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### Case départ: Slavery in Martinique through the Lens of Comedy

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***Case départ: Slavery in Martinique through the Lens of Comedy***  
***Gladys M. Francis***  
**Georgia State University**

*The comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart.*  
 —Henri Bergson

*If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you.*  
 —Oscar Wilde

*Every act of communication is an act of translation.*  
 —Gregory Rabassa

Bearing in mind the limited number of French films on slavery that have been produced in the past decades, there is no overstatement in arguing that French filmmakers have a tendency to circumvent subjects related to slavery and colonization. Though factors underlying this trend are manifold, they nonetheless commonly involve a significant ambivalence on slavery as seen in mainstream print capitalism, history books, schoolbooks, or official discourses concerned with the construction, propaganda, or representation of the French Nation.<sup>1</sup> These inconsistencies and contradictions do not, however, reflect the extensive dealings of France in the slave trade, during a period that spans over two centuries, until the abolition of slavery in France in 1848. In order to better probe representations of identity, bodily pain, race, class, sexuality, and gender in *Case départ* (2011), a French comedy that depicts slavery in colonial Martinique, we must first understand its cultural, historical, and socio-political context. Without this context, it would be difficult to understand the reactions that emerged when it was announced that the film *Case départ* would conjoin a colonial backdrop and the comedy genre. Not unlike conventional discourses, very few French films discuss France's colonial and slavery era,<sup>2</sup> just as there are very few Black actors in the French cinematic arena. Flouting this cinematographic trend, in the summer of 2011, two French actors (of Cameroonian origin) Fabrice Eboué and Thomas N'Gijol

co-starred in and brought to the big screen (with co-director Lionel Stokette) *Case départ*, a full-length movie set for the most part in 1780 colonial Martinique. Beyond presenting a contextual framework, I find it important to observe the representations of the Black body in pain and its agency as defined by the gaze of *Case départ*'s directors. I analyze to what extent the comedians allow the viewers to understand, identify, contextualize and interpret that pain through laughter. Indeed, what substantial understanding or awareness about slavery survives the comedy and the irony?

### **Then and Now: France's Bearings toward Slavery, Colonization, and Race**

During Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852-1870) and the Third Republic (1870-1940), also a period famous for its creation of "National Education" curricula, many history textbooks adopted in primary and secondary schools did not shy away from analogies between the Roman occupation of France and this country's own imperial presence in Africa and the Caribbean. Gustave Hervé and Gaston Clemendot's popular French history book (1904) parallels, for instance, France's conquest of Africans to that of the Romans over the Gauls, ultimately providing a narrative of power and domination coupled with the romanticization of a civilizing mission: "Two thousand years ago, the beautiful country we live in [was called] Gaul. Its inhabitants, the Gauls, lived the same as the savages of Africa live today" (5).<sup>3</sup> The authors add:

In sum, our Gallic ancestors were savages hardly more advanced than are, at present, many negroes in Africa [...] Today, when French or English soldiers fight against African negroes, they always end up defeating them because they have the advantage over them of having better arms. Similarly, the Romans soldiers who invaded Gaul could not but defeat the Gauls because they were much better armed.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout history, the French have maintained methodical patterns through which historical figures, events or facts are retrieved, mythologized, reframed or disregarded to quench the construction of nationhood.<sup>5</sup> As Benedict Anderson argues, national myths of an origin and the nation-building mythology are rather functionalist terms (190-210), or in other words, they are constructed narratives and stories, “imagined communities” – more than they are real. The statement by Ernest Renan (1823-1892) that a Nation is “an everyday plebiscite”<sup>6</sup> puts forth the idea of a collective identity nourished by shared memories and people’s *will/desire* to belong to a nation. It also implies a communal contribution to the creation of the Nation as opposed to major implications of race, locality, or religion. Renan’s “spiritual principle” approach to nationalism, summarized in the German term *Willensnation* (“nation-by-volition”), reveals similar ambivalence in official discourses concerned with positing France’s sense of identity and nationhood. Renan further affirms that

forgetfulness, and [even] historical error, form an essential factor in the creation of a nation; and thus it is that the progress of historical studies may often be dangerous to the nationality. Historical research, in fact, brings back to light the deeds of violence that have taken place at the commencement of all political formations, even of those the consequences of which have been most beneficial. Unity is ever achieved by brutality [...] But the essence of the nation is, that all its individual members should have things in common;<sup>7</sup> and also, that all of them should hold many things in oblivion. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, or a Visigoth; every French citizen ought to have forgotten St. Bartholomew, and the massacres of the South in the thirteenth century. (277)

Renan overlooks the weight conceded to learning mechanisms in an epoch during which the dissemination of knowledge, learning, and *remembering* occurred within state-run schools chartering selective nation-building mythologies and discourses. As Anderson points out, the French state continued to preserve certain bodies of knowledge that “needed to be forgotten” in order to sustain the national identity (199-201). We cannot but ask “what is the process by which one does indeed get one’s history wrong in order to get one’s national or communal identity right?” (Mazrui 9). In addition, Renan’s concepts of “nation-by-volition” and shared memory (and forgetting) reflect, as Tzvetan Todorov stresses, an idealist conceptualization and “a failure” (304-5),<sup>8</sup> one initial reason being that constructions of memory and identity are essentially built on “otherness.” In fact, the creation of identity remains closely intertwined with the constructions of zones of differentiations with the “Other,” a process that partakes in the production of memory and remembering. Furthermore, official discourses filled with (material and symbolic) dominant positivist trends on France’s past, nationhood, or “civic nationalism,” reveal ambivalent nationalist modes of thinking more than the expressions of social reality.

These historical and ontological praxes as well as such empirical discourses (concerned with the *practical* integrity of national imaginings and imaging) complicate the comprehension and discussions on issues of race, slavery, and colonization. Displaced under “positive” configurations (as seen in the selfless, difficult, and necessary civilizing program of the “uncivilized” Africans), the realities, inhumanity, and consequences of slavery and colonization of Africans and their descendants become ineffectual. These particular dispositions of the state have stifled efforts of recognition, commemoration, recollection and reparations vis-à-vis the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. This conventional stance continues to play an important role in the amnesia and misunderstanding on this segment of French history.

Our twenty-first century reveals the extent to which this ambivalence on slavery remains patent as seen in the public statements made in 2007 by Nicolas Sarkozy, who at the time was the President of the French Republic:

The European dream needs the Mediterranean [i.e., the Maghreb] dream. [That] dream that was not so much a dream of conquest as a dream of civilization. Let us stop blackening the past. [The] majority of those who left for the South were neither monsters nor exploiters. Many put their energies toward building roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals. Many wore themselves out cultivating a bit of thankless land that none had farmed before. Many went only to heal or teach. [One] must respect the men and women of goodwill who meant, in good faith, to work beneficially for an ideal of civilization in which they believed. [If] France has a moral debt it is above all toward them. [A] politic of civilization, it is what the Mediterranean prompted us to do [and] nothing has ever been mediocre over there [in the Mediterranean].<sup>9</sup> (2007a)

A month later, Sarkozy reiterated his nostalgia of such a French civilizing model, insisting that France's dedication was to civilize more than it was to exploit, which he concludes, stands as a unique and rare disposition among all of the other European colonial powers. In another speech, Sarkozy went on to assert France's virtuous past through an implicit reference to Germany, affirming that France never committed genocide or any crime against humanity (2007b).<sup>10</sup> Such discourses have nurtured tense environments in which the representativeness and experiences of slavery, colonization, and issues of race and racism are very difficult to tackle within the governmental framework. In fact, Sarkozy's comments were delivered six years after the French government passed the commemorative "Taubira Law" (*La loi Taubira* n. 2001-434) recognizing the Atlantic slave trade and slavery as a crime against humanity. It was not until 2001, exactly

163 years after the abolition of slavery, that such a law was implemented, after the due efforts of Christiane Taubira. Born in French Guiana (a former French colony and now an Overseas Department of France), Taubira is the former Justice Minister of France. Five years after the passing of the Taubira Law, May 10<sup>th</sup> was declared “a national day of memory for the slave trade, slavery and their abolition.” In 2012, a memorial dedicated to slavery and its abolition was built in Nantes (the largest slave trade port in France during the colonial period). It was only as recently as May 10<sup>th</sup> 2015, that The Mémorial ACTe, a cultural center dedicated to the memory, history of the slave trade and struggles of bondage in the Guadeloupe Islands, opened its doors on the former sugar cane factory site of Darboussier, in the city of Pointe à Pitre.

Lately, various overt forms of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia have shed light on detrimental socio-political facets of France. In 2013, Taubira defended and led the passage of France’s same-sex marriage and adoption law (whose supporters commonly named *Le mariage pour tous*). She subsequently became a target of opponents to the law who aimed racist affronts at her. Anne-Sophie Leclère, a National Front<sup>11</sup> candidate, published a picture on Facebook comparing Taubira to a monkey (Stille 2013). The following week, during a protest by “*La Manif<sup>12</sup> pour tous*,”<sup>13</sup> a child waved a banana at Taubira chanting “ugly ape, eat your banana!”<sup>14</sup> (Rotman, Faure 2013). These incidents were echoed in the headline of the French far-right newspaper *Minute*: “Maligne comme un singe, Taubira retrouve la banane.” “Retrouver la banane” literally means getting back/recovering a banana; so the headline translates as “Crafty as a Monkey, Taubira Gets Her Banana Back” (Willsher, 2013). The second half of the headline also evokes a French expression that means to smile (or to be happy). With this interpretation, the entire headline could be read as: “cunning as a monkey, Taubira is as happy as a clam (or sandboy).” These ongoing “violent racist comments denying [Taubira’s] appurtenance to the

human race” (Bonaventure, 2014) are similar to the racist slurs and monkey screeches frequently hollered at French soccer players of color in stadiums across France. In a statement following the legal penalties against *Minute* for their racist treatment of Taubira, the paper’s staff declared themselves without regret, claiming to have practiced not racism, but only satire, which is not a crime (Jean-Marie Molitor interview for *Minute*, in *Le Monde*, 2013).<sup>15</sup> If humor (comedy, irony, satire) can be a powerful tool in the communication of ideas, the comedic process can also carry its own pitfalls in its efforts to challenge one’s assumptions, subjectivities, views, and orthodoxies. In fact, comedy can be informative, deceptive, influential, or dangerous (as the events surrounding *Je suis Charlie* can attest).

Without the cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts previously presented, it would be difficult to understand the reactions that emerged when it was announced that the film *Case départ* would conjoin a colonial backdrop and the comedy genre. Not unlike conventional discourses, very few French films discuss France’s colonial and slavery era,<sup>16</sup> just as there are very few Black actors in the French cinematic arena. Flouting this cinematographic trend, in the summer of 2011, two French actors (of Cameroonian origin) Fabrice Eboué and Thomas N’Gijol co-starred in and brought to the big screen (with co-director Lionel Steketee) *Case départ*, a full-length movie set for the most part in 1780 colonial Martinique. I find it important to observe the representations of the Black body in pain and its agency as defined by the gaze of *Case départ*’s directors. I analyze to what extent the comedians allow the viewers to understand, identify, contextualize and interpret that pain through laughter. Indeed, what substantial understanding or awareness about slavery survives the comedy and the irony?

***Case départ*, “the Movie of Shame”? : When Laughter Meets Morality and Ethics**

Prior to the film's release date, various individuals ranging from bloggers, socio-cultural associations/clubs, or scholars (speaking predominantly from an African diaspora perspective) expressed their outrage on social media platforms. They were shocked that three producers of African ancestry would find the linking between the comedy genre and slavery to be an appropriate approach in France, a country that rarely addresses its colonial past. A Facebook page was created, titled "Let's boycott *Case départ*: the movie of shame." During this period of promotion and marketing, Eboué and N'Gijol responded to the heated commentaries asserting that the movie was not a comedy on slavery, but a comedy that unites people to make them understand issues of identity in contemporary France (Hermer 2011). Asked why the movie was not shot in Martinique, they stated their original desire to film in Martinique, but "being too sensitive to their colonial past, Martiniquans were resistant toward the idea of *Case départ* being filmed on their island" (Allociné);<sup>17</sup> the duo claims in an interview with *Commeaucinéma*, that it was the local whites, or *békés*,<sup>18</sup> who particularly opposed the filming in Martinique.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the decision was made to film in Cuba.<sup>20</sup> These heated discussions and negative attention that took place during the movie's pre-launch period probably boosted the film's promotion. Once released in July 2011, *Case départ* became the leading box office comedy in France, earning over \$15 million in the few months following its opening. The Cannes Festival's positive reactions to the movie and the abounding box office sales (close to 1.8 million tickets sold) affirmed the success of the movie, weakening or silencing the virulent criticisms on social media. Those who disapproved of the movie were often reminded that it was not a historical piece and that they probably lacked a sense of humor. Those entertained by the movie could hardly be blamed, for it is laughter that *Case départ* makes permissible. It was not new to the film industry to examine difficult topics such as fascism, anti-Semitism, or slavery through the lens of

comedy.<sup>21</sup> However, the presentation of issues surrounding the topic of slavery through the lens of comedy was a new approach within the French film industry; *Case départ*'s slant was utterly novel to French cinema.

The film's title, *Case départ*, translates as "back to square one," meaning to start from the beginning, the point of departure. In the colonial context of the French Antilles, "case" also alludes to the wood shack in which slaves lived. Nowadays, it is still common to use the term "case (créole)" to refer to a small wooden house.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the title can be interpreted as a *case (créole)* serving as the characters' point of departure toward their colonial past. *Case départ*'s plot centers on two Parisian half-brothers whose Antillean father is dying in his home, in Martinique. As they visit him prior to his passing, they are transported back to slavery by the magic powers of an old aunt<sup>23</sup> who is infuriated to see them destroy the sole piece of inheritance left to them by their father: the certificate declaring the free status of their grandparents during the French colonial era (the brothers had destroyed the document for they did not find any financial value in it). *Case départ* uses the ambiguity of time and space with the characters propelled into the past while maintaining their twenty-first century gaze. As we know, cinema can make present what is absent, and *Case départ* gives a vivid presence to colonial Martinique. In fact, most of the film is set in colonial times, with costumes, décor, actions, plot and jokes that are all relevant and coherent to the depicted slave system. It is also worth noting that while *Case départ* is by no means a historical film, to make it pertinent to the slavery era, the actors consulted historians to ensure projecting realistic atmospheres through the costumes, the depiction of eighteenth-century eating practices and ballroom scenes, for instance.

The comedy genre probably lends itself more readily than other genres to the analysis of class relations and to the nexus between order and disorder. Comedy is still a big tradition in Europe, especially in France, where half of the film industry's production is comedy. As a genre, comedy deliberately goes against the demands of realism and prides itself on being an arena where repressed tensions can be released in a safe manner. Accordingly, *Case départ*'s icons act out class distinctions (signified by certain cultural referents such as dress codes, linguistic registers, working and living environments), using stereotypes on class, race, and national prejudice that are often meant to foreground or parody such stereotyping. *Case départ*, in essence a "buddy" adventure film, centers on two Black French men distinctly incognizant of their Caribbean roots. Each embodies certain stereotypes; Régis, the wealthy mulatto who denies his Black roots and lacks compassion for the needy, is a "yes-man" to his Caucasian boss and is married to a white woman. The second character, Joël, is a dark-skinned Muslim who harasses a girl for her canteen money (in front of his daughter) so he can pay a bus fine, he also does not want to work, has been to prison for robbing an elderly woman, and systematically blames his problems on racism. In a French context, Régis is thus the bourgeois while Joël represents the scum (*la racaille*). Purposely parochial, the jokes are meant to foreground stereotypes and social class differences internalized within race issues. The film captures class, not just as economic relations but also as power relations with dominant/dominated dichotomies or ideologies. Playing on stereotypes, the directors aim to ridicule behaviors prevalent in contemporary France and to show how current stereotypical discourses used by Black, White and Jewish people are made irrelevant when shifted into the colonial era:

Monsieur Henri (the slave overseer): Get to work, you Negro with your big [*he is interrupted by Joël's interjection*]

Joël: You racist!

Monsieur Henri: What?

Joël: You say that because I'm Black!

Monsieur Henri: Evidently! [*Laughs (long giggle)*]<sup>24</sup>

Displaced in colonial times, we see how Joël and Régis are forced to re-negotiate the economics of their now enslaved selves. In fact, as slaves, they are now a fungible property, underprivileged, and forced to provide free labor while enduring the deprivation of all personal or economic benefits (wages, property, freedom of full mobility, and human rights). Chris Bliss reminds us that best comedies and satires have the ability to “circumvent our ingrained perspectives,” and to generate critical thinking or greater understanding within an individual, potentially leading to real change: “as the philosopher's stone, [comedy takes] the base metal of our conventional wisdom and transforms it through ridicule into a different way of seeing and ultimately being in the world” (2011). Bliss adds that in comedy,

there is this mental delight that is followed by the physical response of laughter, which, not coincidentally, releases endorphins in the brain. And just like that, you have been seduced into a different way of looking at something because the endorphins have brought down your defenses. This is the exact opposite of the way that anger and fear and panic, all of the flight-or-fight responses, operate. Flight-or-fight releases adrenalin, which throws our walls up sky-high. And the comedy comes along, dealing with a lot of the same areas where our defenses are the strongest – race, religion, politics, sexuality – only by approaching them through humor instead of adrenalin, we get endorphins and the alchemy of laughter turns our walls into windows, revealing a fresh and unexpected point of view. (4)

Given a French context in which slavery is rarely discussed, as a comedy, *Case départ* carries double-edged implications. While it has the potential to challenge viewers by making them gaze at issues scantily addressed in the socio-political arena, it can also faultily rely on an “assumed” awareness of meaning on these issues on the part of the viewers. In the latter case, the viewers’ ability to respond depends on not only their sense of moral and ethical responsibility, but also their basic critical thinking.

The priest: Negroes need simple food because they are simple people.

The son-in-law: As a matter of fact, be careful! By getting too close to them, it might be you that they will end up eating.

Madame Jourdain: Are African Negroes really cannibals?

The priest: Of course! All the more so as if you’re lost in the bush, you can hardly escape from a Negro. Their large nostrils confer them a sense of smell much superior than ours. They can smell you from miles away.

The son-in-law: Should not they start to smell themselves?

*[Everybody laughs at the dinner table]*

Madame Jourdain: The worst part is that some white people beget children with these Negro women. Well, should we consider these mixed-bloods as humans?

The priest: When a horse fornicates with a donkey it never results in a horse but a stupid and sterile mule.

Joséphine Jourdain: What about this gigantic sex of theirs?

The priest: [...] It helps them cling to branches like opossums.

Madame Jourdain: [...] These Negroes have legs for hands!

The son-in-law: And hands for legs like any monkey

[*Everybody laughs at the dinner table*]

Filled with racist comments, this comedic scene reminds us of the French far-right newspaper *Minute*'s portrayal of Christiane Taubira as a monkey. In fact, if it is true that “every act of communication is an act of translation” (Rabassa 2005), *Case départ*'s comedy adds a complex layer to the depictions and interpretations surrounding the slavery era through deliberate misdirection, ironic stances, tricky verbiage, and provoking depictions (what comedy usually entails). It also reminds us that many people still believe in such fallacies and stereotypes.

The film also takes historical liberties that both confirm and denies common stereotypes of the Jews. In 1685, the *Black Code* (*Le code noir*)<sup>25</sup> ordered the Jews out of France's colonies, but in *Case départ*, the directors trigger the controversy surrounding the Jews' alleged involvement in the transatlantic slave trade through the depiction of a problematic caricatured Jewish character. In the film, Isaac,<sup>26</sup> a stereotyped Jewish merchant, is seen participating in the slavery's economic system by providing luxury goods to the plantation owner, while also being very sympathetic to the two enslaved brothers whose escape from the same plantation he facilitates. He is later seen feeding the brothers at his house before they continue their escape. In their interview with *Commeaucinéma*, the directors expressed being aware of the controversy on whether or not the Jews were Black slaves' traffickers, to which they contended “finding [this debate] so surreal” querying “how can [one] reasonably debate to know who between the Jews or the Blacks suffered the most?”<sup>27</sup> (*Commeaucinéma* “Interview Croisé” 2011). Subsequently, in the film, Eboué and N'Gijol put in place a humoristic and arbitrary debate on this topic, between the two brothers who come from the future and the Jewish man whose reality is that of 1780, having no idea of the holocaust and anti-Semitism his people will endure:

Régis: Why are you doing all of this for us?

Isaac: Because I am a Jew. Do you know what the Christians used to call the Jews? The Negroes of Europe! Your people and mine lived the same sufferings.

Régis: Well, anyway, thank you!

Joël: You suffered, but it's not preventing you from causing hurt in Palestine!

Isaac: What about Palestine?

Régis: You idiot! How do you want him to know about this?

Isaac: What's happening in Palestine?

Joël: Don't worry about it. It's a tense debate; let's not get into it.

Isaac: In any event, we must stand together. Two peoples suffered throughout History, first the Jews, then the Blacks.

Joël: First the Blacks, *then* the Jews!

Régis: Oh no! We suffered more than you did!

Joël: I'm sorry, but the enslavement of Black people is the biggest suffering of this century!

Isaac: What? We were the first to suffer mass slavery in Egypt until Moses freed us, then it was inquisition, and *we* the number *one* of suffering.

Joël: I'm sorry but I just can't let you say that.

Régis: [...] the Blacks did suffer more.

Isaac: I disagree!

Joël: Later, when Adolph Hitler comes into the picture, we will be able to talk about it some more.

Isaac: Who's Adolph? [...]

*Case départ*'s humor is thus essentially sustained by a series of anachronisms that ultimately force the viewers to revisit issues of racism, labor, identity, and sexuality within satirical and controversial perspectives. In an interview, Eboué explained:

[During slavery], racism wasn't considered racism. It was a way of thinking. [In the film], our goal was also to say that today, when you are Black, you have a choice, a choice to try to integrate, advance, or to be a rebel, whereas [during colonial times] we were Negroes without any choice. [The goal] was also to go back in History.<sup>28</sup>  
(*Commeaucinéma*, 2011)

Although comedy intends primarily to make the viewers laugh, it can nevertheless be misinterpreted by those who are not equipped with sufficient contextual knowledge to critique what is being presented to them. When ironic racist jokes are added to the mix, the results can be disastrous. Based on their comments, the directors believe that to some extent all the characters are portrayed as immoral, whether they be Black, Jewish, or White. By engaging all the characters in racist or ironic comments, they aim to put all of them at a similar level of

despicability. The viewers are thus invited to adopt the characters' positions to get the jokes. Such undertakings constitute one of the potential pitfalls of comedy, since they tend to downplay considerations of privilege, locality, historicity, gender and class stratifications (among others) that shape moral values and interpretations.

*Case départ* might not make fun of slavery. As a comedy, its puns are not declarative (to express what is known to be the case in reality) but they certainly do push boundaries and touch the irrepressible. Yet, not all satire is funny or accurate. Ted Cohen's and Tanya Rodriguez's research on moral psychology and race theory offers interesting examinations on the aesthetics and ethics of humor. They explain that a joke is not good just because it is inappropriate; conversely, that it is inappropriate does not necessarily mean that a joke is not funny (Cohen 84). But appreciating ironic racist humor could involve a lack of empathy toward the reality and horror of slavery. As Rodriguez explains, ironic jokes on race may be acceptable to an audience that already rejects racism (12), and more specifically in the case of *Case départ*, an audience that understands the horror and implications surrounding slavery. But as Rodriguez insists, audiences are comfortable with such jokes precisely because as individuals they feel self-assured in their own rejection of genuine racism and possess an understanding of their space of privilege (ibid). The problem is that this does not (and should not) apply to all viewers. As Henri Bergson argues: "the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (5). It is understood that through ironic racist jokes, the film can unwittingly create a "forsaking of empathy" (Rodriguez 14), given that the viewer can distance him or herself from the feelings of those affected by slavery, lashings, and colonial domination. The viewer could become in such a case a spectator complicit in the horrors of slavery.

Most of the negative press associated with *Case départ* focused on its abject moral and

ethical essence because it “made fun of slavery.” Such criticisms might reside in the fact that the filmmakers insisted to have only used slavery as a secondary backdrop, when in reality the colonial setting stands as the core of *Case départ*. In fact, their simplified depiction of slavery can hardly be measured as a meek background. It is within such aesthetics and positioning that the directors present complex issues of identity, class, racism, gender and sexuality in both colonial Martinique and contemporary France. These issues are without doubt relevant to the socio-cultural tensions we continue to witness in France and between France and its former colonies. Humor, as I argued, can offer efficient and safe methods to address such issues, which is why *Case départ*'s humoristic alternative could stand as suitable. Yet, this diluted presentation of bondage might prevent the audience from experiencing the empathy toward the condition of slavery that is essential to the brothers' identity formation. It is, however, inaccurate to argue that *Case départ* makes fun of slavery *per se* (as I propose to further explain in my next section of study). Rather, it sells laughter and mockery regarding selfhood, immigration, and racism and, as such, the directors attained their goal, just as the entertained viewers probably got the laughter they expected and purchased.

### **Slavery through Depictions of Business and Economic Transactions**

The directors received harsh criticisms for their buffoonish interpretation of Black people within the colonial setting of their film. These comments are rooted in the flawed narratives found in mainstream discourses. They are also rooted in a desire to correct and/or revise historical misrepresentations and exaggerations via a shift in representations and commemorations of blackness – as resistance, nobility, and magnificence. Indeed, *Case départ*'s negative criticisms also derive from apertures, *lacunae*, and urgencies to develop a shared consensus and a truer face

to admittedly negative features of French colonial History. In addition, because Fabrice Eboué and Thomas N’Gijol are of African descent, this certainly brought other sets of expectations. Named “Uncle Toms,” “bounties,”<sup>29</sup> “Black faces,” and “a disgrace to their Black ancestors,” most negative remarks found on social media condemned the fact that two *Black* men were insensitive and found humor to be an appropriate choice to bring the French colonial era – an era largely characterized by the presence of slavery – to the main screen. *Case départ*’s controversy reflects the unaddressed chapters of a French colonial history in relation to which humor seems inappropriate.

In *Case départ*, we also observe a blurring between business acumen and the economics of slavery, which is best illustrated when Régis uses the talents he gained as a twenty-first century mayor’s office employee to please his plantation white master and negotiate for certain privileges or his choice of corporal punishment. For instance, he avoids the torture of lashing, not knowing that branding would be the alternative. It is often Régis who negotiates on behalf of Joël. Furthermore, we witness their negotiation with the plantation owner, regarding the reallocation of the certificates of freedom they received for rescuing his son Victor, who almost drowned in a river. The child’s name is a direct reference to Victor Schoelcher, as stated by Eboué and N’Gijol in various interviews. Named France’s Undersecretary of the Navy and the Colonies in the nineteenth century, Victor Schoelcher headed a commission charged with drafting a decree abolishing slavery in the French Caribbean. Schoelcher is habitually depicted in monuments and mainstream historical narratives as the heartfelt white man and beneficent savior who liberated an entire Black people from bondage. In recent years, French Caribbean union-run education groups and associative movements (of descendants of slaves) have started to de-patronize and de-reify Schoelcher’s figure in a creole slogan “*A pa Schoelcher ki libéré nèg*” (It

is not Schoelcher who freed enslaved people). The process stands for an acknowledgement of the considerable and active roles that slaves and Maroons played in achieving their own freedom. In *Case départ*, Régis and Joël position themselves as those who inspire Victor's propensity and largesse regarding slaves and their freedom.

Among their fellow slaves only Régis and Joël seem capable of participating in political intrigue. We also observe a lack of communication between the two men and the other slaves. As a result, the characters' identity formation (claimed to be necessary through a return to slavery) is not built on the slaves' sense of solidarity and community building. The latter are unique facets of slaves' capacity to survive (and rebel) in the stifling dynamics of the slave trade and slavery. There is therefore no clear resistance from the two men against slavery as an institution. In fact, *Case départ* itself does not challenge this institution and probably never intended to.

*Case départ*'s narrative device of time travel serves as a means to carry out an investigation into identity as well as a mechanism for observing certain social values. The fade/dissolve effects created by the smoke coming from the pipes of both the old mysterious aunt and that of Monsieur Henri ("the overseer") respectively bring Joël and Régis to 1780 and back to the twenty-first century. Their return to events of the past is hermeneutically determined for it produces, in the end, an elucidation. Thus, Joël and Régis' transportation to the slave era is supposed to bring truth (on their sense of self) and shed light on issues of class and race. Slavery is personalized and seen through the eyes of the main characters. The ideological and nationalistic implications of the return to the past are evident. By framing history as an individual experience and because the film is a return to colonial times, history can become didactic: a moral lesson. Alternatively, it can lead to identification with a national ideal. As a matter of fact, back in contemporary France, the brothers seem to have gained a better understanding of their

identity, which contributes to their better fit in the French national landscape. This renewed look at the present via the past is what we see at the end of the movie.

In the film, the classism within colonial society writ large is clearly based on slave workers alienated from the commodity produced, a commodity that is destined for the market and for the profit of white people. In the twenty-first century, Joël, having reached a new sense of identity, is now working on a construction site and getting his minimum wage check. His work still contributes to the profit of others, based in part on the repression within his wages of the profit margin. While Joël fusses about his minimum wage paying job, he most importantly chooses to stay employed. As such, *Case départ's dénouement* presents Joël and Régis as being redeemed. In this fashion, Joël's work ethic mirrors that of Régis, who for his part seems to have lost his "béni-oui-oui" (yes-man) attitude toward his white boss and gained some of Joël's rebelliousness. This is observed when Régis demands that his white boss respect him by showing him a Fleur-de-Lys hot-ironed on his buttock (the brand he received when he was enslaved):

Boss: Hello my lil' Régis! How was your trip to the Caribbean?

Régis: It went well thank you.

Boss: Were they on time for the funeral? [*Laughs*] What?! It's a joke! Did you leave your sense of humor in the Caribbean?

Régis: No it's just that coming from your mouth I don't find this funny [...] I'm not your nigger, I'm not your servant, alright?

Boss: But, what's wrong with you Régis?

Régis: Let me show you something.

Boss: What do you want to show me?

[*Régis pulls down his pants and shows his behind*]

Boss: What the fuck!

Régis: So from now on, you'll have to learn to respect me, okay? Have a good weekend.

The estranged and troubled half-brothers are finally companions, complementing and better understanding each other. Once the characters return from slavery, they are mythologized into "better, improved Black men." They are portrayed as better sons, fathers, and romantic partners (in the case of Régis with his wife).

*Django Unchained* (see relevant essay in this volume), the comedic spaghetti Western directed in 2012 by Tarantino regarding antebellum Mississippi, maintains an unflinching (and controversial) exposition of slavery's horrors. Indeed, the violence against enslaved Blacks is real and raw in *Django Unchained* through the various paraphernalia of slave torture (among other things). This does not happen in *Case départ*, in which lashings, for instance, are barely shown on screen. Instead, during acts of torture, the camera focuses on the masters and their mundane discussions. In parallel, the comedic intention of a scene like this one disembodies the cruelty of the lashing, preventing both the heroification or the potential of defiance by the Black individual, just as the scene removes the victimization of slaves or the Black body in pain as an object of interest (or shock) to the viewers' gaze. Although the slave owners' idiocy is captured through a silly and grotesque parody of European aristocratic society, the gags – nonetheless – hardly capture the politics of exploitation, brutality or resistance that are part of the economics of colonial and post-plantation systems that still affect descendants of slaves today. Similarly, the film's depictions of the Maroons muffle the militant, abolitionist, revolutionary movements, and resisting Blacks in colonial Martinique. We observe this process in the scene that follows the brothers' second escape, when a group of Maroons frees them from the slave hunters and invites them to their secret site in the woods. As they gather and rally to express their resistance and actions to eradicate bondage (massacre all the White people that indulge in slavery), Régis refuses to offer his collaboration noting the extremism of their agenda. As a result, the Maroons evict the brothers from their group. During the scene, the caricatured Maroons are epitomized as savages and their verbiage of resistance presented as simplistic, and in which their principles of freedom are revealed as frivolously sectarian. For example, to welcome Régis and Joël, the leader intends to rename the brothers with free African names, but foolishly chooses to rename

Régis with an enslaved name “Jean Moulin.” The scene could be interpreted as the Maroons being estranged to their own African history and traditions. Although the directors believe they used a colonial past to clarify present attitudes and offer some moral reasoning, colonial Martinique becomes in the film an ambivalent metaphor that comments on contemporary times, rather than being a space of critical reflection on past, present, and future. Built on ersatz politics, the film’s colonial journey seems out of touch with the estranged performances of awareness and self-consciousness provided in the end. Such politics are too narrowly construed to effectively suggest comprehensive interpretations on culture and identity formation within colonial and modern praxes.

### **Representations of Pain, Sex, Gender and Power**

*Case départ* emphasizes the perspective of the slaves’ white overseer, Monsieur Henri. We are also put in the presence of white slave hunters depicted as sociopaths and sadists who seem to prefer inflicting pain rather than producing profit (their sadistic desires are however never fully acted upon in the film). Under their control, the Black slaves are physically and psychologically abused more for pleasure and leisure than for their labor. In another scene on a sugarcane field, the camera angle reflects Joël’s perspective as he witnesses what he perceives as the act of fellatio between two male slaves; he proceeds to videotape the act on his cellphone. The scene is comedic because in reality the two men are resting: one (a slave named Isidore)<sup>30</sup> is seated and eating some sugar cane while talking and facing another fellow slave who is leaning against a pole. In the spotless and romanticized plantation, depictions of slave labor seem secondary and parodic. The slavery of the film, then, can be perceived as socially acceptable and benign. Such a representation could suggest the efforts of the filmmakers to produce a marketable commodity.

The dominance of Monsieur Henri's male subjectivity is a gaze that seems motivated by a fear of castration or obsession with Black slaves' overpowering sex size, which nourishes both his desire to control/punish Black men as well as their "big cock." When Régis is promoted from a domestic slave to slave overseer, Monsieur Henri violently grasps and corners him while yelling: "Listen to me you Negro, it's not the size [of your cock that counts], you understand, do you understand? It's not the size that counts!" Consequently, when he punishes them, he always voices controlling their "big cock." In addition, a slave hunter in the movie is depicted as having a fetish for cutting slaves' feet. The fulfillment of this pleasure eliminates the politics of his profession within the system of Economic Slavery. Furthermore, the role of women merits attention. Joël's mother is hyper masculinized (as seen in the scene when she beats him up and tells him that she will kill him), while the half-sisters are noticeably silent and quite paralytic. We only hear them cry of sadness at their dad's bed and they have no say in their inheritance. Rosalie,<sup>31</sup> the enslaved grandmother (depicted in the film's colonial era as a young woman), has little narrative presence of her own. She is essentialized, while male characters are constructed and conceptualized in greater detail. Patriarchy is therefore valorized and Rosalie is a socially sanctioned object of the erotic gaze.

Thinking that Isidore their grandfather is homosexual (since Joël believed seeing him performing fellatio on another male slave), Régis and Joël trust that they must "fix this error" since their family line would be destroyed and they would never get a chance to be propelled back into the twenty-first century. For the two brothers, resolving Isidore's (mistaken) homosexual problem amounts to the film's dramatic quandary. They use rum to intoxicate Rosalie and Isidore (who do not know that Régis and Joël are, absurdly, their grandchildren). In a murky barrack located on the plantation, the viewers are presented with what is likely the most

shocking scene of the movie. Laying-down on the ground, Régis and Joël are sandwiching the inert bodies of Rosalie and Isidore (Joël positioned behind Isidore and Régis behind Rosalie). Joël masturbates Isidore to get him to an erection. Upon Régis' directions "Okay it's good now, put it down!" we see Joël's discomfort with the entire situation. After inquiring on the reason why he has to be the one "taking care of Isidore" (to which Régis replies, facetiously, that he does not trust him with their grandma), Joël barks at Régis to stop staring at him and breathing so hard. During this whimsical dialogue, Régis himself becomes sexually aroused and seems eager to start maneuvering his body against that of Rosalie. While masturbating against Rosalie, Régis drives Rosalie toward Isidore, while Joël pushes Isidore toward Rosalie. As they facilitate the sexual intercourse between Rosalie and Isidore, Joël stops partaking in the act, while Régis, on the other hand, gets completely carried away, slapping Rosalie's buttocks, moaning, moving faster and faster behind her, until the camera moves outside of the shack. We then notice Monsieur Henri standing in the distance, looking toward the woodshed as he hears loud screams of *jouissance*. Off-screen, the apex of pleasure heard from the perspective of Monsieur Henri and that of the viewers, maintains some level of ambiguity for it is not clear if the long moaning of pleasure comes from Isidore or Régis. Whether cast in terms of voyeurism, rape, or the incestuous-like *ménage à quatre*, the sexual act is great potential controversy in that the representation of rape is displaced from the white master/overseer to the slaves. Régis and Joël take away agency from Rosalie and Isidore; they also clearly emasculate Isidore. The lack of empowerment is a recurring motif in the movie and heteronormativity seems frequently sought after. Empowerment on the part of Régis and Joël, by taking the "gay away" from Isidore, equals a genetic correction that would simultaneously correct the historical/temporal fabric. This sexual transaction embodies the movie's title; the *case* (the woodshed) becomes the lieu of the sexual

intercourse that permits the birth, the *départ*, the point of departure, the square one, the beginning for Joël and Régis (in the post-slavery era).

The ending of *Case départ* reveals – similarly to *Django Unchained* – a problematic vision of resistance and Black agency on the part of its directors. In *Case départ*, it is through individual achievement that the characters articulate and obtain freedom. They give Rosalie and Isidore their freed-slave papers because in the end, what matters to them, is not the collective suffering brought about by slavery, but rather, their own predicament. Collective agency is substituted for them by making a (supposedly) gay man have sex with a woman. As such, the end of the movie carries a neoliberal message that reflects the privileged zone from which the directors are conceptualizing “minority” positioning. The neoliberal happy ending, shows racial hierarchy and difference dissolved into economies of interpersonal and individualized transactions.

## **Conclusion**

As Rodriguez argues, there is a difference between *feeling for* and *feeling as* (7): “Empathic identification, which allows us to feel what a character feels, is the strongest form of emotional engagement” (ibid). Aesthetic identification is imaginative. It puts us in the position of the *other*, we see through that individual’s eyes. *Case départ* dehistoricizes past and present politics that affect Black (Caribbean) people. By transforming political economy and social relations into individual quests and transactions, they risk whitewashing slavery and its legacy. In fact, it is not the comedic undertaking of *Case départ* that disturbs most, since that approach could have bluntly and critically exposed issues of identity, class, race, and gender. It is rather the fact that *Case départ*’s gags tend to replace the actual relations of exploitation central to the colonial and

postcolonial systems it describes. This creates an emotionlessness that could forestall empathy and impede ethical and moral questioning on the part of typical (i.e. non academic) viewers. Cinema as a cultural artifact often serves hegemonic purposes. Similarly, *Case départ*'s problematic lack of focus on the resisting and collective body, and its interest in non-redemptive and unempathetic laughter fail to challenge the homogeneous western gaze on the Black body. In addition, discourses based on satire, ironic racist jokes, stereotyped behaviors, and a diminishing of Black agency within the context of slavery can impede the viewers' ability to empathize with that context. With its narrative of hegemonic individual overcoming, the film fits the ideology of a mass entertainment industry, and as we are fully aware, "the production and consumption of mass culture is [often] thoroughly embedded in capitalist material and ideological imperatives" (Reed 6). In terms of a French film industry so reluctant to finance projects concerned with a colonial past, we could applaud the directors of *Case départ* for using comedy to bring this past to the big screen. In a socio-political sphere filled with amnesia, forgetting, timid remembering and blurred facts and knowledge on the colonial era, *Case départ* does not quite challenge the masses and could be perceived as a simple piece of entertainment.

Most of *Case départ*'s negative criticisms fixated on Eboué and N'Gijol's African heritage, as if being French natives with African lineage should have implicated more sensitivity on their part in their filmic representation of slaves and slavery. Yet, their Cameroonian origins do not inherently position them within sympathetic and unfailing assessments of the experiences lived by African slaves during their bondage – in the Americas. Just as it should not be assumed that their Cameroonian origins infer that they fathom French Caribbean people of African descent's intricate and multifarious emotional and psychological dealings with two centuries of bondage. The same can be said of their understanding of the vestiges of dominance that continue

to affect “French citizens (from the Antilles)” in contemporary France. As a result, the film’s meek representations of bondage, just as its ideological perspective in which Black men of Caribbean origins are policed in ways that require them to become “good” integrated citizens, can be perceived as privileged or condescending. *Case départ* does not intend to be a film *about* slavery. Instead, and regrettably, the movie merely uses slavery as a tool to explore issues of “Black” identity in terms of a *Westernized* African diaspora perspective.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Among these works: Madame de Saint-Ouen (1827); G. Beleze (1841); G. Bruno (1877); A. Dubois (1884); E. Vauche (1885); F. Mahon (1882), E. Bonnemère (1882); Edgar Zevort and E. Burle (1886); E. Lavis 1913 (and few years after the end of the Third Republic: H. Guillemain and l'abbé Le Ster (1943).

<sup>2</sup> *Le passage du milieu* by Guy Deslauriers in 1999; *1802 l'épopée guadeloupéenne* in 2005 by Christian Lara (2,557 tickets sold); the mini TV-series *Tropiques Amers* by Jean-Claude Barny in 2007 (4 million viewers); *Le pays à l'envers* by Sylvaine Dampierre in 2009 (2,960 tickets sold); *Case départ* by Thomas N'Gijol, Fabrice Eboué and Lionel Steketee in 2011 (1.8 million tickets sold) and in 2012 the TV-program *Toussaint Louverture* by Philippe Niang (2.9 million viewers).

<sup>3</sup> « Le beau pays que nous habitons [s'appelait] il y a 2000 ans [la Gaule]. Ses habitants, les Gaulois, vivaient comme vivent aujourd'hui les sauvages d'Afrique.»

<sup>4</sup> « En somme, nos ancêtres gaulois étaient des sauvages aussi peu avancés que le sont, à l'heure actuelle, beaucoup de nègres en Afrique [...] Aujourd'hui, quand les soldats français ou anglais se battent contre des nègres africains, ils

finissent toujours par les vaincre, car ils ont sur eux l'avantage d'avoir de meilleures armes. De même, les soldats romains qui envahirent la Gaule devaient finir par battre les Gaulois, car ils étaient beaucoup mieux armés » (10-13).

<sup>5</sup> Similar ambivalences are found in the cultural, political, literary, historical and anthropological interpretations, relations, and representations of ideologies surrounding the Gallic myth of “Our ancestors the Gauls.” There are various recuperations and interpretations on the fall of the Gauls. Often, their major defeat against the Romans is replaced by a glorification of their resistance against the glorious enemy. Other historical narratives emphasize the Gauls’ military *prouesses*, their patriotism (through the figure of Vercingétorix, who proudly died in his fight against Caesar during the battle of Alésia), as opposed to the Druids’ barbarism, misery, pagan and blood-rites. Vercingétorix was an imperial propaganda for Napoleon III, who in 1866, built a seven-meter high statue of Vercingetorix with traits resembling his. We can also use the example of Charles de Gaulle who stated that for him the History of France begins with the first Christian King Clovis and not with the “pre-historic” Gallo-Roman era: «Pour moi, l'histoire de France commence avec Clovis, choisi comme roi de France par la tribu des Francs, qui donnèrent leur nom à la France. Avant Clovis nous avons la<sup>SEP</sup>préhistoire gallo-romaine et gauloise. L'élément décisif pour moi c'est que Clovis fut le premier roi à être baptisé chrétien. Mon pays est un pays chrétien et je commence à compter l'histoire de France à partir de l'accession d'un roi chrétien qui porte le nom des Francs» (Pognon 1970, 30).

<sup>6</sup> This is a paragon expression symbolizing the civic nationalism born in France as a result of the 1789 French Revolution. The statement was delivered during a lecture at a conference that took place at the University of Sorbonne. In French: “L'existence d'une nation est [...] un plébiscite de tous les jours, comme l'existence de l'individu est une affirmation perpétuelle de vie” (1882).

<sup>7</sup> “[...] l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses.”

<sup>8</sup> “Tout oppose ces deux conceptions, la nation comme race et la nation comme contrat : l'une est physique, l'autre morale, l'une naturelle, l'autre artificielle, l'une est tournée vers le passé, l'autre vers l'avenir, l'une est déterminisme, l'autre liberté. [...] La tentative la plus célèbre pour le faire, celle de Renan, est un échec : on ne peut se contenter d'ajouter, l'un à la suite de l'autre, deux « critères », alors que le second annule le premier” (508-509).

<sup>9</sup> « Le rêve européen a besoin du rêve méditerranéen. [Ce] rêve qui ne fut pas tant un rêve de conquête qu'un rêve de civilisation. Cessons de noircir le passé [...] la plupart de ceux qui partirent vers le Sud n'étaient ni des monstres ni des exploiters. Beaucoup mirent leur énergie à construire des routes, des ponts, des écoles, des hôpitaux. Beaucoup s'épuisèrent à cultiver un bout de terre ingrat que nul avant n'eux n'avait cultivé. Beaucoup ne partirent que pour soigner, pour enseigner. [On] doit respecter les hommes et les femmes de bonne volonté qui ont pensé de bonne foi œuvrer utilement pour un idéal de civilisation auquel ils croyaient. [Si] la France a une dette morale, c'est d'abord envers eux. [...] Faire une politique de civilisation, voilà à quoi nous incite la Méditerranée [où] rien ne fut jamais médiocre.»

<sup>10</sup> « Au bout du compte nous avons tout lieu d'être fiers de notre pays, de son histoire, de ce qu'il a incarné, de ce qu'il incarne encore aux yeux du monde. Car la France n'a jamais cédé à la tentation totalitaire. Elle n'a jamais exterminé un peuple. Elle n'a pas inventé la solution finale, elle n'a pas commis de crime contre l'humanité, ni de génocide [...] La vérité c'est qu'il n'y a pas eu beaucoup de puissances coloniales dans le monde qui aient tant œuvré pour la civilisation et le développement et si peu pour l'exploitation. On peut condamner le principe du système colonial et avoir l'honnêteté de reconnaître cela.»

<sup>11</sup> The “Front National” (FN) is a right-wing French political party.

<sup>12</sup> “Manif” is the abbreviation of “manifestation” (a demonstration/gathering of people in a public space to make known and defend their opinion).

<sup>13</sup> *La manif pour tous* comprised groups opposing *Le mariage pour tous*.

<sup>14</sup> “La guenon, mange ta banana!”

<sup>15</sup> “Nous ne sommes pas du tout racistes, cette Une est de mauvais goût mais c'est de la satire, ce n'est pas un délit” Jean-Marie Molitor, *Minute*.

<sup>16</sup> *Le passage du milieu* by Guy Deslauriers in 1999; *1802 l'épopée guadeloupéenne* in 2005 by Christian Lara (2,557 tickets sold); the mini TV-series *Tropiques Amers* by Jean-Claude Barny in 2007 (4 million viewers); *Le pays à l'envers* by Sylvaine Dampierre in 2009 (2,960 tickets sold); *Case départ* by Thomas N'Gijol, Fabrice Eboué and Lionel Steketee in 2011 (1.8 million tickets sold) and in 2012 the TV-program *Toussaint Louverture* by Philippe Niang (2.9 million viewers).

<sup>17</sup> “Le tournage a duré 44 jours et s'est déroulé entre Paris et Cuba. Au départ, les réalisateurs souhaitaient tourner en Martinique, mais la population était très réticente, en partie à cause du lien complexe qu'elle entretient avec l'histoire de l'esclavage.”

<sup>18</sup> The term *Béké* is a Creole word used to describe a descendant of the early European (French) settlers in the French Antilles. Nowadays, the *békés* represent a small minority in the French Caribbean but they control much of the local industry. The class difference that exists between the *békés* and the predominantly Black majority population of French Caribbean societies is quite striking. For more on the topic, consult the documentary “Les derniers maîtres de la Martinique” (2009).

<sup>19</sup> In *Commeaucinéma*: [Interviewer -] Vous avez tourné à Cuba... Lionel - Et à Paris pour les scènes en Métropole. Au départ, nous voulions tourner en Martinique, mais certains békés - les descendants des grands propriétaires de l'époque - n'ont pas voulu qu'on tourne le film dans leurs propriétés. Les blessures sont toujours ouvertes. Nous n'avons pas eu le choix, et nous nous sommes tournés naturellement vers Cuba, où nous n'avons eu aucun problème. Fabrice - Le paradoxe est intéressant : pour des histoires de susceptibilité, nous n'avons pas pu tourner un film dans ce qui est censé être une des grandes démocraties de cette planète et on a été obligés d'aller le tourner dans ce qui est censé être une des dernières dictatures...

<sup>20</sup> Cuba's natural beauty, iconic colonial architecture, coffee plantations, and National Parks continue to draw (since the end of the Cuban Revolution) various filmmakers shooting movies on slavery.

<sup>21</sup> For instance *Duck Soup* in 1933, *The Great Dictator* in 1940, *Il Federale* in 1961, *La vita e bella* in 1997, and shortly after *Case départ*, *Django Unchained* in 2012.

<sup>22</sup> For more information on this topic, consult the “cases créoles” illustrations and critical analyses in the volume *Sexe, Amour, Genre et Trauma dans la Caraïbe francophone* by Gladys M. Francis (2016).

<sup>23</sup> Played by Isabel del Carmen Solar Montalvo.

<sup>24</sup> In this essay, all translations of *Case Départ*'s quotes (from French to English) are mine.

<sup>25</sup> The “Code noir” is a decree originally passed by France's King Louis XIV in 1685. It outlined the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire; for instance, it limited the activities of free Negroes, prohibited the practice of any religion other than Roman Catholicism, and indicated the types of corporal punishments runaway slaves should be subjected to.

<sup>26</sup> Played by Michel Crémadès.

<sup>27</sup> Il y a quantité de polémiques sur les Juifs qui auraient été des esclavagistes ou pas mais nous, on trouve ça tellement surréaliste... Comment est-il possible de débattre raisonnablement pour savoir qui des Juifs ou des Noirs a le plus souffert?( <http://www.commeaucinema.com/interviews/case-depart,188592>).

<sup>28</sup> Fabrice - À l'époque, le racisme n'était pas considéré comme étant du racisme. C'était un mode de pensée. Le but, c'était aussi de dire qu'aujourd'hui, quand on est noir, on a le choix, le choix d'essayer de s'intégrer, d'avancer, ou d'être un rebelle, alors qu'à l'époque, on était un nègre et on n'avait aucun choix. C'était aussi l'intérêt de remonter en arrière dans l'Histoire.

<sup>29</sup> The Bounty Bar is a coconut filled chocolate bar that is brown on the outside and white on the inside. The term “bounty” is used to refer to someone Black in a derogatory manner. The ethnic slur describes a Black individual criticized for being an assimilated French citizen (*un intégré*) or an “indigenous of the French Republic” (*un indigène de la République*). The insult insinuates that the “bounty” behaves like white people and/or adopts white people's politics, betraying as a result the Black community

<sup>30</sup> Played by Eric Ebouaney.

<sup>31</sup> Played by Stéfi Celma.