Carnival as Contentious Performance: A Comparison between Contemporary Fort-de-France, Pointe-à-Pitre, and London Carnivals

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KEYWORDS

Caribbean
cultural movements
carnival performances
mobilization
politicization
repertoire
resistance

ABSTRACT

In the 1970s, in a context of increased racial tensions and growing nationalist claims, the use of rhythms, instruments, and clothing associated with Africa among the black populations of England, Guadeloupe, and Martinique became part of a cultural and political repertoire aimed at resurrecting and denouncing a long history of subordination. Similarly, the mobilization of carnival by Afro-Caribbean activists today can be considered as a tactical choice—that is to say, carnival has become part of the standardized, limited, context-dependent repertoires from which claim-making performances are drawn.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Fort-de-France, London, and Pointe-à-Pitre between 2000 and 2018, this article analyzes how cultural movements have drawn on carnivalesque aesthetics to both memorialize and display the complex history of black Caribbean populations. I argue that Caribbean carnival has been subject to constant reinterpretations since the eighteenth century and that, as such, this repertoire is not only a model or a set of limited means of action, but also a convention through which carnival groups constantly reinvent their skills and resources. Furthermore, this article shows that the repertoires mobilized by the carnival bands I study in Europe and in the Caribbean cannot be reduced to an aesthetic gesture that serves political claims, and that they are part of a historical genealogy that testifies to the irreducible character of a way of life.

1. Roger Bastide, *Les Amériques noires* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996 [1967]).
2. Denis-Constant Martin, "Je est un autre, nous est un même. Culture populaire, identités et politique à propos du carnaval de Trinidad." *Revue française de science politique* 42, no. 5 (1992): 183.
3. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
4. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the Creole expression *pwofitasyon* refers to the abuse of power by a powerful person over someone he already knows is weaker than he is, to make him even more subordinate.
5. Charles Tilly, *Trajectories of Change* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006), 50, 39.
6. Charles Tilly, "Repertoires of Contention in America and Britain, 1750-1830," in *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control, and Tactics*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John David McCarthy (Cambridge: Winthrop, 1979), 131.
7. While these "sister islands" display a high degree of commonality, starting of course with their simultaneous integration into the French Republic after World War II, their histories are different. Occupied by the English from 1794 to 1802, Martinique in particular was exempted from the first abolition of slavery (1794), which in Guadeloupe resulted in a considerable weakening of planter hegemony. This historical divergence may explain why

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Introduction

Following nineteenth-century emancipations, black populations remained marginalized across the American continent. Kept away from participation in the national economic and political systems, they often used carnival as a vehicle to assert their presence and to position themselves against the hegemonic projects of European societies.¹ While the legacy of slavery fueled a desire to emancipate from the norms and codes of white "civilization," carnival artists and participants rarely explicitly memorialized their past oppression. Across the continent, carnival was primarily perceived as a time and space for celebration and for individual or collective creation.² In the Caribbean, even though it provided a stage for free expression that sometimes bordered on the political—the burning of Vaval, the traditional cardboard and papier-mâché figure that reigns over the Guadeloupe and Martinique carnivals, may thus be interpreted as a way to wipe the slate clean and erase present inequalities—it was not a site for vocal claim-making.

In the 1970s, however, a variety of cultural movements challenged the "bourgeois" character of carnival and injected it with more militant undertones in a context of increased racial tensions and growing nationalist claims. Carnival thus left the "infrapolitical" sphere—where actions, gestures, and signs that criticized the dominant went mostly unnoticed—and grew into a "public transcript" of power relations that was more rebellious and subversive.³ The use of rhythms, instruments, and clothing associated with Africa, especially, became part of a cultural and political repertoire aimed at resurrecting and denouncing a long history of subordination. Deemed more "authentic," African performance styles epitomized a desire to resist the neocolonial order, racism, assimilation, or, more largely, *pwofitasyon*.⁴

Charles Tilly's notion of "repertoires of contention," defined as "prevailing forms of [collective] action" that "characterize the interaction among a specified set of collective actors" seems particularly fruitful when analyzing the reasons why social movements put certain artistic traditions, including carnival, at the service of political battles.⁵ The mobilization of the carnival performance repertoire can indeed be considered a "strategic choice" if we consider "the range of actions theoretically available" to Afro-Caribbean activists.⁶ In the Caribbean context, however, the use of particular drums or costumes cannot be analyzed solely as a "tactic," insofar as slavery was not just a form of economic oppression: it also entailed a process of cultural dispossession (deculturation) and the imposition of an exogenous culture (enculturation). Consequently, carnival participation by Afro-Caribbean activists in Fort-de-France, Pointe-à-Pitre, and London is inseparable from a desire to expose the cultural dimension of neocolonialism, with a view to individual and collective empowerment.

To test this hypothesis, I will first review the history of carnival in Guadeloupe and Martinique—two former colonies that became overseas *départements* of France in 1946⁷—and in London, where Trinidadian migrants established and developed one of the largest carnivals in the world in

large-scale social, political, and cultural mobilizations such as the 2009 general strike have often started in Guadeloupe before spreading to Martinique. See Jean-Luc Bonniol, "Janvier-mars 2009, trois mois de lutte en Guadeloupe," *Les Temps Modernes* 1, nos. 662–63 (2011): 82–113. For further discussion, see Lionel Arnaud, *Les tambours de Bô Kan-nal. Mobilisations et résistances culturelles en Martinique* (Paris: Karthala, forthcoming).

8. Tilly, *Trajectories of Change*.

9. Howard S. Becker and Robert R. Faulkner, "Do You Know...?" *The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

10. Charles Tilly, "Nineteenth-Century Origins of Our Twentieth-Century Collective-Action Repertoire," CRSO Working Paper No. 244 (University of Michigan, September 1981), 9–10.

11. Lilian Mathieu, *L'espace des mouvements sociaux* (Bellecombes-en-Bauges: Le Croquant, 2012).

12. On the general history of Afro-Caribbean carnivals, see Richard D. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Paul Rosele Chim and Joël Raboteur, eds., *Le Carnaval et la folie imaginaire des peuples* (Paris: Édition Publibook, 2012); Thierry L'Etang et André Lucrèce, eds., *Le Carnaval. Sources, traditions, modernité* (Fort-de-France: Les Cahiers du Patrimoine, 2007); Hollis Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion: The Carnival*

the post–World War II period. I will then analyze how groups organized in these three locations in the 1970s have drawn on carnivalesque aesthetics to both memorialize and display the complex history of black Caribbean populations. The third part of my essay will focus on the participatory nature of carnival and how it has fostered forms of resistance that are not only aesthetic but also social—that is, embedded in values of solidarity and community. Ultimately, I will highlight the "trajectories of change"⁸ that have affected Afro-Caribbean carnival performances so as to refute the idea of fixed Afro-Caribbean cultural and political repertoire that can be learned and then known once and for all, and to present carnival as a *convention* through which carnival groups constantly reinvent their skills and resources.⁹

1. The Origins of the Carnival Action Repertoire in Guadeloupe, Martinique, and London

In its most interactionist sense, the word "repertoire" refers to a model "in which the accumulated experience ... of contenders interact with the strategies of authorities to make a limited number of forms of action more feasible, attractive, and frequent than many others which could, in principle, serve the same interests."¹⁰ The choice of means of action is thus restricted by situational constraints, including cultural familiarity, the availability of certain resources to the group at a specific time, and the existence of "competing" claims by other groups.¹¹ Carnival provides an interesting vantage point from which to investigate the dynamics of the reconstruction and reappropriation of meaning, especially in contexts of cultural pluralism where various social groups are involved in uneven numerical, political, economic, or racial relationships. In order to better understand this process of constant reinterpretation, I will begin by briefly distinguishing three stages—from the arrival of carnival in the Caribbean to the development of street bands in the aftermath of abolition to its reinvention in the immediate postwar period.¹² I will then analyze how cultural movements have tried to reinvent carnival by subverting the hierarchy of values between European and African cultures.

Carnival: Between Freedom and Prohibition

The first period started when European Christian settlers imported their carnivalesque traditions, including charivaris, cavalcades, balls, and masked receptions. Soon, carnival became a "Creole" celebration, organized by and for the exclusive enjoyment of European settlers: it consisted mainly of indoor parties, balls, and house-to-house visits, in which high-society men and women were costumed either as *neg' jardin* (black field workers) or *mulâtresses* (mulatto women), who embodied seduction and temptation in the white imagination.¹³ In Trinidad and Tobago, where carnival arrived in the luggage of French colonists worried about the instability of the islands they had settled in, men went out at night with torches and drums to form *canboulay* (from *cannes brûlées*, burnt cane) processions in which they mimicked black activity when a cane fire broke out.¹⁴ Meanwhile, free people of color were not allowed to mingle with whites, and therefore celebrated carnival more discreetly, away from the *habitations*. However, under mounting pressure from the black population in the early nineteenth century, whites let the *mûlatres* organize private dances, which they were forbidden to attend. As for slaves, they were banned from participating in the masquerade carnival events of the colonial elite, except to serve their masters.

After the abolition of slavery in 1838 (Trinidad and Tobago) and in 1848 (Martinique and

Tradition in Trinidad and Tobago 1763-1962 (Chicago: Research Associates School Times, 2001); Biringanine Ndagano, *Penser le carnaval. Variations, discours et représentations* (Paris: Karthala, 2010); John W. Nunley and Judith Bettelheim, eds. *Caribbean Festival Arts: Each and Every Bit of Difference* (Seattle: St. Louis Art Museum/University of Washington Press, 1988); and Véronique Rochais and Patrick Bruneteaux, *Le Carnaval des travestis. Les travestis makoumè* (Case-Pilote: Lafontaine, 2006).

13. The word *mûlatres* comes from the late sixteenth-century Spanish word *mulato*, which meant "young mule." It was the term enslavers used to refer to children born out of (mostly forced) intercourse with African slaves. In their minds, any union between whites and blacks was unnatural and could thus be compared to the progeny of two equine species. Owing to their European ancestry and to a generally lighter skin, however, mulatto children were often freed, educated, and could inherit their father's estate. They thus became part of a small but relatively privileged socioeconomic class. On the specific figure of the *mulatta* in the Atlantic world, see Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010); and Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

Guadeloupe), a new period began. While the black bourgeoisie tried to imitate the white bourgeoisie by launching its own balls, where satin and velvet reigned supreme, former slaves left the houses to "occupy" the streets, a space where people with few resources could nevertheless celebrate.¹⁵ Because colonial officials considered street carnival to be a threat to law and order, morality, and private property, masks and disguises were often prohibited, under penalty of imprisonment. In Trinidad, attempts were made as early as 1858 to prevent the canboulay processions, which since 1838 had become a symbolic celebration of black emancipation—even though they never took place on August 1, that is, the official day of the abolition of slavery. Canboulay was no longer allowed after 1881, while a ship from the British royal fleet would remain anchored off Port-of-Spain during the carnival period until the 1950s.

After the Second World War, carnival changed again. In 1946 the former French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe became French overseas *départements*, which meant that the residents of both islands now benefited from the same social and political rights as the rest of French citizens. From a simple popular celebration, carnival became a public affair. The city of Fort-de-France gradually got involved in its organization and consistently supported its development. Competitions were organized that allowed local artists and musicians to display their mastery of beguine,¹⁶ mazurka,¹⁷ and *valse creole* (Creole waltz), while in the countryside and in working-class neighborhoods people continued to organize satirical parades that mocked political figures and social actors who had "erred" (whether by committing adultery or engaging in so-called disreputable behavior) by burning them in effigy. But the emergence of organizing committees and carnival federations, along with the development of a Caribbean consumer society, partly converted carnival into a sedate, westernized celebration. In 1950s Fort-de-France and Pointe-à-Pitre, beautiful young women dressed in either traditional clothing or modern outfits now competed for the title of Queen of Carnival in the presence of the prefect and military authorities.¹⁸ In Trinidad and Tobago, the independence gained from the United Kingdom in 1962 resulted in the recognition and institutionalization of carnival. Steel band¹⁹ and calypso²⁰ competitions lost some of their critical edge to become instruments of nationalism.

The Two Faces of Carnival: "Pretty Mas" vs. "Traditional Mas"

In Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Trinidad and Tobago today, carnival is a divided event: on the one hand, there is "Pretty Mas" (also called "Fancy Mas" or "bourgeois carnival"), the colorful and joyful festival during which well-organized walking bands dance one after another, displaying shimmering, richly decorated costumes; on the other hand, there is "Traditional Mas" (or "Ole Mas"), the carnival of the "dirty," the celebration which showcases menacing, disruptive costumed figures (the Midnight Robber, Pierrot Grenade, etc.) and during which single maskers and small groups of men and women parade in cheap costumes that they have made with the means at their disposal. This duality of carnival, separating two audiences and two carnival repertoires—one static, aesthetically pleasing, and European in inspiration; the other ambulatory, vaguely threatening, and rooted in Afro-Creole culture—particularly manifested itself in the 1970s, with groups that sought to challenge the cultural hegemony of the bourgeois elites by occupying public space.

In the French West Indies some carnival groups indeed freed themselves from the rules set by the carnival federations. Emancipated from bourgeois conventions, much like their fugitive-

14. Trinidad was a Spanish colony from 1498 to 1797. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, an influx of white and "colored"

French planters and their black slaves transformed Trinidad into a Spanish colony run by Frenchmen and worked by African slaves. In 1797, when the island came under British control, it hosted 250 white French planters, 150 Spanish residents, 4,700 mulattoes, and nearly 100,000 slaves. For about a century, from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, the French plantocracy dominated Trinidad and Tobago. Planters spoke French or a Creolized French, and they mainly attended Catholic churches.

15. On postemancipation carnival in Trinidad, see especially Ana Maria Alonso, "Men in 'Rags' and the Devil on the Throne: A Study of Protest and Inversion in the Carnival of Post-Emancipation Trinidad," in "Carnival in Perspective," special issue, *Plantation Society in the Americas: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Tropical and Subtropical History and Culture* 3, no. 1: 73–120.

16. Beguine (or biguine) is a Caribbean musical and choreographic genre that developed in Martinique after 1848. With the creation of musical societies and the organization of concerts, the cities of Martinique and Guadeloupe saw the emergence of ball orchestras identical to the jazz orchestras of New Orleans. Composed of clarinets, drums, and banjos, later associated with drums, these orchestras popularized biguine in Parisian clubs of the 1920s. For a study of twentieth-century biguine, see

slave ancestors (*maroons*) had freed themselves from slavery, they went off the beaten track, both in the literal and figurative sense, since they did not allow themselves to be constricted by any itinerary or any way of experiencing carnival. "A form of physical and symbolic violence exuded from the[ir] bodies through the virulent determination to speak out against, mock, and stigmatize power-brokers of any kind. This was their opportunity to give corporeal expression to their dissatisfaction."²¹ If maskers often came off as "*méchant*," (nasty) in their politicized use of carnival, they nevertheless submitted to the rules of conduct set by the groups they joined. They also conformed to carefully defined musical identities and ritualized outfits whose primary goal was to showcase their attachment to African roots. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the *mas a Kongo* (Congo masking) and the "Neg Gwo Siwo" (from *nègres gros-sirop*) thus involved coating their bodies and faces with a mixture of *sirop de batterie* (sugarcane syrup) and soot or coal, giving their skins a darker, shiny aspect (fig. 1). The body thus disguised, sometimes dressed in a short loincloth made with banana leaves, was supposed to enhance the memory of Africa in a context where it was often denied, or simply despised. The deprecated link to Africa was thus transformed into the affirmation of a glorious identity, in an interesting reversal of the ordinary hierarchy of values between European and African performance cultures.

Figure 1. The "Neg Gwo Siwo" tradition revisited by a group of young activists in the colors of the Martinique flag during Fort-de-France Carnival, 2020. Credit: Benny Photo.

Édouard Benoît, "Biguine: Popular Music of Guadeloupe, 1940-1960," in *Zouk: World Music in the West Indies*, ed. Jocelyne Guilbaud (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

17. Mazurka is a style of music and dance that originated from Poland. It arrived in Martinique at the very beginning of the twentieth century. It was the favorite dance of the French army officers, who were soon imitated by the residents of the city of Saint-Pierre, the former capital of Martinique.

18. In this new configuration resulting from *départementalisation*, that is, the 1946 incorporation of the "old colonies" (Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion Island, and French Guiana) into France as *départements*, the prefect became the main representative of the French state, as he already was in other French departments. His authority gradually replaced that of the all-powerful governor, who symbolized the colonial administration. Martinicans overwhelmingly voted for this change, expecting this supposed administrative standardization to break with the colonial tradition of using the "peculiar" nature of overseas countries as an excuse for setting specific legal rules.

19. A steel band is an orchestra made up of percussion instruments such as drums and metal containers. Steel bands often play calypso melodies, but calypso singers tend to be also accompanied by instruments such as the guitar, the trumpet, and the saxophone.

20. The word "calypso" supposedly derives from the West

However, it should be noted that, before the 1960s and 1970s, the use of the *masque à goudron* (tar mask) in Guadeloupe and Martinique carnivals was not necessarily related to African ancestry but was rather meant to frighten children and bystanders—especially those wearing elegant carnival outfits—who feared being soiled by the *siwo batri*. In other words, even though the color black was activated as a symbolic marker, *mas a Kongo* did not necessarily constitute a political claim or an act of "resistance" as conceptualized by James Scott.²² The practice of black body make-up, as well as the use of foliage, was actually a crucial aspect of Indo-European carnival, with its attendant cult of the bear and the wild man.²³ Similarly, the *djab wouj* (red devil) and *ti djab* (little devil) figures which, today, are said to refer to positive African gods (similar to the masks of the Casamance harvest in Senegal), could also found in many European carnivals (fig. 2).²⁴ Even the use of the whip in contemporary Guadeloupe Carnival, said to be a reminder of slavery and subjugation, is nevertheless present in Indo-European carnival as a way to improve soil (and female) fertility and ward off evil spirits.²⁵

Figure 2. The Red Devils of the Tanbo Bô Kannal walking group in Fort-de-France Carnival, 2013.
Author's photograph.

The same type of tradition also existed in Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, especially during Jouvay (or J'Ouvert), when gangs of young people imitated devils, demons, monsters, and goblins by soiling themselves with chocolate, fat, oil and paint, tar, and molasses to symbolize the shedding of all inhibitions and exorcize their fear of death. But these traditions echoed not only the happy and festive celebrations of slaves after they gained their freedom in 1838, but also the spirit of civil unrest in Port-of-Spain, when people covered themselves in oil or paint or tar to avoid being recognized, without any reference to an African past.

The desire to promote Afro-Caribbean culture and traditions in Trinidad only became explicit in the 1950s, with the making of increasingly spectacular costumes that would later become tourist

African term *kaiso*, used as an expression of admiration similar to "Bravo!" In West Africa (present-day Nigeria), people would gather in *kaiso* tents where a griot would lead them in song.

In pre-emancipation Trinidad captive Africans brought to work on sugar plantations would gather during carnival and mix African singing, dancing, and drumming with "patois" (Trinidadian French Creole) to mock their masters and to communicate with each other. To stand out, each singer adopted a stage name and a recognizable style. Today, the word "calypso" refers to any song that is performed in the streets by carnival-goers, or on stage by professional or semi-professional singers. For further detail, see John Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Jocelyne Guilbaud, *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad's Carnival Musics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).

21. Jérôme Pruneau, Melyon-Reinette Stéphanie, and Agnès Danielle, "'Maché an Mas-la !' Ethnographie de l'usage symbolique du corps 'charnel' dans le carnaval guadeloupéen," *Caribbean Studies* 37, no. 1 (2009): 53. My translation.

22. When analyzing the notion of resistance, James Scott distinguishes between "real resistance," which "embodies ideas or intentions that negate the basis of domination itself" and has revolutionary potential, and "token, incidental, or epiphenomenal activities," which lack the organized, systematic, and cooperative character of true resistance and

attractions. In 1957, a nineteen-year-old bandleader named George Bailey revolutionized carnival with his "Back to Africa" organization, which presented a "Pretty" version of the African roots of Trinidadians, hitherto perceived through the prism of the Western or even Hollywood imagination, in a sumptuous show inspired by the traditions of West Africa.²⁶

Intended to offset the pejorative image of Africa conveyed by the colonial imagination, this performance repertoire was imported to London in 1959 by Trinidadian activist Claudia Jones (1915–64). The founding editor of the *West Indian Gazette*, a monthly newspaper with a circulation of fifteen thousand established in London in March 1958, she led the first West Indian delegation to the Home Office to deal with the racist violence that had then been shaking the Notting Hill district.²⁷ Four months later, on January 30, 1959, in order to bring the Caribbean community together and encourage friendship based on equality and human dignity with the English, she took the initiative in organizing London's first Afro-Caribbean carnival in the St. Pancras festival hall, north of the British capital city.²⁸ A thousand people attended the event, which featured steel bands, calypso singers, and a lavish costume competition. The celebration soon spilled over when steel band players decided to organize an impromptu parade during the event, creating tensions with some residents. In 1964, Rhaunee Laslett, a social worker and community activist who had been born in London to an American Indian mother and a Russian father, reshaped the event around the prevention of racial tensions and the rapprochement of a divided community. With the help of a social work organization, the North Kensington Amenity Trust, she transformed Notting Hill Carnival from a simple competition of calypso masks and singers into a vast public event. In the early 1970s, the advent of sound systems, but also of Rastafarian culture from Jamaica, boosted the event but also its communal dimension by attracting many participants, particularly young blacks from the various segregated districts of London.

2. From the Promotion of Caribbean Culture to Political Mobilization

In London, Fort-de-France, and Pointe-à-Pitre, the 1970s were a time when the carnival repertoire was reconfigured. In a context of growing "identity" claims and political radicalization, attested by the diffusion and success of Black Power ideas among Afro-descendants around the world, the opposition between Pretty Mas and Traditional Mas was replayed to serve more openly militant agendas.²⁹ A "third way" of sorts between the self-regulated, "civilized" celebration of the "bourgeois" (whites) and the unruly charivari of the (black) masses was devised. It combined a supposed African and popular "authenticity" with careful, even spectacular staging.

Among the "new" carnival bands that emerged at the time, carnival was seen as a way not only to reclaim and celebrate black culture but also to psychologically and somatically awaken Afro-Caribbean people to the need for political or, more specifically, identity-based claims. As such, the repertoire was not solely meant to mobilize: it was rooted in action-based pedagogy, meaning in a willingness, endogenous to the collective, to deepen its understanding of itself, of others, and of their political, social, and cultural environment.

Skin Drums and Colonial Helmets as Vehicles of Cultural Revival

In Fort-de-France, the Tanbo Bô Kannal walking band (TBK) has strived for more than forty years to promote not just Martinican carnival, but also, and above all, black Martinican music and

therefore cannot effect significant change. See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 292.

23. See Samuel Kinser's essay in this issue and Marie-Pascale Mallé, ed., *Le Monde à l'envers* (Paris: Mucem/Flammarion, 2014).

24. Aimé Césaire, the poet who was elected mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945 and remained deputy to the French National Assembly for Martinique from 1945 to 1993, is often presented as the first, if not the first, to have highlighted the African ancestry of the Martinican red devil: "One day, I had a shock, I was in Senegal, in Casamance, during a great village festival. Suddenly, I saw the Martinican Mardi-Gras fat ox coming in with its red suit studded with mirrors, its tail and its bovine horns. I ran up to a villager, asked him what it was, what this mask was, and what it meant to him. He told me that it was the mask of those who have undergone the initiation. He explained to me that the bovine horns were the symbol of temporal wealth, and that the mirrors placed side by side were the symbol of knowledge, in other words the symbol of spiritual wealth." Cited in Thierry L'Étang et André Lucrèce, eds., *Le Carnaval. Sources, traditions, modernité* (Fort-de-France: Les Cahiers du Patrimoine, 2007), 106. My translation.

25. Stéphanie Mulet, "La trace des Masques. Identité guadeloupéenne entre pratiques et discours." *Ethnologie française* 33, no. 1 (2003): 111–22.

dances such as *bèlè* and *kalenda*, inherited from the former plantation complex and whose main characteristic is that they involve skin drums (*tambours a po* in Martinican Creole).³⁰ TBK was born in one of the most disadvantaged districts of Martinican capital, the Rive Droite-Levassor district, also known as "Bô Kannal": members wanted to improve the image of this area of ill repute while claiming their nonconformity, in a sort of reversal of the stigma.³¹ Concerned with the gradual disappearance in his neighborhood of a number of cultural traditions such as the Papa Djab figure (an emblematic red devil that used to be an essential figure in Martinique Carnival) and of *danmyé* (a martial art and dance form similar to Brazilian *capoeira*, in which two men clash to the rhythm of the drum), a young slaughterhouse worker named Victor Treffre (born in 1941) started to publicize the work of various informal artistic collectives in the early 1960s. He later strove to collect traditional musical and choreographic know-how in order to transmit and disseminate them among the younger generations. In February 1973, these initiatives acquired a spectacular dimension as youths from Rive Droite decided to display their singing and drumming skills in the streets of Fort-de-France. Denigrated by the mulatto class, pushed off the podium by the organizers of carnival, they improvised a vindictive chorus (*Comité bourgeois, carnaval bidon!* [Bourgeois committee, fake carnival!]) and vowed to restore carnival to its former "authenticity," which, according to them, was threatened by the "flowery floats" of the assimilated elites.

Hooked on the idea, they started rehearsing with new instruments adapted to street-walking, created by recycling old plastic cans on which they fixed the skins of young goats recovered from the slaughterhouse in Fort-de-France where some of them worked. Rather than just imitate the scorned music of the "old negroes" (*bagay vié neg*), they created a new type of performance, the *kalenbwa*, inspired by *kalenda* dancing³² and by the music of the *chwal bwa* (wooden horse).³³ The overall atmosphere was one of celebration and mockery, with the participants being mainly there to "let off steam" and to make their "sound" heard. However, a series of tragic events—including the police murder of a young student at Schoelcher High School in 1971³⁴ and the bloody repression of the February 1974 strike in Chalvet³⁵—led to a reorientation of the practice. Cultural and political activists started to envision the cultural initiatives of Bô Kannal youths as a potential mechanism for popular political mobilization.

Today, TBK is present at most events that commemorate slavery, be it the "Convoy for Reparation" (initiated in 2000 by Garcin Malsa, founder of the Movement for the Independence of Martinique), the events organized for the fiftieth anniversary of Frantz Fanon's death in 2011, or the commemorations of the popular revolt of December 1959 when three young demonstrators were killed by the police (fig. 3).³⁶ In 2015, TBK was particularly active in the May 22 celebrations that, in Martinique, commemorate the abolition of slavery by the French Republic.³⁷ So was Voukoum, a guest Guadeloupean organization created in 1988 with which it maintains close relations. Originally from Basse-Terre (the main island of Guadeloupe), Voukoum is in many respects comparable to TBK, due to its popular origins and its use of so-called *a po* (skin) drums. What is original about this walking group's carnival work is their desire to honor Guadeloupean culture heritage through masks and traditional costumes (such as *mas a Kongo*). To them, these are emblems of a Guadeloupean identity and, more broadly, of its African roots, which the group considers to be in jeopardy and would like to see acknowledged, supported, and strengthened.

26. Garth L. Green and Philip W. Scher, eds., *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 35.

27. On August 17, 1958, a hateful crowd broke the windows of a black-occupied house on Stowe Road in the Shepherd's Bush neighborhood. A few days later, a black man was savagely attacked in a North Kensington pub. From August to September 1958, these racist attacks occurred daily, day and night, causing dozens of injuries. Eight months later, a young Caribbean carpenter was beaten to death. These riots, known as the "Notting Hill white riots," galvanized the black community and strongly contributed to its mobilization throughout the 1960s. See Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988).

28. Bill Schwarz, "'Claudia Jones and the West Indian Gazette': Reflections on the Emergence of Post-colonial Britain," *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003): 264–85.

29. As Stuart Hall has argued, "Black is not a question of pigmentation ... [It] is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category." Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Theories of Race and Racism*, ed. John Solomos and Les Back (London: Routledge, 2000), 149. According to Claire Alexander, British "blackness" has its own specific history that can be broadly divided into two phases: one that ran from the 1960s to the mid-1980s and which should be understood as a political commitment to bringing

Figure 3. Tanbo Bô Kannal's 2011 parade through the streets of Fort-de-France to commemorate the December 1959 popular uprising. Author's photograph.

As emblematic of the Antillean cultural revival is Akiyo (Creole for "Who are they?"), a carnival group initiated in 1979 by anticolonial activists concerned with promoting Guadeloupean culture for a Guadeloupean audience. Taking up the formula initiated by TBK in the early 1970s, this self-identified *Mouvman kiltirél* (cultural movement) reclaims the streets with skin drums and rhythms from the *gwo ka* (literally, big drum) repertoire, a musical genre inherited from the plantation complex and similar to *bèlè*, but specific to Guadeloupe. Akiyo differs from TBK, however, in its organization and its openly political commitment to wrest Guadeloupean culture from local and national public authorities. Some of its founding members were actually activists associated with the Mouvement populaire pour une Guadeloupe indépendante (MPGI), while others belonged to clandestine political groups.³⁸ While TBK members have become more or less politicized over time, trading their red *kaban* costumes (old nightgowns or sheets traditionally stored under the bed as a draw sheet) for African outfits and later costumes bearing the colors of the Martinican flag (black, red, and green), Akiyo members immediately considered the mobilization of previously banned music and instruments as anticolonial action. In the early 1980s, its participants went so far as to mock the French state by wearing military fatigues and colonial helmets. Believing that the group was damaging the reputation of the French army, the subprefect issued an order in 1985 prohibiting the band from performing in public. In reaction, more than eight thousand people demonstrated in the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre along with Akiyo. Since then, colonial outfits have become a trademark of the band. Combined with the beat of dozens of skin drums, played in unison while performing a fast-paced march (the *déboulé*), they reinforce the group's warlike character and never fail to impress audiences. Today, Akiyo's stated objective is to turn carnival into a place of expression, derision, an outlet for youth, where it is possible to denounce colonization, slavery, and the excess of assimilation without replacing the politics of protest (fig. 4).

together all the "nonwhite" populations of England; and a second, from the mid-1980s to the very early 2000s, which saw "the fracturing of this coalition" over the identity claims of various ethnic (and later, religious) groups. Claire Alexander, "Breaking Black: The Death of Ethnic and Racial Studies in Britain," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 6 (2018): 1038. A comparable analysis and chronology could be applied to the French West Indies.

30. Philip Curtin, *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex: Essays in Atlantic History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

31. While the name "Bô kannal" sounds like an abbreviated form of *Bord de canal* (canal's edge), that is, the name given to the initially illegal neighborhood located along the Levassor canal, "bo" more commonly refers to a kiss, which gives the term a very affectionate dimension.

32. Kalenda is said to be the oldest of the African dances in Martinique. It is more improvisational than *bèlè*, as the dancer is alone in front of the drum. On the complexities of contemporary kalenda in the French Antilles, see Julian Gerstin, "The Allure of Origins. Neo-African Dances in the French Caribbean and the Southern United States," in *Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the U.S. South*, ed. Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cécile Accilien (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007): 123–45.

33. *Chwal bwa* music owes its name to the eponymous merry-

Figure 4. Akyio's déboulé on January 7, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vi3wWBBSOKo>

Sound Systems and the Celebration of Black Community

In the French overseas departments, the 1970s were characterized by the growth of a pro-independence, even nationalist, rhetoric that fostered a rediscovery of African music and dance as well as renewed interest in carnival, particularly among students. In contrast, young Afro-Caribbean people based in Paris or in the rest of France had little interest in festive traditions, and the same was true with English youths, especially those born in Jamaica.³⁹ Since most of them had been born and educated in London's inner city neighborhoods, their cultural self-expression tended to favor the lyrics and rhythms of reggae as well as the concepts, beliefs, symbols, and practices of Rastafarianism, two forms popularized and conflated by Bob Marley and his band, the Wailers, who quickly became icons comparable to Marcus Garvey or Malcolm X. Marley's songs spoke of violence, blood, fire, police, oppression, and revolt; but also of love and Jah Rastafari, the black God who would come to save black people and take them to the promised land, Africa. Indeed, reggae and Rastafarianism developed particularly in the 1960s in the poor districts of Kingston, the Jamaican capital, before spreading throughout the black diaspora, and young West Indians born in Britain, facing racism and segregation, soon identified with these movements. Gradually, reggae based in Great Britain began to emerge in the music and songs of Caribbean bands such as Aswad, Cimarons, Misty in Roots, and Steel Pulse, which tried to reflect in part the personal experience of black people in England. In this sense, reggae and Rastafarianism provided London's Caribbean youth with a worldview, a political philosophy, and an exclusive language, as well as a set of rituals rooted in music, dance, and marijuana use.⁴⁰ More significantly, both participated in the formation of neighborhood groups that would gather around sound systems, allowing them to recreate forms of sociability away from the London's nightclubs, from which they were generally excluded (although the 1968 and 1976 Race Relations Act had theoretically banned such discriminatory practices). Introduced in the 1974 Notting Hill Carnival, sound systems symbolically "took possession" of the city's space-time, while the exhilaration triggered by the gathering, exacerbated by the massive consumption of alcohol and "God's herb," broke with contemporary norms of behavior. Made up of one or more turntables,

go-round that turns only with the strength of the men who push it to give it the necessary impetus.

In the center, musicians play traditional instruments such as the *chacha*, *ti-bwa*, the accordion, the Martinican flute, or the drum. Until the 1970s, this small wooden carousel was a feature of all local festivals in Martinique.

34. On May 14, 1971, during a demonstration by students of the Schœlcher High School against the visit of the minister of the interior, Pierre Messmer, a clash with the police led to the death of a high school student named Gérard Nouvet. The outcry that followed forced the minister to shorten part of his stay.

35. In early 1974, agricultural workers went on strike to obtain a five-franc wage increase. On February 14, 1974, a group of demonstrators headed north of the island. On the Chalvet plateau, they fell into an ambush set up by the French police, which surrounded the strikers with a helicopter and more than two hundred gendarmes. Stones were thrown against police officers, who responded with bullets. The confrontation left one worker dead and several injured. On February 16, the tortured body of a young man from Marigot was found abandoned on a beach.

36. On these events, see Louis-Georges Placide, *Les émeutes de décembre 1959 en Martinique. Un repère historique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

37. On May 22, 1848, some sixty thousand slaves from Martinique rebelled to enforce the abolition decree signed a month earlier by

an amplifier, numerous speakers, and an extensive collection of vinyl records, the sound system allowed the disc jockey to adjust the sounds to the tastes and moods of his audience, which made it an extremely powerful medium within the Afro-Caribbean community (fig. 5). In their presence, the streets were charged with unusual, frenetic energy.

Figure 5. Gladys Wax sound system, Notting Hill Carnival, August 2000. Author's photograph.

However, the multiplication of sound systems in carnival parades, the volume of the music they played, and the crowds they generated made them an increasingly problematic aspect of the festivities to residents and participants alike. The 1975 carnival was thus marked by an upsurge in pickpocketing, snatching, illegal alcohol sales, and damage to the gardens of residential areas, while only about sixty police officers were in attendance to ensure the safety of a demonstration previously perceived as anecdotal to London life. To meet these new challenges, various artists who participated in the Notting Hill Carnival came together in 1975 as an organization, the Carnival Development Committee (CDC), which encouraged the creation of new steel bands and masking groups and eventually redirected the carnival towards the Trinidad and Tobago tradition. In April 1976, the CDC met with the Council of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea as well as with the Metropolitan Police to discuss how to make the festivities safer. Its leaders then decided to increase the number of police officers to twelve hundred during the two days of carnival, a deployment of force that was quickly considered a provocation by many young West Indians, who already considered the police to be fundamentally racist. Some of them, loosely organized into gangs, started to harass police officers with stones and bottles before dispersing into the crowd. Hundreds of police officers and a few civilians were wounded and taken to the

members of the French government. In memory of this uprising, May 22 has become the day Martinicans commemorate abolition.

The date of May 10 was chosen for metropolitan France.

38. A founding member of the Akiyo collective, Joël Nankin, was convicted in 1983 for having committed attacks and violating the integrity of French territory, and was imprisoned until 1989.

39. There is a festival in Paris that owes a lot to the mobilization of the Caribbean people who live in metropolitan France. However, besides the fact that the Parisian city council of Paris largely initiated its creation in 2001, it should be noted that the "Carnaval Tropical de Paris" welcomes an ever-increasing variety of other countries and cultures and that the history of the Caribbean populations living in mainland France is, from this point of view, very different from that of black Britons. Broadly speaking, each group has much more in common with the population of the country in which it lives than with the Caribbean populations of other European countries. See Stéphanie Condon and Margaret Byron, *Migration in Comparative Perspective: Caribbean Communities in Britain and France* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

40. See the famous study by Dick Hebdige, "Reggae, Rastas and Rudies," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1975), 135–55.

41. On the general history of Notting Hill Carnival, see Abner Cohen, "Drama and Politics in

hospital. The media and the government quickly escalated this confrontation, and carnival was from then on systematically associated with disorder and violence, while the general population's hostility increased.⁴¹

Two approaches to carnival emerged following the 1970s confrontations.⁴² On the one hand, the CDC tried to strengthen its artistic dimension by drawing inspiration from the innovations introduced by Peter Minshall in the 1975 Trinidad Carnival. A former student of the Central School of Art and Design in London, this spiritual heir of George Bailey surprised by presenting a revolutionary scenography entitled "Paradise Lost," in reference to the famous epic poem by seventeenth-century English poet John Milton, with a group of two hundred carnival artists who walked around the streets of Port-of-Spain with huge, spectacular costumes. On the other hand, the Carnival and Arts Committee set out to turn Notting Hill Carnival into "a celebration of the Black community" that would reflect the needs and aspirations of Afro-Caribbean youth and allow them to express their latent frustrations. The violence of young blacks during the 1976 carnival was interpreted by these cultural activists as a symbolic attack on the British state. They therefore criticized any artistic approach as a form of depoliticization. In reaction to their criticisms, the CDC reorganized in 1977 under the authority of Darcus Howe, a Trinidadian who was also editor-in-chief of a Marxist magazine, *Race Today*. According to this influential advocate from the London West Indian community, the risk was, on the contrary, that the masses would turn away from anyone who tried to turn carnival into a political demonstration. This was summarized in 1977 by Linton Kwesi Johnson, a poet, singer, and member of the *Race Today* collective: "If politics creeps into art unconsciously, without the writer trying anything, it is often the most powerful political expression; but when artists try to be political in their art, it generally ends badly, whether in poetry or literature or in other art forms. People don't like to be lectured."⁴³ According to this perspective, any attempt at instrumentalizing carnival might end up killing it or at least blunting its political edge. Its organizers and participants had to remain focused on maintaining their autonomy from the authorities. Consequently, CDC officials in the 1980s condemned both the repeated attacks against Notting Hill Carnival launched by the Tory government and interference by the Labour Party, which was then ruling the Greater London Council and whose leader, Ken Livingstone, was working to rebrand the celebration as a symbol of true multiculturalism and an outpost of resistance to Margaret Thatcher's politics.⁴⁴

3. Marronage and Cultural Resistance: The Invention of New Forms of Collective Action

Since the eighteenth century, the carnivalesque repertoire and the meaning of carnival itself have constantly been reconceptualized and redesigned in the Caribbean to serve the political needs and goals of various groups and individual actors. Carnival is not merely a spectacle; it is a celebration in which everyone is called upon to participate and express themselves. Unlike the fine arts, which foreground the eye as the main channel through which people can experience beauty and maintain a distance between the viewer and the artist's work, carnival arts celebrate interaction and a diversity of viewpoints.⁴⁵ Like other popular festivals, carnival allows Afro-Caribbean people to attest to their mutual presence—to see, hear, feel, touch, rub shoulders, and support each other. In this way, carnival appears as a survival of traditional cultures, which, unlike modern societies, did not experience such a clear division between the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres.⁴⁶

the Development of a London Carnival," in *Custom and Conflict in British Society*, ed. Ronald Frankenberg (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1982), 313–44; and Lionel Arnaud, "À qui appartient le carnaval? Circulations, (ré)appropriations et résistances à Notting Hill (Londres, 1958–2008)," in *Les capitales européennes de la culture depuis 1945: Berlin, Londres, Madrid, Paris*, ed. Françoise Taliano-Des Garets (Bordeaux: PUG, 2020, forthcoming).

42. Everton A. Pryce, "The Notting Hill Gate Carnival. Black Politics, Resistance, and Leadership 1976–1978," *Caribbean Quarterly* 2, no. 31 (1995): 35–52.

43. Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Jamaican Rebel Music," *Race and Class* 17, no. 4 (1976): 411.

44. Lionel Arnaud, *Réinventer la ville. Artistes, minorités ethniques et militants au service des politiques de développement urbain. Une comparaison franco-britannique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

45. On the inherently dialogic dimension of carnival, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984); and Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

46. Émile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social* (Paris: PUF, 2004 [1893]).

47. On maroon communities throughout the Americas, see Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities*

In the Caribbean, the conjunction of social and cultural claims has to do with colonial history and slavery. Thus, one of the specificities of the Caribbean is undoubtedly that social struggles have been built in close connection with cultural practices. Much like the use of the Creole language has been erected as an act of political resistance—especially when it takes written forms that were unknown until about thirty years ago—carnival bands today use "country" food, certain forms of social assistance, and traditional music based on skin drums to revive the more or less mythicized economic, social, and cultural resistance capability of the maroons. Hence the need to shift our gaze from the mere processes of aesthetic and identity reinterpretation to the repertoires that are part of their practical organization.

Marronage Practices in Caribbean Cultural Movements

To groups like Akiyo or Tanbo Bô Kannal, the reference to marronage is central. Marronage refers to the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century phenomenon of slaves running away from the plantations to join independent communities of fugitive slaves in inaccessible, inhospitable environments (swamps in the southern United States, canyons in Jamaica, forests in Suriname, jungles in the Guianas).⁴⁷ Cultural life in these settlements was often rooted in Africa. Today, the most militant carnival bands call for a new kind of marronage, "cultural marronage," equating *gwoka* and *bèlè* with resistance practices.⁴⁸ Akiyo often retells the history of abolition, declaring that it was not truly the French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher who freed the slaves, but rather the maroons who fought for liberty for generations. The question of whether statistically significant marronage practices actually existed in Guadeloupe and Martinique is of little relevance here. As with the African masks used by Voukour, the reconstruction of history consolidates Afro-Caribbean identity around the pride of having had enslaved, but rebellious and free-spirited, ancestors.⁴⁹

This dynamic was first inspired by folk musicians such as Vélo in Guadeloupe or Ti Emile in Martinique, who conceptualized the practice of Afro-Caribbean drumming and dancing from an "existential" point of view, as a way of "retaining the old world," more than as a strictly political positioning. Michel Halley, one of Akiyo's founders who developed his drumming skills in contact with Vélo, explains that "for a man like Vélo, independent or non-independent, colonial or noncolonial, white or nonwhite Guadeloupe ... it was not his concern, it never was his concern. His concern was to play, to be able to sleep and eat, and to practice freely (as much as he could) his art of Ka, that's all."⁵⁰ Gradually, however, and in a context of increasing nationalist and identity-based claims, the approach inherited from these "ordinary" musicians⁵¹ was mobilized and transformed into acts of cultural and political resistance toward the French state by the generations born after the war (fig. 6). The slave, the maroon, and the *morne* (small mountain) farmer were conflated in the collective imagination into a single mythical character whose drumming skills allowed him to free himself spiritually and physically from the plantation system. In this respect, the practice of *bèlè* and *gwoka* became associated with a call for cultural independence meant to combat the "Frenchification" of Martinican and Guadeloupean societies generated by the transformation of the islands into French departments in 1946.

in the Americas (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Alvin O. Thompson, *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2006). On the Martinican case, see Gabriel Debien, "Le Maronnage aux Antilles françaises au XVIIIe siècle," *Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 3 (Oct. 1966): 3–43.

48. On cultural marronage from the West Indies to Madagascar to Brazil, see Stéphanie Melyon-Reinette, ed., *Maronnage and Arts: Revolts in Bodies and Voices* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

49. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

50. Michel Halley interviewed by Gustav Michaux-Vignes, La Médiathèque Caraïbe, 2001, accessed November 16, 2018, <http://www.lameca.org/publications-numeriques/interviews-audio/michel-halley-2003/> (my translation). In Antillean Creole the particle "ka" expresses the fact that an action is being performed, but it also refers to the art of drumming, or to the drum itself, which is single-headed, barrel-shaped and stretched with goat- (or kid-)skin.

51. Marc Perrenoud, *Les Musicos. Enquête sur des musiciens ordinaires* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

52. Luciani Lanoir L'Etang, *Réseaux de solidarité dans la Guadeloupe d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

Figure 6. Public performance by Akiyo in the pedestrian streets of Pointe-à-Pitre, where they perform every Saturday morning. Credit: Otto Von Viani, 2020. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=86799984>

While a new musical and choreographic repertoire was added to Antillean Carnival, transforming it into a place of cultural reinvention and political expression, modes of social organization more or less inherited from the experience of slavery such as the *Koudmen* (helping hand), which consisted in freely offering one's services to lighten the burden of someone building their house or farming a piece of land, were increasingly championed by cultural movements as a way to counter Antillean societies' growing individualism and consumerism.⁵²

Today, the workshops organized in preparation for carnival provide an introduction to the musical style of each band, as well as to the fabrication of musical instruments or costumes. This informal transmission process takes place in two stages: during the period leading to the fat days, when advice and assistance can be obtained for the preparation of new outfits or for the improvement of instrumental practice; and during the rest of the year, when the groups' performance calendar clears up, allowing outsiders to take part in the social and leisure activities offered to members.

Though rooted in the experience of slavery, cultural marronage cannot fail to recall other artistic practices that have generated new forms of sociability and blurred the lines between the politics of protest and cultural revival, such as the artistic squats of large contemporary cities and the rural communities that emerged after May 1968 in France.⁵³ In 1980s London, preparations for Notting Hill Carnival took place within the framework of community centers that were often run by activists close to the British New Left, who wanted to fight social and racial segregation while demystifying the cultural structures that conditioned social relations.⁵⁴ Gradually, and as the civil rights movement became more radical in the United States, these community centers became the nexus of Afro-Caribbean life. Costume workshops, concerts, and plays inspired by the Black Arts Movement were organized to raise local residents' social and cultural awareness.⁵⁵ Some centers explicitly engaged in memory work aimed at reclaiming a connection to Africa while promoting a kind of cultural nationalism that came out of the independence movements. For instance, the Yaa Asantewaa Arts & Community Center located in the Paddington district took the name of Ghanaian Queen Yaa Asantewaa (1850–1921) in 1985, thus honoring the woman "who successfully led the heroic and ultimate struggle to maintain the national integrity and

53. See George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997); and Laura Portwood-Stacer, *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

54. Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

55. Presented as the artistic branch of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement emerged in the mid-1960s in New York's Harlem district. Its founders insisted on the need to forge an art that acts, creates, and fights ("We want poems that kill"), making the artist a major actor of black political resistance. See Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation. Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

56. Yaa Asantewaa Arts & Cultural Centre website, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://yaacentrew9.com/about-us/>.

57. The notion of "conscientization" is part of the classical repertoire of popular and political education activists who, from Mao-Zedong to Augusto Boal, have used knowledge and culture in general as instruments of militancy and political awakening of the oppressed masses. In Martinique, this approach has been taken up by various cultural movements such as the Groupe Culturel 22 Mai 1848 or An Lòt Chimen Pou la Jénès (ALCPJ,

ancient cultural heritage of her people."⁵⁶ Today, the wall of the vast courtyard where most of the Notting Hill Carnival parades are prepared remains adorned with portraits of great black leaders—including Claudia Jones, Amílcar Cabral, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Bob Marley, Queen Nzinga, Walter Rodney, and Sojourner Truth—painted in black against a background of green, yellow and red, that is, the three colors of the Pan-African flag (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Fabrication of a costume in the main hall at the Yaa Asantewaa Arts & Community Center, London, August 2002. Author's photograph.

Mobilizing Traditions and Popular Culture to Sustain a Protest Agenda

Since the 1970s Antillean political activists have gradually turned away from overt political action and have immersed themselves in the social reality of the working classes, speaking Creole and adopting their cultural practices, in order to offer in return a revolutionary struggle agenda rooted in their daily lives. Together with singers and *bèlè/gwoka* musicians, they have contributed to reviving clandestine *swaré bèlè* and *léwòz*, night parties that used to punctuate rural and mountain life and which they now use to raise political consciousness among the black inhabitants of Guadeloupe and Martinique.⁵⁷ This way of mobilizing traditions and popular culture for protest purposes became particularly manifest during the 2009 general strike against *pwofitasyon*. Originating in Guadeloupe at the beginning of December 2008 at the initiative of the LKP (Liyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon, or Alliance against Exploitation), a large coalition of trade unions and associations, this protest movement spread to Martinique on February 5, 2009, and continued until March 5 as part of an unprecedented social movement against the high cost of living and, more generally, the economic and cultural dispossession that overseas inhabitants experience daily.⁵⁸ Akiyo and Voukoum took part in the negotiations with the French government,

Another Path for Youth), which in the 1970s set out to reconquer the consciences and bodies of the Martinican “people” by revalorizing certain artistic practices such as dance and the *bèlè* drum. See Lionel Arnaud, “Une conscientisation ‘pratique’: Les mobilisations culturelles des habitants d’un quartier populaire de Fort-de-France, entre autonomisation et politisation,” *Sociétés contemporaines* (forthcoming).

58. Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Pierre Odin, *Pwofitasyon. Luttès syndicales et anticolonialisme en Guadeloupe et en Martinique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).

59. From slave cemeteries to *habitations*, from Fort Delgrès to the streets of Pointe-à-Pitre where the drums of the *gwo-ka* resound, from the Schoelcher Museum to the ACTe Memorial, the memory sites scattered across Guadeloupe are now part of a “Slave Route” itinerary. Interpreters tell visitors about slavery and the imprint it has left everywhere, on the territory and on people’s minds. This enables Guadeloupeans to reclaim their history by searching for their roots and ancestors.

acting as lead mediators on societal—more precisely, cultural—issues. Among their demands: that the language and culture of Guadeloupe be taken into account in media programming, that popular memory sites be rehabilitated, and that a cultural institute be created to celebrate Guadeloupean popular culture and preserve the memory of slavery.⁵⁹ During demonstrations, the two groups initiated and supervised major *déboulés* (*mas a konsyans* or “carnival of conscience,” and *mas a pwofitasyon* or “carnival of profiteering,” which to many looked and sounded like political marches.)

This mobilization of *kiltir* (culture) and of the carnival reference has now clearly become part of the “repertoire of contention” promoted by trade unions and revolutionary and/or nationalist parties, both in Martinique and in Guadeloupe. In Fort-de-France, TBK members accompanied the demonstrations that took place in February 2009 as an extension of the general strike that had started in Guadeloupe two months earlier. Thirty-seven years after its writing, the carnival song “Tchè Nou Blindé” (Our heart is armored) became the anthem of the protesters, and is still played nowadays in the meetings of the pro-independence parties and movements (fig. 8).

Figure 8. Tanbo Bô Kannal and demonstrators singing “Tchè Nou Blindé” in the streets of Fort-de-France during the 2009 general strike. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsTzF8N6-E0>

On May 9, 2015, on the eve of the inauguration of the ACTe Memorial (a monumental museum located in Pointe-à-Pitre and dedicated to the memory of the slave trade and slavery) by French president François Hollande, the LKP organized a ceremony in honor of the “slave ancestors” at the Palais de la Mutualité (Trade Union House) in Pointe-à-Pitre. In the tradition of mortuary vigils, activists followed one another to perform texts and poems to the rhythm of drums. Fruits and flowers were placed on a specially arranged altar before being transported by the crowd to the fishing port, where they were thrown into the ocean. Accompanied by the songs and music of Akiyo, the ritual clearly highlighted the blurring of the commonly accepted boundaries between

60. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.
61. Erik Neveu, *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, 3rd ed. (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 24.
62. Becker and Faulkner, "Do You Know...?"
63. Roy Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
64. Lionel Arnaud, "The Marketing of Diversity and the Aestheticization of Differences. The Cultural Expressions of Ethnic Minorities Put to the Test of New Urban Cultural Policies," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 22, no. 1 (2016): 9–26.

social and cultural mobilizations, political action and cultural action, as well as the extent to which carnival repertoires are subject to constant attention and mobilization.

Conclusion

Because it is largely based on double entendre, distortion, and inversion, carnival perfectly illustrates the "infrapolitics of subordinate groups" studied by James Scott, that is, "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" and that develop only because they cannot challenge the existing social and political order.⁶⁰

Among the descendants of Africans deported to the Americas, carnival was quickly seen as an equivocal, contentious performance that, though inscribed in dominant forms, could nonetheless be used to challenge social and racial positions and "reinvent a symbolic activity to perform group identity."⁶¹ As such, American carnival has always been subject to reinterpretation based on the actors' interests and purposes, leading to alliances or confrontations. The constitution of the carnival action repertoire is a complex phenomenon, which does not always draw on a reservoir of stable actions but rather proceeds from permanent reinventions and reappropriations. Like the constitution of the jazz repertoire described by Howard Becker and Robert Faulkner, it requires the participation of a vast number of people, each bringing their own conceptions of their history and geographical location, which involves more or less explicit discussions and negotiations about what participants can and should do, given the pressure exerted by the context and the other people involved.⁶²

But the repertoires mobilized today by the carnival bands of Fort-de-France, London, and Pointe-à-Pitre are not only "means" or mere aesthetic forms: they are also their own ends. Or rather, they are part of an act of identity affirmation that is supposed to exemplify a society in the making. In other words, the mobilization of a *tambour a po* or of a sound system is not only an aesthetic gesture, any more than the valorization of the *Kouidmen* can only be explained by economic contingency: all these cultural practices are part of a historical genealogy and affirm a way of life. "As Martinican activists often explain, *Bèlè, Danmyé, sé dansé, sé mizik, sé an manniè viv* [*Bèlè, danmyé*, they're about dancing, about music, they're a way of life]." These features are the hallmark of the specificity of cultural movements; their repertoires of action do not only aim at mobilizing or supporting the struggle, but also contain a philosophy and a set of principles of action with the potential to play a catalytic role in the transformation of cultural preferences, measures, and values.⁶³

The free-floating nature of the carnival repertoire also means that it can be interpreted and appropriated in ways that sometimes contradict the objectives of cultural movements. Indeed, while I have highlighted the growing mobilization of carnival in Fort-de-France, London, and Pointe-à-Pitre for protest purposes, I also want to acknowledge that the repertoires of cultural movements that seek to revalue the African past, and more properly Caribbean history (and therefore the fight against the oversight of crimes related to slavery and colonization) can also be recruited by local governments in order to promote tourism. This is particularly well illustrated by the London case, where a cultural movement rooted in an experience of racism and segregation has been converted into a mega-event designed and organized for the benefit of the city's social and economic development.⁶⁴ In this case, the objective is less to "raise consciousness,"

65. Kevin Fox Gotham, "Marketing
Mardi Gras: Commodification,
Spectacle and the Political Econ-
omy of Tourism in New Orleans,"
Urban Studies 39, no. 10 (2002):
1735–56

66. Michel Giraud, "La patrimoni-
alisation des cultures antillaises,"
Ethnologie française 29, no. 3
(1999): 375–86.

and even less to protest, than to assemble, acknowledge, and turn cultural and social identities into "heritage"—in other words, to reduce them to cultural objects or even to (multicultural) spectacles.⁶⁵ Such a transformation is far from benign: it turns Afro-Caribbean populations into powerless spectators of what is proclaimed to be *their* culture, as if it were no longer a question of renewing, challenging, or enriching it.⁶⁶ It reminds us that the mobilization of the carnival repertoire for political purposes does not necessarily affirm an existence that is subject to any form of interpretation but can also contribute to transforming cultural dynamics into inert knowledge, ossified traditions, aesthetics detached from a sociohistorical substrate that remains, at heart, necessarily contentious.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is based on fieldwork I conducted in London from 2000 to 2007, with funding from the British Council (see Lionel Arnaud, *Réinventer la ville. Artistes, minorités ethniques et militants au service des politiques de développement urbain. Une comparaison franco-britannique* [Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008]), and in Fort-de-France from 2011 to 2018 during a fellowship at the Center for Research into Local Politics in the Caribbean (CRPLC/CNRS 8053), based at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane (Lionel Arnaud, *Les tambours de Bô Kannal. Mobilisations et résistances culturelles en Martinique* [Paris: Karthala, 2020]). The data concerning Pointe-à-Pitre Carnival stems from exploratory observations and interviews I conducted in August 2014 and May 2015. For a more detailed presentation of my ethnographic methodology, see Lionel Arnaud, "Enquêter en pays dominé A l'épreuve de la résistance culturelle des habitants d'un quartier populaire de Fort-de-France," in *"En immersion": Approches ethnographiques en journalisme, Littérature et Sciences Sociales*, ed. Pierre Leroux and Erik Neveu (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017), 271–86. I would like to thank Aurélie Godet, Olivier Tomat, and the journal's readers for the corrections and improvements they successively made to the first versions of this text.

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HOW TO CITE

Arnaud, Lionel. "Carnival as Contentious Performance: A Comparison between Contemporary Fort-de-France, Pointe-à-Pitre, and London Carnivals." *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 179–202. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.24>

The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from [H-Celebration](#), a network of [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](#), and is the inaugural journal published through the [H-Net Journals](#) initiative. It can be found online at <https://journals.h-net.org/jfs>.