It's Like Gold

Paroles de Nègres (2020). Film still courtesy of filmmaker Sylvaine Dampierre.

by Claire Tancons

"It's like gold," exclaims one of the workers from the Grande-Anse sugar factory. He has just extracted the sweet substance from one of the tanks where it is being processed in the upper levels of the rickety instrument that is their workplace. It sticks in the cusp of his hand with the density of thick, damp sand, like on the beaches where the sea hasn't refined shell and coral bits into dust the color of ochre.

The factory is located on the island of Marie-Galante, a few nautical miles away from the larger islands that form the archipelago within the archipelago that is the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. Its workers, neighboring cane fields, and field hands are the main sites and protagonists of *Paroles de Nègres* (2020), a feature-length documentary by Sylvaine Dampierre, cowritten with longtime collaborator Gilda Gonfier.

Paroles de Nègres hovers over the harrowing questions of ancestral recovery, restorative justice, and economic reparation for the formerly enslaved and colonized populations in US and Caribbean territories.[1] With an emphasis on French particularism, it takes hold of the Black Atlantic imagination.

The film pursues a dual narrative thread that is emblematic of Marie-Galante. It parallels, and ultimately intertwines, the slavery-era trial of a sugarcane plantation master and the contemporary trials of the sugarcane economy. Factory workers, sugarcane planters, and cutters translate, from the written French transcription of the trial back into spoken Creole, what the enslaved said at the trial of their enslaver. Dampierre and Gonfier deliver these mirrored histories via a mélange of making-of cinematographic strategy and Theater of the Oppressed methodology in the service of daunting tasks. They invite us to ask ourselves if the consciousness of a people formerly enslaved can arise from the reenactment of its traumatic history in the absence of concurrent economic reparation, without which diminished material conditions only produce new forms of enslavements. They also probe the question of whether the restoration of dignity should be measured against the old, romantic project of "giving voice to the oppressed" in the absence of economic compensation commensurate with the labor produced and the wealth created. In short, *Paroles de Nègres* asks: how can one embody his or her past and present at once under continued conditions of thinly disguised and loosely acquiesced oppression?

Like an alluring tropical cathedral, albeit one in a state of advanced dereliction, the factory's engine room is an organ of broken tubes and rusted metal pipes. Its workers are its fine-tuners, caught in the industrial melody that syncopates the rhythms of their nights and days. Their quarter shifts are metered like a classical music sheet. The worker who likened sugar to gold itself murmurs as much to the listener—the film's soundscape informs

1. I wish to establish at the onset both my awareness of and reverence for the use of the term "enslaved" instead of the noun "slave" in order to distinguish between Africans' temporary historical circumstances versus a permanent condition. I do, however, also use the term "slave," as it would have been used within the historic context of the trial. I do so also in recognition of the vexing, untranslatable, or rather untranslated, term "enslaved" in the French language, whose users continue to use the noun "*esclave*" rather than the lengthy sentence "*personne mise en esclavage*."

you of the functioning of the instrument; the sounds it makes alarm you of its failings. Through another worker, one hears a different sound: the stock market. The global prices for sugar are put in the balance as he recounts the tonnage. The factory saw its last profit six years ago, in 2015. The economic dimension of sugar is introduced midway through the documentary, both in the symbolic image of gold and in relationship to productivity. *Parole de Nègres* is grounded in a broader history that is world history itself, one in which "sweetness and power" are entangled in much the manner narrated by Sidney Mintz in his eponymous book.[2]

Paroles de Nègres (2020). Film still courtesy of filmmaker Sylvaine Dampierre.

The opening sequence lingers on bird's-eye views of the sea as the a slave narrates details of the voyage from the Habitation Vallentin in Marie-Galante to the Assize Court in Pointe-à-Pitre. The openness of the Caribbean Sea and the thoughts of escape it brings to mind contrast with the tale of confinement retold by the slave/worker/narrator as he describes the six days during which sixteen of the seventy-five slaves from the plantation of Master Vallentin are called to testify at his trial—held captive in the witness room, brought sustenance, and left to sleep on stone benches in the process.

2. Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

With the context thus set, the film unfolds in a series of vignettes oscillating between the historical and the contemporary, tracing the habitual toil of labor in the fields and at the factory. One can only infer that the extraordinary task of telling the story of enslaved forebearers was facilitated by a significant shift toward acknowledgment of slavery in France and the francophone Caribbean. This acknowledgment was brought on by the relatively recent opening of Mémorial ACTe, a one-of-a-kind center dedicated to the history of slavery in the Caribbean, located in Guadeloupe.[3] The workers are introduced as a tight-knit community of men

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Top and bottom: *Paroles de Nègres* (2020). Film still courtesy of filmmaker Sylvaine Dampierre.

whose ties, extending far beyond their factory shifts, belie love and pride in the work they do. Despite a recession, the contribution they make to the island's economic development is significant. Importantly, they impart their hard-won knowledge and well-honed skills upon younger generations of otherwise unemployed adult men. Whether in the factory or the fields, the videography is insistent on the seeming nonchalance of precise gestures incorporated into the embodied memory of these workers. Three precise cuts are needed to cut cane: one at the base of the stem, another to cut off its top, and the last to rip off its cutting leaves. Their rhythmic repetition produces in time the heap of canes that will be hauled onto oxen-drawn carts or motorized vehicles, and driven into the factory.

The hearing proceeds at Assize Court, as accounted for in the 1842 edition of *La Gazette de la Guadeloupe* and supplemented by personal archives from the same epoch handed over to the coauthors by genealogist Michel Rogers over a decade ago. It is rendered during break-time readings and in situ filming sessions during which the workers, like the men enslaved before them, seem all the more interchangeable for the fact that they all bear banal French names. Sébastien and Félicien, the accused and accusing slaves, respectively, and their cohorts find stand-ins in Louis, Paul, and Jean-Claude, the contemporary factory workers/cane-cutters who sometimes introduce themselves in their present quality and sometimes do not. In this contemporary cast, two exceptions stand apart. The figure of a traitor, Félicien, mayhap appears under the guise of a quitting worker who announces to his comrades that he has had it and won't return to the factory next year—only to be met with circumspection from the rest of the group, who fear that he might all too easily be proven wrong.

Despite this, though, rather than turning against each other, the workers seem willing to share the burden of their condition. This might be rendered in their readiness to figuratively take in the gag introduced by Master Vallentin to punish rebellious slaves, a passage of the trial written into the script of the film that they follow seemingly unquestioningly—at least on camera—having supposedly left the questioning about the veracity of this judicial archive to the film's coauthors. The crime around which the court hearing took place—poisoning—is revealed early enough in the film and is the harrowing presence, the spectral image, against which no representation can take hold. It is doubly embodied: first in the factory, doubling as the dungeon where Sébastien was left to perish over three months and likely killed by means of the same crime of which he was accused, and second by the workers themselves, doubling as the enslaved. Yet, the loudest statement made by the film might be that the lively and even boisterous men of great presence and pride procure more afterimages than do the specters of the enslaved, and that the crime of their enslaver recedes in the face of the myriad existential challenges of their

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3. *Mémorial ACTe Centre Caribéen d'expressions et de mémoire de la traite et de l'esclavage* (MACTe; Caribbean Center of expressions and memory of the slave trade and of slavery), whose programmatic title reveals its ambitions, was inaugurated in May 2015. In addition to a permanent display interpreting the slave trade and slavery, the MACTe also features temporary contemporary exhibitions and hosts artists residencies. Controversial to some at its inauguration, it is generally welcomed by the local population and appreciated by foreign visitors, if not uncritically.

survivors. The factory workers at Grande-Anse are no more voiceless than the enslaved were acquiescent to their fate.

Like the question of treason among the enslaved, that of truth—judicial truth versus historical truth, for instance—and its corollary dilemmas such as historical narration versus contemporary reenactment might be too lightly skimmed over by Dampierre and Gonfier. For if the historical event relies in equal part on the catastrophe of slavery and the humane drama of treason, a greater depth of rendition of the latter dimension is lacking in the contemporary version. Hands—belonging to Dampierre or Gonfier, perusing the gazette in a short sequence as if a historical mise en abyme—are a passing critical inset in the film whose dual structure alone might not actually provide the criticality presumably aimed for by the filmmaker and her collaborator.

That they leave much to the imagination, however, is their weakness's matching strength, if not the apologetic precondition of such a delicate endeavor as theirs. The sole white character who makes an appearance toward the end of the film, presumably the factory overseer, could be a stand-in for Master Vallentin. Initially perceived by his slaves as benevolent according to the standards of the times—he is praised for "spoiling his negroes with cod on Tuesday and syrup on Friday," as one of them recounts—he turns murderous when he sets out to poison Sébastien. (In the contemporary footage, the white manager oversees the collapse of a machine part that he appears not to notice and leaves for his men to fix.)

Following from this belated appearance of a lone white character, and as if to further impart the notion of the lasting workings of the white man's hand, toward the end of the film, on the occasion of a mass celebrated in the honor of its patron Saint (Éloi), the factory is literally turned into a cathedral, the house of the white man's god. But if in this closing scene the workers, their families, and friends pray that the factory continues to function well as guarantor of their community's subsistence, in the closing credits it is the *gwo ka* drums that provide the sounds of true redemption.

Soné ka la![4]

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