

Since I Don't Want to Die, I'm Walking with Time¹

- So what's going on? Don't you like it here?
- I'm leaving to do practical training in agriculture.
- And become a farmer? Listen Mr Coulibaly, progress is farmers leaving the land to become laborers. That's how it's always been and that's how it always will be.
- *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* by Sidney Sokhona, 1978

A Multi-Handed Narrative: Takes and Retakes

For quite some time I have been exploring the theme of “the properties of soil”, which I once tried to untangle in the form of an exhibition that bore this title at Espace Khiasma in 2015. The polysemy of the name of this exhibition was not innocent, and it is part of an ecology of names that is an important component of my work. How does the slave rid himself of the ascendancy of the master's name, considering that the slave's condition is a particular experience, very different from that of a poor worker insofar as the slave has given up the human condition to become an object, a piece of furniture that bears his buyer's countermark? In previous performances and texts I have explored the question of names as important artifacts of colonialism, and considered ways of dealing with this heritage poisoned by a cooking process—that is to say a sorcerous chemistry that penetrates and produces the body through the mouth. As I do later in this text, I tried to develop the idea of retaking names as an alternative to their rejection/suppression, in order to unsettle their opaque surface and replay their history. Without going into a detailed examination of the question of cooking (which involves gestures of possession retaking and reversal that I borrow from production systems in voodoo culture), in the present text I explore another way of placing names at the heart of a translation and displacement operation: activating them as a motif through a collective practice like a string game, in order to move them away from what they capture or designate. Like cooking, it is all about moving away from the uniqueness that a name is supposed to designate in terms of property or identity, in order to move it towards a play of interpretations and reinterpretations. When I have tried to deal with my own relationship with names—in my writing as well as in my curatorial practice—I have often left them with no object to name, like a vagabond, a “thief with fresh hands.”² They often long precede what they might designate, and ultimately never really designate at all. They stay on the threshold, like troublemakers in the neighborhoods of object, bodies and situations. They are reserves of meaning that need to find their cropland and be found by it.³

1 Bouba Touré, quoted from one of his films.

2 Quote extracted from the text “An Ecology of Shadow (Speak Low)”, reading given at Gasworks (London) in 2017.

3 On this subject, see Louis Henderson's fascinating text: “Compost in the Créole Garden: The Archive as a Multispecies Assemblage”.

They wait like seeds—and each seed is a bomb that explodes several times in several different ways. In a sense, I have always let things name themselves, even if today I have to admit that this practice, which lets the name come of its own accord, immediately produces a mask, a shadow, and that we are now forced to find our way through the darkness this name casts around places and things.

Exhibitions are not a matter of invention, but rather of attention—to chemical process, alliances, silhouettes, shadows and counter-shapes, attention to what is happening, coming and arising. It takes something that we do not yet know and makes it public. It is a multi-voiced narrative that is not the presentation of a result, of the visible consequence and material proof that something happened beforehand. It is rather an attempt to produce an entropic situation that could—through montage effects (both from decisions and from letting go)—give rise to something unexpected, uncertain, something not yet captured by words, which intrudes upon the space made possible by the presence of the works and by their untimely dialogue. The name does not emerge from all of this unscathed. It is thickened for lack of clarification. Like a mask, it is changed by the ceremony.

To return to that first exhibition at Khiasma (we could just as well speak of publication): among other works, I invited films by Louis Henderson and Filipa César, as well as a video installation by Raphaël Grisey, *A Mina dos Vagalumes*, which reused sequences from the film *Remanescentes*, in which he connected two systems and levels of ownership of soil in Brazil.⁴ When I undertook an interpretation of Grisey's cinematographic work with Boubou Touré, it occurred to me that it might be possible to continue certain threads of a conversation, on a path full of detours where the voices of the two other artists still circulate in benevolent shadows.⁵

All of this could be summed up by the string games dear to Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and their companions in thought, where every hand has fun expanding the motif drawn by others. And this idea of a many-handed narrative made by taking and retaking could very well apply to what is created in cinema by Touré/Grisey—to name them as the filmmakers and as a duo of characters, since they constantly navigate between these two realms of utterance.

It is my turn to get involved in this game and take advantage of the chance to plunge my hands back into the motif of the properties of soil, in order to continue weaving it and speaking about its uncertain landscape.

4 *Remanescentes*, a feature-length documentary by Raphaël Grisey, chronicles the day-to-day life of two quilombos, communities of descendants of former slaves. One is coming into being, or rather trying to become visible again, in a valley threatened by an international mining company. In the city, the other one is being invaded by property speculation, while the women of the community put up a strong fight to preserve what remains and reconquer the despoiled lands. *Remanescentes* is a documentary essay on the quilombola question and Brazil's complex relationship with its own origins. Raphaël Grisey follows various land right struggles simultaneously and weaves them together, while immersing the viewer in the cosmology of Brazil's "Maroon" culture.

5 Building upon the exhibition "The Properties of Soil" at Espace Khiasma, Filipa César and Tobias Hering offered the symposium "Encounters Beyond History" in Guimarães, Portugal in December 2015. By considering the relationship with a collection of archives from the early days of cinema in Guinea-Bissau, it offered other perspectives on, and approaches to, this same subject.

Cinema's Food Crop: Returning Different

The properties of soil. The expression presents two quite opposite realities as one single crystal diffracting different narrative beams. On the one hand, it is a proprietary politics of soil, either private or public, defined by an appropriation of space that goes hand-in-hand with control over its use and the right to circulate on it. But maybe more importantly, this appropriation prohibits its adaptation and the creation of a provisional soil and the equally provisional community (culture) that could grow from it. A right-of-use culture. This would presuppose a consideration of the conditions for a conversation with the soil, and therefore its multiple properties would have to be taken into account as the vocabulary of an animist narrative. These properties would need to be attributed practices and scales, ways of doing with, of caring, to constantly preserve and redefine the soil at the same time, by rearranging layers of meanings and stories. It is a conversation gesture that would translate a future construction through a "retake" of heritage—in the sense of a new way of understanding heritage and reinterpreting it as a kind of music—an antidote to conservative melancholy and its accompanying story of loss. It is a story of loss that eats into emotions, and uses other means to pursue the production of a colonial psyche stuck between an obsession with the essentialized repetition of tradition and a fantasy of progress that presupposes its destruction. To understand this, I think it is important not only to grasp that colonies are in a first phase—being not just sites of captured resources, but also social, cultural and technical experimentation laboratories—but also to see how they subsequently transformed with decolonization into generators of a new traditional Western fantasy, based on the myth of the lost paradise. This is how one should understand the amendment proposed by Christian Vanneste in 2005, which loomed up in the National Assembly like a specter in the dead of night.⁶ It attempted to enshrine in law "the positive role of colonization". Yet the same year, the French suburbs were thrown into a state of unrest after the deaths of two youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, an event that recalled another story—a necropolitical one—of French populations from the former colonies.

It is also a matter of getting away from the interpretation of traditional culture that sees it as essentially a product of changelessness, as opposed to a progressive, modern gesture, a movement of emancipation and development, and instead seeing it as one single culture of the radical, even though here I would like to see nostalgia and the culture of the new take over from the defeated gestures. Gestures that regrasp and displace, that produce some different sameness, a return to the surface of the old, as a humus of futures. To understand the ecology of these gestures and develop it as a motif, one must specify its scale, that of the conversation with the soil evoked above, which annihilates its intensive

6 On this subject, see "La Possession de Vanneste", by Olivier Marboeuf, published in the magazine *Mouvement* (Paris) in 2012.

exploitation. This is why food agriculture interests me for its level of attention—and why it is useful as a motif for mapping out the ecology of other practices, including (as we will see later) that of a certain kind of cinema that I am calling for. But make no mistake. This is not a focus on the small scale as such, but on the possibility of producing larger, more transnational motifs from a network of situated motifs.

Amílcar Cabral, an agronomist by training who became the leader of the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance de Guinée et du Cap Vert (PAIGC / The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde), was quick to sense the need to direct attention to the properties of soil in Alentejo, in Portugal's arid south, while the state was putting all of its energy into accumulating new colonial properties. In Cabral's eyes, aridity was not an inevitability, but rather a sign that it was necessary to pay attention to a broader spectrum of interlinked factors, an invisible ecology of relationships and interdependencies.⁷ One could describe this brief overview of the situation produced by the colonial paradigm thus: attention to property rather than to the properties of soil.

Even if this could appear incongruous at first glance, I thought it would be interesting to attempt to draw lessons from a certain way of working the soil, as a way of understanding the ecology of a kind of cinema that combines different image temporalities. A cinema that is something of a temporal medium, which makes possible multiple versions of films, and moves away from the masterpiece as an object that encloses meaning, by offering itself as material for other stories. "Since I don't want to die, I'm walking with time" Bouba Touré says in a voiceover to one of his videos. And he gives us room to think that this is the voice of the film itself, a film that, like a soil, reconstitutes itself and never dies, that is to say it never becomes a vestige, an artifact of the past, but rather a humus that is active in the present of other films. And to draw a parallel between food agriculture and a certain way of cultivating images, of producing a cinema of the future with material accumulated from a past that constantly returns by being displaced, something that is remarkably exemplified by a film like *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Film Collective. A cultivated cinema that replays time and feeds on the compost of films that preceded it in an impure form, in which all types of heritage play the roles of poltergeists. The story loses its hierarchy and its order between things. The living transform the dead into partners in struggle.⁸

Maybe it would be appropriate for the Afrofuturist dimension of Raphaël Grisey's work to be situated here, in the way it creates a cinema that mobilizes the ghosts of other cinemas, a film that revives other films, a work as a possible, provisional organization of a community of

7 On this subject, see "Mined Soil", a film-essay by Filipa César (2014), who literally presents Cabral's knowledge-return ritual as an antidote to the Portuguese soil crisis.

8 I am quoting the film *Handsworth Songs* by Black Audio Film Collective.



Film stills from *Handsworth Songs*, Black Audio Film Collective, 1986.

specters. This is why I am treating the Somandiki Coura cooperative venture and its multiple narrations as a single gesture, which I see as having something of the nature of a retaking and fertilization of composite soil. The narrative that Raphaël Grisey develops does not erase its predecessors, but converses with them in a narrative string game of intersecting voices. It is a game he cultivates but did not invent, because already in 1977, Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona got Bouba Touré to play his own role in *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* Bouba Touré himself never stopped migrating from one perspective to another: emigrant, immigrant, factory worker, photographer, then filmmaker-chronicler of illegal immigrant struggles and of the cooperative's venture.

This game of deterritorializing / reterritorializing practices is the very essence of what underlies the singular Somandiki Coura gesture, because the French countryside is where those migrant workers met with local farmers and learned practices that they could implement upon returning to the Kayes region on the banks of the Senegal River. There was a transposition of tradition, that is to say a retake of heritage, a recreation, an invention of geography that closely relates to the cine-geography at play in the work of Touré / Grisey. By saying "Touré / Grisey", I am trying to convey that it is a cinema doubly affected by the practice of these two filmmakers / characters, that it is the production of a hybrid narrator who is spoken by the film more than he speaks it. Because although Raphaël Grisey is the one pulling the strings today, Bouba Touré has contributed to producing an invaluable continuity between the fate of yesterday's and today's migrant workers, a documentation of a minority, in which he never stops speaking from a situated point of view, thus recasting his body as one of the territories on which the history he is recounting was inscribed—something that I see as the characteristic feature of the history of immigration.

But in this game where each motif is only a provisional landscape of strings, other figures can still appear and populate the narrative. Thus we could carry on repeating the mantra that supplies new interpretations with each new cycle: "Since I don't want to die, I'm walking with time", and this would be the grandfather speaking, the one who comes back in Bouba's body, the grandfather who fought for the French army in the trenches of Verdun during the First World War, a soldier of whom Bouba is convinced he is the reincarnation. History makes a first return in the body itself, but it does not repeat itself. Bouba made the journey to France as well, but it was a different journey to a different France. But it does not repeat itself particularly because, as Roland Barthes said, the grandfather is already in the realm of fiction, of a motif that Bouba reinterprets. Like his worker / actor / filmmaker status, with Bouba reincarnation signifies a different ecology of the double, a return-chronology that is not a cyclical time but rather a spiraling time in which everything replays differently. Everything that returns comes back displaced and on the move, walking with time.

An Event and its Narrative: A Story Politics

The advent of state post-truth—which to some extent takes over from the hackneyed grand narratives of colonial modernity as a tool of inequality essentialization and as the infantile melancholy of the powerful—gives even more urgency to American scholar Donna Haraway's call to invent new narratives as antidotes and possible spaces of care and transition—I stress the idea of narrative as both a material and a tool for producing a transmission situation. And this is not a question of imagination, like fables that stem from pure fantasy. The stories that matter attentively cultivate the most discreet facts of the past, rooting themselves in the present where we get them to grow and make themselves into footholds, into fulcrums and perspectives for a possible future. Haraway translates a story politics and the need, from a post-Marxist perspective, to retaliate on the territory of narratives—situated narratives the must confront those of the deadly supremacy of white males, and also confront the major multi-purpose revolutionary ideologies. Understanding that it is not just a matter of changing the narrator, but changing the method and scale of narratives. Thus cultivating a constellation of little stories that extend through capillary action, through the networking, transferal and smuggling of knowledge. But also and especially cultivating motifs that can be extended, stories that can be replayed, recipes that can be interpreted. An expanding narrative ecology where the narrative never restricts its possible epilogues and versions. It stays at the level of its enunciation community, like a food crop, out of a necessity of close relations that does not compromise the possibility of global alliances and distant translations / transductions.

The Fiction of Another Story

In my view, the dialogue at the beginning of this text—a snippet extracted from the famous film *Safrana or Freedom of Speech* by Sidney Sokhona—is a perfect introduction to a present-day attempt to consider the Somankidi Coura cooperative's venture from the particular angle of narrative. Because although it is necessary to first study it as a singular event—in its historical context, in order to detail its ecology, its stages, its incredible successes as well as its contradictions and blind spots—I believe it is no less important to consider it as a motif, a narrative that breaks with tradition, a different story. A story which is different in that through its various alliances, strategies and geographies, it launches a rear attack on a certain established order in the relationship between the north and south, between France and a formerly colonized West Africa. This applies to economics, but also to a symbolic regime of seduction—which becomes relevant in our case as soon as we take the political power of narrative seriously and appreciate the way it assigns, produces and administers bodies and desires. In other words, returning to one's country means considering another hypothesis, a counter-narrative that turns its back on the magnetism of the body of France. Do not misunderstand: it is not so much or solely about a logic of country, territory or soil, but about a clause added to an established narrative that unfolds in people's imaginations: about

France as an Eldorado, a land of plenty, and exile as the only solution for an African man who wants to provide for his close ones.

Disproving this imaginary France is not just important for migrant workers, it is a necessity for everyone who detects in state narratives the very essence of a melancholic politics, capable of imagining neither a different story nor a different development in the struggles. In his film, Sidney Sokhona always uses the same dark humor to depict the relationship between the activists and the migrants who have decided to go back to their home country and farm the land. While the activists fight for the rights of workers being exploited at factories, the migrants are taking off, to literally and doubly go further. The migrant worker, having come out of his strict invisibility, is still nothing but a silent body, an object on which the struggles between bosses and activists hinge—a typically self-centered French story. No one attributes to this body the possibility of making an autonomous decision, stating a possible future, spinning a narrative thread that is definitely not favorable to him, creating his own montage.

If Sokhona made the film of this different story not without malice, this was probably in order to cultivate it, to discard its singularity so that it can become a narrative of possibilities, a fiction that, as Bruno Latour has said, is not so much about placing reality at arm's length (something that could be opposed to the documentary genre), but about making a constructed, tooled form of reality. A form that I will call a motif in order to return to the idea of that string game and the possibilities it offers in terms of intervention and development through other hands and voices. When Raphaël Grisey films the retaking of that motif, he extends it, withdraws it from its historical stratum, brings it back into the future. *Xarassi Xanne* [crossing voices], the film he is currently working on, echoes a first film *Cooperative*, which he made in 2008, and which already featured Touré/Grisey. By allowing himself to return to it, he asserts the possibility of an open-motif cinema and the possible extension of the cine-geography that populates it.