

Storytelling – Trauma, Resistance and Remembering
2nd Global Inclusive Interdisciplinary Conference
Saturday 9th-Sunday 10th July 2022
Deadline : February 11, 2022.

Stéphanie Melyon-Reinette, PhD

Sociologist, independent scholar & performer artist
s.melyonreinette@gmail.com

From Collective Suicides to '*Wake of Souls Immolated*
Suicides and the Post-Traumatic Living. Re-weaving the living with Silences.

DRAFT 1

Des Suicides Collectifs à '*Veillée d'âmes immolées*'
Suicides et le Vivre post-traumatique. Retisser le vivant à partir des Silences.

BIOGRAPHY

Stéphanie Melyon-Reinette

is a poetess (Nèfta poetry), performer and choreographer. She created her dance company in 2016, but has been an artist for decades. She gains recognition as a poetess and performer, womanist artist and founder of the France Cri de Femmes Festival. She is also a sociologist (PhD in American Civilization). Her research is axed on the concets of diaspora, integration strategies, empowerment, Women, Feminism/Womanism, Sexuality, Caribbean history and Memory, Black dances and music, Black Body and Performance.

ABBREVIATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Decolonizing and Memorializing Practices in the Francophone Caribbean and Other Spaces (Editor).

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2021.

Marronnage and Arts. Revolts in Bodies and Voices (Editor)

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2013

More here <https://univ-antilles.academia.edu/StephanieMelyonReinette/>

From '*Collective Suicides* to '*Wake of Souls Immolated*

Suicides and the Post-Traumatic Living. Re-weaving the living with Silences.

Abstract

This panel is an invitation to cross both the sensitive and the meaning, to operate a catharsis and an introspection-reflection on the question of suicides – individual and collective – as events structuring the individuals and the existences that inherit them. This panel is a multilateral, reciprocal and reflexive experience and conversation. From the theoretical to the sentient, from a questioning of the issue of suicide to performance *Wake of Souls Immolated*, I will attempt to elucidate the place left by suicide(s) and death in our French-Caribbean postcolonial societies: how do the ontological and memorial traumas pass through those who commit the irreparable as those who must unravel the breadcrumb trails towards a sensitive and political understanding of this act which interrupted the flow of existence? As a survivor of kins and loved ones gone through suicides – I will commit an intercultural and intersemiotic experiment to grasp the trauma. There is implicitly the idea of the shroud shared between the ones who committed suicides and their survivors, as well as the idea of "resolution", understood sometimes as the act of solving the trauma, sometimes as the determination to die, and to live.

Keywords: Guadeloupe/Cape Verde – Suicides – Memory – Resolution – Art – Imaginaries – Grief/ving;

Part 1. S. Melyon-Reinette –15 minutes

"Branded by suicide: sedimented memories of collective suicides as a source of emancipation. Guadeloupe stories". Introspective and exploratory experiences of suicide in self-determination. What place does (collective) suicide occupy in the memories of Guadeloupean Afro-descendants when we know that the heroes and heroines of the Maroon pantheon committed collective suicide to escape being re-enslaved? Has collective suicide become a weapon of rebellion today, in the contemporary and symbolic sense?

Part 2. Wake of Souls Immolated (performance) by Stéphanie Melyon-Reinette – 20 minutes

There is pain. The organization of death. Ankylosis. Suicide is like a happening, a performance, aimed at questioning the world and turning it upside down. A revolution on a human scale. Before the funeral, there is the wake, the only time on the plantation when the slaves made filiation. A moment when we celebrate the memory of the dead through tales, feasts, anecdotes... A succession of rituals: from the killing to the wake, from paralysis to the river of carmine candles.

INTRODUCTION

This panel is an invitation to cross both the sensitive and the meaning, to operate a catharsis and an introspection-reflection on the question of suicides – individual and collective – as events structuring the individuals and the existences that inherit them. This panel is a multilateral, reciprocal and reflexive experience and conversation. From the theoretical to the sentient, from a questioning of the issue of suicide to performance *Wake of Souls Immolated*, I will attempt to elucidate the place left by suicide(s) and death in our French-Caribbean postcolonial societies: how do the ontological and memorial traumas pass through those who commit the irreparable as those who must unravel the breadcrumb trails towards a sensitive and political understanding of this act which interrupted the flow of existence? As a survivor of kins and loved ones gone through suicides – I will commit an intercultural and intersemiotic experiment to grasp the trauma. There is implicitly the idea of the shroud shared between the ones who committed suicides and their survivors, as well as the idea of "resolution", understood sometimes as the act of solving the trauma, sometimes as the determination to die, and to live.



I belong to a line of committed women. Women who literally and structurally contribute to building our Guadeloupean society, still embryonic, in its national achievement. They have all become professionals in higher slices of the hierarchy of socio-professional categories. This obviously takes into account the era in which they were born and raised.

My grandmother was a teacher and then director of the Michelet college (first an establishment for young girls, then made mixed). She was the only one among her siblings, raised in Petit-Canal (an area still very rural today), to have been entitled to a higher education. At the time, the school certificate was the highest level that it was possible to achieve. My grandfather, my mother's father, was a mechanic and owned a bus line. By marrying him, a short, dark-skinned man, she had made a misalliance (it was deemed statutory to marry in lighter complexions than their own before). My grandmother's youngest daughter, the youngest of my maternal aunts, is a dentist. Then, going back to my eldest mother, a retired doctor and lieutenant colonel of the firefighters corps, there is a Spanish teacher, and the second sister was a Literature professor then, and a after competition, chief of staff of 5 education rectors of Guadeloupe Academy. My grandmother will celebrate 103 years on earth, she was born in 1919 on a plantation, in the colony of Guadeloupe. At the time, therefore, leaving the cane fields required going through the French's school. Which they all did, in the wake of their mother, my grandfather telling them: "your first husband is your job". They lead the family with iron fists in velvet gloves. Matriarchal. Manman, Potomitan, matrifocal. On the paternal side, they are 12 children, both parents were teachers. I will not enumerate their professions, ranks and qualities. Let's just say that they all succeeded in life. A family ruled by men. Patriarchal, without adoring the success of women. Quite the contrary. My paternal grandmother died at the age of 102... In short, I am one of the lucky ones.

My ancestors and relatives are doing very well in a society that crushes black bodies, blurs horizons. A society founded in violence: it literally emerges from the colonial enterprise of a few French families ennobled by the industry of sugar and blood, domination and predation.

In Guadeloupe, all the families come from the countryside. It should be understood that the sugar plantations and the distilleries were mainly located where the vastness of the land allowed both cultivation, harvesting, and transformations, and this in a perimeter that was all at once gathered and spread. Consequently, the urbanized centers are the nodes of successive exoduses which, apart from the civil servants who worked for the French institutions, bring together the landless, unemployed workers. A similar phenomenon unfolded in the United States, with serfs/sharecroppers on the one hand and men and women rushing to the cities in search of life on the other. This is how a bourgeois black middle class will emerge through Frenchizing schools. Slavery was abolished by decree in 1848 and is it not that an opaque veil must cover the centuries of abuse, torture, objectification, uprooting, deboning, disembodiment, to cross the gehenna of the plantation economic system, where the black body is subjected to the daily tearing of its smallest fibers, in ecchymoses. How can we think that stifling the bodies and to present to the minds the dream of personal enrichment is sufficient for the ontological wound of enslavement to become an evanescent rumor?

To be born from sugar societies is to bear the tumors of a past that does not pass. Which does not heal. It sticks to the skin, to the feet, because it is still on their doorsteps. A door left ajar. It is a somatic trait that allows us to recognize ourselves. Return to the native country, and amazement in front of the sweet madness that roams the streets. The pain is standing but staggering. It can be seen in every face hardened by adversity, severe by self-sacrifice, smily with weariness, disfigured by crack. A society that rots minds under the sun. Misery under the sun is not sweeter. The souls that roam the streets have two faces. They split. Some would say they are possessed by the devil. *Dyab-la se krak. Dyab-la sé listwa annou ka fè nou touné zannimo...* They lose the north, all their will and their desires projected through the loved one. Thus, we see many souls sinking into despair, depression, madness. Looking for who they are, without a stable identity... Who am I? Voices whisper to them, to kill themselves slowly, or to put an end to it in a more radical way. The rope around the neck. The rope... The lynching rope. But, the sun is shining and life can be soothing, tropical. The postcard never dulls everyday life. It can be just as addictive...

PARTIE I – Small Chronicles of Suicidal Intimates

JL.

The day I die, everyone will remember it. He had uttered those words. He was a musician. A piano virtuoso. He had a devouring stage fright that led him to drown his virtuosity in alcohol. And as long as the fumes of alcohol did not paralyze his brain, his fingering was intact. Only the stage fright was acute and ate his soul and ate his inspiration. His improvisations dried up, becoming an imbroglia of notes that collided in unspeakable dissonances. He was still sinking into the wineskin from which he drew the elixir of oblivion. As a result, he cursed himself, the modest troubadour who had entertained the gallery for one night, for one night. When success loomed, the threshold of opportunity, the pressure was exponential and the pain too piercing. He dusted off his instruments, polished them, put them away... and hung a rope on an exposed beam in his little bungalow to put an end to this torture. Success at

any cost is a consuming rage. An immolation of the mind that ponders finding a way out of this dilemma... am I the virtuoso they see in me? [...]

C.

He hung himself under the light. Under both spotlights. No one said action. No one had said "cut!" to restart the scene. The catch was good, unique. Accomplished. The gesture was perfect in the horror of a killing of his own creativity. He had put an end to a torture he seemed to suffer for years. A wave in the soul. Yet he was the sweetest and most comforting boy. Listening and always attentive to the rustling of the world. A romantic who could not endure the ugliness of the selfishness that disfigured his kins.

C. was a remarkable young man: helpful, attentive, handsome as a heart. He spoke in a soft, calm voice. He loved cinema and had studied to become a production assistant. This June day, the 6th, while we are visiting the same island, Martinique, for separate appointments, we learn that you hung yourself from a lamp post. In front of the house of your father's friend who was accomodating you. You had arrived a few days before, busy shooting a feature film. What was the event – perhaps anecdotal, of an altogether insignificant impact – that made you switch?

L.

She was nothing to me. She was only the previous period of my history with him. She committed yet another suicide attempt where she threatened to take her child. She was his ex. My companion's. And she had attempted her own life again. Ingestion of tablets. Each time, she was in extremis at the gates of a symbiotically earthly purgatory. This purgatory was the daily life where she dug scars and ditches between herself and the alleged love of her life and the apple of her eyes. She mutilated them with her desire to die, which was as a matter-of-fact, only a desire to hold back the love that seemed to escape a deadly union. Dying to retain, contain, refrain. Blackmailing life to ransom love. It was an insult to those who had committed the accurate gesture.

PARTIE II – Exorcism-Catharsis -Death: Transcendental States

PROJECTION / VIDEO PERFORMANCE. *WAKE OF SOULS IMMOLATED*¹ – 10 minutes video performance) There is pain. The organization of death. Ankylosis. Suicide is like a happening, a performance, aimed at questioning the world and turning it upside down. A revolution on a human scale. Before the funeral, there is the wake, the only time on the plantation when the slaves made filiation. A moment when we celebrate the memory of the dead through tales, feasts, anecdotes... A succession of rituals: from the killing to the wake, from paralysis to the river of carmine candles.

¹ *VEILLEE D'AMES IMMOLEES*

PARTIE III – The Suicide Brand & Resolution

"Branded by suicide: sedimented memories of collective suicides as a source of emancipation. Guadeloupe stories".

Introspective and exploratory experiences of suicide in self-determination. What place does (collective) suicide occupy in the memories of Guadeloupean Afro-descendants when we know that the heroes and heroines of the Maroon pantheon committed collective suicide to escape being re-enslaved? Has collective suicide become a weapon of rebellion today, in the contemporary and symbolic sense?

"It is not society that sheds light on suicide, it is suicide that sheds light on society" wrote Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, in their book *Suicide, the other side of our world* (Le Seuil, 2006). What the suicide of Guadeloupe tells us is the underlying tragedy that is playing out. The tragedy of the price of freedom. Slavery runs in the sap of the roots of Guadeloupean society, of plantation.

Matouba

Louis Delgrès et 300 de ses compagnons se suicident en se faisant sauter à l'explosif, le 28 mai 1802 sur les hauteurs de Matouba, à Saint-Claude, en Guadeloupe. Huit jours auparavant, Delgrès et ses troupes se replient à Basse-terre qu'ils abandonnent deux jours après pour trouver refuge dans les hauteurs, au pied de la Soufrière. Acculé à l'habitation Danglemont où ils trouvèrent refuge, Delgrès cria dans sa proclamation du 10 mai 1802 (rédigée par le citoyen Monnereau, un blanc créole né en Martinique, secrétaire du commandant Delgrès, pendu pour avoir rédigé cette pièce) :

Louis Delgrès and 300 companions of his committed suicide together, blowing themselves up with explosives, on May 28, 1802 on the heights of Matouba, in Saint-Claude, Guadeloupe. Eight days earlier, Delgrès and his troops retreated to Basse-terre, which they abandoned two days after to shelter in the heights, at the foot of the Soufrière. Cornered at the Danglemont habitation, outnumbered by Napoleon's army, they chose to die instead of being reverted to the fetters. Delgrès shouted in his proclamation of May 10, 1802 (drafted by citizen Monnereau, a white Creole born in Martinique, secretary to Commander Delgrès, hanged for having written this document):

"What are these blows of authority with which we are threatened? Do we want to direct the bayonets of those brave soldiers whose time of arrival we liked to calculate, and who formerly directed them only against the enemies of the republic? Ah! Rather, if we are to believe the blows of authority already struck at the Port de la Liberté (name given by Hugue to Pointe-à-Pitre), the system of a slow death in the dungeons continues to be followed; well ! We choose to die sooner"²

² « Quels sont donc ces coups d'autorité dont on nous menace ? Veut-on diriger contre nous les baïonnettes de ces braves militaires dont nous aimions à calculer le moment de l'arrivée, et qui naguère ne les dirigeaient que contre les ennemis de la république ? Ah ! Plutôt, si nous en croyons les coups d'autorité déjà frappés au

« Vivre libre ou mourir » le cri de ces soldats pour la liberté et les lumières de la France pour tous les hommes au-delà de leur couleur. Ils préférèrent mourir car – Delgrès de proclamer encore : « Osons le dire, les maximes de la tyrannie la plus atroce sont surpassées aujourd’hui. Nos anciens tyrans permettaient à un maître d’affranchir son esclave, et tout nous annonce que, dans le siècle de la philosophie, il existe des hommes, malheureusement trop puissants par leur éloignement de l’autorité dont ils émanent, qui ne veulent d’hommes noirs, ou tirant leur origine de cette couleur, que dans les fers de l’esclavage. » Car Delgrès et ses hommes se battent en 1802 contre le rétablissement de l’esclavage. En premier lieu aboli en 1794, il est rétabli en 1802, et est définitivement aboli en 1848. Louis Delgrès ainsi qu’Ignace et Solitude, ses compagnons de guerre sont devenues des figures sacrées de la pensée, philosophie marronne de Guadeloupe. Le marronnage est la source de la révolte syndicale, éloge et aboutissement d’une logique du suicide collectif, comme arme de résistance.

"Vivre libre ou mourir" (Live free or die), the cry of those soldiers fighting for freedom and the spirit of the *Lumières de France* for all men beyond skin color, race and ethnicity. They preferred to die because, as Delgrès proclaimed again : "Let us dare to say it, the maxims of the most atrocious tyranny are surpassed today. Our ancient tyrants allowed a master to free his slave, and everything tells us that, in the century of philosophy, there are men, unfortunately too powerful by their estrangement from the authority they emanate from, who want black men, or any men whose origins are derived from this color, to only be kept in the shackles of slavery".

Because Delgrès and his men fought in 1802 against the reestablishment of slavery. First abolished in 1794, it was restored in 1802, and was definitively abolished in 1848. Louis Delgrès as well as Ignace and Solitude, his companions in war became sacred figures of thought, Maroon philosophy of Guadeloupe. Marooning is the source of union revolt, praise and culmination of a logic of collective suicide, as a weapon of resistance.

The Suspended (Les Suspendus)

The Covid epidemic hit Guadeloupe very hard, between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The employees of the University Hospital Center, at the forefront of the fight against the epidemic, find themselves suspended for not complying with the mandatory vaccination law and protocol edicted by President Macron’s former government. Since then, the Suspended have been deploying the same strategies of paralysis of the territory, putting the country's economy in crisis. They have implemented the same coercitive techniques with their unions to force the State into negotiations. By paralyzing the island, preventing commerces to function, this is their own fellow Guadeloupeans who suffered the most, for a so-said altruistic anti-vaxx, anticolonial, marooing campaign [...]

port de la Liberté (nom donné par Hugue à la Pointe-à-Pitre), le système d’une mort lente dans les cachots continue à être suivi ; eh bien ! Nous choisissons de mourir plus promptement » (Excerpt of Delgrès’s Proclamation, May 10, 1802).

CONCLUSIONS

Since the 19th century in Europe, Émile Durkheim had studied the question of suicide in depth, laying the foundations of the sociology developed on the subject. Durkheim divides suicide into three categories: egotistical suicide, altruistic suicide and anomic suicide.

Conclusion : according to Durkheim's classifications.