

Athénaïse & Varan Caraïbe present

Words of Negroes

The workers of today break the silence of slaves ...



A film by
Sylvaine DAMPIERRE



DOX Leipzig
International
Competition
2021



SUMMARY

Workers dedicate themselves to the survival of their old sugar factory. They lend their voices to the recovered words of slaves and thus bring back to life a forgotten memory. Against erasure and oblivion, they break the silence of Negroes...

WORDS OF NEGROES is a uniquely three dimensional portrait of life on the tiny French island of Marie Galante. With exquisite cinematography, its images depict the sugar cane fields where the islanders raise and harvest their only source of income and the factory — which is something out of another century — where they process the cane into sugar. But what gives this documentary an extra dimension is the words, almost 200 year old newspaper reports of the trial of a slave owner accused of murdering one of his slaves in the 1840's on the same island. As spoken by today's islanders (who work the same fields, physically process the same crop and who, the audience cannot help but think are descendants of the slaves in the news reports) this story creates a historic context for the images of the workers and their labor. The result is a poignant picture of an island where survival today is a continuing struggle and where the islanders' lives in the 21st century very much echo the slavery of the 19th century.

JIM STARK,

PRODUCER OF AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARIES «TEMPESTAD» AND «CITY OF THE SUN»

Words of



SYNOPSIS

Marie Galante is a tiny island off the banks of Guadeloupe in the french West Indies. In the past, this dependency was a prison out of sight, where slaves were undergoing a merciless treatment in the plantations. Nowadays, the island is still covered with sugar cane fieds and the whole island depends on the chaotic course of its old sugar factory : Grand Anse.

It's a cathedral of rusty iron living on borrowed time for 30 years, whose old cast iron boiler is out of breath. About 60 men work here along the year, striving to keep it alive. Every sugar campaign, a hundred seasonal workers join them. As long as the campaign lasts, Men work in three shifts of 8 hours and the factory gobbles up in a few weeks the major part of the cane produced on the island..

Here the past resurfaces, in the timeless landscapes, the anachronistic shape of the factory, the unchanged gestures of the labour, the endurance that it requires. Here, the men's fate depends on cane and sugar is still made out of their sweat in the machine's din.

I bring back to the workers of the factory a part of their heritage: the transcription of the words pronounced by slaves at the trial of their master in 1842. They seize and embody these words of negroes, thus giving sense to a memory that still forges their lives ...

Negroes



PROPOSAL

At the end of the shooting of "The country upsidedown", the previous documentary feature film I made in Guadeloupe, one of the characters of the movie, Michel Rogers, genealogist, gave me an archive : the detailed report of Louis Joseph Vallentin's trial, judged for the first-degree murder of his slave Sébastien at the Pointe-à-Pitre court in 1842. In this text I found a treasure : the transcription of the declarations of the slaves who were called to testify in their master's trial. This new film was born from my desire to bring back to life these fragments of memory, to sound echoes of these voices in Guadeloupe today's reality

The facts took place in 1838, in Marie Galante. After three months of agony, Sébastien dies in the cell looking like a grave where his master had thrown him, accusing him wrongly of cattle poisoning. Three years after his death, some of the seventy-five slaves of Vallentin were called to testify. Their answers to the questions of the magistrates were recorded and translated by the clerk of the court. Despite the numerous evidences against him, Vallentin is acquitted. Reading this long text shows that there was no alternative ending : slaves had spoken but were never heard.

But now, overcoming the lack of justice and the colonial manipulation, their words must be listened to. I only kept from the text the slaves' answers, transcribed and translated by the clerk, and asked the workers to read them in front of my camera. The choir of men is formed to the rhythm of work shifts. Three or four of them join me for another type of work. It is the time for discovery and confrontation with the archive. First they read the difficult language of the XIXth century, and soon they translate it into creole language : the archive is embodied, brought back into life. They lend their own voices to these fragments of memory

Yet those words are not in the least heroic, they reveal the slaves' survival strategies. They are talking about a world where heroism consisted in surviving, where resiliency was a form of resistance. The workers embody these words knowingly, they appropriate them. The workers of Grand Anse offer a tortured slave a sepulture of words, and thus reconnect themselves to their collective identity, and begin to speak of themselves



INTENTION

They are these workers whose disappearance is relentlessly announced, these Caribbean plant workers, cane planter and cutters, whose we do not even suspect the existence, as they are supposed to live on public aid in an unproductive renowned country. They are these black men standing.

I pay tribute to their skills and their knowledge of the factory, before it's abolition by the economic rationality. I portray them in their landscape, their island ruffled of cane, their painful and glorious heritage, before it's turned into a picturesque scenery where they only play a decorative role. If it is their defeat that is coming, I want to tell their fight, their courage.

I deliberately stand at their side, the side of their distraught strength, their solitude. I walk with them from the sources of their history toward an uncertain future, in order to make their voices heard, to assert their presence.

I am profoundly moved by their courage, the constancy that they show while carrying out the most thankless tasks, by their mutual attention. I want to pass on this emotion : with Jean-Paul and David granting their gestures while they fight against the boiler, with Paul and his companions carrying their wheelbarrows of dust, with Jocelyn and his cane cutters' team, with the youngest ones growing up in the factory ...

In their gesture, I see beauty, in their strength a shape of sweetness, of grace, and the expression of values such as brotherhood, solidarity. Their work, yet directly bound to a disastrous memory, is nevertheless the instrument of their fulfillment.

The social transformation that comes is about to change their lives, their landscape, their relationship to the world. But I don't consider them neither defeated nor resigned. Their beliefs falter, they are concerned, but the film keeps on trusting in their ability to overcome, to reinvent. Even if it is a fragile dream ... **Words of Negroes** build up an heroic, epic vision of the work of the men of Grand Anse to reach their fragility, their humanity.



Length : **80'**
 Language : **French, creole**
 Format : **DCP - 16:9 - Color - Stereo**

Author and director : **Sylvaine Dampierre**
 Based on a idea by : **Sylvaine Dampierre & Gilda Gonfier**

Producer : **Sophie salbot**
 Image : **Renaud Personnaz**
 Sound : **Greg Le Maître**
 Editing : **Sophie Reiter**
 Sound Mixing : **Niels Barletta**
 Photography : **Bernard Gomez**

Produced by : **Athénaise**

In coproduction with : **Varan Caraïbe / Micro Climats / PRO ARTI**

With the support of : **Région Guadeloupe**

CNC - Fonds Image de la Diversité et Commissariat Général à l'Egalité des territoires
Union européenne - FEDER
Fondation pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage
Fondation Esclavage et Réconciliation



Sylvaine Dampierre, film maker

Author of fiction scripts, script-doctor for fiction and documentary. Member of the Ateliers Varan's team in Paris, founder of Varan Caraïbe in Guadeloupe, as a trainer for film making and writting workshops. Was a film editor until 1998 and founded «Télé- Rencontres», an internal television channel at the Paris prison La Santé.

- * **L'île** - 1998, 57'
- * **Un enclos** - 1999, 63'
- * **La rivière des galets** - 2000, 63'
- * **Pouvons-nous vivre ici ?** - 2002, 58'
- * **Green Guérilla** - 2003, 63'
- * **L'île nue**, 14' / **New York repérages**, 17' /
- * **Quelque chose à vous dire**, 20' - 2005
- * **Le pays à l'envers** - 2009, 90'
- * **Piazza Mora** - 2013, 53'

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