"The musical narrative of slavery and colonialism In the imagination of Eugène MONA".

"Faire mémoire de l'esclavage colonial en musique en Martinique et en Guadeloupe entre 1956 et 1998" is the title of my thesis. Through this subject, I am attempting to depict the social history of Martinique and Guadeloupe through the prism of the memory of slavery in music after departmentalization (Halbwachs 1950; Ricoeur 2000). But also to retrace the history of music in the Antilles between 1956 and 1998, placing it in a context of intense circulation of people and ideas between the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. To carry out this research, I use songs as a source, placing them in their context of creation, dissemination, transmission and reception. But also to put into perspective the discourse conveyed by artists during interviews, performances, shows and concerts.

My talk today focuses on an artist emblematic of my thesis: Eugène Mona. Seven of his songs are included in my corpus of 103 musical works. How does he talk about slavery and colonialism? How is his narrative-memoir received by the Martinican public? And finally, how does it help us understand the memory of slavery in Martinique between the 1970s and 1990s? In the aftermath of departmentalization, Martinique society is still deeply marked by its colonial past (Sainton 2012). Mechanisms of domination remained, and the promises of the assimilation law were not kept. The change in status so desired by the political elites and the people of Martinique has a bitter taste, as this is a time of disillusionment. The island is experiencing a real social crisis, coupled with a political crisis, all against a backdrop of demographic explosion. It was in this particular context that voices were regularly raised to demand the famous social advances provided for by the law of March 19 1946, known as the "loi de départementalisation". Strikes were frequent to demand greater equality and justice, and were often bloodily put down by the forces of law and order (Lavenaire 2017; Mary 2018). From the early 1970s, politicians, trade unions and activists turned to culture in their quest for a Martinican identity free from colonization. The basic idea was to promote all the cultural practices they considered ancestral, particularly those known at the time as "*bagay vié nèg"*. This racist expression refers to the figure of the wild, boorish black man, the cliché of the black beast of burden, ignorant of everything, even social norms and conventions. In the course of this valorization process, the *vié nèg* became the *nèg mawon*, the runaway slave who was the subject of much thought and research. But above all, he is elevated to the status of abolition hero in these circles. We need to get away from the republican abolitionist narrative that focuses on Victor Schoelcher and erases the agentivity of the enslaved.

It's by going out to meet the inhabitants of the Martinique countryside that these groups will discover and showcase what they call the culture of the mornes (Edmond- Mariette 2018). The latter is in fact the *bèlè* world, which could briefly be defined as follows: anchored in nature, working the land and moments of rejoicing. That's why *bèlè* culture includes songs for work and celebration, as well as songs to accompany important moments in life, such as death. These are responsorial drum dances and music played and sung in precise, defined social settings. Gathered in a circle *(lawonn)* around the *tanbou bèlè* (Martinique drum) and the *tibwa* (rhythmic instrument) with *lavwa* (the voice) and *répondè* (the responders - the chorus), they sing in

Creole, dance barefoot and recount their experiences (work, love stories, social misery, misadventures of politicians, e t c .) (Jean- Baptiste 2008). Through these journeys, Martinique society embarks on a genuine return to its roots, encountering its African roots in a decolonial and authentic process.

It was in this context that author, composer, performer and flautist Eugène Mona emerged. Nicknamed in Martinique the "nègre marron" or "nègre debout" (as the Martinican chronicler Michel Thimon initially called him), Mona single-handedly embodied the figure of the *vié nèg*, who became a heroic figure. He is therefore part of this pivotal period in Martinican culture. So, do his songs provide a narrative-memory of colonial slavery from the 1960s to the 1990s? First, let's look at the "figure" of Eugène Mona during his lifetime. Then, after his death, to the process of the artist's sacralization. To do this, we'll use two tools: his songs "*Boi Brilé"* and "Face à face".

A. Mona in her lifetime: *"Nou tout sé Boi Brilé"* (We are all burnt wood)

Georges Nilecam was born in Le Vauclin, a commune in southern Martinique, on July 13, 1943. After spending his childhood and adolescence in Fort-de-France and Saint Pierre, in the 1960s he moved to Marigot, in the north of the island (Glaudon 2009). It was at this point that Eugène Mona was born and began writing and composing. In his songs, he evokes the island, nature, his people and their history of colonization, the slave trade, slavery and the divine. His condition as a black man is central and recurrent in his productions. He sings in French and a lot of Creole. His music is often labelled as "the music of the Mornes", but in fact it reflects his island, as he uses all the cultural components of Martinican society. He composes biguines, waltzes, mazurkas, *bèlè, etc.* He is also inspired by American music, particularly negro spirituals and blues. In several interviews, he explains that for him the blues is the prerogative of Afro descendants, and that there is blues in his music.

Orchestration, image and mysticism

With his backing band, he does what no Martinican orchestra had done before: he mixes several drums. So we find the *tanbou bèlè* alongside the *tanbou di bass* (another type of drum)*,* and congas. Of course, the *tibwa also features,* along with the *chacha* and triangle. As for melodic instruments, there's the occasional accordion, but above all the *toutoun- banbou,* otherwise known as the flûte des mornes (bamboo flute from Martinique). This instrumentalization is unusual and intriguing, which is why Mona and her band from Marigot are considered country musicians. There's no guitar, clarinet or brass section as was customary.

In addition to the sound of the mornes, Eugène Mona physically embodies this representation of the countryman through his posture and stature. Of imposing stature, the artist with bright black skin (Glaudon 2009) always performed barefoot, with natural hair, a shaggy, untrimmed beard and, as his signature garment, a tunic/boubou in plain or patterned Martinique fabrics. But it wasn't a costume; Mona wore it every day. According to several eyewitness accounts[1] , the flautist spoke loud and clear, loved to laugh out loud and was a man of integrity, making his joys and angers legendary.

By choosing to remain barefoot, he marked his anchorage to the earth and his connection to the divine. Yes, there was a mystical aspect to Eugène Mona.

[1] Series of programs and interviews in the archives of the INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel) consulted during two research missions in November 2021 and July-August 2022. Plus my fieldwork with Eugène Mona's relatives in March-April 2023.

He was a being of great spirituality, which governed his relationship with the world: animal, vegetable and, of course, human. His musical practice was intimately linked to his beliefs, which is why God is omnipresent in his lyrics. But this relationship with the sacred was not limited to her lyrics: before performing or beginning a recording session, Mona and her companions would engage in rituals (prayers, meditations, etc.). "*Boi Brilé"* subtly highlights this.

Boi Brilé

Released on Eugène Mona's first vinyl album in 1973, this song is a tribute to Julien Bredas, a Marigot resident and sugar cane farm worker. Julien was nicknamed *Boi Brilé*, and Mona used to come across him more or less regularly in the mornings as he worked in the fields. Sometimes, in the evening, they would get together and *Boi Brilé* would tell her all about his days at work. He would explain how, when the cane was burnt before being harvested, the cane cutters would emerge from the fields covered in ashes and impossible to recognize[2] .
The title of this "slow fox"[3] is a tribute to this man whose work symbolizes the toil, effort and injuries of those whose bodies were blackened by the cane being burned. Through this text and melody (cadence, processional rhythm, moaning flute and his resonant, cavernous voice) he highlights t h e relationship between black bodies deported, then enslaved to plant and harvest sugar gold during colonial slavery. This narrative-memory also shows that this situation of injustice persists despite the fact that slavery was abolished in 1848. In 1973, the descendants of those who were enslaved are still working under the sun in the same cane and banana fields. It's as if this misery is hereditary, preventing them from having access to well-being and luxury, as he puts it. But for him, these living conditions also make these men and women strong, resistant and resilient.

Eugène Mona recounts the day of a black man, a *Boi brilé*, who tends his vegetable garden and says his prayers before cutting his cane. And as if to demonstrate the transnational nature of this black man's condition, he sings that Otis Redding, Louis Armstrong (two of his favorite artists) and Martin Luther King were also *Boi brilé* with white names. Names inherited from the masters who renamed their slaves.

[2] Testimonials by Pierre-Louis Michalon (April 2023) and Félix Fleury (March 2023).

[3] Musical genre of the piece written by Eugène Mona on the application to the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs de Musique.

The song was a great success at the time, and remains one of the artist's most frequently covered songs. It holds up a musical mirror to the artist's quest for culture, identity and authenticity.

Mona revisits the slavery period in his own way, to demonstrate the humanity of the black man. He denounces the exploitation of man by man in Martinique, and more broadly in the Americas.

B. From death to resurrection: the sanctity of Eugène Mona

After seven long years of wandering and absence, in 1990, the artist returned to the forefront of the scene with his last album Blanc Manger/Blan *Manjé.* But on Saturday, September 21, 1991, an earthquake shook Martinique: Eugène Mona died suddenly in Fort- de-France. On the day of his funeral, the roads were crowded as the hearse took his body from Fort-de-France to the church in Marigot, then from the church to the cemetery in Vauclin. Everyone wants to greet the "standing negro" one last time. The participants in the micro-trottoirs all speak with almost the same voice: amazement, horror and guilt (Glaudon 2009)[4] . They all regret not having given the artist enough support during his lifetime, not having understood him. Indeed, between 1990 and 1991 he sold out several of the island's concert halls, but album sales failed to take off. It's at times like these that the "standing negro" epitomizes the figure of the *vié nèg/ nèg mawon* explained in the introduction. True, he was successful during his lifetime, but his physical posture, his lyrics, his use of Creole and his spirituality made him an artist whose authenticity, for some, led to marginalization during his lifetime, and his great diatribes in the media were not always understood. His sudden death acted as a detonator, propelling him onto the memorial stage. Eugène Mona became an untouchable *nèg mawon* hero. *Karibèl* magazine devoted a special issue to him in July/August 1992. An author by the name of Kalinago highlighted the fact that the singer died on the day the southern insurrection began (September 21, 1870 - September 21, 1991). His title was *"21 Sèptanm Bèl dat pou jou lanmò djéryé Matinik"* (September 21, a beautiful date for the death of Martinique's warrior) (Kalinago 1992).
Also in the same magazine, Edouard Glissant's article *"La grande ombre d'Eugène Mona" (The Great Shadow of Eugène Mona)* explains Martinique society's astonishment at the musician's death in terms of its sacred nature. "

[4] Interviews, broadcasts and testimonials *Op. Cit.*

Mona's death summoned us to the sacred gravity of his music, finally evident under the daily pleasure of rhythm, that he is no longer there to improvise or maintain. L'ombre de Mona is as great a musician as Mona himself. (Glissant 1992 p.3).

Face to face

The song "Face à face", with its evocative title, echoes this situation. It appeared on the composer's last album. This time, the instrumentalization of this blues is enriched with a more modern sound, thanks in particular to the synthesizer. Félix Fleury and Pierre-Louis Michalon, two of Eugène Mona's closest friends and collaborators, told me that if you want to understand the Mona man, just listen to *"Bois Brilé"* and "Face à face"[5] .
These two songs say it all. The "nègre debout" philosophizes, taking stock of his life, his island,

his people, and this milestone, which turns out to be a period, says it all about his melancholy and bitterness. In this title, he speaks of colonialism without ever uttering the word. The *gwo mòdan* that colonizes and exploits will have to stop sooner or later, because that's how life goes. Mona explains that the war of domination of one people by another carries an unspeakable wound to the world. And this wound is consubstantial with the one that breaks his heart. He repeats over and over: *"an tjè félé pa fasil pou djéri mé sa ki sav' sav', sa ki pa sav' pa sav'"* (a broken heart is not easily healed, those who have lived through it know what I'm talking about,

others don't). Which for Max Cilla, Eugène's flautist mentor, makes him think: "(...), all things considered, of Jesus who said: 'Let those who have ears to hear, hear'" (Karibèl 1992 p. 89). He offers those who listen to him a divine revelation in the image of Christ, Son of God, who gave his life on the cross to save humanity. Suffering is part of life, and we must go through it to move towards a better tomorrow. The singer doesn't just think of Martinique, he gives his words a universal scope, even going so far as to appeal to Saddam Hussein and George Bush Senior, who are in the middle of the Gulf War (August 1990-February 1991). Eugène Mona's genius allows him to do with his mystical use of Creole what great Martinican writers such as Fanon and Césaire did with their great literary flights of fancy. Denounce colonialism and evoke the struggles to emerge from it and become a people.

In several interviews to promote the album between late 1990 and 1991, Mona explains that, after years of offering the people resistance dishes with his music, this latest opus is called blanc manger like the coconut milk dessert. For him, it was clearly the end of a cycle. [5] Interviews March-April 2023.

Eugène Mona's career as a whole, the positions he took, the premonitory nature of his lyrics, his spirituality and his relationship with the sacred and the divine all contributed to the sacralization of the artist's persona. In the years following his death, he gained recognition and his music was often revived, and tribute concerts were organized on a regular basis.

Eugène Mona, the misunderstood, became Mona the prophet. From then on, his music was used to support and commemorate great moments in Martinican history. Through his work, he helps us to remember, conferring on it an immortal character. As Elina Djebbari and Charlotte Grabli explain in the latest issue of the CIRESC journal on the "musical memorial": the memorial processes of the slave trade and slavery through music are made up of several interwoven stratifications.

Talking about A "musical memorial" means "restoring to music the full scope of the memorial projections it catalyzes, performs and conveys" (Djebbari & Grabli 2022 p.2). In his process of musical creation, Eugène Mona uses what he knows about colonial slavery and the slave trade in Martinique (thanks to various encounters and means) and transcribes in his own way the memory of slavery that exists and is said at the time.

A memory that focuses on the agentivity of enslaved people through the figure of the maroon slave. His persona, his discourse and his concerts add a new sedimentation to the stratification of this memory, as it is grafted onto his musical career, the whole of which is perceived and received by the Martinican public as an undeniable contribution to our cultural richness in this post-colonial period. Together, these elements constitute a musical memorial as defined by the two researchers.

Another interesting stratification in this musical memorial: the use of song *"Raleï, raleï"* by the singer during the debunking of the statues of Victor Schoelcher, Joséphine de Beauharnais and Belain d'Esnambuc, in Fort-de-France and Schoelcher in May and July 2020. Some of these activists see Eugène Mona as a spirit to be invoked in their mobilizations and demonstrations against a system that, in their view, maintains a colonial and slave-owning order in Martinique. Edouard Glissant was right, the shadow has overtaken the master.

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Translation and transcription by Yasmina Mathurine yasmina.mathurine@gmail.com