



THE PAST IS MADE BY WALKING: Labor Activism and Historical Production in Postcolonial Guadeloupe

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Walker, your footprints are the path, and nothing more;
walker, there is no path, the path is made by walking.

—Antonio Machado

[the walker] knows the ground is alive; he feels the pulses of the wind and reads the mute language of things. His sympathies are all aroused; his senses are continuously reporting messages to his mind. Wind, frost, rain, heat, cold are something to him. He experiences the country he passes through,—tastes it, feels it, absorbs it . . .

—William S Burroughs

While conducting research on labor activism in the French Caribbean Overseas Department of Guadeloupe, I was invited to participate in a form of both political and historical walking, originally described to me as a *marche historique*—that is, a historical walk or memory walk. The Creole slogan for these events is *fe memwa maché*, which literally means to “make your memory walk” or “take your memory on a walk.” This phrase refers to the process of thinking back, scanning your memory for past events; when something or someone causes you to recall something, they are making your memory walk.

Having already participated in numerous union rallies and collective demonstrations (*manifs*), I expected to join a large mass of workers with signs and banners,

chanting political slogans as they blocked busy city streets. However, when I arrived at the designated meeting place, I found myself among a markedly smaller and quieter group. There were no placards, banners, bullhorns, or loudspeakers—just a few dozen workers milling about quietly with their families and children. As I would soon discover, these memory walks differ sharply from the usual mass marches and demonstrations organized by political activists.

Once we set off on our journey, the busy city streets of Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe's economic capital) slowly faded away and we found ourselves walking in silence through former plantation lands and overgrown sugar fields, surrounded by the pungent smell—both sweet and sour—of ripened cane. We struggled through the unfamiliar terrain, trudging up steep and slippery hills, and marching single file through small, tunnel-like paths that cut through the tall blades of cane. As we walked, I struggled to find the labor leaders who were usually at the front of the union marches yelling out directions, chanting slogans, and directing the crowd. I was surprised to find them lingering at the back of the group, walking quietly with their children. Their usual energy and aura of authority seemed overshadowed by the landscape itself: the whisper of the wind rustling through the fields, the looming presence of the tall centenarian trees with their thick twisted trunks and overgrown roots, and the rhythmic crunch of our footsteps on the unpaved soil.

Weeks later I discussed this event with Sabine, a young schoolteacher and fellow tenderfoot. She became excited as she reflected back on that day and explained how powerful the experience had been for her:

During that walk I could not help but feel connected to those who had gone before. For me, it was like being part of history! I was there, where they had been, where they had walked. . . . It was like I could feel their presence . . . because I was there, in the very site where history was made!

Many of the participants I interviewed about these events echoed Sabine's feelings of historical intimacy—particularly her feeling of having “been there.” They expressed that the memory walks had provided them with a personal, direct connection to the past. In what follows, I explore how these memory walks generate this feeling of historical intimacy, and why this form of historical and archival production becomes salient to the work of labor activism in Guadeloupe. Along the way, I consider what these events reveal about postcolonial forms of archival production and the importance of historical praxis to the formation of political subjectivities.

WALKING AS POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL PRAXIS

The act of walking has long constituted an important (yet underexamined) element of political protest and collective action. From Ghandi's Salt March, to the "freedom walks" of the Civil Rights movement, to the weekly counterclockwise marches of the Argentinean mothers of La Plaza de Mayo: countless social movements have been defined by walking or marching as a form of protest and political speech. In these moments, walking can represent an act of spatial transformation (displacing cars with politicized pedestrians, obstructing sidewalks with striking workers, and filling otherwise empty public squares with political demonstrators) as well as a highly symbolic and performative act (e.g., walking to remember "the disappeared," walking in lieu of using segregated buses, and walking "for freedom"). These forms of collective walking represent important moments of political praxis and subject formation. By literally falling in step with the crowd, individuals experience a sense of social solidarity and "collective effervescence" (Durkheim 1965) that can transform social consciousness. Walking as a political act thus harnesses the power of visual spectacle, symbolic ritual, and transformative praxis—while simultaneously aiding in the creation of a sense of collectivity, community, and a shared trajectory.

Walking has also become an important form of commemorative practice through the development of heritage walks, walking tours, and historic pilgrimages (see Markwell et al. 2004; Plate 2006; Slavin 2003). During these forms of peripatetic commemoration, participants are encouraged to inhabit the world of the past, to follow in the footsteps of those that came before, to see the world as they saw it, and to "feel what they felt" thus generating experiential and multisensory forms of historical knowledge (see Handler and Gable 1997; Schwenkel 2006). These practices create a particular kind of historical engagement—one immediately linked to space, feeling, and action. In these instances historical knowledge is transmitted not just through a textual or discursive engagement, but also through a sensuous encounter with the material landscape. History is "read" off of both the natural and built environment, but it is also experienced through the sensorium.¹

It is precisely at moments like this—when spatial, sensuous, emotional, and discursive forms of memory combine—that historical praxis is most likely to affect political action (Cole 2006:212). Emotion is a powerful mnemonic. Emotional forms of memory-making serve not just to provide knowledge about the past or to help retain information, but to articulate a particular vision of the world and of how it should be (Cole 2001:281). Thus, it is no coincidence that labor activists

in Guadeloupe have chosen this form of historical production as a tool for building their movement.

Moreover, the construction of historical narratives is integral to the development of political imaginaries, given that the claim to a collective history carries within it the claim to a collective political subject. In addition, the ways in which the events of the past are reconstructed and “plotted” is key to the political projects and possibilities of the present (see Scott 2004). Our ideas about the past shape our expectations for what is possible and imaginable beyond the present horizon (Koselleck 1985). Thus, arguably, by reshaping visions of the past one can reshape the possibilities of the future, and make an alternative future imaginable.

The act of walking is particularly apposite to this project in its capacity to provide trajectory, direction, connection, and to create a bridge between distanced spacetimes (Munn 2004). Walking locates pedestrians in place, resituating them in relation to that which came before. It creates a link between where we are going and where we have been (Amato 2004). As I will show, labor activists in Guadeloupe engage in politicized forms of historical walking not just to familiarize participants with the past, but to recast them as heirs to that past. Slave uprisings, labor conflicts, and anticolonial struggles are all placed on a common trajectory leading to present-day labor politics as the contemporary expression of a long-standing Guadeloupean political consciousness and collective will.

CREATING A NEW MAN

This political and historical project is part of the broader project of contemporary labor activism in Guadeloupe and specifically of the Union Générale des Travailleurs de la Guadeloupe (UGTG).² This particular labor movement combines the institutional strength of French syndicalism with the ideological and tactical repertoires of Caribbean nationalist and anticolonial struggles. The result is a particular kind of “postcolonial syndicalism” that infuses labor struggles with battles over collective memory, cultural preservation, political autonomy, and historical consciousness.

The UGTG is the only local union in Guadeloupe that is not affiliated to a French national union, and the only labor union that positions itself in favor of political independence for Guadeloupe. Both of these distinctions are evident in the general tenor of UGTG practice, which is characterized by an emphasis on local cultural forms, including the use of Creole in public meetings and official negotiations, the presence of traditional *gwo ka* music at rallies and picket lines,

and an emphasis on Guadeloupean history—particularly the history of anti slavery revolts and anti colonial political movements.

UGTG activists refer to their political project as a form of making man (*fe nonm*). They see their use of Creole language, gwo ka music, and local history as part of their wider efforts at breaking the colonial alienation that has emerged from centuries of colonial ties to France. As one labor leader explained, “the project of making man is about the unearthing of an authentic Guadeloupean subjectivity out from the debris of colonial assimilation.” Within the domain of labor conflicts the idea of *fe nonm* is often invoked in relationship to the development of an increased political consciousness. Labor strikes are thought to *fe nonm* on the picket line through the unmasking of social relationships with fellow strikers, bosses, and the wider society. In the context of historical commemoration, to *fe nonm* speaks to the development of a new historical consciousness through an engagement with local histories of resistance and collective struggle.

To promote what they describe as the “reconciliation” of Guadeloupean workers with their past and to foster a connection to past forms of resistance, union activists decided to develop a new cultural organization charged exclusively with issues of historical memory and cultural identity. The organization takes its name from the Creole word NONM, which stands for “Man” (or humanity) and their stated goal is to further the union’s attempts at “making man” (*fe nonm*).³ The memory walks represent one of the key practices through which the organization seeks to *fe nonm* by engaging workers in an active, purposeful, form of historical praxis, which they describe as “making memory walk” (*fe memwa maché*).

One of the main (although not the sole) intellectual engineer for these events is Raymod Gama, a middle school history teacher.⁴ Gama holds a doctorate in history and worked as a history teacher at a local middle school until his retirement in 2009, but has always fancied himself as a public intellectual, rather than an instructor. He hosted his own history show (in Creole) called *Istwa An Nou* (our history) on the TV station *L’Une*, is a frequent speaker at public events and historical commemorations, and maintains a popular website (with the help of his nephews) where he posts recent writings and uploads videos of his presentations.⁵ As a self-described “patriot” activist, he sees his main vocation as political, rather than academic, arguing that his aim is to be a Guadeloupean historian, rather than merely a historian of Guadeloupe (Gama 2007). He sees history as an important political tool, but when asked if he could be accused of historical presentism he explains:

I do not regard history through the eyes of the present, I simply offer a new reading of the past. Every historian creates meaning, creates facts. Historical facts are not lying around in an archive, waiting to be plucked out and pasted onto the pages of history. We make facts. The historian is inherently a maker of facts. He relies on documentation to build facts, but each person who approaches a document produces facts in their own way. Historical facts are not immutable, we produce them.

Gama's arguments echo contemporary theories of historiography that view the production of history as an act of power that is asserted throughout the various moments of historical production (see White 1973; De Certeau 1988; Todorov 1995; Trouillot 1995).⁶ He views history as an argument, open to new interpretation, and recognizes the narrative power of the historian as a maker of facts, and a granter of meaning.⁷

He also points to the particularity of history making in the postcolonial context:

In addition, we have a colonial problem, a problem of alienation, and so we need to question everything that is assumed in order to find ourselves among those facts. We are confronted with a particular duty: to find ourselves within the culture of the other. How can you find yourself in documents that have not bothered to archive you, that have actually sought to eliminate you? How do you find yourself there?

Gama is clearly cognizant of the silences that inhere from the very first moment in which events are crystallized into facts, and facts are weaved into stories (see Trouillot 1995:49). He understands that the repertoire of stories that are said to matter, the events that are deemed worthy of commemoration, and the places that are chosen for preservation, are all products and testaments of the relations of power that conditioned their moment of production.

In the case of the French Antilles, the official processes of historical production have been conditioned by the insertion of these Caribbean societies into the French polity. A quick survey of public forms of historical commemoration, serves to reveal the political and economic relationships that underpin their very foundation.

THE LANDSCAPE OF HISTORY IN GUADELOUPE: *LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE* OR *LIEUX D'OUBLI*?

Since becoming an Overseas Department of France (DOM) in 1946, Guadeloupe (along with Martinique, French Guyana, and Réunion) has undergone

a half-century-long process of what Aimé Césaire termed *départementalisation*. This neologism (or euphemism) was created by Césaire to describe the political and cultural process of assimilation that stemmed from the March 19, 1946 *Loi d'Assimilation* through which the *vieilles colonies* became fully incorporated Departments of France.⁸ This process, which Richard Price (1998) describes as “francisation,” entailed the formal alignment of local political institutions with those of the French Republic, as well as the deployment of a larger cultural program, which included the imposition of the French national educational curriculum, the devaluation of the local Creole language, the imposition of French cultural norms, foods and practices, and the celebration of the French national past at the expense of the preservation of local histories (see Bébel-Gisler 1976; Schnepel 1998, 2004; Managan 2004; Reinhardt 2006).

Although in the French mainland the project of nation-building helped nourish a feverish drive for the conservation of *le patrimoine national* resulting in a proliferation of *médiathèques*, *vidéothèques*, and other sites of archival power, this “archival imperative” (Nora 1992:14) did not extend to the Overseas Departments. It is important to keep in mind that the sites or realms of memory which Pierre Nora discusses (ranging from the tricolor flag, the Republican calendar, the Marseillaise, public monuments, Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire*, the Louvre, and the French language itself), although invested with significant meaning for the general population, were part of an institutional processes of conservation and remembrance intimately linked to the process of nation-building and should not be seen as a form of “popular memory” standing in opposition to official histories. In the case of the French Antilles, the historical processes of colonialism and departmentalization disallowed the development of such political imperatives and institutional infrastructures. Although the French *lieux de mémoire* emerged out of an institutional and systemic insistence on remembering, the insertion of Guadeloupe into the French nation has produced (and was predicated on) a systemic forgetting. Departmentalization by its very nature required both amnesty and amnesia toward the colonial crimes of *la mère-patrie* (Cottias 1997; Danquin 2001; Vergès 1999). As Françoise Vergès argues, “if Republican France was found guilty of slavery and colonialism, how could a demand for assimilation by its victims be justified?” (Vergès 1999:116). Following departmentalization, Guadeloupean histories of resistance and opposition to French colonial rule were thus systematically silenced in the service of French integration. Schoolbooks emphasized the history of the French Revolution, parents discouraged their children from speaking Creole, and throughout the island’s public plazas one could distinctly hear the roar of *La Marseillaise* on Bastille Day.

As a result, until recently, most historical commemorations in the French Antilles have constituted colonial realms of memory, focused around important figures of French Colonial history, such as the Empress Josephine de Beauharnais (the wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, who was born in Martinique) and the French Abolitionist writer Victor Schoelcher—both of whom hold prominent places in the commemorative landscape (Curius 2008). Meanwhile locally important historic sites and structures often lie fallow, overrun by vegetation, without official markers or signposts, and in eminent danger of collapse. Rather than becoming *lieux de mémoire* (realms of memory), these sites have become *lieux d'oubli* (realms of forgetting), material evidence of a forsaken and deteriorating past.

Moreover, when local histories do become the object of preservation and commemoration they are often subjected to what Richard Price (1998) describes as the “postcarding of the past,” through which the past is sanitized, defanged, and stripped of any potentially subversive meaning. Through this process “memories of oppression, inequality, and struggle are replaced by nostalgia, complicity and celebration” (Price 1998:184).⁹ This is most evident in the recent proliferation of plantation museums and plantation resorts in the French Antilles where former slave barracks have been transformed into luxe accommodations for tourists, while their underlying history is reduced to a technological account of sugar, tobacco, coffee, and rum production—with little discussion of the social and economic relations that underpinned these industries (Chivallon 2006; Cottias 2000; Reinhardt 2006).¹⁰

While these former centers of slave labor and colonial resistance are reworked as objects of folkloric and *touristique* consumption, other historical sites have become the source of confusion and ambiguity. A particularly poignant example is the case of “the steps of the slaves” (*marches des esclaves*) in Petit-Canal, a haunting set of 49 oversized white steps (each of which bears a small wooden sign with the name of a different African ethnic group) that lead up to the town’s church from a small dock on the edge of the mangrove. The historical origins and semiotic intention of the steps remains unknown, and even the local *mairie* (mayor’s office) is unable to provide an official explanation or attribution of authorship for the memorial (Chivallon 2002:608). Catherine Reinhardt describes such places as “silent sites of memory” in that they lack the referential context necessary for their appreciation: “The past is there, before the viewer, but does not have a direct bearing on the historical consciousness he/she brings to the scene” (Reinhardt 2006:138).

One could argue that the importance of collective histories does not necessarily lie in their accuracy or even veracity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and in fact all historical narratives are also inherently a “bundle of silences” (Trouillot 1995:27).

However, in the Antilles these sites of muted and confused history, when combined with the absence of local history in the education system because of the imposition of the French national curriculum, the refusal of older generations to speak of a past they deem too painful to remember (Bébel-Gisler 1994), and the overpowering presence of a triumphant French national history, together lead to a particular historical landscape dominated by fractured or “broken” memories: histories that have been cast out because they disrupt the official discourses and unfulfilled promises of progress through integration (Díaz-Quñones 1993). This is most acute in relationship to the history of slavery, which throughout the Caribbean has proved difficult to the postcolonial project of collective history (Thomas 1999). However, these “broken memories” cannot be described as forgotten. Instead, one could argue that they have been “socially suppressed” (Cole 2001:253) or “arrested” (McGranahan 2005:575)—set aside because they disrupt hegemonic narratives of the past. The challenge for new forms of historical production in these contexts, like that of labor activists in Guadeloupe, is thus not simply to reanimate obscured moments of historical action, but to find new ways of bringing these events “out of arrest” and into relationship with the political projects of the present.

LE DEVOIR DE MÉMOIRE

In the last two decades there has been a swell of public debate over historical commemoration in the French Antilles, resulting in what some describe as a “memory boom” (Giraud 2004).¹¹ During this time the idea of a “devoir de mémoire” (or a duty of memory) began to take hold in the Antilles. As a new imperative emerged around public history previous forms and sites of commemoration came under attack. In 1991, the infamous statue of Empress Josephine was vandalized and decapitated and in following years there was increasing pressure to move away from the commemoration of abolition through Victor Schoelcher’s birthday on July 22, focusing instead on the role of slave insurrections in precipitating abolition and on the importance of Abolition Day (May 22 in Martinique, and May 27 in Guadeloupe) as a public holiday.¹²

In response to these emerging battles over the commemorative landscape, new sites of commemoration were developed in Guadeloupe (funded in part by local government offices but also through private fund-raising) around iconic figures of resistance to slavery. At the Lycée Bambridge a series of murals were painted that represented the slave trade, images of colonial plantation life and Guadeloupean figures of slave resistance. On the adjacent boulevard (renamed boulevard des

heroes) several statues were installed featuring important figures of resistance to the reimposition of slavery in the Antilles in 1802, most notably the heroic figures of Joseph Ignace, Louis Delgrés, and La Mulâtresse Solitude (see Dubois 2006; Reinhardt 2006).

Local activists and cultural groups have tried to appropriate these sites as important realms of memory, most notably by using them as gathering points for historical marches and other commemorative events. However, many of these monuments have been placed in the middle of busy multilane avenues, high above the ground on the ubiquitous *rond-points* (traffic circles or roundabouts) that characterize Guadeloupe's French road system. Unlike statues placed in public plazas and other open spaces, the *rond-points* have no benches, sidewalks, or other vantage points from which to contemplate their display, and they are mostly found along segments of the national highway with little or no foot traffic. Some suggest that their strategic placement in the middle of high-traffic avenues gives them a prominent place in local imaginary. However, others argue that this type of historical representation does not promote a sustained engagement with the past, but instead encourages one to simply "drive by" the past with little reflection.

In addition to these monument-driven forms of public commemoration, there have also been increased efforts in recent years to generate alternative realms of "topographic memory" (Reinhardt 2006) in which the natural landscape becomes a central element of the commemorative endeavor. One example of this is the stele in memory of the *nég mawon* in the Col de Mamelles in Guadeloupe. This simple marker serves to commemorate not only the history of rebel slaves but also the forest itself as a site of resistance and refuge. Another example is the Mémorial de l'Anse Caffard in Martinique, which offers a nontraditional representation of slavery. Rather than the usual figure of enchained slaves (see Savage 1999), this monument shows a group of 15 statues staring out into the sea from the edge of a cliff. Their stance is not one of suffering but of determination and endurance. The figures are not placed high above on a pedestal, but directly on the grass allowing participants to walk between the statues and engage directly with them. However, what is most powerful about the monument is not just the statues, but the nature that surrounds them—particularly the ocean view that spreads out below. The statues' outward gaze guides the visitors' eyes toward the dark waters of the middle passage. Here nature becomes integral to the act of commemoration— as both site and source of historical memory.

MAKING MEMORY WALK

It is in the middle of this politicized historical landscape that contemporary labor activists have developed their concept of the memory walks. After the creation of NONM in 2001, organizers held their first memory walk in May 2002, in commemoration of the bicentennial of the antislavery insurrection of May 1802. During this walk, participants attempted to follow (in real time) the path of the rebel insurgents to the fort Matouba. They walked for three days, building campsites along their route, and reflecting each night on their experiences. However, after this initial walk, organizers lost interest in historical reenactment, paying little attention to the issues of “accuracy” and “authenticity” which are of such concern in other forms of historical re-creation (cf. Handler and Gable 1997), and focusing instead on refashioning, rather than reenacting the past.

At present the NONM organization holds several memory walk events each year, many of them concentrated around the month of May, which labor activist have declared to be a month of memory because of its many commemorative dates (discussed below). The group of participants is usually small—around two dozen—but some of the larger events can draw over a hundred participants. The demographics of the participants in the walks reaches well beyond the usual rank and file of the union membership. In fact, part of goal of creating the NONM organization was to reach out to students, housewives, unemployed youth, and other nonunionized sectors of the population. Unlike picket lines and barricades, which are imagined as sites of violent confrontation, the memory walks represent a family oriented space that can integrate a wider spectrum of participants.

For each walk, participants gather early in the morning at a designated meeting place where they park their cars and board buses to the starting point for the route. From there, walkers are led on foot through a series of historical locations, eventually arriving back at their starting location. At each historical site a small historical reflection or *témoignage* (testimony) is offered by a designated knowledgeable expert, often someone with a personal connection to the events that unfolded in that place. At the end of each walk there is a collective celebration and meal (provided at minimal cost), consisting of highly symbolic local foods such as *mori* (salt fish), *pòyò* (green bananas), and *rasin* (root vegetables) accompanied by freshly prepared juice from local fruits. These meals stand in sharp contrast to the daily diet of many Guadeloupeans, which has become increasingly dominated by imported and prepackaged French foods.¹³ Some of the more seasoned participants bring their own plates, fashioned out of hollowed-out coconuts or gourds, to eat “like the ancestors.” In addition, the act of walking itself represents a radical

departure from the daily routine of the French Antilles, which is characterized by an overabundance of cars and permanently congested roads.¹⁴ Walking is associated, not with quotidian life, but with the exceptional rituals of carnival, particular the *déboulés* where the carnival participants “descend” onto the streets in mass parades. These traditions constitute a subversive reappropriation of space, as pedestrians “invade” public streets and subvert traditional pathways (Pruneau et al. 2009).

Unlike the “freedom trails” or “heritage routes” that have become popular forms of public history in other parts of the world, the memory walks have no accompanying markers, guidebooks, or other lasting explicative texts. They are usually advertised by simple flyers that mark the starting point but do not provide any indication of the route itself.¹⁵ The routes created do not become cemented as official pathways of remembrance. Rather, for each memory walk a new route is drawn, to narrate a history that speaks to the conflicts of the current moment.

For example, in 2001, a memory walk was organized in response to a series of conflicts revolving around the prominent labor activist Michel Madassamy. Madassamy had been arrested for participating in a demonstration-turned-riot organized by the UGTG to demand the recognition of Abolition Day as an official local holiday. He became the object of scrutiny for his involvement because he was of Indian descent.¹⁶ Within the public sphere of Guadeloupean call-in radio and TV shows, there was much discussion about the role of an Indian in the commemoration of slavery. (The argument being that Indians did not experience the cruelty of the slave trade and thus had no claims to that history.) In response, the union, along with the organization NONM, decided to organize a historical march. However, rather than focusing on the arrival of indentured workers to the Caribbean—which is the traditional focus of celebrations of *Indianité* in Guadeloupe—they decided to commemorate a labor strike from 1925, which they argued represented the first time Indian workers in Guadeloupe had fought and lost their lives alongside black workers on the picket line. The organizers felt that this was a strike of great historical importance because it represented the genesis of Afro-Guadeloupean and Indo-Guadeloupean solidarity against French repressive forces. They argued that it was precisely because moments like this had been forgotten that people could continue to question the role of an *Indien* in the battle over the commemoration of slavery.

Raymond Gama, explained on a local TV segment that in preparation for this walk, they had searched the historical record for a relevant event with which to “think through” the Madassamy affair and rethink the place of Indians in Guadeloupe. “We decided” he stated “that we needed our history to respond to us in an original

way, in a very particular way.” Gama’s words hint at the kind of historical vision guiding the event. History in this context is not simply “what happened” but an account of what happened—an account that is unabashedly “useful.” In this case, the leaders decided that the official narrative of “Indian arrival” did not provide the necessary historical context for understanding the “Madassamy Affair” and that they needed to find new forms of evidence with which to produce an alternative narrative, one that would speak more directly to the struggles of the present. In this way, organizers approach the landscape as a palimpsest from which various versions of the past can be retrieved, and onto which new historical routes are continuously inscribed in response to ongoing struggles.¹⁷ The landscape thus becomes both a site of textual production (through pedestrian “speech acts”) as well as a historical text itself (open to multiple interpretations). As I discuss below, participants are taught to read the textual landscape for clues to the past and to engage the natural environment as both site and source of historical evidence.

THE LANDSCAPE AS HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

[History] is there in Antillean geography, in the vegetation itself. The sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory, or the lances of cane as a green prison where indentured Asians, the ancestors of Felicity, are still serving time.

—Derek Walcott

During the memory walks participants are encouraged to develop new relationships to the surrounding landscape and to rework the ways in which they both imagine and experience nature and its fruits. The walks usually include several pauses for refreshment, during which participants are able to snack on raw sugar stalks and drink from the freshly chopped coconuts that are deftly prepared by the organizers. These actions serve to reclaim the landscape as a source of nourishment and nurturing. Cane fields and former plantations, which are traditionally seen as sites of backwardness or the setting of dark and violent histories (Gordillo 2004; Japtok 2000), are reimagined as sites of resistance, strength, and sustenance.

Participants in the walks regularly expressed that their relationship to the environment had been transformed, and that they subsequently viewed and experienced nature differently. Adeline, a middle-aged cafeteria worker and a passionate

participant in the memory walks, described how the walks transformed her view of the local vegetation and environment as follows:

Before, I simply consumed my environment, I consumed my country culturally, politically, whatever . . . before I just lived. I didn't valorize my environment. I lived without any awareness of the value of what was around me. I did things without realizing what I was doing. Now I live differently.

For example, I used to always go to the river with my family, but I never thought about why. But now I understand the importance of the river in our past, how it served as a gathering place, where people came to wash their clothes, to bathe, to fish—the river used to be so important! But today we just go and play in the water, with no attention to the importance and value of that place!

For Adeline the memory walks led to a new awareness of the natural environment as an important element of history. Nature no longer constituted a backdrop for mindless activity, or a mere repertoire of signs. Instead, it was transformed into an agent and ally of social action. Rivers, trees, and other parts of the natural landscape were recast as integral elements in the unfolding of history by providing shelter, refuge, and nourishment. This became evident as Adeline explained how she had changed her relationship to the local breadfruit:

I eat differently now—I realize that it's not just about how things taste, that there are other things besides taste that come into play—there is respect also. For example, the breadfruit—I have so much respect for the breadfruit! Did you know that every year I have a party for the breadfruit?

When I asked her why she had decided to hold an annual *fête* for the *fouyapen*, she recounted the following story:

Once I was walking in the forest with a historian. And he told me: "*Voilà*, there were runaway slaves who lived here at some point." I asked him how he knew this and he said, "It's not complicated. Look around you—what do you see here?" I told him, "I don't know, I don't see anything." He said, "Come, I'll show you. Look at the breadfruit here . . . look at the breadfruit there . . . look at the breadfruit over there. . . ." You see, breadfruit doesn't just grow in the middle of the forest like that. If there is a breadfruit tree it's because someone planted it a long time ago. It is a trace.¹⁸

In Adeline's narratives of the river and the breadfruit we can see the ways in which the natural landscape is reconfigured, as both site and source of historical evidence. Here breadfruit trees provide evidence for otherwise silenced maroon communities, while rivers stand as testaments to forgotten forms of social organization.

Through this process, the memory walks' organizers are able to assert "archival power" (Trouillot 1995:52) by assembling the natural landscape into a catalogue of historical traces.¹⁹ This in turn conditions the ways in which historical authority and credibility is assessed. Archives condition what counts as historical evidence, they impart the qualia of authenticity, validity, soundness, and truth by conditioning the epistemological "rules of credibility" (Trouillot 1995:52) for historical discourses. In this instance, the natural archive produces a particular kind of evidentiary authority, which is conditioned by the particularity of nature as a historical source. Unlike the words of a historian or the pages of a textbook, trees, rivers, and valleys are saturated with an animate materiality that privileges proximity and sensuous experience over and above narration. As a result, historical knowledge is acquired not through a textual or discursive engagement, but through material and sensorial experience. What makes history convincing in this instance is not its evidentiary authority but its emotional impact.

FEELING AND KNOWING HISTORY: FROM *SAVOIR* TO *CONNAÎTRE*

The importance of emotional and sensorial connection to this form of historical production became evident during an interview I conducted with Jean Michel, a young grocery cashier. Jean Michel was a seasoned participant in the memory walks at the time of our interview, and an active member of the organization NONM, but during our conversation he referred to the memory walks with the same level of wonder and emotion as the more neophyte walkers. As he described the events in which he had participated, he often shivered and rubbed the goose bumps that appeared on his arms. He became particularly animated when he recounted his experiences during the inaugural memory walk (which was organized in 2002 to commemorate the 1802 insurrection against the reimposition of slavery):

It was during that walk that I really came to understand Guadeloupean history, because we went to the different sites. There . . . where the struggles actually happened, where the traces still remained . . . the old canons, and the trees, the tree where slaves were hung. . . . There . . . with those traces, you *felt* it. You would get these shivers . . . you would tremble. . . . The trees, you see,

they . . . they speak. There's a spirit there which makes you *feel*. . . . It's not the same as in a classroom. When someone tells you about history in a classroom, well, I would listen, I would hear it, but I didn't have that *feeling*, that feeling of shivering, as it passes through you. . . . It's not the same in a lecture hall. When you're in a lecture hall you listen, but maybe you doubt. You have doubts about the history that you're being told. But when you're *there* when you're at the site, you see it, and you have no more doubts. You can't doubt it; it's there, running through you. There's something that runs through you and that tells you—*voilà* it's true. And you have no more doubts, because now you *know* it, you were there, you lived it—you don't just know it, you *lived it* because you were there.

Underlying Jean Michel's words is the idea that the physical landscape can provide a unique testimony to history. The animate materiality of nature generates a particular aura of truth and credibility.²⁰ In Jean Michel's account, the tree "where slaves were hung" is invoked as both evidence and irrefutable witness to the past. The materiality of the tree as a historical source conditions not only its evidentiary status but also its form of (sensorial) transmission. In this instance historical knowledge is transmitted through sensations, rather than words; shivers, rather than lectures; history becomes something to be felt, witnessed, experienced, and lived, rather than simply learned (Comaroff 2005).

As Jean Michel's words suggest, this form of historical praxis creates a feeling of firsthand knowledge about the past. Participants do not feel as if they simply learned about the past; they feel as if they lived it, as if "they were there" and are now witnesses to those events. For Jean Michel this intimate form of knowing is best understood as the constitutive difference between *savoir* and *connaître*, which he explained as follows,

Savoir is when someone else tells you that slavery was abolished in 1848—that's what I was told in school—that's what I knew [*c'est ça que j'ai su*]. But why did slavery exist? I didn't know. What was slavery like? I didn't know. Why was it abolished in 1848? I didn't really know it. In my opinion, by just being told history in a lecture hall, I wouldn't have known, or understood, or been able to explain that history to others. But by participating in the memory walks, I feel like I lived through those events, I was there, I was *in it*—that's how I feel about it—it's as if I was present in that past . . . well, it's not like I was present, but I was somehow . . . *there* . . . now I know it [*je le connais*] and I believe it [*je le crois*].

The memory walks thus do not simply help Jean Michel discover a past of which he was unaware, but, rather, they help organize and channel a knowledge that he already possessed. They serve to make the events of the past more concrete and believable, they help participants such as Jean Michel move from a detached and disorganized form of knowledge (*savoir*) to an intimate firsthand knowledge of the past (*connaître*). As a result, the past is no longer just something you know about, but something you know intimately, something you know well.

THE SPIRAL OF HISTORY

In addition to creating a feeling of historical intimacy, the memory walks also help participants bridge the gaps of their historical knowledge by stressing the links between historical events. Unlike the chronological timelines of official commemorations in which historical events are placed in a linear relationship to one another that stretches out the distance between the “faraway past” and the immediate present, this form of historical presentation collapses temporal distance and presents history as overlapping moments within a shared space. Here the banner of history does not unfurl in a chronological timeline of events stretching out and away from the present moment. Instead history is experienced as a spiral of events, spinning around a shared space and place, encompassing the landscape, and saturating it with the weight of that which came before. What becomes important is not the sequence of events—what happened when—but the spatiality of history—what happened here. As a result, the past is ordered, not through a chronology of events, but through a thematic spiral that spins through the past, present, and future of a shared space.

This is most clearly seen during the month of May, which labor activists have increasingly come to identify as the “month of memory.” Officially the French government only recognizes two historical dates in the month of May: May Day and Abolition Day. However, in Guadeloupe, the month of May also carries the commemorative weight of two of the most violent and repressive moments in the island’s colonial history. First, the commemoration of the events of May 1802 during which local populations fought against the reestablishment of slavery by Napoleon Bonaparte.²¹ Second, the month of May also marks the anniversary of the more recent events of May 1967, when French forces opened fire on political demonstrators during a construction workers’ strike in downtown Pointe-à-Pitre, which was followed by two days of police violence, resulting in the death of 87 Guadeloupean civilians and the arrest and forced exile of numerous anticolonial activists.²²

That these events all took place during the month of May was a fact that seemed to go unnoticed (or at least unremarked) by local residents until recently. Each year journalists would sporadically pick up a different moment to memorialize, focusing one year on 1967, another year on 1802, and at another time on 1848. These events were treated as separate and discrete moments, rather than as part of a common history. However, when I sat down to talk about the memory walks with Didier, an employee of the local cable company, he carefully navigated through these different historical events, weaving them together into a singular search for autonomy and independence. As he described the importance of these events, he interlaced his explanation with references to the more recent Madassamy Affair in 2001, when the police arrested several notable labor activists for protesting against local businesses that remained open on Abolition Day. As I interviewed Didier on his veranda at his modest home in *Abymes*, he leaned forward and looked at me intensely as he purposefully stated,

The war of 1802 was a political war. It's true that there was also the issue of slavery—of people being enslaved—but there was also a political side to that struggle. What is the political side? It was a seizing of power, a Guadeloupean seizing of power [*la prise de pouvoir des Guadeloupéens*]. Guadeloupeans wanted to be emancipated, they wanted to rule their own country. In 1802 they fought to rule their country, in 1967 again it was a seizing of power, Guadeloupeans wanted to be emancipated, to take power, to chase out the French *carrément* [in no uncertain terms]. And in 2001 again it's the same thing. There is always that desire for power—for political power, for liberty, for emancipation. And it's precisely by studying the history of 1802 and the reactions of the colonial state in 1802 . . . and when you look at the history of 1967—it's more or less the same thing. It's practically the same reaction and practically the same demands for liberty and emancipation. In 2001 it's the same thing! It's the same reaction of the colonial state after seeing that Guadeloupeans were demanding their liberty—the liberty of emancipation.

In Didier's narrative the different moments of Guadeloupean history come together into a collective history of repression and resistance: the massacre of 1802 is made to signify not the reimposition of slavery but, rather, the refusal to be reenslaved. In addition, 1967 is not portrayed as a senseless massacre but as colonialist reaction to a nationalist will. Both of these moments, which in official histories are narrated through a discourse of failure (1802 being represented as collective suicide and 1967 as a government organized massacre), are rescued as expressions of resistance

and refusal. The events of May 2001 are then read as yet another chapter in this history. The history that is constructed is thus not one of victimhood, trauma, and subjugation, but of resistance, perseverance, and bravery. French slaves become proto-Guadeloupean insurgents as the history of slave rebellions is folded into a telos of collective destiny, which places today's striking workers as the heirs of an epic emancipatory struggle.

Numerous participants in the memory walks insisted that the most powerful aspect of these commemorations was precisely the ways in which different moments of historical action were brought into relationship. For example, one of the participants remarked that the walks had helped her understand not just history, but the links between historical moments. She described this as *l'acheminement de l'histoire*. In common French parlance to *acheminer* means "to route" something, to send it on its way (in the case of a package), or to place it on its correct path (in the case of a train). However, *acheminer* also implies a progression toward an inevitable result or outcome.²³ Thus, understanding the *acheminement* of history implies understanding both its trajectory and its goal, or *telos*. It means knowing not just where the past has been, but also where it is going. Through this form of historical production history is recovered as an agentive process, not simply "one damn thing after another," but a purposeful series of events. As Edouard Glissant might argue, history finally becomes ordered into a narrative that can "stretch into our past and calmly take us into tomorrow" (Glissant 1989:161–162). In fact, Didier explained to me that the biggest lesson he got from the memory walks was not about the details of the past but, rather, about the certainty of a Guadeloupean future. As he explained,

Whether they want it or not, men will always fight for their liberty . . . man was born to be free, free in his thinking, free to think in order to construct himself, and to construct his future. That means that even if the UGTG loses the struggle today, there will be another generation *quelconque* [unspecified] which will rise up for their liberty. As long as Guadeloupe is not decolonized, as long as it is not free, there will always be Guadeloupeans who will rise up and demand to be free.

For Didier, and many of the other participants, the memory walks provided both a certainty about the past, and a newfound faith in the political efficacy of the present. During these walks participants are remade as both subjects and agents of history. History spirals around them, passes through them, and presses them into service, leaving them with the distinct feeling that they "were there." This certainty

about the past in turn cements their faith in the possibility of a new collective future.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have sought to explore how labor activists in Guadeloupe are creating alternate forms of historical production and subject formation through the development of memory walks. In the context of the French Antilles where the project of departmentalization has conditioned the production of a historical archive centered on the process of integration with the French nation, these events allow for the assertion of an archival counterpower, by reworking the landscape as an alternative site and source of political memory. What marks these memory walks as moments of historical praxis (rather than simply historical production) is not just the stories that are told, and the evidence that is marshaled, but the experience that is produced and the ways in which that experience is transformative of political and historical consciousness. These peripatetic practices form part of a broader effort to *fe nonm*, or to build a new Guadeloupean political subject, steeped in political, cultural, and historical fluency. These practices impart historical fluency by generating an intimate knowledge of the past: participants emerge not just with knowledge about the past (*savoir*), but with an intimate relation to the past (*connaissance*). It is this intimate connection, which instills a sense of political continuity.

We have long understood that the process of class formation reaches beyond the realm of the ideological, transforming emotional, sensorial, and corporeal experiences (Marx and Fromm 1961; Thompson 1968; Williams 1977). In fact, it could be argued that class consciousness is best understood, not as an idea, but as a structure of feeling: a shared sentiment of exploitation and solidarity, and a shared readiness for action. Historical consciousness can be similarly understood as a structure of feeling: a feeling of connection, genealogy, and continuity with the communities, events, and projects of the past. It is in this way that the Guadeloupean *devoir de mémoire* becomes not just a matter of commemorating the past, but of carrying forth a particular political project.

Some critics might argue that these forms of historical praxis are a mere vulgarization or instrumentalization of history for political ends. However, the question is not whether or not histories are produced to serve political ends—for we have long known that they are—but, rather, how these processes take shape and who is authorized to undertake them. States and governments have long been endowed with the ability to produce official histories, while community leaders and

political activists are thought to generate only biased or instrumental accounts of the past. At best their historical productions are relegated to the realm of folkloric myth, at worst they are discarded as hoaxes or fakes.²⁴ However, in recent years the lines drawn between history and memory have proven to be faulty, if not useless.²⁵ Debates over the distinctions between living memory and dead history have become stale and moot. We can only hope that the days of opposing factual and objective “history” to malleable and capricious “memory” are far gone and that, to borrow from Marx, we can finally accept that men do indeed make their own history, each according to their needs.

ABSTRACT

The act of walking represents an important (yet underexamined) element of political protest and collective action, as well as an increasingly common form of historical commemoration. In this article I examine the development of a series of “memory walks” by labor activists in the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe. I argue that these peripatetic practices constitute a particular spatial, kinesthetic, and sensorial form of historical and archival production. Along the way, I consider what these events reveal about postcolonial forms of archival production and the importance of historical praxis to the formation of political subjectivities. [historical production, social movements, labor activism]

NOTES

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1. I am not arguing here for a phenomenological understanding of historical knowledge understood as an unconscious form of sensorial knowledge independent of an organizing narrative (cf. Downey 2005). It is very clear that the type of historical experience being produced here is informed by a particular historical and political project. Thus, as Joan Scott argues, this is not a matter of “individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (Scott 1991:779).
2. The UGTG is the largest and most politically active labor union in the French Caribbean with about 7,000 members, and it is responsible for over 70 percent of labor protests in the island (as reported by the Direction du Travail, de l’Emploi et de la Formation Professionnelle de la Guadeloupe [DTEFP] in the report *Les Conflits Collectifs en 2002*. For more info see <http://ugtg.org>).
3. Nonm is arguably a gender-neutral word, but many of the women involved in NONM joke sarcastically that the focus of the organization is on the men because women are already à la vanguard in their political development. There was relative gender parity among the

- membership of the organization, but (as in the case of the UGTG generally) during my fieldwork the positions of leadership were for the most part held by men.
4. I conducted extensive interviews with Gama about these events, but he is not the sole organizer of them. One of the other main organizers is the local activist and poet Carlomann R. Bassette. For more on Bassette's views of Guadeloupean history, see Bassette (2008).
 5. See www.lespwisavann.com.
 6. Trouillot describes the various moments of historical production as follows: "fact creation (the making of sources), fact assembly (the making of archives), fact retrieval (the making of narratives), and retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (Trouillot 1995:26).
 7. It is worth noting that the memory walks are just one of various ways in which Gama engages in historical production. He has also published numerous texts and pamphlets, and is constantly engaged in conferences and debates where he presents his arguments and offers them up to the public for debate.
 8. The French Antilles and Réunion are referred to as the *vieilles colonies* or "old colonies" to distinguish them from France's later colonial ventures in Africa and Asia. These original colonies are rarely mentioned in national discussions of France's colonial and imperial history.
 9. For a similar argument regarding the "folklorization of blackness" in Puerto Rico, see Godreau (2002).
 10. For a wider comparative analysis of these forms of public history see Giovannetti (2009). In the context of the U.S. South, see Hoelscher (2006).
 11. This turn to the past was influenced by the numerous commemorations of colonialism and slavery that took place in the last two decades including the Columbus Quincentennial in 1992, the 50th anniversary of France's abolition of slavery in 1998, the legal recognition in France of slavery as a crime against humanity in 2001 (loi n°2001-434), the bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution in 2004, and the designation of January 30 as the official day of commemoration of the abolition of slavery in France in 2006. For a broader discussion of these debates in the French mainland, see Vergès (1999, 2006) and Garraway (2008).
 12. Despite being designated as a *jour férié* in 1983 (loi n° 83-550), abolition day was not recognized as a *jour chômée*, which meant that many private businesses and commercial venues in Guadeloupe remained open on this day until labor activists enforced the commemorative holiday through labor strikes and demonstrations in 2001.
 13. The presence of French foods is so prevalent that there are currently initiatives in the local schools to introduce children to the taste of local fruits and vegetables, which some argue are becoming *oubliés* or *méconnus* (forgotten or unknown; see Osard 2003). For more on the symbolic importance of French food in the Antilles, see Loichot (2007); on the importance of creole food in cultural affirmation, see Loichot (2000).
 14. The French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) estimated that in 1995 about 54 percent of households in Guadeloupe owned a car (INSEE 1997). A later study found that 69 percent of the labor force drives to work in personal vehicles (INSEE 2000).
 15. This lack of physical representation might speak to the organizers' desire to preserve the importance of the act of walking itself, rather than abstracting the experience of the walk into a material representation of the terrain covered. De Certeau argues that the fixation of pedestrian pathways onto city maps constitutes a form of forgetting in which "the trace . . . is substituted for the practice" (De Certeau 1984:87). In other words, the importance of the act of walking can be obscured by highlighting the specificity of the terrain covered.
 16. In the Caribbean, the descendants of South Asian indentured workers are locally referred to as "Indian" or "East Indian" (as opposed to West Indian). For more on the place of East Indians in the Caribbean imagination, see Munasinghe (2001) and Khan (2004). For more on ideas of *ideanté* in the francophone context, see Outar (2010).
 17. It is worth noting that the organizers do not rely solely on the natural landscape for the construction of their narratives. As Gable and Handler (2000) note in the case of Colonial Williamsburg, these forms of historical production present themselves in opposition to traditional forms of archival history, yet they often involve the use of traditional historical sources,

- which are then translated into a living tableaux, such that these scenes and artifacts are used to “tell the story that the historians have written” (Gable and Handler 2000:244).
18. The historian whom Adeline mentions in her anecdote is most likely Raymond Gama whom I discuss above. It is interesting that Adeline does not cite him by name and that instead she recounts her story of “walking with a historian” as if this had become a quotidian act.
 19. As Trouillot suggests, the category of archives goes beyond government sponsored institutions, to include other less visible institutions and practices that “sort sources and organize facts.” He describes archives as “sites of mediation” that bridge the distance between what happened and what is said to have happened, and argues that “in that sense, a tourist guide, a museum tour, an archaeological expedition, or an auction at Sotheby’s can perform as much an archival role as the Library of Congress” (Trouillot 1995:52).
 20. Renato Rosaldo (1980) talks about the truth effects of this form of historical evidence when he suggests that for the Ilongot “the trees themselves bore silent, yet culturally incontrovertible, testimony to the truth of the tales of the past” (Rosaldo 1980:44). A similar argument has been made in relation to the artifacts and mise-en-scènes of “living history” museums in which the “tangible presence” of the living tableaux (and the way in which this presence is emphasized by organizers) generates an epistemological status of truth that marks them as “the real thing” (Gable et al. 1992:795).
 21. In Guadeloupe, slavery was initially abolished in 1794 (as part of the application of the French Revolutionary ideals in the colonies), violently reinstated in May 1802 under the Napoleonic regime, and definitively abolished in 1848.
 22. For more, see Co. GA. So. D (1969) and Gama and Sainton (1985).
 23. The definition for *acheminer* in the *Petit Larousse Illustré* (2005 edition) reads as follows: “Transporter vers un lieu. Se diriger vers un lieu. Avancer, progresser vers l’aboutissement de quelque chose. ‘S’acheminer vers un resultat.’”
 24. For more on fakes, see Todorov (1995) and Trouillot (1995).
 25. See, for example, Palmié (2007, 2010).

Editors’ Note: *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of articles on memory and colonialism. See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler’s “Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination” (2008), William Cunningham Bissell’s “Engaging Colonial Nostalgia” (2005), and Liam Buckley’s “Objects of Love and Decay: Colonial Photographs in a Postcolonial Archive” (2005).

Cultural Anthropology has also published articles on the Caribbean, including Todd Ramon Ochoa’s “Versions of the Dead: Kalunga, Cuban-Kongo Materiality, and Ethnography” (2007), Bill Maurer’s “Due Diligence and ‘Reasonable Man,’ Offshore” (2005), Deborah A. Thomas’s “Democratizing Dance: Institutional Transformation and Hegemonic Re-Ordering in Post-colonial Jamaica” (2002), and Aisha Khan’s “Journey to the Center of the Earth: The Caribbean as Master Symbol” (2001).

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