

Spaces and Strategies of Resistance: Cultural Movements in the French West Indies

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Introduction

So-called non-institutional, unconventional, or protest actions (strikes, petitions, demonstrations, occupations, blockades, etc.) are favored by those who have little or no access to institutional political arenas. Therefore, above all, they appear in the face of relatively closed political opportunity structures. The French West Indies are particularly interesting areas for studying how cultural actions can foster the resistance of ordinary people. As a French department since 1946, Martinique is an integral part of the French nation, and its inhabitants now enjoy the same rights as their fellow citizens in mainland France. But this has not always been the case. Before 1848, Martinique was a slave colony where millions of Africans were deported and violently cut off from their natural environment and cultural roots, starting with their language and religions (Petitjean-Roget, 1985; Nicolas, 1996). It is therefore all the more surprising that some practices have managed to persist, such as some dances and music that are now being mobilized by activists. The slaves' resistance to their condition of enslavement was manifested by poisonings, suicides, infanticides, revolts, and, more actively, maroonage in the forests of the hills (De Vassoigne, 1971 ; Diouf, 1976). Far from habitation, slaves were able to recreate and preserve certain ancestral practices (songs, dances, and challenges, that were part of traditional and religious rituals); in this way, the music and dances forbidden by the masters were able to maintain their African character (Bastide, 1967).

But, as analyst Gabriel Entiope points out, maroonage is not "a simple short- or long-term escape into cities or woods, but rather to accept maroonage as a determined attitude on the part of the Indian, white or black slave whose purpose is to question the slavery system in his favour" (Entiope, 1996, 228). As such, music and dance would be part of a "passive" resistance that involves "recreating a world of their own different from that of the white man, different from the one they wanted to impose on him" (Ibid, 217). In a hostile environment, the descendants of Africans deported to the Americas would have had no choice but to incorporate their history into objects, aesthetic forms, and social organizations as well as their own language and flesh. In this way, dominated Blacks were not categorically abused by dominant Whites; rather, they mocked it and even developed "arts of resistance" (Scott, 2009) whose repertoire ranged from shrugging shoulders to staging a carnival. Different forms of cunning and hidden practices were included. In fact, even though slavery was abolished in 1848 and the French political regime democratized, this repertoire of resistance remains an resource of those masses excluded from places of power, and, more broadly, of those who did not feel (correctly) represented in the colonial society. "There is indeed an affinity between the structural position of dominance and the use of less institutionalized, less official forms of speaking out" (Neveu, 2002, 20).

The objective of this article is to examine the socio-spatial springboards that enabled the inhabitants of this "neighborhood" to mobilize, with the hypothesis that the collective residence that constitutes the neighborhood acts as a privileged space for politicization. Based on a long-term field survey conducted in the Rive-Droite Levassor district of Fort-de-France, Martinique, I examine the spatial dimension of collective action strategies and repertoires (Tilly, 1984, 1986) and their conditions and difficulties of implementation.¹

¹ From 2011 to 2018, I conducted an ethnographic survey in Fort-de-France as part of a CNRS delegation to the *Centre de Recherche sur les Pouvoirs Locaux dans les Caraïbes* (CRPLC, UMR

Located a stone's throw from the center of Fort-de-France, this working-class district is well known to the people of Martinique, even if they rarely venture there. From the 1960s onward, some inhabitants of the district managed to make their drums resound in the heart of the carnival of Fort-de-France, but they also reinvented original music and revalued certain local cultural traditions threatened with destruction, in particular by creating the marching band *Tambo Bô Kannal*. Their actions are representative of a militant conception of culture as an instrument of struggle and political "conscientization"—to the point of becoming a reference for other West Indian cultural movements. This paper shows that if it appears necessary to reintroduce space as a central dimension of the collective action of deprived groups, this reintroduction can only be achieved by questioning the mechanisms by which individuals and groups play with each other in the spaces and places they conceive, manage, or invest.

This article is divided into three parts. Part one shows how the relative spatial and social isolation of the inhabitants of the *Rive Droite Levassor* district have helped to protect their way of life from the processes of assimilation initiated by the French state. Part two demonstrates how the experience of land and social and economic precariousness has nourished cultural mobilization and the process of cultural creation and transmission. Finally, the third part examines the carnival repertory and how it has encouraged the inhabitants' intrusion into spaces outside their neighborhood and enabled them to be both visible and valued.

1. The neighborhood as a space of resistance

A now-classic study on the Paris Commune has shown that "mobilization does not rest only on social ties, but also creates new ones" (Gould, 1995: 69). With this simple expression, Roger Gould insists on the need for impoverished and disenfranchised deprived groups to make the most of "co-presence" and population concentration as a mobilizing force. The cultural practices that I studied in Martinique, which are closely interwoven with ordinary social life, are expressions that I would describe as community based. They have been long practiced on the fringes of, or even against, the institutional logics valued by the French state in remote places such as the countryside and working-class neighborhoods. Situated on the edge of the city center on the banks of the *Levassor Canal*, the *Rive-Droite Levassor* neighborhood has enabled certain cultural practices to continue, despite prejudices, administrative and religious prohibitions, and the profound economic changes of the post-war period. From this point of view, the neighborhood constitutes a "social space of relative autonomy" that encourages inhabitants to help each other and share and build knowledge, experiences, and know-how away from the dominant rules and standards (Scott, 2009: 133-135).

a) Urban experience and urban marooning

The first inhabitants of what was to become the *Rive-Droite Levassor* district were fishermen who came mainly from the communes of southwest Martinique to sell their fish in the port. They gradually took possession of the land on the right bank of the canal, which was still relatively uninhabited. In 1848, the abolition of slavery coincided with a revolution in the form of production that required a large workforce and enormous material handling work, particularly in the port of Fort-de-France. Scattered huts sprang up on the borders of the colonial city bounded by the river *Madame*, which today flows into the *Levassor canal*. After the eruption of *Mount Pelée* in 1902, which completely destroyed *Saint Pierre*, the former capital of Martinique, hundreds of refugees from the North Atlantic came to join the

8053), University of the West Indies and Guyana. The data concerning the *Pointe-à-Pitre* carnival is based on exploratory observations and interviews that I conducted in August 2014 and May 2015.

population already established on the outskirts of the city, gradually saturating the site. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the crisis in the sugar industry further accelerated the rural exodus to Fort-de-France. Inhabited by 60,000 people in 1954, the city had nearly 100,000 inhabitants fifteen years later, an increase of 67% (Letchimy, 1992). The arrival of 2,600 individuals per year, in an area not designed for such growth, reinforced unrestrained urbanization through the squatterization of accessible land. This is how neighborhoods are formed that are entirely self-built, often with recycled materials (wood, stone, sheet metal). Over the years, the occupants have formed de facto urbanization zones, consolidating their habitats by erecting cinder block walls and pouring cement slabs. According to the resources available, the works were thus completed year after year. From this point of view, the "spontaneous" method of habitat construction appears to be an atypical enclave compared to the development of the colonial city: in the city, the geometrical framework of an aligned and ordered urban grammar, thought out and planned in advance by its builders in a quasi-military manner; in the self-built habitat, the indecipherable mosaic-crown, caught in the meanders of concrete and wooden boxes.

The cultural mobilization of the inhabitants of the Rive-Droite Levassor district is a direct extension of this urban experience, which finds its foundation and motivation in the exceptional situation of illegality and the residential and social precariousness of the populations living in self-built neighborhoods. Until the 1980s, most of the inhabitants worked as day laborers (djobbers), whether as dockworkers or slaughterhouse workers. Generally speaking, one of the constants in the history of the West Indies since the abolition of slavery is the permanence of precariousness in the world of work despite an extension in the sphere of public or semipublic wage earning. Today, the private sector remains largely the domain of precarious work, while alternative jobs have multiplied in the public sector. Beyond that, it is the lack of adapted equipment and space that has shaped the cultural practices of the inhabitants of the neighborhood, forcing them to organize their cultural practices in the open air and, more precisely, in the street. In the 1950s and 1960s, the leisure activities of young people in the Rive-Droite neighborhood were mainly limited to three activities: football, petanque, and carnival. Some residents continued to practice traditional activities, particularly Danmyé, a danced and sometimes fierce fight between two men who compete to the rhythm of the drum, the ostinato of the ti-bwa, and songs sung in a circle called a ronde. Because of its violence and bad reputation, however, parents often forbade their children from attending the fights. Danmyé's demonstrations were nevertheless at the center of the neighborhood's patronal celebrations, and children grew up in contact with this practice, sometimes to the point of developing a particular taste for it. The result was an initial, almost spontaneous approach to song, dance, and music that did not involve scriptural, pedagogical, moral, or ideological inculcation but was accomplished in a "fortuitous" way by participating in the neighborhood's activities and observing the adults.



Photo 1: The Tanbo Bô Kannal walking band in Fort-de-France (credits: Jean-Michel Terrine)

In fact, it was the youngest people who, at the turn of the 1960s, began to take an interest in Danmyé, seen as a practice that was as subversive as it was playful and which they quickly identified as an act of assertion for belonging to the neighborhood. Generally speaking, the recruitment of the first informal collectives that began to value and develop traditional music and dance has long taken place in the context of spatial and social proximity or, in other words, in the neighborhood, which places the entry into musical or choreographic practice in the extension of social belonging. A configuration confirmed by the results of the questionnaire survey I conducted in 2013–2014 among 73 members of the Tanbo Bô Kannal (TBK) association² showed that 86% of the group members had a familial relationship (husband and wife, son or daughter, nephew or niece, cousin, grandson or granddaughter), while the youngest members almost always had a father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, or aunt who is or was a member of the group. The logic of local and social proximity tends to combine with a sort of pre-integration into TBK, inasmuch as the family and friendly environment contributes to orienting young people towards traditional music, whereas inter-acquaintance facilitates and makes it attractive to learn traditional drumming and dancing. This is all the truer since, in Rive-Droite area, the houses are built very close to each other and access to one of them may oblige the occupants to walk along another. In such a context, children evolve under the close supervision of their parents and/or the neighborhood; and while young people spend a lot of time outside the home, they are rarely left to their own devices. The doorstep, the balcony, and the facade are the immediate spaces that constitute visual and physical stops for strolling, chatting, resting, and watching the children. In a context marked by social promiscuity, the cultural mobilization of the inhabitants is carried out through direct participation in the activities of the neighborhood, which in turn contributes to forging their mental and behavioral dispositions.

b) The social and cultural supports of the municipality of Fort-de-France

The squatters of Rive-Droite neighborhood were often aware of transgressing French land law by settling on land without property rights. Nevertheless, some *Bèkès*³ families, who did not hesitate to use force, claimed ownership of the land, sometimes with the help of the gendarmes. In the aftermath of the Second World War, inhabitants took advantage of *départementalisation* (i.e. the transformation in 1946 of the old colonies (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion Island, and French Guiana) into French departments with the same legislative regime and administrative organization) to evade these demands by founding a syndicate and demanding that these supposed owners provide a deed of ownership. In this struggle, they received the support of the communist municipality of Aimé Césaire, which initiated a process of official reappropriation of land. Césaire was elected mayor of Fort-de-France and served from 1945 to 2001; was deputy of Martinique from 1945 to 1993; and was rapporteur of the 1946 departmentalization law, which he thought at the time would put an end to the colonial relationship. Césaire wished to offer the inhabitants of working-class

² Far from opposing the principles of ethnographic research, the questionnaire technique allowed me to access more formal data likely to promote a better knowledge of the people surveyed, their background, and their motivations. Between December 2013 and February 2014, I was able to personally collect general information on the members of TBK, their social properties (age, sex, profession, social and geographical origin, level of diploma, etc.), their musical training (mode of learning music), the place of music and dance in their environment (practice and type of practice of their parents, friends, and colleagues), their leisure practices, and their motivations.

³ In the French West Indies, *Békés* designates the descendants of the first European settlers on the island as slave owners.

districts a chance of integration and citizenship status through free and unrestricted access to various urban services. He defended the right of the poor to house themselves, not only by granting them land rights but also by carrying out public works in occupied areas. He further provided technical and material assistance to self-builders.

By making the inhabitants feel secure, these social supports promoted the development and fulfilment of their autonomy (Castel, 2005). But it is also a philosophical connivance that unites the poet of Negritude with the *malheureux* (unfortunates). By taking an interest in popular traditions, by offering them institutional and artistic recognition, Aimé Césaire intended to counter the hegemony of French culture. He thus undertook an ambitious municipal cultural policy inspired by the techniques of "cultural democratization," which were dear to André Malraux, the founder of the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In the mid-1970s, cultural activity centers were inaugurated in every district of the Martinique capital. However, this was in contrast to the Ministry, which intended "to make the great works of humanity, and first and foremost of France, accessible to the largest possible number of French people", as stipulated in its founding decree of 1959. At the same time, the decree intended to downgrade peripheral cultures to the state of folklore with the pejorative meaning that we know in France. On the contrary, the administration of Fort-de-France aimed to reveal and promote the cultures born on Martinique soil and rejected by the French state.

The mayor's ambition was clear: to radically oppose the government's strategy to make the West Indies "a relay for French culture." (Bernabé, Capgras & Murgier, 1997: 132). In 1976, Césaire set up a *Service municipal d'action culturelle* (SERMAC) responsible for developing cultural activities inspired by the idea of Négritude.⁴ Associated with the launch of the Fort-de-France Festival in 1972, the creation of such a municipal service dedicated to the support and dissemination of the "Negro arts" clearly acted as a declaration of the municipality's cultural independence. For its creators as well as for its organizers, the ambition of the SERMAC was to "change people to change mentalities" (Bernabé, Capgras & Murgier, 1997: 136) by introducing as many people as possible to the different forms of artistic expression. In the neighborhoods as well as in the Parc Floral, a former military barracks embedded in the city center where part of the activities and a theatre are concentrated, the workshops offered were open to all: anyone can take classes free of charge as part of an open pedagogy, based on free access to classes and the free loan of musical instruments.

By promoting cultural action independent of state power and the tourist and cultural industries, by contributing to the symbolic but also concrete revaluation via a dedicated policy of the cultural forms inherited from Africa, the city of Fort-de-France has played an essential role in the legitimization and dissemination of Martinican dances and music. In the Rive-Droite Levassor district, however, no cultural center was established. This absence was justified by the proximity of the SERMAC premises, located on the other side of the canal within walking distance. But it can also be explained by the inhabitants' fierce desire to assert their sovereignty over the district and to organize amongst themselves without intrusion from the municipality. In this respect, if the cultural initiatives of the inhabitants of Rive-Droite Levassor cannot be detached from the institutional conditions that contributed to their emergence and development, they are also part of a concern for concrete and symbolic resistance within Martinican society itself.

⁴ A movement of writers mainly from the French colonies of sub-Saharan Africa, the West Indies, and Guyana, Négritude aims to denounce the contempt of black people by Western civilization and to resist cultural assimilation.

2. The creation of a free space

As defined by Sara Evans and Harry C. Boyte, free spaces "constitute the environment in which individuals have the opportunity to learn a new kind of mutual respect, deeper and more secure group identity, public knowledge, cooperative values, and civic virtues. Simply put, free spaces are places that bridge the gap between private lives and large-scale institutions in which ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and foresight" (Evans and Boyte, 1986, 17). This definition has since been widely taken up by scholars, which has had the effect of broadening its meaning and dematerializing a paradoxically problematic concept to capture the more physical dimensions of collective action (Poletta, 1999). Beyond the academic discussions, the interest of the concept of "free space" lies in its capacity to grasp the modalities by which the control of space is an issue of struggle between the mobilized group, the potentially mobilizable group, and the decried institution. In order to escape the cultural domination of the French institutions and to create a set of sites that are conducive to collective discussion and decision-making as well as the mobilization of habitants, the activists intend to reconvert the physical spaces of the neighborhood into "safe spaces" (Tilly, 2000).

Generally speaking, the rejection and fear expressed by the representatives of the colonial power and by the assimilated black elites towards the inhabitants of the neighborhood quickly contributed to the emergence of a community of destiny, favored by the concentration of a lumpen proletariat made up of a low-skilled or unskilled labor force, which quickly understood that they could rely only on their own forces. It is in this context that Victor Treffre, a young slaughterhouse worker, undertook in the 1960s to introduce the young people of the neighborhood to the practice of Danmyé. In his twenties, Victor Treffre was fascinated by the champions (*Majors*) of Danmyé. He undertook to develop several collectives, with the help of the young inhabitants of the Rive-Droite, to promote Danmyé as well as the dances and music of *Bèlè* and *Kalenda*, which were then relegated to the rank of picturesque practices devoid of artistic value—when they were not directly despised by the elite of Martinique.

a) The re-invention of a musical identity

Until the 1970s, Victor Treffre's initiatives helped to awaken the interest of the neighborhood's young people but failed to mobilize them. In 1971, Victor created the *Rénovation culturelle* collective to prepare and stage mini shows featuring mimes, songs, and sketches danced and sung to a repertoire of biguines, mazurka, waltzes, and rumbas. This marks the beginning of a series of collectives activated by Victor to resist the *francization* of Martinique and to hold back a world in danger of disappearing. Until then, however, these initiatives were mainly aimed at raising the awareness of the inhabitants of the neighborhood; and even though the young people sometimes ventured into the *Mornes* to meet musicians-farmers, particularly in the commune of Sainte Marie on the Atlantic slope, presented as the Mecca of Martinican musical and choreographic folklore, the reputation of these young cultural activists rarely went beyond the perimeter of the neighborhood.

Everything changed in 1973 with the first public appearance of the young people of *Bô Kannal* during the carnival. At that time, they brought drums of all kinds, and their music was still rudimentary. Over the years, however, they began to perfect their repertoire and to invent their own sound. In order to reconnect with the music of their elders, the *Bô Kannal* engaged in the creation of a singular music by drawing from the musical traditions of Martinique, including the music and instruments of the *chwal bwa*, the traditional hand-

pushed rides on which they had fun during the patron saint festivals of their childhood.⁵ Another influence on their music was that of the *Kalennnda*, one of the oldest Martinican dances of African origin, which was popularized after the Second World War by the Loulou Boislaville through the performances of the Martinican Folk Group. The contribution of these two rhythms produces a characteristic sound that is the musical signature of the group. It was given the name "kalenbwa," a contraction of the words *Kalennnda* and *chwal bwa*.

To be able to play this sound in the street, it was also necessary to acquire the technical means and break down the different rhythms of the drums into as many instruments invented for the needs of wandering. The work of TBK's militants was to break down the rhythms of *Danmyé*, *Bélé*, and *Kalennnda* music by bringing organological innovations. In addition to the African drums of the first releases, different types of instruments coming directly from the musical traditions of Martinique were gradually added and then substituted: *ti-bwa*, *doum-be-doum*, bass and medium drums, and *chacha*. Over the years, the members have refined their repertoire and built or simply adapted their own drums for walking by making them from recycled materials—wooden or PVC tubes to which they attached goatskins recovered from slaughterhouses or bamboo to make *ti-bwas*.



Photo 2: TBK and its dancers in the streets of Fort-de-France (credits: Jean-Michel Terrine)

The "sound" of the young people of Rive-Droite, its musical identity and stylistic originality, is thus based on a subtle combination of the heritage of traditional music and the influence of the street that characterizes the carnival. This approach is an extension of an urban experience based on resourcefulness. The methods of invention and re-invention of dances, music, and instruments used for 40 years by the young people of the neighborhood

⁵ The *chwal bwa* orchestra is composed of a *Bèlè* drum, a *ti-bwa* made of bamboo, a *de-bonda* drum, and a Martinican flute player (sometimes replaced by an accordion).

are not only the result of their living environment but also part of a craft that involves a great deal of rehearsal, correction, calculation, and strategy.

b) On-the-job learning and politization

In a context where entry into cultural practices such as Carnival or Danmyé has long been based on social and spatial resources mobilized by young people in their immediate neighborhood, and not on any cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979b), it is through observation and repeated imitation of the techniques, postures, and gestures of other members that cultural practices have been learned and developed. But it is also thanks to the remarks and advice from one person to another to improve and correct technique that changes in posture or style have been made possible, including the invention of new steps, sounds, and cultural forms. This process of acquisition "resembles less a silent habituation than an intersubjective constitution that mobilizes all the senses" (Faure, 2000: 110). The musical and choreographic skills of the young people of the neighborhood were thus acquired mainly through practice, mimesis, gestures, oral exchanges, and advice—but without any written form, as Monique recalls. Monique took her first steps as a dancer and musician with the Lavwa Pitjan [the prickly voice] collective, created in 1977 by Victor Treffre and the brothers Niko and Eric Gernet to study and rigorously reproduce the dances and music inherited from the former habitation society. Monique explained the process of acquisition:

We were teaching each other by the way, when you look closely. That is to say that Niko might give a subject, he might come up with a theme, a dance, a song, and then... we'd navigate through it.... Now we have a school, but before, I had the impression that I had, that's how I get it, we would arrive, well, Niko said we were going to do that, and then we would throw on what. I don't know how to explain it... we were training, we were training to do the thing well, but there wasn't a teacher who said, it's good it's not good, that is to say that everyone was putting... their grain of salt. Niko would come up with an idea for a sketch, Victor would come up with his, we'd correct... this one would put in his bit of salt and then it would go like this... (Monique, 49 years old, Ti-Bwa player, craftsman-plumber, 12 March 2012).

Generally speaking, the universe of the neighborhood's inhabitants, mainly composed of workers, employees, a few craftsmen, and djobbers, was only partially penetrated by reading and writing practices. Even today, the majority of members still arrives at TBK without any musical or choreographic training, or they learned alone or in a family or friendly setting. The sociological composition of TBK thus highlights a certain structural homology (Bourdieu, 1979a) between the degree of training of its members and their appetite for manual and technical activities. In 2011–2012, nearly 66% of them (48 individuals out of 73 respondents) had a level of training below the baccalaureate or were in vocational education. In cultural groups as in the work sphere, most of the respondents learned on the job, through observation and repeated imitation of the techniques and gestures of Danmyé players and folk dancers.

There were no classes like there are now. You came to dance, you were taught how to dance, you were taken apart. If you know a little bit, they put you in the group. If you see that you don't succeed, then you do something else in the association (Joël, 56 years old, dancer and tanbouyé, handler, 26 July 2012).

It is within the framework of a formative relationship between individuals and their human and spatial environments that the learning of dance and music by TBK members takes place. The reference is not produced by theoretical thought but by the senses, that is, aesthetically. It is a learning mode that mobilizes the sensitivity and singularity of each individual in the transmission of know-how, while each individual is led to acquire a technical background by relying on a sensitive awareness of the gestures learned.



Photo 3: A musical rehearsal of the musicians and dancers in the Rive-Droite Levassor neighborhood, Fort-de-France (credits: Lionel Arnaud)

This analysis can be applied to politicization. The vast majority of individuals who join TBK do not have militant experience or even prior artistic skills: they do it to join with relatives and friends and to participate in the carnival. The regular attendance of TBK is nevertheless accompanied by a change in their perceptions of the neighborhood, its inhabitants, and local traditions; but, more broadly speaking, their perceptions of economic and political systems also change. Thus, many of the participants insist that their elders take part in discussions, and that conversations regarding the cultural activities of the collective start in an informal way. By participating in the various TBK activities, Monique has acquired a social role, gained self-confidence, and enhanced practical skills, in particular the ability to speak in public, which is inseparable from a nascent sense of legitimacy (Matonti & Poupeau, 2004). But it was less the associative activity as such, its meetings and democratic procedures, that contributed to awakening and developing her activist skills, and more the practice of dance and music. Monique explained that the repetition of gestures, the remarks and advice from one member to another, and the discussions between peers lead to changes in posture, style, and even the invention of new steps.

Through these devices, she has gained self-confidence and developed a kind of reflexivity about her environment:

I mean, that's how it was done... [she snaps her fingers]. We were teaching each other, by the way, when you look closely. That is to say that maybe Niko would give a subject, maybe he'd come up with a theme, a dance, a song and then... we'd navigate through it.... And then that led us to take an interest, to research our culture, to ask the elders.... I don't know how to explain that... we trained, we trained to do the thing well, but there wasn't a teacher who said, "It's good, it's not good," that is to say that everyone put... their grain of salt in it. Niko would come up with an idea for a sketch, Victor would come up with his, we'd correct... this one would put his bit of salt and then it would go like this... (Monique, 49 years old, Ti-Bwa player, craftsman-plumber, 12 March 2012).

Like the routine frameworks of conversation that allow ordinary workers to "quickly discover that many of these conversational techniques and resources" make them "collectively and completely competent" (Gamson, 1992, 20), the practice of dance and music and all that it encompasses in terms of elaboration, discussion, and self-staging has allowed Monique to develop a critical relationship with the world around her. From this point of view, TBK is seen as a space for self-realization, a creative space, where everyone can contribute and share knowledge, experience, and skills and pool their time and ingenuity.

3. The street as a space for protest

"Great maroonage," or active resistance, refers to the definitive escape from the life of a slave, in which a runaway generally recreates a lost community by hiding in a hostile environment and gives birth to black-brown societies based on a return to African cultural forms. "Small maroonage," in contrast, was a temporary escape of no more than one month. But these two maroonings carry within them two aesthetic principles of resistance. The first principle can be compared to the creation of communities, from rastas to the Black Arts Movement, that encouraged the idea of Black separatism. In trying to facilitate this, inhabitants hoped to further strengthen black ideals, solidarity, and creativity in the image of the free space that Rive-Droite activists have managed to create in their neighborhood. The second principle joins the "arts of resistance" and the "politics of style," which, from Dick Hebdige (1979) to James Scott via Michel de Certeau (1980), intends to analyze the infrapolitics of the dominated, defined as "a great variety of discrete forms of resistance which do not dare to say their name" (Scott, 2009: 33) and develop because they cannot act against the dominant.

Even if one cannot decide on the political or nonpolitical nature of such cultural movements—as this would imply an essentialist definition of the term (Arnaud & Guionnet, 2005)—their relationship to the political field and the social structure they face, or even in which they intervene objectively, can be considered necessary. A common feature of TBK participants is their willingness to influence the course of events at local, if not national, levels even though they do not have access to places of power (political, administrative, economic), either directly or through representatives. It is also a way of proceeding for those who do not want to enter these places and struggles for power, who refuse to do politics and to think of themselves as political actors, or who only accept this term by specifying that it is a question of doing politics in the noble sense or otherwise. From then on, and failing to physically force the door to places of power, the first reflex of the mobilized collectives is often to try to invest and become masters of the street.

Thus, in February 1973, the young inhabitants of the Rive-Droite Levassor district burst into the Fort-de-France carnival. Organized, their objective was to restore the image of their neighborhood and to restore its letters of nobility to the music inherited from Africa.

Denigrated by the dominant society, pushed aside from the podium by the organizers, the young people of the Rive-Droite Levassor area ransacked it and improvised a vengeful refrain: "Comité bourgeois, bourgeois carnival." [Bourgeois committee, carnival bourgeois]. This personification shows that carnival is the space for political protest par excellence in the repertoire inherited from popular movements (Tartakowsky, 1998): that of demonstrations and other gatherings of angry people. As its name indicates, the function of the demonstration is to make manifest disagreements and to challenge opponents, public authorities (which may be confused) and the citizenry as a whole. In this sense, the carnival is not only a way of occupying public space in the concrete sense of the term, but also of making the mobilized group and its demands exist in a public space in the "abstract" sense.

a) Carnival as a repertoire of protest action

In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, carnivals have particularly demonstrated —and still do—the will of Blacks who have become free but remain excluded from any participation in economic and political systems. Carnivals allow them to assert their presence by positioning themselves against the hegemonic project of a society based on the moral order and models of European civilization (Bastide, 1967). But while slavery has emerged as an essential element of their desire to free themselves from the norms and codes of white society, its memory has rarely been explicitly mobilized; and the carnival is first perceived as a celebration and a space for individual and collective creation (Martin, 1992). It is not in itself a place of protest, even if it is a place of free expression that sometimes carries political connotations such as the figure of "Vaval," a traditional character made of papier-mâché who is traditionally burned in public places at the end of Martinique carnivals as a way to absolve the past and its attendant misfortunes.



Photo 4: In 2020, TBK participated in various demonstrations against the French State following the use of Chlordecone in the banana plantations for more than 20 years (1972-1993). Banned in the United States since 1976, this pesticide has poisoned soils, rivers and the sea for centuries, with significant health consequences for the population. (credits: René Charles "Benny" Suvélor)

In the Caribbean, two conceptions of carnival tend to oppose each other. On one side is the "Pretty Mas'," the bourgeois carnival, which is a colorful and joyful festival where well-organized marching bands dance one after another, displaying shimmering and richly decorated costumes. On the other side is the "Traditional Mas'," the carnival of the "dirty," the disturbing and frightening celebration where small groups or individuals emerge with cheap costumes made with any means available and present menacing and disruptive figures. This duality of carnival, separating two audiences and two carnival repertoires—one static, aesthetic European, the other dynamic and supported by traditional figures (but also vulgar and pornographic)—was particularly evident in the 1970s with groups that sought to challenge, via the free expression space of carnival, the cultural hegemony of the bourgeois elites. The originality of TBK, however, was, even at an early stage, to free itself from the rules of the carnival federations. Similar to the emancipated runaway slaves (*marrones*), the TBK went off the beaten track, both literally and figuratively, and would not allow themselves to be imposed upon by any specific itinerary or way of celebrating the carnival. Moreover, a form of physical and symbolic violence sweats from the bodies through the virulent determination to denounce, mock, and stigmatize the holders of power of all kinds in order to translate the ideas of rebellion and social and political demand.

The tradition of the *vidé*—which refers both to a parade of people running, dancing, and singing behind a marching band or a sound system mounted on a truck, chanting short incantatory phrases in the form of a call-and-response between singer and choir, supported by a rhythm sung tirelessly as they parade through the streets—underlines the ability of the carnival to bring together all types of participants, from the most involved (officials, activists, and members of carnival groups) to those who do not belong to any organization. No particular skills seem to be required. Whether gathering at the meeting place, walking, running, watching, or sitting, everyone feels part of the event from the outset. Nevertheless, TBK has organization and rules of conduct to which each member submits. It also displays a specific musical identity whose primary characteristic is to stage an attachment to African roots. This identity includes the use of ritualized costumes; skin drums, when most marching bands in the Americas use plastic membranes; and the revival of the *djab wouj* (red devils), which, in Martinique today, refers to African (positive) gods and is used to enhance the memory of Africa in a context where its remembrance is often denied or simply despised. During carnival, the devaluing link to Africa is transformed into the affirmation of a glorious identity because individuals, during the celebration period, reverse the hierarchy of values between European and African roots.

b) The dissemination and politicization of marching bands' cultural repertoires in the French West Indies

Following their intrusion into the 1974 carnival, the cultural initiatives of the young inhabitants of Rive-Droite Levassor soon attracted attention. A year later, the municipality of Fort-de-France organized a large gathering of drums from the city's working-class neighborhoods and inhabitants were invited under the name *Carnaval Bô Kannal*, a way of proudly claiming their belonging to this sub-district of Rive-Droite Levassor. But the name *Bô Kannal* has a strong resonance in Creole and aims to reflect another image of the inhabitants of the Rive-Droite Levassor district, a reversal of the stigma. The independence movements are sensitive to this approach. In the revival of Afro-Martinican cultural traditions, they see an instrument for rallying and a political struggle. After their legal declaration in 1986 as an association under the name of *Tanbo Bô Kannal*, the collective gradually asserted itself in the cultural and political landscape of Martinique in order to benefit from public subsidies. Today, TBK is present in most commemorative events, whether it is Frantz

Fanon's birthday, the "Convoy for Reparation" (initiated in 2000 by the founder of one of the most important pro-independence party in Martinique), or the commemorations of the Fort-de-France riots of December 1959.

In 2015, TBK was particularly active in the celebrations of 22 May 1848, which, in Martinique, is the day of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery. The TBK invited in particular the Guadeloupean group Voukoum, with whom it maintains regular relations. Originally from Basse-Terre, Voukoum is a marching band founded in 1988 and is, in many respects, comparable to TBK due to its popular origins and the use of skin drums. Generally speaking, the action repertoire developed by TBK has spread not only in Martinique but also to the neighbouring French island of Guadeloupe. Initiated in 1978 by anti-colonialist activists concerned with revaluing Guadeloupe's culture among the Guadeloupeans themselves, the marching band Akiyo [in Creole: Who are they?] took up the formula initiated by TBK in the early 1970s. As a carnival group, Akiyo reclaimed the streets with skin drums and rhythms from the *gwo ka* repertoire, a musical genre inherited from the Plantation society, comparable to *bèlè* but specific to Guadeloupe. However, the group differs from TBK in its organization and openly political commitment, which allows it to define itself as a "*mouvman kiltirel*" [in Creole: cultural movement] oriented towards the defense of the Guadeloupean culture and against the (post-)colonial French state. Initially, some members of the association were political activists, particularly within the *Mouvement populaire pour une Guadeloupe indépendante (MPGI)* [Popular movement for an independent Guadeloupe], or even clandestine activists.⁶

But the objective of Akiyo is first and foremost to make carnival a place of expression and derision and an outlet for youth where it is possible to denounce colonization, slavery, and the excesses of assimilation without taking political action. As such, if TBK members have become more or less politicized over time by trading their *red kaban* costumes (old nightgowns or sheets traditionally stored under the bed as a draw sheet) for African outfits and costumes bearing the colors of the Martinican flag (black, red, green), the members of Akiyo in contrast considered the mobilization of previously banned music and instruments as real anti-colonial action. From the early 1980s, Akiyo's participants did not hesitate to mock the French state by wearing military fatigues and colonial helmets. Believing that the group was damaging the image of the French army, the subprefect issued an order in 1985 prohibiting the band from going public. In protest, more than 8,000 people demonstrated in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre with Akiyo. Since then, colonial dress has become a trademark of the band. Combined with the beat of its dozens of skin drums, played in rhythm while performing a fast but rhythmic march (the *déboulé*), this military outfit reinforces the group's warlike character and impresses the audience when it marches through the streets.

Conclusion

In *Le Discours antillais* (1981), writer and poet Édouard Glissant proposes to oppose the resistance of marronage to official history *via* the *Détour*, both historical and cultural and from the perspective of slaves in revolt and African cultures of survival; and the *Retour*, or Antillanité, *i.e.* the "convergence of re-rootedness in our true place" following the rejection of a single Euro-centric genesis (495). In spite of the absence of a geographical hinterland in Martinique, it would be necessary to look at the past, and to "excavate the past" in order to maroon, to inhabit the landscape and appropriate it, to surprise its poetics, and to "name oneself to the world." (284).

⁶ A founding member of the Akiyo collective, Joël Nankin was convicted for having committed attacks and for violating the integrity of French territory; he was imprisoned from 1983 to 1989.

However, the mobilizations of the inhabitants of Rive-Droite Levassor are a reminder that marooning is still a matter of space. The geography of this neighborhood, together with the analysis of the practices and social representations of the inhabitants of Bô Kannal, underline the reality of a confinement that has contributed to the formation of an ecosystem as well as a space for self-realization and emancipation. The Rive-Droite neighborhood thus appears to be a creative space, where a do-it-yourself resourcefulness is practiced, where inhabitants can share their tools, time, and ingenuity. And it is attraction to this freedom as much as to the sound of TBK that has driven generations of young people to join the band and train to create their own cultural, musical, and choreographic environment: materially, through the construction of their own instruments; and aesthetically, through the creation of their own sound. Here, the mobilized groups turned spatial constraints into advantage and redefined the meaning, uses, and strategic value of space. Urban space becomes a framework structuring the nature and form of the contacts people have with each other. The success of such cultural movements, specific to powerless groups, is therefore measured by the ability of these groups to subvert the meaning deposited and crystallized in built spaces and, more broadly, to resist the colonization of their everyday life.

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