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Martinique, Memory, Césaire

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***Landscape & Memory: Martinican Land-People-History.* By Renée Gosson and Eric Faden. French with English subtitles. Distributed by Third World Newsreel (NYC), 2001. DVD. 30 minutes.**

***Aimé Césaire Poet and Statesman.* French dialogue with English voice-over (A French version is also available). Distributed by The Cinema Guild (NYC), 2003. DVD. 48 minutes.**

Landscape & Memory was made by Renée Gosson (then assistant professor of French at Bucknell University) and Eric Faden (then assistant professor of film studies at that same institution), with the cooperation of the three founding members of the Creolist movement (in order of their literary fame, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé).

It is filmed in “média-stylo” form, which the filmmakers claim “challenges the limits of traditional scholarship” and is intended to pay homage to French film theorist Alexandre Astruc’s 1948 manifesto “La caméra-stylo.” “This manifesto,” they inform us, “urged filmmakers to develop a genre that was neither documentary nor fiction but closer to the form of the essay—poetic, fragmented, open-ended, speculative, reflexive, and subjective.” Intermittently, the film fills the screen with a paragraph from one of the Creolist’s publications—or, several times, from a publication of Edouard Glissant (who is assumed to be the god-father of the Creolist undertaking), for instance a selection from *Poetics of Relation* that serves as the film’s epigraph.

The film provides a fair summary of the Creolists’ ecological doctrine, which has always been stronger on poetics than on politics. It seems most appropriate for a Martiniquan *college* (junior high)- and *lycée*-level audience, as a wake-up call about the ways that modernization and Frenchification are bringing about the destruction of the local environment, the “cementing over” of agricultural lands, unbridled consumerism, and loss of Creole identity—processes that many Martiniquans are happy to ignore. In what is the only surprising moment of an otherwise predictable documentary, the Creolists speak pessimistically of the certain and not-far-off disappearance of their language and the subsequent erasure of Martiniquan identity, a stance that differs from their usually upbeat celebrations of both.

Chamoiseau begins the film by pronouncing that all of Martinique is a place of memory, that the beaches are cemeteries, and lamenting that Martiniquans remain unaware that their land is being *bétonné* (cemented-over). In the first titled section, "Landscape as Witness to a Forgotten Past," he argues that Colonial History hasn't paid attention to Martiniquans, that chronological lists of major events are all defined from a colonial (French) perspective. Echoing the *Eloge de la créolité*, he (over)generalizes that "our history doesn't appear in archives or libraries," and that, like all peoples of the Americas, Martiniquans must reconstitute their history by means of traces in the landscape. (This idea—expressed in the Caribbean long before the Creolists [think, for example, of Walcott's "The Sea is History"]—takes on almost comic-book simplification in his expression of it here.)

Part Two, "From De-Industrialization to Passive Consumption," points out that for the island's first three centuries, "even if there was slavery," at least there was agricultural production. Now, there is very little—everything has become cemented-over. Supermarkets, gas stations, parking lots abound. The capacity of the island's population to survive if cut off by a blockade or other event (as during World War II) is now down to a single week. Today, we are told, some market women buy their produce in supermarkets and then resell it in the "picturesque" covered market in the center of Fort-de-France. And of the products sold in the ubiquitous supermarkets, fully 98% are imported from Europe, with only 2% locally-made or home-grown.

Part Three, "From Cementification to Frenchification," begins with a quotation from Confiant and argues that French ways of acting and thinking are becoming dominant. Urbanization is rampant. Per capita car ownership is higher, the film claims, in Martinique than in France. "The main production of Martinique today is garbage." The Creolists dwell on the colonial misunderstanding of the mangrove (which is rapidly being destroyed by "development") as a space of death rather than life. They tell us that they have nevertheless appropriated the metaphor of death of the primary source (Africans, Amerindians, Hindus) to emphasize that it permitted the rebirth or creation of new (Creole) realities and identities. Pessimism, however, runs deep through the Creolists' narrative in this film. TV, they tell us, is French, the island's newspaper is French, all school examinations are the same as in France. Today's Martiniquans—they use the English word—are "brainwashed."

Part Four, "The Politics of Commemoration," describes how the colonizers celebrated their heroes through statues. Pride of place is reserved for the pirate-explorer d'Esnambuc (who, Chamoiseau says, exterminated the Amerindians and may be compared to Hitler) and Victor Schoelcher (who has become the symbol of cultural and politi-

cal assimilation and the absorption of Martiniquan identity into that of the *mère patrie*). They report one small victory, however: when Empress Joséphine's head was knocked off in the 1990s by unknown "patriots," a decision was eventually made to leave her standing "guillotined" in the Savane, for all to see. "We need," they argue, "statues of resistance—Maroons, etc." (In fact, for ten years now there have been several such statues, erected with French funds to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, in various Martiniquan towns.) I also note that of the five street signs the filmmakers illustrate to show how thoroughly France has imposed memory of its own heroes on the Martiniquan capital (they show, among others, Rue Lamartine, Rue Victor Hugo, Rue Victor Schoelcher) two seem poorly chosen (Rue Victor Sévère and Rue Antoine Siger) since these streets carry the names of men who were in fact Martiniquans and eminent local politicians.

Part Five, "Anse Caffard and the Politics of the Créolité Movement," focuses on the 1990s monument facing the sea at Anse Caffard, an homage to the victims of an early 19th-century slave shipwreck that tries to "transcend Négritude" by making the giant, semi-abstract commemorative statues white. "For us Antillians," they insist, "it's not race that is important. We have black ancestors, Hindu ancestors, etc." In Creolist theory, diversity rules (no matter how much racist, Fanonian realities persist in the everyday life of the island).

Given the banality of the film's message for anyone who knows Martinique (or for that matter Puerto Rico or Jamaica), it is hard to imagine that anyone would disagree with its central premise about the ongoing destruction of the environment, what George Lamming, writing more generally about the Caribbean, referred to when he called development "the most dangerously toxic word in our vocabulary." Why, then, do I think the film's prime audience should be Martiniquan teenagers? Ironically, young Martiniquans are little exposed to Creolist ideas, which have always been largely for French (metropolitan) consumption. If, despite Creolist dogma, diversity may not rule in Martinique, assimilation and development certainly do.

Like *Landscape & Memory*, the Césaire film seems most suitable for high-schoolers, but this time for non-Martiniquans. Although the main talking head, Ann Armstrong Scarboro, presents herself as a scholar of French literature, when she is heard asking a simple question of Césaire she asks it in English. Billed as an "educational video," it seems, frankly, quite dumbed-down. Scarboro spends a good bit of time telling what the film will cover and then interjects herself every couple of minutes during the interview with Césaire (which is presented in an annoying English voice-over) to tell viewers what he is about to say. She asserts that Négritude is similar to Black Power and refers to French Guiana (at

least twice) as “Guyana.” The male voice-over mispronounces Césaire’s poetry collection *Ferrements* as “Ferréments,” and many of the book covers shown during the film are either English translations or reprint editions, rather than the originals, making something of a mess of history.

Most of the film is devoted to Scarboro’s 2001 interview with Césaire in which he describes his love of the Martiniquan landscape (the Mont Pélé volcano and its enormous energy, the sea, the silk-cotton trees), expands on his views of Surrealism and poetry (which are arguably the most interesting parts of the film), and reminisces about his schooldays in Paris (the oft-told stories of his encounter with Senghor) and the genesis of the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (another oft-told tale about visiting the Dalmatian-coast home of his acquaintance Paul Guberina and thinking obsessively of Martinique). Then a segment on the SERMAC, the cultural center for the arts that Césaire founded and nurtured during his more than half-century as mayor of Fort-de-France, which leads into cameo appearances by Victor Anicet, a Césairian and one of Martinique’s best-known sculptors/painters/ceramicists, and Luc Martin, a painter who says that Césaire sees the themes of marronage and freedom in many of his abstractions.

The film ends with Césaire reading a couple of pages from the *Cahier*. We hear it first via English voice-over, then in his original voice. Music from the group *Taxi-Créole* caps off the video, which credits an impressive number of French Caribbeanist specialists—what role they might have played is hard to imagine and is not specified.

It is sad to have to report that when Sally and I last visited with Césaire in January 2007, to present him with a new book (as has been our custom during the past twenty-five years), his usual ebullience was accompanied by a significant loss of memory and acuity. Though he enthusiastically paged through *Romare Bearden: une dimension caribéenne* (repeatedly asking us if Bearden was “really Black”), his mind had, in his own words, largely *foutu le camp* (“flown the coop”). Clearly, there will be no more films in which he is interviewed. During the past two decades, there have been quite a few films made about Césaire, often by RFO-TV in Martinique, but also by others from around the world. Unfortunately, this one adds little of value to that particular legacy.