

CARIBBEAN INTRANSIT THE ARTS JOURNAL



ISSUE 1 NOVEMBER 2011

THE POLITICS OF THE VISUAL AND THE VOCAL



PASCALE DESOUZA

From markers of French history to memorials of Caribbean resistance: monuments to Louis Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude

Keywords: resistance, monuments, positivism, constructivism, Guadeloupe

Abstract:

In *Silencing the Past* Michel-Rolph Trouillot contrasts a positivist vision of history aimed at approximating the truth and a constructivist one which appears as another form of fiction. In Guadeloupe, the history of maroon slaves has elicited both discourses, as reflected in the statue erected to mark an 1802 rebellion and its three main figures: Louis Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude. A chronological examination of monuments dedicated to them reveals an evolving representation from a rebel first interpreted as playing a part in French revolutionary history and later celebrated for his/her role in resisting French hegemony. As several 21st century initiatives reveal, both visions endure in Guadeloupe, reflecting the complex history of an island still struggling to define its Caribbean identity while being an overseas French region.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

*Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that gray vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up.*

The sea is History

(Walcott, 364)

In *Silencing the Past*, the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot contrasts a positivist view of history wherein “the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth” (5) with a constructivist view of history as “another form of fiction” (ibid). Trouillot contends that positivism characterizes European and North-American approaches to colonial history as it provides “a story about power, a story about those who won” (ibid), thereby silencing the voice of the [Caribbean] other. While seeking to give credence to the histories of those who were often powerless

to express themselves, be they slaves, indentured servants or thwarted rebels, Trouillot’s reading of history may contribute to the ongoing erasure of the other, by labeling their contributions forms of fiction. A truly constructivist view of history would approach all historical testimonies as forms of fiction, reflecting the biases and ambivalence of the person sharing her experience or vision of events, regardless of the amount of power this person wields in society. Maroons present an interesting case in point. Having left the plantation, they established an alternate historical discourse, predicated on another

form of power. Their history may be interpreted as another positivist approach, especially in cases when their rebellions led to ultimate victory as when Haiti achieved its independence or Jamaican maroons obtained the rights to use part of the land to maintain their communities. In the French Caribbean, the history of maroon slaves has elicited both a positivist discourse aimed at celebrating them by folding them into a French revolutionary narrative and a constructivist approach which underlines their roles as Caribbean rebels fighting against France, and often suppresses such discourses of resistance, especially when these are successfully thwarted by French forces. Both approaches are reflected in the statuary erected to mark an 1802 rebellion in Guadeloupe and its three main figures: Louis Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude.

As Trouillot suggests, “the production of traces is always also the production of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual and collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not” (29). This paper proposes a chronological examination of several such ‘physical markers’ to demonstrate how the monuments erected to celebrate Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude produce both traces and silences. A diachronic analysis reveals the evolving representation of the rebel figure first interpreted as playing a part in a French history characterized by revolutionary ideals and the later celebration of its role in resisting French hegemony. As several 21st century initiatives reveal, both visions endure in Guadeloupe, reflecting the complex history of an island still struggling to define its Caribbean identity while being an overseas French region.

Historical Background

Called Karukera (the island of beautiful waters) by the Caribs, Guadeloupe is a twin island located in the Lesser Antilles. Low-lying lands and some hilly terrain comprise its eastern half named Grande-Terre while a volcanic chain with rugged forested slopes covers most of the land on its western half called Basse-Terre. The former was more suited to the cultivation of sugar and other staples during the heyday of the plantation

economy while the latter often served as a refuge for marooning slaves. Christopher Columbus reached the island in 1493 and named it Guadalupe after a monastery in Spain. Guadeloupe, the French version of the name has endured and replaced its native name. While Christopher Columbus’ historical role has undergone much scrutiny and his negative impact on Amerindian cultures and peoples has been widely denounced, markers celebrating his ‘discovery’ of the New World still abound. There is one such monument in Guadeloupe, the Mémorial Christophe Colomb.

On November 4, 1916, Emile Mervart, the governor of the island, inaugurated a monument to celebrate Columbus on land offered by local planters in Sainte-Marie near the town of Capesterre Belle Eau (Basse-Terre). The village is located near the site where Columbus first disembarked and was named after one of Columbus’ ships, the Santa Maria. While erected away from the town center, the monument attracts some local, metropolitan and foreign visitors. It stands on a small plaza along the main road to the town of Basse-Terre and a postal agency is located nearby. The statue - a bust of Columbus - was carved by an artist from Genoa and is set on a triangular base. A marble plaque at the base of the statue bears a text in Latin and a poem in French written by Mervart himself. The text written in Latin on the base celebrates Columbus’ arrival and renaming of the island while the poem—which follows the French rules of versification for sonnets—praises the “discoverer” and “godfather”, marking the spot where “Karukera became Guadeloupe”. Several canons and two anchors were later added to the site. Such a representation of Caribbean history seems totally dated nowadays. Yet, the memorial still stands and is featured on multiple touristic sites and blogs, thereby inscribing Columbus into a French narrative of Caribbean colonization.

After Columbus’ arrival in 1493, the island failed to attract much interest. Its western half was poorly suited to agriculture, except for an eastern coastal plain, and the mangrove-fringed shores of its eastern half were deemed rather insalubrious. Colonized by the French in 1635, it eventually became a major producer of sugar, though it remained less attractive to French planters than Haiti or Martinique. Several French planters who settled in

Martinique indeed let overseers run their Guadeloupean plantations. On June 7, 1794, following the French revolution, slavery was abolished in Haiti and Guadeloupe. The measure was however not applicable to Martinique, which was a British colony at the time. By 1802, France was no longer a republic but an empire and Napoleon Bonaparte reinstated slavery. Two main reasons led to such a decision. The first was financial need to support war in Europe, the second was the influence of his wife Josephine who was born in Martinique in a planter's family. Faced with the risk of losing their free labor in 1794, Martinican planters had opted instead to hand over the island to the English, thereby ensuring the maintenance of slavery. However, several Martinican planters owned plantations in Guadeloupe and were adversely affected when France abolished slavery and declared all former slaves to be henceforth French citizens with full civil rights. Not only did they forfeit the income provided by their Guadeloupean holdings but lost their investments in men and machinery on that island without any potential for compensation. Napoleon's decision to reinstate slavery in 1802 led to several rebellions as former slaves rallied to fight for their freedom both in Haiti and in Guadeloupe. The two main figures of the Guadeloupean rebellion were Louis Delgrès, a mulatto from Martinique, and Ignace his lieutenant. Solitude was a field laborer who joined Delgrès' fight and about whom little is known beyond a few lines in a *Histoire de la Guadeloupe* published in 1858 by a French historian. Unlike in Haiti where Napoleon's troops were defeated, the 4000 French troops under the direction of General Antoine Richepance sent to Guadeloupe prevailed and quelled the rebellion. Ignace died on May 25, 1802 on Grande-Terre while Delgrès and 300 of his followers managed to escape to Matouba, a town located at the foot of the Soufrière volcano on Basse-Terre. On May 28, Delgrès chose death over surrender and set off the explosion of the plantation house where he had sought refuge. It is believed but not attested that Solitude was captured, imprisoned till the delivery of the child she was expecting and hanged the day after she gave birth in 1802.

From History to Memory

The figure of the maroon features prominently in Caribbean visual art. Several statues are dedicated to maroons throughout the francophone Caribbean, most of which portray a defiant man, sometimes bearing the scars of prior punishment. The most famous depiction in stone is the statue in Port-au-Prince featuring a maroon calling slaves to revolt by blowing into a conch. Two statues can be found in Martinique, one erected in Le Diamant in 1998 and another in Saint-Esprit in 2000. Both works feature a single man standing defiantly. A statue located in Sainte-Anne in Guadeloupe focuses more on the concept of flight and punishment. It represents a man emerging from a white wall suggestive of a sugar mill; his lower left leg is missing, probably cut after he was punished for marronage. All these figures are anonymous. Within this imagery of resistance, the 1802 rebellion has however elicited specific interest in Guadeloupe and several memorials have been erected to Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude.

The first two monuments analyzed in this paper are busts, which recall, through their style and plaque, the bust of Columbus erected in Capesterre. The first, from a chronological perspective, was dedicated in 1948 and is located in the village of Saint-Claude, close to the Matouba (Basse-Terre). It stands in a small park, surrounded by flowers and somewhat recessed from the road, which makes it hard to see as one drives past. The static pose and the clothing, a buttoned jacket and a neatly pressed frilled shirt, could be used to represent any 19th century French official, the stern look suggesting more restraint though than defiance. The plaque at the base does not identify Delgrès as the leader of a local rebellion against French troops. It simply dedicates the memorial to the memory of Delgrès and his companions and provides the date of the events at the Matouba. A second similar bust is part of the Petit-Canal memorial to slavery (Grande-Terre). The location is highly relevant to the 1802 rebellion as Ignace and numerous followers embarked from this village to Basse-Terre to join forces with Delgrès. The memorial includes a staircase composed of 54 steps – 52 were built by slaves in the 19th century— with, on either side, the names of African ethnic groups which contributed slaves

to Guadeloupe (Congo, Peul, Yoruba, etc), a giant drum with a plaque honoring “The unknown slave” erected in 1994 and a bust of Delgrès at the foot of the stairs. The bust is very similar to the one in Saint-Claude, in terms of size, style, pose and clothing. It was given by the Conseil Régional de la Guadeloupe and inaugurated on May 28, 2008, 106 years to the day after Delgrès’ death. It bears two plaques. The one located below the bust to the front of the memorial states:

“Offert par le Conseil Régional de la Guadeloupe en 2008.

Le Député Président de Région Victorin Lurel 28 mai 2008”

It thus honors the initiative taken by the Conseil Régional and the Guadeloupean-born official in charge at the time. Another plaque located at the back of the base (and hence more hidden from view) identifies Delgrès as a colored officer who served in the French army on several islands, opposed General Richepance sent to apply a decision regarding the reestablishment of slavery and chose death over surrender. While historically true, this visual and verbal depiction of Delgrès suggests he was a French soldier who dutifully served his country till 1802 rather than a former slave who rebelled against a decision made by Napoleon. It does note his decision to commit suicide at the Habitation Danglemont in Matouba, thereby contributing to his image as a martyr. Such imagery may appear dated nowadays; yet it has elicited two recent initiatives which attest to an enduring vision of Delgrès as one of many French heroes. The first is the emission of a French stamp in 2005. It features a similar bust of Delgrès, with a faint smile; the dates of his birth and death are provided, but no information as to his role in the rebellion nor any link to the Caribbean are given, except for a set of red hibiscus suggesting an ‘exotic’ locale. The author of this reading of Delgrès was not a local artist but a French navigator of Breton ancestry called Titouan Lamazou. For French citizens unfamiliar with Delgrès, the stamp could evoke any administrator in a French colony located in a tropical setting.

The second initiative is more far-reaching with regards to the integration of Delgrès within French iconography. In 2008, Guadeloupe ordered 34

busts of Louis Delgrès, all similar in style to the ones found in Saint-Claude and Petit-Canal. Several of the 32 offered to Guadeloupean towns have already been inaugurated such as the first one in Saint Claude on May 28, 2008, followed by ones in Petit Canal, Anse-Bertrand, Vieux-Fort and Trois-Rivières. Guadeloupean mayors are free to display the bust, if they so wish, and to select an appropriate setting. The busts were made by Didier Audrat, a metropolitan artist now based in Guadeloupe on the recommendations of a Guadeloupean historian René Bélénus. Such an initiative is open to multiple and complex interpretations. On the one hand, the 34 busts suggest an effort to replace the bust of Marianne in each town hall, substituting a French revolutionary figure with a local hero. On the other hand, the style of the bust and the generous ‘gift’ of 34 identical ones carved by a metropolitan sculptor may be interpreted as a French effort to impose a certain streamlined image of Delgrès. Indeed, on a 2008 blog, contributors question the selection of a sculptor who is a ‘zorey’, a pejorative term for metropolitans settled in Guadeloupe, denounce the selection of a Martinican (delgrès was born in Saint-Pierre, Martinique) as a Guadeloupean hero and debate the use of local taxes for the whole initiative. The postings reveal all the complexity of the quest for identity, not only with regards to France but also to the ‘sister’ island of Martinique. Rather than assemble the community behind Delgrès, the initiative underlines lines of fracture with France and Martinique.

These various initiatives and the (lack) of information provided regarding Delgrès’ role as a Caribbean rebel reflect efforts on the part of France to establish him both as a soldier who served the interests of the French republic and as a Marianne-like revolutionary figure. Other memorials however challenge such a representation and propose a vision of Delgrès as a local hero who becomes part of an ongoing narrative of resistance to metropolitan France.

Erected in 2002, the monument to Delgrès located in Fort Delgrès, about 10 miles south of Saint-Claude on Basse-Terre stands in sharp contrast to the previous ones. Unlike Petit-Canal and Saint-Claude which remain poorly connected to major tourist itineraries, the fort is located near the main coastal road to Basse-Terre,



Delgrès at Matouba

well indicated with multiple signs and the logo identifying a “Monument Historique”. The fort itself may seem an odd location for such a memorial as French soldiers erected it to defend the island against foreign invasion. As such, it bears witness to the ongoing French presence on the island and the colonizers’ efforts to maintain their presence. However, the various names it bore reveal another facet of French history, one aimed at acknowledging local events. Charles Houël, governor of Guadeloupe, first had a fortified house built on the site in 1650. This house was meant to assert and reflect his local power and named Fort Saint-Charles. Renamed Fort Royal in the 1760s, it was the site of a major battle (the last one fought on the premises) during the 1802 rebellion. French soldiers set siege to the fort where Delgrès, Ignace and their troops resisted for 10 days. They eventually formed separate battalions and escaped respectively to Saint-Claude and Pointe-à-Pitre. The fort was renamed Fort Richepance in the early 19th century to honor the man who won the siege and forced Delgrès and Ignace to divide their troops. In 1989, it was finally renamed Fort Delgrès after multiple local petitions. The names adopted reflect an evolution in the vision of the site from a stronghold aimed at establishing the power of the local governor to the site of a battle won by Napoleon’s troops and ultimately to one where rebels fought for the right to preserve their freedom. This change in perception reflected in the name is further supported by the erection of a memorial designed by a local artist Roger Akerian. It must be noted that while such initiatives

reflect a local will to inscribe Guadeloupean history into the landscape of the island, such changes cannot occur without formal approval from Paris, especially since the fort became a “Monument Historique” in November 1977.

The memorial to Delgrès stands in an open area readily accessible to visitors, overlooking the Caribbean Sea. It is composed of 6-foot-high megaliths aligned in three concentric circles surrounding a larger head; there is no base as each stone is set directly into the soil. Unlike the busts previously studied which are life-size and bear a rather demure expression, Delgrès’ head is several feet tall and displays an angry frown. Though the names of several members of Delgrès’ and Ignace’s troops are known, the anonymous megaliths stand in for all the rebels, both male and female, who draw their strength from Guadeloupean soil, symbolizing the community. The nearby plaque makes no reference to Delgrès being an officer in the French army but rather hails him as a hero of the struggle against the reestablishment of slavery in Guadeloupe, emphasizing that he chose to die and was never captured. The absence of any reference to his service in the army may be seen as a way to romanticize him, and thereby contribute to establishing his role in a more constructivist light as less historical and more ‘fictional’. The monument and its plaque establish a new communal narrative of resistance, one that is ongoing as the monument is the site of yearly celebrations in May. These celebrations focus on community activities such as concerts, cooking demonstrations, movies, fashion shows, and workshops for children. In an article entitled “Imaginez maintenant ou un bel hommage à Delgrès”, *France-Antilles*, the local newspaper, characterized the 2010 event as a ‘flight towards creativity’.

The last memorial to Delgrès is part of a set of three monuments located near Pointe-à-Pitre and dedicated to Ignace, Solitude and Delgrès. The three monuments are all located in the center of roundabouts on the Boulevard des Héros, a main thoroughfare. Their location makes them readily but fleetingly visible by passing drivers. This location both increases public exposure and limits a detailed examination. In order to get a closer look, I had to park some way up the street, walk back and cross two busy highway lanes. They were inaugurated

respectively on May 27, 1998, May 27, 1999 and May 27, 2001. The day corresponds to the time when Ignace and Delgrès died but the first inauguration also coincided with the 150th anniversary of the second abolition of slavery. This inauguration to commemorate 1848 is paradoxical seeing that Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude were fighting for the enforcement of the first abolition signed in 1794. Had they won, the second abolition would not have occurred. Each monument is accompanied by a panel, which explains its respective role within the rebellion in 4 languages (Creole, English, French, Spanish). The panels are placed about 100 yards away, on the side of the road, therefore easier to reach on foot, but they are set so high that the two texts at the top are beyond the reach of a person of average height. The information provided is part fact, part fiction, especially on the panel dedicated to Solitude which bears little in common with the scant historical information available but draws more upon the rereading of the character, including a fictionalized account of her life, *La Mulâtresse Solitude*, published in 1972. All panels underline the valor and courage of the three rebels.

The first memorial inaugurated is dedicated to Ignace, Delgrès' lieutenant. He was actually the first to rebel against the reinstatement of slavery and committed suicide to escape capture on May 26, 1802 in the stronghold of Baimbridge, a few miles from the monument. It is a rather traditional depiction of a rebel, rallying his troops for battle. A few hundred yards down on the same boulevard, stands the statue dedicated to Solitude a year later. Jacky Poulrier, a local sculptor created it. The plaque at the bottom recalls Solitude's role as a "heroine of resistance and oppression and emblematic figure of marooning in Guadeloupe". It is a befitting tribute to a peasant woman who joined Delgrès' troops but did not lead any battle during the 1802 rebellion. It is also a reflection of the prominent role played by women during the rebellion as they formed their own troops and fought against the French army in the early days of the rebellion. Solitude is presented as a pregnant woman who stands defiantly, hands on her hips. She does not carry any weapon nor any object associated with a Caribbean



Ignace in Pointe à Pitre

warrior tradition, such as the conch on the statue in Port-au-Prince. Her lack of weaponry might recall the subterfuges such as poisoning used by slave women, which often made their acts of resistance invisible in the annals of history. Her pose, arms akimbo, links her to a traditional depiction of African, African-American and Caribbean women. In *Arms Akimbo: Africana women in contemporary literature*, Janice Liddell and Yakini Belinda Kemp characterize this pose as a "majestic, sometimes defiant, always affirming stance of arms on the hips whether we are from Dakar, Kingston or DC- which Black women so often assume" (9). This stance itself serves to reconnect Solitude to her African past and is indicative of a warrior spirit that will not be subdued. It seems that while both Ignace, whose two sons were killed in 1802, and Solitude who was hanged shortly after delivering her child, were unable to pass on their heritage, they are now defiantly providing a lineage from Africa to contemporary Guadeloupeans and suggesting that they, too, should stand proud of their heritage and pass it on to their own children. Three schools stand nearby, each one bearing

the name of one of the heroes.

The last monument to be erected on the boulevard des Héros is dedicated to Delgrès. The monument recalls the one in Fort Delgrès insofar as it features a partial representation of Delgrès surrounded by some of his followers. The statue of Delgrès features a head leaning on an arm itself posed on a leg but no actual body connects the three parts. The eight men surrounding Delgrès have a defiant pause, some raising a fist; while such a depiction underlines the participation of other rebels, it fails to acknowledge women's role. The representation of Delgrès reflects the circumstances of his death in an explosion. The absence of the body also hints that Delgrès headed the rebellion and that the eight men surrounding him, as well as all Guadeloupeans, are in effect, his body. The statue would then suggest that while Delgrès led the rebellion, he was one of many and drew his strength from his numerous followers and the surrounding community.

Several official events to mark the 1802 rebellion are held near the three statues. The monuments thus continue to reflect the historical heritage of rebellion in Guadeloupe while partaking in an ongoing communal effort to acknowledge the past and inspire present initiatives to resist the ongoing French influence in the region. The multiple ambiguities on the 'historical' panels may appear problematic, but in fact reflect the constructivist view of history characterized by Trouillot as "another form of fiction" (5).

The final monument which I would like to examine in this paper is not located in Guadeloupe. It is a monumental set of three columns dedicated to Solitude in Bagneux, a Parisian suburb. The significance of this monument is better understood when inscribed in a wider context of various recent initiatives to explore the role of slavery in French history. These include efforts such as the law proposed—and adopted on May 10, 2001—by Christiane Taubira, the representative of French Guyana in the Chambre des Députés, to have slavery and slave trading acknowledged as crimes against humanity; the petition by the Comité pour la mémoire et l'histoire de l'esclavage—headed by Maryse Condé till 2008—to establish May 10 as the day to commemorate

the abolition of slavery and the campaign by Bordeaux to acknowledge its slave-trading past and be included on the UN World Heritage List. The selection of Bagneux as the site for a statue dedicated to Solitude may however seem problematic. What could justify erecting a monument to Solitude in a small town which, unlike, Bordeaux or Nantes, did not partake in the triangular trade and which many French people would have difficulty locating? The only connection to the French Caribbean seems to be through its twinning with Gros-Bourg on the island of Marie-Galante. The choice of location may however simply be ascribed to the fact that its sculptor, Nicolas Alquin, is a Belgian artist who resides in Bagneux.



Solitude in Pointe à Pitre

According to the Comité pour la mémoire et l'histoire de l'esclavage, the monument stands as a "homage and acknowledgement of the victims of the slave trade and slavery and those who rebelled against them" and Solitude was selected because she "fought, arms in hand, against the soldiers of General Richepance who was in charge of subduing the rebellion". This depiction contradicts the historical data available on Solitude and is not supported by the design selected. The monument includes three 8-foot-tall pillars, two dark and one lighter ones, made of wood and metal with rough hewn backs and carvings on their inward side. The carvings are dug into the columns and represent female forms with arms akimbo. The hollowed figures suggest both the presence

and absence of Solitude and more generally of women's contributions to the history of the Caribbean, while the three columns and the African wood evoke the triangular trade. This monument is however meant to look beyond the slave trade and establish a lineage with past and present slavery worldwide. Thus, Nicolas Alquin, the sculptor, sees it as "the first memorial in the world dedicated to all the slaves who rebel" while the mayor of Bagnaux, upon dedicating the monument, established a clear link with contemporary issues such as present-day slavery and discrimination based on color.

The memorials to Delgrès, Ignace and Solitude analyzed here reflect dual visions of the 1802 rebellion in Guadeloupe. While the first two memorials to Delgrès tend to emphasize his identity as a French soldier and subsume his role within a larger French revolutionary tradition, the latter two and the statues dedicated to Ignace and Solitude underline their role as Caribbean rebels fighting against a decision made by the French government of the time, namely the reestablishment of slavery. The plaque and panels reinforce the message of each statue, and reveal to which extent the erection of such monuments underlines history as open to multiple interpretations through visual arts. Throughout this paper, the lens adopted by the commissioned artists has revealed divergent, if not outright conflicting, images of the three rebels. The role of the French government in this evolving representation remains ambiguous. France has a long-standing tradition of honoring its major historical figures through street names, stamps and monuments, generally statues. While at first weary of any influence which the Haitian example could provide for slaves in Guadeloupe to foment a similar revolt, and firmly opposed to marronage as an economic but also political threat to the plantation system, it has over the past years sought to give increased visibility to the role of slavery in the history of metropolitan France and its overseas regions. In doing so, it may however have adopted a positivist vision of history.

About the Author:

Pascale De Souza (Ph.D in French, University of Maryland, College Park) is a Term Assistant Professor of French at George Mason University. She first majored in English, obtaining a DEA in Langue, littérature et

in the poem listed in the epigraph, Walcott wonders "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?", concluding that "The sea has locked them up" (364). This paper identifies multiple visual ways of unlocking Guadeloupean history and celebrating its battles and martyrs. Despite the portrayal of Delgrès as a French revolutionary hero, initiatives such as community-focused gatherings at Fort Delgrès may contribute to an ongoing constructivist celebration of cultural resistance to French hegemony in Guadeloupe. In this respect, the yearly hike organized since May 2005 may bear the most hopeful name as it no longer focuses on Delgrès as the head of the rebellion but suggests that participants walk "Sur les pas de Delgrès".

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