strength in relations and the points where relations are almost but not quite forged are central to Claire Denis's film *J'ai pas sommeil*, discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. The film depicts a Caribbean (a composite callaloo of identities) in a Paris full of noise and opacity, yet with very little dialogue between the characters. The colonial visual economy, central to underpinning the colonial project and shown by Fanon to be crucial to how black subjects have been forced to view themselves through the eyes of others, is unpinned through the film itself, which threatens to loosen the authority of the viewer's grasp on the subjects represented.

Many readers of Fanon take his masculinist perspective to sustain the discourse of Martinique and other Caribbean islands as homophobic and oppressively patriarchal. Yet projects such as those undertaken by artists like Harris, or even scholarly projects such as this thesis, have used the very theories of Fanon on how the black body has been imaged historically in order to challenge post-slavery patriarchy, French universalism and the homophobic claims of *Peau noire, masques blancs*.³ This process constitutes for Harris an act of self-possession, as viewers are forced to look through the lens opaquely and are thus not always all-perceiving nor all-possessing when they do look. As Glissant asserts, 'au fond du miroir il y a maintenant de l'opacité' (*at the bottom of the mirror there is now opacity; Poétique* 125), which threatens to loosen the scaffolding of the West's representational authority. In his fabrications and refashionings of self through dress, Harris, like the social actors and creators of Antillean society examined in the preceding chapters, refracts dominant visualizing practices and redraws 'authentic' lines of sight creating new and divergent meeting points along Fanon's travelled road.

³ Gracchus (305) and Britton (Race 84) go even as far as to suggest that Fanon's denial of homosexuality in the Antilles – slipped furtively into a footnote in the text – can be interpreted as a sign of Fanon's repression of his own homosexuality.

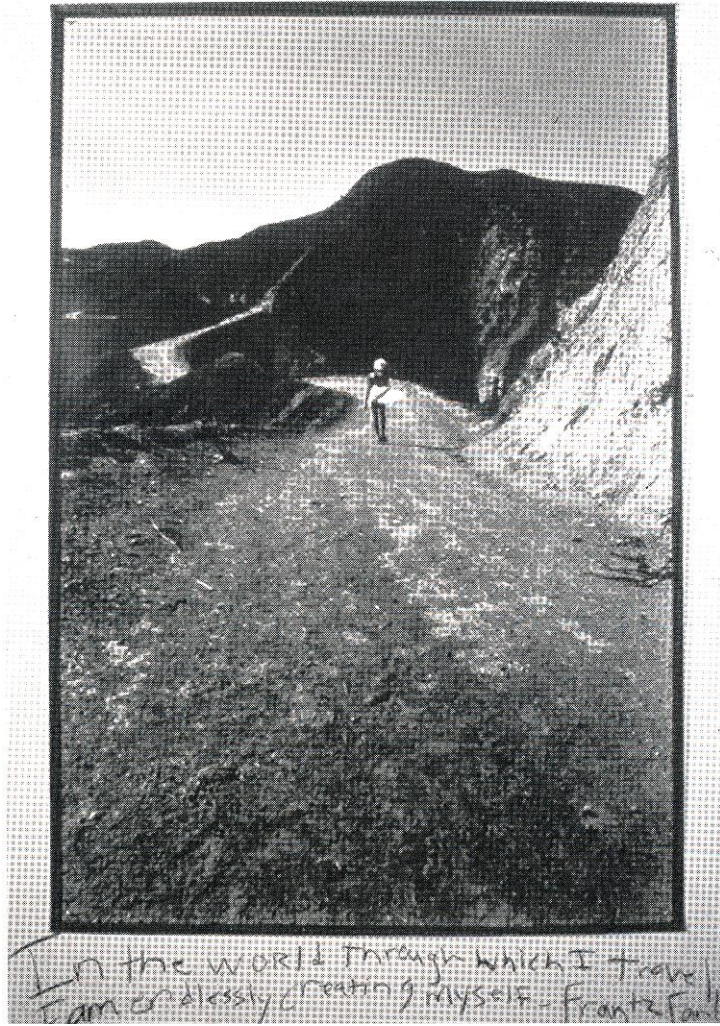


Figure 11: Lyle Ashton Harris. *In the world through which I travel*, 1990, b+w print, editions 30x20, '72 x 48' Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

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GLOSSARY

Branché

In colloquial French *branché* is used to describe a person, place or thing that is trendy or ‘with it’. In Martinique it is also used to signify a man who desires other men and who is part of the same ‘scene’.

Candio

Candio is a male dandy figure who emerges across the Black Atlantic in the eighteenth century. He uses style and wit to undermine the power of the colonizer and is sometimes portrayed as a storyteller or womanizer. The word may be derived from the West African Mande term *koundjo*, referring to a traditional dance.

Chabin/e

The light-skinned offspring of two black, or mixed black/white, Afro-Caribbean parents. The *chabin/e* is celebrated as a truly Caribbean creation. The *chabin/e*’s counterpart in the Anglophone Caribbean would be he/she categorised as ‘red-skinned’ or ‘browning.’

Gede

The *gede* or *guédé* are mischievous Vodou spirits of death and eroticism.

Loup-Gawou

The *loup-gawou* is a shape-shifting folkloric creature mistrusted in French Caribbean culture, often used metaphorically to refer to foreigners, non-normative identities or criminals.

Lwa

The *lwa*, *loa* or *lezinvisib* as they are sometimes known, are the spirits of Vodou who together form a pantheon derived from a syncretism of African and Creole deities, ancestors and Catholic saints.

Makomè

The Creole term *makomè* (*macoumé*, *makoumé*) comes from the French ‘ma commère,’ meaning ‘my godmother.’ It is now more commonly used in Martinique and Guadeloupe as a pejorative label to refer to men who display effeminate traits and who are thought to engage in sexual relations with other men. The term is roughly equivalent to *masisi* (in Haiti), *chichi man* or *buller man* (in the Anglophone islands).

Makrelaj/Makrélé

Makrelaj is used in the Antilles to describe the act of regarding other people’s affairs, or gossiping about people in the community. *Makrélé* refers to the person doing the gossiping.

Manbo

The *manbo* or *mambo* is female leader of the Vodou community who is granted equal status to male priests (*oungan*).

Marronaj

Marronaj is when enslaved people fled the plantation to live (often in communities) in the surrounding countryside. Vodou is said to have formed out of this underground existence, where shared healing practices and an extended kinship support system were important to the survival of the *marrons/mawon*.

Masisi

The term *masisi* is said to originate from the female West African Fon deity *mamisis*, or *mami wata*, who can be found in various forms throughout the Caribbean. Like *makomè* it connotes an outwardly effeminate man, who desires other men. Whilst still used in a pejorative sense in contemporary Haitian society, its Creole specificity has recently been re-appropriated and revalued by the M-movement and other groups defending the rights of sexual minorities in Haiti.

Ounfo

Also spelt *hounfo* or *hounfort*, this is the vodou temple and can be both an interior or exterior space.

Oungan

Also spelt *houngan*. This is the male leader of the Vodou congregation who acts as a medium between the initiates and the spirits.

Poto-mitan

The *poto-mitan* is the central pillar or post of the Vodou temple (*ounfo*). Strong women and mothers of the community are sometimes referred to as *poto-mitan* in the French Caribbean.

Rara

Rara is a form of musical expression and processional travelling street performance that acts as an extension of carnival in Haiti during the period of *karèm* (lent). Many *rara* bands are formed from Vodou communities or *sosyete* and are often organised to mimic military hierarchies and roles.

Soukounian

The *soukounian* or *soukounyan* is a female spirit found across the Eastern Caribbean islands. This amorphous figure hangs up her skin at night and travels around as a firebolt visiting people.

Vodwizan

Vodwizan or *vodouisants* are initiates of the Vodou belief system.