

Decolonial variations

A conversation between Olivier Marboeuf and Joachim Ben Yakoub (May 2019)

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Everyone talks about decolonization, but no one knows if we're really decolonizing. The growing demand for decolonization has been taken up enthusiastically by various mainstream white institutions that have spread confusion. Arts institutions produce festivals on decolonization, theaters claim it as an artistic mission in conjunction with intersectionality, and art centers take on, as their own, all sorts of radical concepts as soon as they enter the cultural lexicon. The militant rallying cry has been kidnapped to serve as a new strategic institutional concept—but a concept that risks reproducing the same obsolete practices, structures and economies and thus reinforcing the existing power relations in the world of the arts.

Last January in Brussels, the festival Congolisation, Café Congo and The Space invited Gerty Dambury, Françoise Vergès and Pascal Obolo to present the book *Décolonisons les arts! (Decolonize the Arts!)*. The presentation was conceived of in two parts, articulated around two questions: “Is it possible to decolonize from the inside?” and “How can we decolonize from the outside?”. The first question was asked at the ‘Muntpunt’, the principal Flemish language library in Brussels, which is currently in the process of “decolonizing” its collection. The second was posed at The Space in Brussels. We spoke of the need to create alternative outside spaces that are non-institutionalized and non-instrumentalized, so that this very necessary militant demand, which resonates more and more, not be appropriated, and also to imagine other possible art worlds.

In his contribution to the book, “To Decolonize is to be present, to decolonize is to flee,” Olivier Marboeuf underscores precisely this “need for a landslide” in order to create “the conditions for an alternative scene, produced in the echo chamber of Maroon culture.” Marboeuf is an author, performer and independent curator. He was the director of the Espace Khasma, an art center dedicated to the production and exhibition of video and artists’ films, which, since closing in October 2018, has ceded its place to a new project, “un lieu pour respirer” (“a place to breathe”). An ensemble of different collectives and projects—such as “R22 Tout-monde,” “Potager Liberté” and “La Fabrique Phantom”—decided to regroup with the objective of creating in a new way an experimental community center for all, an independent refuge with an alternative, lighter economy. Marboeuf is thus well positioned to interrogate “this sudden decolonizing fever that seizes the trembling bodies of the most renowned institutions in the art world” and to “re-arm the decolonial gesture, sharpen it so that it pierces again the lips of those who pronounce it” As Edouard Glissant would say, he offers us an idea that may not necessarily incite us to “understand” (“comprendre,” which means in French “take with”), or take in with a certain knowledge, but rather an idea that we should “be with,” a poetry that demands to be lived and experimented, to be constantly re-translated into daily life.

Joachim Ben Yakoub

Joachim Ben Yakoub: So everyone is organizing debates, talking about decolonizing, but are we actually decolonizing anything?

Olivier Marboeuf: There can and should be several answers to this question. Firstly, the question is too broad. It needs to be adapted to the scale of particular experience before it can be answered, cut into smaller pieces, each more precisely situated, in order to create a *response-ability*,¹ to use American philosopher Donna Haraway's terms.

It may be necessary to state beforehand the place from where I'm speaking, what I'm speaking about and also how I speak. Like everyone, I have the luxury of speaking about myself from several perspectives, given that certain details, certain traces, take on a particular importance in the context of time and resonate differently depending on circumstances. To me this does not mean an issue of legitimacy. And I consider that the figure that interests me in this history, the body-vehicle that I borrow, assumes its illegitimacy. It is a body that until now has never had the right to speak very loudly. For many reasons, it was never the right time for it; this body was never welcome, there were always good reasons to find it too noisy, too talkative, too vague, inaudible and untimely. It always had an unfortunate excess, manners that just wouldn't do. It had been educated in a form of limitation of self, in a manner of being against itself, a shame of self and, often, an incapacity to name itself. And so a strange moment occurred, a brief moment where it was told: *all right, speak now, it's your turn, but be careful what you say and how you say it, we're listening to you but we're also watching you*. There was a sort freedom under control.

As a consequence, at this moment of speech, this body refuses something. It refuses to speak at a moment decided by those who had decided that it wouldn't speak before because it didn't have anything in particular to say that others couldn't say in its place. And so perhaps to speak of the position of enunciation, I would say that I speak from this form of asymmetry, from this desire to break with the symmetry imposed by the dominating agenda, from an attempt to escape an organization of speech.

I am a man who grew up in a large family in the suburbs of Paris, marked by a certain relation to flight, to displacement, to a certain uprooting. I have Caribbean origins that come from my father, who very involuntarily transmitted to me a painful manner of *being French*, which comes from neither open-mouthed adhesion nor radical rejection, but is a form of problematic, melancholic and also a very vibrant incorporation of the idea of *being French*. For me, all of this does not constitute an identity that would open one to forms of legitimacy to speak. All of this is a question of matter(s). And it is in these matters that my thought resonates, my masculinity, in the beloved concrete of the urban suburbs, in the risky and toxic affect which is never far from social death, in a form of vegetation in movement, both menacing and friendly, that accompanies the frenzied rush of the Maroon towards a life beyond death, a life that returns in echo in the movement of unfurling landscapes seen from suburban trains that screech in pleasure on the night-time railway switch points

¹ Capacity for reaction

JBY: Thank you for situating your thoughts—such a necessary reflex that is too often not addressed. From this clear position, could you specify the decolonizing motif that interests you?

OM: If we want to consider the decolonizing gesture, I think we have to begin by accepting that knowledge is not an ensemble of “gaseous” objects, but rather something that takes form and disposes itself in and from individual bodies that must be named. But here again, these bodies are not so much the exclusive owners of subjects, territories and histories than echo chambers that permit us to hear their specific intensity emanating from specific matters.

We also must speak of where this anger comes from, because anger is an important component in the decolonizing gesture. It’s a rather difficult sort of knowledge, a bit vague, but it is a significant part of the minority capital. The anger that we are interested in alerts us that something is blocked and that it comes from a long way back, that it isn’t an intimate question but rather an echo in a specific body of a vast history of violence that reemerges and is reconfigured endlessly. Understanding the colonial motif is important as much in its historical implications as in its larger structure, the idea of coloniality, which produces permanently new situations of domination in new geographies.

Thus the decolonial body—I use “body” here as a mode of feeling, of thought, which does not involve only gaze—must always be in movement between the specific and the structure, which allows us to never forget that colonialism is the root of modern capitalism and that it is not a single, unfortunate episode, a detail, a mistake that would call for a rather shameful form of reparation, a regime of morality there where we would be expecting a political stance. The idea of decolonizing that interests me refuses to isolate the problem of race from the questions of class, gender, territory, membership or non-membership of nation-states, or errant identities that are becoming modes of being for many people in the decades to come. And yet it doesn’t lose sight of the specific music of history in specific bodies.

To get back to the illegitimate body I was speaking of, it is the body that ridicules the bourgeois obsession with being legitimate in everything, that sees in the decolonizing gesticulations of the Institution a desire to occupy all possible territories of attention, to have access to all possibilities. But I don’t think that all experiences are interchangeable; in fact some of them, situated in certain bodies, alert us, inform us. And everything depends then on that mode of alert and transmission, in the place that engendered the alert, its intensity, its visibility. Who sees this place, who feels it, inhabits it and creates it?

It’s a place with a secret dimension that is nevertheless fragile because a dominant power wants to know all secrets and refuses the resistance of this place, which is perhaps the last space of withdrawal from capitalist dominion.

JBY: Is one capable of resisting this staging of the secret, the narcissistic impulse engendered by these decolonial gesticulations of the institution?

OM: I think that white cultural institutions—and I include here all the operators that function in them: artists, curators, audiences and associated academics—have come to understand, in varying ways, that the capitalization of knowledge had a limit. They have understood that in the future it will be necessary for them to not only appropriate the knowledge and experience of a body, but also the body itself. Today the institution is decolonizing through discourse, but also by inviting the minority body, inviting it to appear, exposing it like a sign, inventing it by producing it in a place of comfort (for the institution). There is thus a form of appropriation of the minority body

as a tool for enunciation, an instrument. The invitation becomes a means of controlling the mode of appearance, of avoiding an irruption—in other words circumventing the possibility of the body inviting itself in the way the Comité Adama (Adama Committee) brilliantly invited itself into the heart of the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) movement.²

The minority body is absorbed in a form of narcissistic consent. It is made to speak, and it is spoken of and exhibited as bait. This turns out to be both its moment of glory and its most stinging defeat. Because it thereby loses a very specific capacity, that of generating discomfort, which in my view means *a certain attention focused on something that is not working*, an ability to be an historic body, which is refused it, a body that knows something particularly dark, which is refused it, an echo chamber that informs us about something we do not wish to know.

What I call the “institutional decolonialism” deletes this space, this difference, and manufactures a new body-golem where Black bodies are added to the *White Body of Reference*³ like supplementary flesh to augment it. It is this monstrous and narcissistic presence that is proposed to us as a model for social peace, a model for alliance. And any attitude that tends towards creating a distance with this fatal presence is pointed to as a sort of error, as a risk that could undo solidarity. It is this sort of blackmail that is used against decolonial feminism, as Françoise Vergès describes,⁴ in the way it attempts to create a political discomfort at the heart of dominant feminism. For this reason I think it is essential that the decolonial gesture be conceived of in terms of discomfort, a discomfort that is not ephemeral, but long and shared, an experience of mangrove. We must learn to live and deal with discords without this being synonymous with violence. We must learn to stay with problems, *to stay with the trouble*.⁵

JBY: Could you illustrate your proposal concerning this necessary discomfort ?

OM: There is a text printed by the American artist and writer Kameelah Janan Rasheed: “Selling my black rage to the highest bidder.”⁶ I find this very interesting. The meanings are multiple. Firstly, all affects, even the most radical, can be capitalized. The artist (re)positions herself here, in brief, at the heart of the flux of an economy of herself. She no longer wants to be merely merchandise, like a slave, she also wants to be the negotiator. This is not so much a cynical position as a realistic strategy, because this *black rage* for me is a form of patrimony, of minority capital. But it is also via this very particular rage that racialized bodies are worn down, by assigning them to anger, to an exteriority of affects—to what I call *a twisting towards the outside*—which is a strategy of destruction, exhaustion and extraction. This is also true for an ensemble of ecstatic Black presences and practices that another African American artist, Arthur Jafa, associates quite rightly with morbidity in his famous and provocative video *Love is the Message, the*

² On July 19, 2016, when he turned 24, Adam Traoré was killed in unclear circumstances on the grounds of the Persan (outskirts of Paris) army police, after having been interrogated. Since that day, the Truth and Justice for Adama Committee has brought together members of the Traoré family, friends and supporters. Ever since, the committee has demanded justice and truth concerning the circumstances of Traoré’s death. Over the years, around Assa Traoré, Adam’s sister, a veritable fight against police violence and defense of the rights of the citizens of poor neighborhoods has been led. On December 1, 2018, the committee decided to join the Yellow Vest movement, even though some saw it as a movement with racist tendencies.

³ I develop this idea of a *White Body of Reference* in the text ‘Fugitive Gardens’, published as a working draft in the magazine *Jef Klak* n°5, September 2018.

⁴ Françoise Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial* (Paris : La Fabrique, 2019).

⁵ See: Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. (Duke University Press, 2016).

Message is Death (2016). Saying one sells one's rage to the highest bidder not only means participating in speculation, but also opposing a certain difficulty, a certain test, a certain value. It is a harsh echo of the slave market, but that is not enough, and Kameelah Janan Rasheed knows it. It is, however, a means of resistance that proposes a body in anger, a body that is a difficult matter to negotiate. It is perhaps a way *to flee by being present*. But for me, the limit here is that one agrees to enter into a mechanism of value that is exterior, a dominant market, while the flight that interests me is situated on the side of "valueless" in the sense of an immeasurable matter that escapes the standard, that doesn't try to be quantified or deciphered, that is illegitimate in the sense that it escapes recognition, by not presenting a known face. I like to imagine *black rage* as an elusive, intangible, unsellable category for which there would be no possibility of a "best offer," an undesired presence that would nevertheless impose itself at the center of transactions and negotiations.

It's this radical beauty that I find in the gesture of the Comité Adama, when it arrives not to join, but literally to occupy the Gilets Jaunes movement. A manner of settling into a place of struggle by creating a form of equivalence that is, in fact, a short-circuit in the social imagination that says: *we, the racialized youth of the suburbs, killed by the police for decades with the same weapons that wound you today, by linking ourselves to you we bring you into a landscape that obliges you to see the necropolitics that some do not wish to see*. It's a method of invasive alliance with the White Body, that of the imaginary white worker who is penetrated by break-in, because minority history is always a break-in even within "the People", as this is constituted in the French Revolutionary fable. This undesired alliance is quite beautiful because it is neither a surrender nor a simple alliance; it is a presence that stretches what is happening toward a vaster landscape, recomposing popular categories into a form of agreement in difference. This requires imagining a common horizon in practice, by trying to show that we share common problems that are linked to the ravages of liberalism and the fact that it produces enclaves in both rural and urban zones. It is a form of *revolt of the deserts*.

JBY: The irony is that meanwhile institutions capitalize on knowledge as well as the critical and decolonial discourse formulated through these revolts!

OM: The difficulty is in fact two-pronged. Because we find ourselves caught between a very conservative argument, overtly racist and sexist, clinging to its patriarchal fiction—the agonizing body of the white male—and its sagely progressive counterpart, which is going to take possession of the decolonial space. And between these two poles are the advocates of a plethora of intermediary variations who see in decolonial practices the risk of weakening a form of abstract solidarity and have difficulty understanding both structural racism on the one hand and the multiple and subtle variations of "racism with good intentions" on the other. The clash of these two worlds on the scale of institutional culture is often illusory, a dramatization that aims at obscuring the subject that preoccupies them, the survival of capitalism and acquired privileges at any cost, even if they must assume a new appearance, a new disguise. The Lebanese anthropologist Ghassan Hage speaks of a particular episode of power that, in a moment of weakness, exercises a visible violence even though prior to this it had enjoyed a long period of the privilege to exercise a naturalized, invisible, "sans mains" ("hands off") form of control.⁶ For me, among the different strengths of the decolonial gesture, there is the ability to make visible and audible the stories and instruments of this violence, the ability to create a particular attention to the images and practices hidden at the heart of institutional structures. Certain foundational myths must be revisited, such as the tales of contemporary democracy in the West. When we

⁶ Ghassan Hage, *Another de-colonial politics is possible*, December 24, 2018
<http://hageba2a.blogspot.com/>.

look at the link between the means of the French Revolution, for example, and the economy of slavery, it's rather painful. But it is a necessary act in order to understand what is rotten to the core and will continue to haunt this model, its radical racialization that will obscure and hide the concept of the citizen and the whole fable of merit—and this question is replayed with regard to gender, obviously.

It's clear that the great Western institutions that are “decolonizing” are doing it to maintain control of what is shown and what is not, to preserve their centrality and continue to be the masters of history and the agenda. They want to remain as the *White Bodies of Reference*, from whose point of view one speaks, thinks and measures one's humanity. It's a dazzling gesture that pursues the historical narrative modalities of the colonial story. Designating, allotting, dazzling, hiding. It's a form of narrative by recuperation whose spectral motif is the *terra nullius* for which an original name must be given—by retracting or writing over existing names.

Beyond the fact that the “political decolonial” gesture makes things visible, it is a gesture of decentering. It asks if it is possible to remove itself from the gaze of this referential body, to invent other modes of existence. It is a paradoxical movement, both revealing and hiding, being present and yet also fleeing. To a certain extent, it is the decision to no longer be produced as a subject created on the basis of white hegemony. And therefore to no longer consider it urgent to respond to either the insults of enemies or the loving discourse of others. To exit symmetrical contingency. Paradoxically, what the institutions that are decolonizing want is to prevent decolonization from happening without them. This is the only viable solution for them if they want to remain center-stage.

JBY: In your text for *Décolonisons les arts*, you write that one of the conditions for decolonization is to create a mangrove or another alternative place in order to give our own value to our own work.

OM: Yes, that is a key question. To feel the possibility of removing ourselves from the gaze of the masters and to think outside their presence/point of reference. I particularly like one of the scenes in the book by the Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau, *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (*The Old Slave and the Mastiff*).⁸ In this rather crazy story, the white plantation master who terrorizes his slave via the intercession of an animal (an instrument of terror called the Mastiff, which is one of the ways to weaponize the living) comes to listen to the storyteller at night, amidst the gathered slaves. He is there to amuse himself, to occupy the slaves' most intimate place, a space of possibility for the re-composition of a slave memory and a slave culture. He refuses that this space exists without him and imposes his presence as a way of annihilating any exteriority. He replays the story of the plantation without an *outside*. Because through story, as also through the planting of gardens, the slave culture creates (for itself) an outside, both secret and opaque, a place of escape within the confines of the actual plantation, a path that is hidden in plain sight. This culture informs a first escape from the affect and the tales of the masters. It is a form of preparation.⁹ But in Chamoiseau's text, we have the old man. He doesn't speak. He remains silent, he refuses to give way a second time. He listens to the story because he knows it isn't what it seems to be *on the surface*, that it is actually an instrument for traveling through space

⁸ Patrick Chamoiseau, *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (*The Old Slave and the Mastiff*) (éditions Gallimard, Paris, 2018 / Dialogue Books, 2018)

⁹ “If we make the hypothesis that these simulacra of a fantasized body are also a form of introduction to confrontation, we can develop the idea which posits that imagined combat is not only a form of psychic self-defense, but also a form of physical training, of anticipatory visualization of the entry into defensive violence.” Elsa Dorlin, *Se défendre* (Editions de la Découverte, 2017), p.31 – translated by Liz Young

and time, from the *real* towards the *virtual*.¹⁰ It is the second *flight by being present*, an escape to a place that is neither completely known or unknown.

It's for this reason that it seems to me we must create our own spaces, both concrete and poetic *at the same time*. To create places and stories about places, tales that animate them so that they remain in a state of suspension, always becoming and never crystallized into organizations, regulations and market values. Like the old man slave, like the story, the place must always be something other than what it seems to be. With Khiasma, we created an independent place in the close outskirts of Paris that manufactured a specific value based on a specific and situated point of view, based on forms of life, as La ~~Colonie~~ and other places in Paris are currently doing.

But today, in the decolonial arsenal of the dominant system, naming a few racialized individuals for important posts in an effort to put out the fire has become one of the options—even though in France this will probably take longer to happen than elsewhere. But celebrating this gesture seems to me to be a way of accepting a symmetrical response of power, the mechanism of acknowledgment I spoke of earlier. I'm not saying that it is a bad thing that racialized professionals make their way up the ladder of the great institutions, but for my part I would like to play another part than that of building a second castle with a Black king or queen. It is in part—because it is a very rich and varied landscape—one of the limits of African-American racial strategy and we need to take the time to speak about it again in detail because I'm convinced that the European decolonial question must form its own matrix based on certain very specific geographic centers, on their economies of violence and their particular mode of production of subaltern subjects: Algeria, Congo, Cameroon and the French Overseas colonies, whether we call them departments or territories, to mention just a few.

The mangrove is the place where no one can be a king or queen, where the exercise of authority by policing forces is impossible. It's a place where no one can walk with assurance. It's a constantly reinvented path that interests me because it takes on a quality of errancy as much in space as in language, in a discourse that has not yet found all its words. The mangrove is one of the ways to speak outside of the frameworks that have been dictated to us. It's "speaking with your own words"¹¹ and not only repeating the great classics of anti- and post-colonial literature. The alliance—or perhaps even the unstable alloy—of the Comité Adama with the Gilets Jaunes, for example, gives a particular consistency to the struggle against police violence. It's a collision—in other words the unpredictable meeting of two spaces that should not be there—and at the same time the invention of a new sonority, a harmony that would be the result of two ways of saying that the state refuses to listen, of two supposed cacophonies which, by coming together, form a voice that has never been heard before.

JBY: At the same time, there's a form of ambiguity in your text, between flight and presence, between the "house slave" and the "field slave," which coexist in a single and contradictory body. I understand this movement of flight as a condition of decolonization, but how can one be present after escaping

OM: First, the text proposes a poetics, as a political act. It's very important not to forget the "how it is said," as it holds the possible keys to what we're currently living. It isn't an ornament on the surface of language, it's the expression of a deep turmoil, an existential chaos, which is the heritage passed down to us by the colonial disorder, with more or less intensity, in bodies, language, physical and mental landscapes. And so the "how" of political decolonial discourse is

¹⁰ See : Gilles Deleuze, *L'actuel et le virtuel* (*The real and the virtual*), in *Dialogues*, 1996, Flammarion

¹¹ See : Olivier Marboeuf, *Parler avec des mots à soi* (*speak with your own words*), 2018 (Blog Toujours Debout)

an affected “how”, a mess, a din,¹² and is also, in my case, the “how” of Creole writers of the Caribbean, both French-speaking and Creole-speaking, and the “how” of the working class suburbs.

I think this proposition troubles you because you’re trying to distinguish two periods of time and to think in these two periods; you ask yourself, “how to be present *after* flight?” While in my proposition these two periods of time are not distinct and successive; the tension exists in a single movement, being present *in* flight. There are simultaneous times in an existence, in the *real* and the *virtual*. Removing oneself doesn’t mean disappearing. The slave who cultivates a Creole garden on the plantation removes himself into a secret cosmogony and concerns on the basis of a space that is *not* hidden, the garden, which is visible, like a motif in a tapestry that has always been there, a motif that hides on the very surface of the visible. Just as the house servant escapes behind a social grimace, the face as mirror, towards the imagined idea of murder. One removes oneself essentially by refusing the symmetry imposed by the Body of Reference, which imposes a way of being, a value. On the basis of this flight beyond value, the question is then to know how to return, in which regime to make a reappearance. And for me it is here that we should concentrate our efforts. As the American thinker Ramon Amaro brilliantly points out in his text “As if,” concerning artificial intelligence and systems of facial recognition, the question is not to demand that a Black face also be recognized by a mechanical system of control—implying: in the same way a white face is—but to know what it is possible to imagine as a mode of apparition based on this particular invisibility, if it is possible to explore an *infinity of paths* . . .¹³

In a recent performance, “From a dangerous matter,”¹⁴ I claim the ontology of matter that thinks, speaks, remembers, as a way of emerging from identity politics in what they offer in symmetry with white hegemony. It’s a very particular exit from the slave experience—a matter that speaks *par excellence*. In this moment of return, of reappearance, I choose to say: *I refuse to be a person, but I am present as matter, something you do not know what to do with because I have no face to present to you, no face in which you can contemplate yourself. More than a face, I give you an entire landscape that you have wounded, but that is now rising up again, a landscape that responds in a language that contains the grunts, roars and howls of rocks, leaves, soil, speaking matters and non-human species. I bring this cacophony to the conversation.* Fleeing and being present is thus a strategy to counter an economy of relation and a toxic contingency that I believe must be opposed by new ways of being present. What we are fleeing is the summons. *I do not want to be the racialized person you want me to be, neither radical nor domesticated.* Fleeing while being present could also be a way of returning to visit the plantation and saying: *out of this hell I make my home.* It’s the strategy of the raid, slaves coming back to loot the plantation, to take the resources they need to survive in their retreat. Anything I can take from the plantation, I’ll take. All the knowledge I can obtain, I’ll take. I sit at the masters’ table, but I pull on the tablecloth, climb out of the window and take the feast elsewhere with me. For me, the essential point is to leave, to remove oneself rather than to ask for a place. It’s here that I follow the path of the Maroons, of those who must always reinvent without recreating new stable systems or institutions—the errant figures.

¹² I evoke this question in *Du Boucan chez Glissant* in the catalogue Hereafter, published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the festival Sonic Acts (Amsterdam, 2019).

¹³ Ramon Amaro, *As if*, E-Flux Architecture, Becoming Digital, 2019 (<https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/becoming-digital/248073/as-if/>)

¹⁴ Performance by Olivier Marboeuf, part of the project *Looming Creole* by Filipa César for *The New Alphabet*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2019.

JBY: Am I hearing possible echoes of a conversation with *La Dignité ou la mort* (Dignity or Death), Norman Ajari's latest book?

OM: It's an important book that incites us to work. Norman Ajari is a philosopher who deconstructs white philosophy. And it is here where he digs to reveal vaster patterns, to discover power and try out a way to revitalize the term "dignity." For my part, I speak on the basis of stories and images, imagined places as the sites of conflicts of "futures"; this comes from my professional experiences which cross through the practice of comics, visual arts and cinema. I share with Ajari the idea of the singularity of the experience of the transatlantic slave, but we take different paths to express it. Norman is interested in a Black radicality, inspired by an Afro-pessimist reading of Frantz Fanon. But he is also seeking, like Fanon, something luminous on the side of power which interests me, although I have a tendency to formulate it differently, perhaps in a more Caribbean way, a world that is more populated, who speaks in the cacophony that I mentioned earlier.

What is certain is that the lines from Norman Ajari allow us to expand and stretch the scene offered by the white institutional decolonial debate, which proposes to make peace concerning a war that has not yet been named. The discussion takes place in the uncomfortable clamor of battle and that changes many things. It also promises an alternative peace. Ajari, like Houria Bouteldja and others, contributes to the maintaining of a radical line, which does not however eradicate hope, a living thread, which results in the conditions of the debate being displaced, but less rigidly than people would like to say because with these two thinkers there is a very specific sort of writing and address. They produce discursive gunshots, war cries, energies that extend possibilities. For my part, I try to contribute to keeping these territories open. I try to populate them from another place, another tradition of speech that sets in motion the escape from the place of the *White Body of Reference*, but a non-heroic escape. However, I take note that from the moment when we began to speak, to dare to speak, the responses our words provoked taught us a great deal about the state of Western thought, about what it represses, its forbidden paths. Here again I come back to the idea of discomfort engendered by the decolonial political gesture and to the idea that in return it makes visible the heart of what had been naturalized in the fiction of Europe, in particular.

JBY: But it remains a form of "strategic essentialism" that goes against the ambiguity of your proposal. The Glissantian image of the mangrove, with its roots, as a fugitive space, is very ambiguous, even rhizomatic?

OM: I first have to say that I always try when I refer to him, to liberate Glissant from a common use. In other words to speak, in particular, of the part of his work that has not been sufficiently read, the fire of *Caribbean Discourse*, for example, which is a very specifically situated and warlike book, less nebulous than his later philosophy which, for the better or for the worse—but frequently for the worse—greatly influenced contemporary art. To work with Glissant—in other words, both in contact with and sometimes in opposition to—I also try to repopulate his work with the language and literature that surrounded him and even with his own poetry, all of this as a form of geography. It is a vast oeuvre with a very specific form, an architecture, which has become a withered fruit that some use to extract three quotes in lieu of thought. It's a rather cruel destiny that's been reserved for him, this forgetful sort of love. I think we shouldn't economise in underscoring the place where he belonged—and the authors with whom he maintained productive dialogues, either from a cool distance or more tempestuously, as with Patrick Chamoiseau or Frankétienne. And we should remember how much the torsion of his thought and his French were rooted in a resonant grammar, the speeds and chaos of the Creole fable, which has little to do with Western philosophy. Grammar that is a manner of thought, where noises, cries, echos, the spiral motif are all at work. This Glissantian grammar demands that we

follow the method whereby an idea begins to appear through a surface perused many times, sometimes in a contradictory way from book to book, and to observe how the idea is not stated but rises up like an imperfect but living creature. I digress, but I wanted to say how much the alliance with Glissant is uncomfortable to me and that this discomfort is productive.

We have a tendency to schematize the stakes, placing on one side what we could call racial essentialization and on the other the fluid and rhizomatic identities, of which Glissant's oeuvre would be the paragon. What is seductive in Glissant's work, or rather in a certain reading of him, is the possibility of emerging from race in order to think of a generalized Creolization. This is attractive because it allows one to reconfigure the modes of conquest and capture of the *White Body of Reference* at the time of cognitive capitalism by rising above the critique of cultural appropriation. It's one of the main thrusts of institutional decolonialism, notably in cultural and artistic spheres. It allows one to feel authorized to occupy all spaces in a comfortable manner, because that is what is asked for. But Glissant imposes many conditions to creolization—which are not followed—and not only the “right to opacity.” (It seems to me that the term—“right”—is poorly suited, considering that opacity is firstly the effect of an asymmetry in methods of knowledge, and ways of being *with* the world, and thus does not arise from a right, a formulation that, in my opinion, cedes too much to Western criteria of the possible.) Glissant worries about the closing of the place, the place as cultural or even ethnic property—remember that he was writing at the time of the explosion of the former Yugoslavia and the Rwandan genocide, we should not forget this backdrop to his writing. But he also says that the place is essential—and for my part I think as much in terms of corporeality as of landscape and not as border—as space in which the traces of initial conditions can reappear, a form of specific memory, what I call *matter*, which for me is marked and imbued in an indelible way by violence.

To get back to your question, I try to maintain a balance between these two poles, considering that the temptation of essentialization is a protective reflex against new cultural extractions, new dispossessions. It isn't a viable project, but rather a gesture of survival, which I understand. On the other hand, new futures will not be able to form if they ignore the history of violence embedded in certain bodies and the way they echo certain traces. For those who are impatient and dream of a post-racial society, they will have to go through a time of reconfiguration that includes the discomfort of this echo, which is not a right, not a legitimacy of the minority body, but is a landscape where what was hidden now appears abruptly and painfully before our eyes.

JBY: Do you understand place as the practice of situating possible critique(s)?

OM: Yes, but as a location that can move—and here I'm being Glissantian. The mangrove is this marvelous rooted thing that moves. Place and story are at the heart of my work, an inseparable pair. From where are stories told? A stable motif is always colonized by the institutional machine and thus it is impossible to inhabit it in a sustainable way. The place of which I speak is unstable, with no authority, and it is also a place in movement. An oxymoron, a site that will constantly be worked, reworked, edited, re-edited, constructed and deconstructed. With speech, ways of speaking or not speaking, and being together, with all of these present, spaces and poetics are born. But in this case no one envisions the same place. On the one hand the Western institution practices and produces a language that becomes law and has authority over the living, over the way of being alive—or not. It intervenes by and with a necropolitical language—to follow the proposition of Achille Mbembe¹⁵—in other words it claims the right to death. And that is how it speaks of the living, in a negative manner. It forbids the presence and limits the possibilities of certain bodies simply to be there, to cross through, in a similar way to today's police.

¹⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Nécropolitique*, in « Raisons politiques » 2006/1 (no 21), pages 29 to 60

And so the process of creating a place contains within it the way of speaking about it. And here poetry, if we consider it as a political gesture, is the way of speaking without seizing, capturing, or appropriating. Poetry leaves room for interpretation, to be performed by each individual in function with his/her life experience. Hospitality freed of morality. This is why I feel it's necessary to remain in contact with difficult sorts of writing, such as that of Donna Haraway, rather than merely extracting a few ideas that manufacture quasi-religious relations. Because certain essential things can be found in the manner of speaking, in the particular form of saying things, which needs to be honored by veritable critical work, but also a capacity to welcome disturbance or trouble, to welcome not being immediately sure of what one thinks, what one feels in contact with this writing that is a proposition of a place to inhabit.

JBY: In relation to the toxic economy of the plantation and this other, lighter economy that you are imagining for “un lieu pour respirer,” what is the mangrove economy?

OM: I would say that the mangrove economy is one of decomposition and recomposition. It's an economy of life and death, but death in the sense of what leaves the *real* in order to continue living in the *virtual*. Conceiving of the end of a place in terms that are beyond the tragic mode is important. It's also important to think about what it is possible to recompose based on this end, but only if one doesn't give in to the narcissistic temptation of the *tabula rasa* and rather tries to rethink things in the way that heritage can be reconsidered in a non-authoritative way, as echoes, with traces. The other response concerns the economy of the project which has become the heart of cultural economy. The idea of the mangrove is moving forward without knowing, without a project, moving forward without a recognizable face, with no desire for an acknowledgment that is exterior to the values produced by and for the place. Institutions have difficulty with this position because they cannot respect someone's work without recognizing him/her as one of their own. This immediately creates a problem if a gesture emerges that doesn't fit in with what is expected from a certain discipline. And so it's also a new form of presence through flight, this idea of not expecting an acknowledgment that emanates from anything outside the system of production of values that we have created ourselves.

Of course some people have built their economy on the translation of minority forms towards the institutional. They try to fit a struggling world in chaos, which sometimes experiments dangerously with new possibilities of life, into the narrow, pre-existing slots of state services. It's a capitalistic attitude that I challenge and it's from this looting that the institution claims to be decolonizing itself from the inside. For me there is a fundamental difference between passing through an institution and installing oneself in it, building a long-term commercial relationship with minority bodies by attributing them a certain value. When an institution invites me, I always say to myself “neither honor, nor debt.” This system was created based on practices with/to which I do not want to feel honored or indebted.

Imagining the possibility of other spaces does not mean recreating a new center towards which everyone should turn, but rather defending a political stance that crosses through all manners of creating a place and is not limited to an economy of the minority subject. Decolonizing should involve working thoughtfully on the manner in which the place emerges and is organized; it is not a cultural program. But the mangrove is never very far from the plantation, it is not an “elsewhere,” it's a border that indicates a limit to the toxic relationship. Because it is toxic to be in relation with an institution that says it should decolonize. For me, we each need to determine the right distance from the institution that is sustainable for us. This distance is difficult to determine and we will make errors, there will be readjustments. This is especially true for young, precarious, racialized artists who are trying to find a way to subsist with their work. This is why it is important to create alternative places in order to have reference points and possibilities, so these young artists won't have to reinvent themselves all on their own.

JBY: One has to negotiate one's distances, but also one's alliances?

OM: One always has to be in movement. Distances and alliances are two things that work together because alliance in this instance is always a question of distance, of “play” in the mechanical sense of the term, as that which permits movement, not being fixed to or by the Other—to express things in the spirit and vocabulary of the Caribbean thinker Gauthier Tancons.¹⁶ Thus the flight that is in play in my text for *Decolonize the Arts!* is the creation of this necessary distance that the institutional decolonial tendency is trying to suppress, a distance that is a vector of dissent, of discomfort, which allows us to refuse to join with the golem-body I spoke of earlier and to augment its capacity, surface, using our minority flesh as a supplement. This distance forces the ensemble of the scene to move and, for those who are obsessed with the idea of getting to know you, of being your brother, your sister, convinced of a forced friendship, a fantasized family—to question themselves regarding the very nature of the relation they’ve invented, the emotional blackmail they contribute to, currently as well as in its dark and historic bedrock. They need to consider what this impossible distance reveals about their narcissistic plan, their economy of debt. The *White Body of Reference* constrains me to be happy with what it gives me, but it didn’t ask me what I wanted. Because it thinks it is obvious that what I want is in relation with it. The institution—here again used in the sense of all the operators of art and culture—spends its time saying what I want, and saying it for me, in my place. Decolonizing means both reclaiming speech and determining the distance with which we take it.

JBY: There is great confusion in Belgium as there are many projects and not enough permanent places. It would seem that all the discursive and reflective space of decolonization is conditioned by the institutions of formal art.

OM: When racialized individuals begin to manufacture more places, things will change. The institution will have to enter the mangroves that have organized themselves without it. And it will meet people it never invited, it will hear speech it did not facilitate, manners of speaking and recounting that are different. The economy of the institution that claims to be decolonizing is limited to an economy of subjects and a dramatization of presences and images at the surface of the visible, a surface that continues to dissimulate the division of work, salary disparities, differences of race, gender, class and territory at the heart of its structure, in its very matter. Presenting a program on Africa is not a decolonial gesture. The decolonial gesture is going out to see things there where you have been told not to go, it is the deconstruction of systems of power. This is why, in my opinion, a racial critique that does not enter into a historical critique of capitalism is of no interest and makes no sense. And it’s the same thing for questions of gender.

JBY: You sometimes go to other places which are not part of your alliance?

OM: It’s a question of strategy that one can’t answer in a general manner, but only specifically. As I said earlier, I don’t think that you can decolonize from the inside without immediately exploding all the principles that govern and support that interior. As to passing through an institution, traversing it, that’s a decision that should not be taken alone. One should always be able to respond to invitations in a collective manner to avoid the solitude that systems of power relegate us to, a heroic position that is sometimes toxic. And so occasionally, it is interesting to go speak somewhere when you think there will be enough of you, and you will be strong enough, to create a place within the place. I think what defines the minority presence is this imperative to always manufacture a place from which to speak; the place is never a given. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes not. Decolonizing is also an incredible amount of work on the self. Letting go of the idea that one is right and has always done what one should have done. It’s very demanding when you’re not satisfied with thinking of yourself as a legitimate body who has

¹⁶ Gauthier Tancons, *Moi-Mangrove*, university thesis - University of Perpignan via Domitia, 2015.

waited its turn and is now the king. Decolonizing is creating discomfort for yourself, too. An invitation is both a material economy for you and an economy of attention for the institution made on your presence. So it's always complicated to make a decision when your life is precarious. Again, it seems impossible to me to really address this question from the solitude of the neo-liberal subject.

JBY: Which is why the question of this alternative economy interests me, this lighter economy, or this mangrove economy...

OM: I think there is a question that especially needs to be asked in the field of art and culture, even though it should be asked in other sectors also. The question of work and practice. Should survival be indexed to work and the value of work to money and its symbolic equivalents? A mangrove economy is an economy that reveals and shares all the conditions of existence of a place, but also all the regimens of value, and tries to see how to redistribute responsibilities and efforts as well as produced values.

JBY: The impossibility of separating the story from the place translates to the impossibility of separating discourse from decolonial practice. This makes me think of the fundamental impossibility of a radical practice...

OM: I'm going to give a quick answer to a question that needs a much longer response. I think that a radical practice is not directly accessible if one is not one of those naked humans, as Glissant spoke of the "naked migrant," a figure of radicalism, an echo of the Maroon who must rebuild everything in the space of escape. At that precise moment, there is a form of contradictory power in destitution, a form of optimism in obligatory survival. It's the fundamental optimism of the slave who has left the plantation, who walks without knowing where to go, carried by an enormous desire to live that will allow him to pass beyond death.

JBY: This desire for life, doesn't it project an image of a better life or a better world? Isn't the mangrove a utopia?

OM: No, to radically want to survive or live doesn't project (an idea of) a better world. The question of projection is a colonial question, the question of the great project, the great destiny. We are mired in these projections and they become today morbid objects of affect. What interests me is building realities with bits of realities, with no great pictures, groping, because there is no hero, because there is no ideal society, because the world is here and it's with a part of its toxicity that we must create other ways of living. The mangrove is thus not a utopia. Rather, it is the search for an exterior state, a place in relation that is practiced with no preliminary announcement. But it is also the search for an interior relation, a way of escaping on the one hand this desire for a solid, narcissistic and toxic identity, and on the other hand an idea of fluidity as a system of absorption of differences, as a practice of pacification of the place, which must remain uncomfortable.

JBY: Isn't the risk of narcissism embedded in the functioning of the mangrove's echo chamber?

OM: The echo chamber is related to the question of Trace. The demand for Trace is the writing of a minority history that doesn't seek heroism—that says, as I mentioned earlier, that certain experiences resonate in a particular way in a particular body and that these stories must be heard. The echo chamber is the alternative between identities in conflict. It's a condition of permanent movement of the place that will have to be endlessly restated. But in order for the echo to be heard, we need space, the distance I spoke of earlier. Otherwise there is no air and, quite literally, we cannot breathe.

JB Y: That makes me think of the feeling of suffocation or the impossibility of breathing that is central to the movements of revolt in Tunisie or the Maghreb region. When you speak about places, don't you go beyond the question of the suffocating body that flees and must also remain present?

OM: Let's say that I think from a body that I separate from the question of identity. I think of it in an expanded and spatial manner, that of a body-landscape that I've tried to convey throughout our conversation.¹⁷ It consists of a matter traversed by time(s), an echo chamber. Beyond themselves, beyond their opinion, their positioning, bodies tell the story of something that goes beyond words and that will play a role in how the space for a place will organize itself or "make (a) place" (*faire lieu*). It's impossible to do this strategically or opportunistically. When you dance, it's obvious—you can't pretend to dance, you dance with a body that is marked by a certain experience, a certain relation to dance, hips, torso, to posture, the way you contract muscles, relax, protect yourself and abandon yourself. It's also impossible to pretend to prepare food—when you prepare food, you really do it. The fundamental problem with the arts is the simulation of situations. When the big institutions tell you, *we're going to decolonize*, they need to really do it. It's not a professional posture, it's an experience that truly must be experienced and carried by bodies ready to invest in the maelstrom of history.

Traduction Liz Young. Thanks to Shela Sheikh

¹⁷ *A body-landscape*, conversation with Tarek Lakhrissi, from the catalogue for his first solo show, "Cameleon Club", at the Noisy-le-Sec Gallery (France), February 2019. <https://olivier-marboeuf.com/2019/02/18/un-corps-paysage/>

