ESLA
ENGLISH STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA
A JOURNAL OF CULTURAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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Source: English Studies in Latin America, No. 27 (July 2024)

Date received: February 19, 2024

Date accepted: April 24, 2024

ISSN 0719-9139

Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

English Studies in Latin America
ISSN: 0719-9139
Issue 27 (July 2024)

LYRICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LADY BRION'S *I TALK BLACK* AND SIMONE LAGRAND'S *NOUS SOMMES DES RIVIÈRES*

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ABSTRACT

The comparative study that I propose through the present article is not only a structured overview – of *I Talk Black*, written and spoken by the artist Lady Brion, from Maryland, in 2018, and *Nous sommes des rivières*,[2] written and spoken by the artist Simone Lagrand, from Martinique, in 2014 – but a clear statement on the lyrical situation in the Americas. This paper comprehends various insights on an African-American woman's musicality and a Franco-Creole-Caribbean woman's orality. Taken together, these Black women's pieces of work call for demonstrative freedom and compelling peace. If Brion says that, "This slang is semantic resistance" (*I Talk*) and Lagrand affirms that, "Il est dit que toutes les rivières descendent à la mer"[3] (*Nous sommes*) therefore, where do their narratives meet each other? What's the link between Brion's "cornbread accent" and Lagrand's "voyage vers nous-même"?[4] To what extent do the selected authors' prevailing rhetorical strategies echo one another? I will address how English, French and Creole languages evoke the creative process that nourishes the artists that I have met in person and interviewed in the context of my Ph.D. research on oral literatures such as Slam Poetry and Spoken Word in the Americas.

KEY WORDS: Maryland, Martinique, Lyrical, Lady Brion, Simone Lagrand.

1 Americanist and comparativist by training, Sarah Couvin questions oral literature and poetry through the practice of the Slam phenomenon in the United States and the Antilles. She is fascinated by the impacts of languages and her research involves, among other topics, African-American identities facing Franco-Creole-Caribbean realities.

2 "We are rivers." All translations from French and Creole in this article are my own.

3 "It is said that every river goes back to the sea."

4 "Journey toward ourselves."

The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is –

it's to imagine what is possible

(bell hooks)

Le premier don que la nature m'ait fait, c'est la voix ...[1]

(Simone Schwarz-Bart)

I am spoken courage passed down (Lady Brion)

La mer m'a mise au monde pour soigner, pour dire des

silences qui soulagent, réveillent et révèlent[2] (Simone Lagrand)

If, for millennia, the power of words and sounds has helped shape societies and human beings, nowadays the art of poetics through orality – in particular in the Slam Poetry and Spoken Word[3] arenas – constitutes an effective method that can be utilized to describe oneself, share historical backgrounds, examine sociocultural facts, and reflect on the polysemy of a lyrical scene. What the artists Lady Brion and Simone Lagrand capture with *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières*, respectively, is engaging in different manners. *I Talk Black* is part of Brion's collection *With my head unbowed*,[4] a tribute to Maya Angelou, while *Nous sommes des rivières* is part of Lagrand's project *Sap Sap,* co-created with the artist Patrick Nupert. Brion's delivery is an a cappella one, whereas Lagrand's proposal is accompanied by the guitarist Yann Ravet. One uses the singular pronoun "I" while the other chooses the extendible plural "Nous."[5] Online, the length of their recordings is strikingly similar: the first, 2:17 minutes on YouTube and the second, 2:27 minutes on SoundCloud. Between linguistic resistance and systematic insistence, Brion's and Lagrand's voices are tackling black appropriations, memorizations, and innovations. Brion, moreover, presents

1 "The first gift that nature gave me is a voice…"
2 "The sea gave birth to me so I can care, I can tell silences that relieve, wake up and reveal."
3 In France, or in the Francophone world, the term "Slam" can define both competition and open mic events.
4 This volume of poetry comes with a CD where *I Talk Black* is also present.
5 "We."

herself as a national slam champion, poetry coach, activist, organizer, educator or international spoken word artist; Lagrand, on the other hand, is referred to as a *poétesse-pawolèz*, the dazzling inheritor of the *parler martiniquais*,[6] meaning the literary embodiment of a Creole culture interacting with musicological entities. In her own words, she points out that:

> La fonction de paroleuse est apparue un peu par la force des choses. À l'origine, je suis issue de la scène slam, que j'ai connue dans les années 2005 à Paris. Mais je suis aussi Martiniquaise et donc héritière en tant que telle d'une tradition orale très importante, que j'active notamment par la pratique du conte. J'ajouterais que quand je suis en Martinique, cela me semble plutôt inapproprié de transférer dans un contexte antillais une approche comme celle du slam, qui est tellement liée à un certain type d'urbanité. Du fait de cette double filiation, je n'arrivais jamais à me situer. Les slameurs me trouvaient trop poétique, les conteurs me trouvaient trop slameuse, et les poètes ne savaient pas où me situer. C'est la lecture du grand écrivain martiniquais Patrick Chamoiseau qui m'a permis de sortir de ce dilemme, en découvrant ce qu'il dit des « marqueurs de paroles », qui se tiennent justement à l'intersection de la tradition orale et de la tradition écrite. J'ai pris le parti, puisque personne ne voulait de moi dans sa *team*, de créer la *team* parole, d'être une « paroleuse ». Je trouvais que ça me correspondait bien, et le terme s'est transmis en Martinique, ce qui me convient tout à fait. C'est d'ailleurs plutôt un terme que j'utilise en créole, *pawolèz*, parce que le créole est important pour moi, même si je reste bien sûr très francophile. ("Explorer")

Lagrand made these observations in 2022, in the prestigious Villa Albertine program, an initiative from the French government to enrich and promote a large number of artistic creations between Francophone territories and the United States of America. In this passage, the artist explains the

6 "the Martinican way of speaking."

adequacy of using the Creole word *pawolèz* in the organizing of her lyrical world because she comes from both the Spoken Word venue, taking place in Paris in 2005, and the oral tradition rooted in her as a native Martinican or Franco-Creole-Caribbean.

Meanwhile, reading the 1992 Goncourt Prize recipient, Patrick Chamoiseau, has been an incredible match to how Lagrand perceives her own storytelling skills. Indeed, Chamoiseau's neologism "marqueur de paroles" – that could be translated as "words' scratcher" – gives form to the following paradoxical truth: writing is speaking. In his writings – in particular *Chronique des sept misères* (1986), *Solibo Magnifique* (1988), *Éloge de la créolité*[7] (1989), *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1997), and *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997) – Chamoiseau questions the real, fictional and autobiographical features that are anchored in the practice of Antillean literature. As he says, "Comment écrire alors que ton imagination s'abreuve du matin jusqu'aux rêves, à des images, des pensées, des valeurs qui ne sont pas les tiennes? Comment écrire quand ce que tu es, végète en dehors des élans qui déterminent ta vie? Comment écrire, dominé?" (17). In English, Chamoiseau asks the laborious question of how it is possible, in a dominated land, to write independently from the ethnographic words or the hybrid voices that belong to the inner self. According to Dominique Chancé, the Creole language is the *sine qua non* condition for illustrating this singular quest. As she puts it in her chapter "Écrire/traduire la parole: inventer une langue,"[8]

> en rencontrant la langue créole … le 'marqueur de paroles' pourra 'écrire la parole.' … Le 'marqueur de paroles' n'est plus ici le conteur, qui s'adresse à la communauté, c'est celui qui intégrera la langue créole au sein même de la langue écrite, le français; c'est celui qui, par un certain ton, un rythme, laissera passer un souffle dans son écriture. (107; 133)

In Guadeloupe, or in Martinique, a "marqueur" can also be a "tanbouyé," a drummer,

7 Co-written by the authors Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant.
8 "To write/To translate spoken words: to invent a language."

someone playing the cultural music called *gwoka* and *bèlè*. The collective imagination behind the "marqueur de paroles" allows the saying to transcend its invisible state in order to arise and gain a visual understanding: it is both an act and a gesture. Furthermore, in her article "Marqueur de paroles, en réalité sans profession," Anne Douaire says that,

> C'est dans la vibration qu'est non seulement la vie (image courante), mais l'identité. S'accorder à la vibration, c'est ne pas transcrire ce que l'on voit ou bâtir des réalismes, mais marquer (matjé pour les tambours qui scandent la parole des conteurs) la créature, suivre son rythme plutôt que de s'attacher à son état-civil ou à ses tropismes intimes. (91)

One could summarize her point by saying that it is through detectible vibrations that both life and identity lean on. To amplify this image, to understand the vibrations, is not about transcribing what is ostensible or building realisms but following the person's rhythm instead of focusing on its civil status or intimate tropes. From the expression "marqueur de paroles" to the Creole word *pawolèz,* Lagrand encapsulates a Franco-Creole-Caribbean incorporation of the art of poetics through orality. As a *pawolèz,* she offers unique representations of the nexus between written traditional materials and spoken sociocultural concerns. She initiated *La Pawolotèk*, a website gathering data about the Martinican way of speaking.[9] In that respect, the comparative study of *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* is inescapable because Brion's lyrical world is compatible to the continual discoveries and rediscoveries happening in the Franco-Creole-Caribbean oral literature.

In my previous examination of *I Talk Black* entitled "Du Noir au Marron: de la douleur à la couleur africaine-américaine"[10] – in comparison with Léon-Gontran Damas' "Foi de marron" in *Pigments, Névralgies* – I argue Brion mimics the act of *marronnage*. Despite the fact that a complete history of the Creole concept and philosophy of *marronnage* will not be undertaken in this article,

9 https://pawolotek.com/?trk=public_post_reshare-text.

10 "From being Black to being Maroon: from the African-American hurt to its color."

it is necessary to keep in mind that the act of *marronnage* means to take flight, escape, flee, or run away from the masters' exploitation. This was much more than an alternative in enslaved places. This was a strategic step forward to access self-determination, demonstrative freedom and compelling peace. According to Lucien Peytraud, *marronnage* is "innate." In his words, "dès qu'il y eut des esclaves dans ces îles, il y eut des marrons; et jamais on ne trouva le moyen d'empêcher ce délit; au contraire, il alla toujours en augmentant; tant est inné au cœur de l'homme l'amour de la liberté!" (343). Human beings, even in oppressive circumstances, expect to be, live, and feel freely. With linguistic resistance and systematic insistence, the act of *marronnage* integrates a specific state of mind; the people who commit *marronnage* believe that another reality is doable. Even if all the subtleties of racial narratives disseminated in oral literatures cannot be fully grasped here, the landscapes of *Nous sommes des rivières* reclaim heritages and create voyages. They mark a need for demonstrative freedom and compelling peace. If Brion says that, "This slang is semantic resistance" (*I Talk*) and Lagrand affirms that, "Il est dit que toutes les rivières descendent à la mer"[11] (*Nous sommes*) therefore, where do their narratives meet each other? What's the link between Brion's "cornbread accent" and Lagrand's "voyage vers nous-même"?[12] To what extent do the selected authors' prevailing rhetorical strategies echo one another? From their departure points to their final denouements, what do *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* contain? Why would Brion affirm that, "There is a Black anthem inside my belly" while Lagrand assumes that, "nos paraboles captent nos ascendances"?[13]

In the following cross-analysis, the interception of stylistic and intertextual messages will be the chosen terrain to make *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* unambiguous. To succeed in such an operation, this article will be organized into two parts. The first will be a blueprint to

11 "It is said that every river goes back to the sea."
12 "Journey toward ourselves."
13 "Our parables catch our bloodlines."

mobilize an aesthetic ambition or (non)fictional requirements through the concept of "interoralité," developed by Hanétha Vété-Congolo. The second will expose the complex fusion between Brion's straightforwardness and Lagrand's elusiveness.

TWO NAVIGATIONAL INCIPITS

I have been folding my tongue beneath itself,
bleaching my language,
clenching my jaw with shackled teeth, because the moment I open my mouth, uprisings spring from my saliva. (*I Talk*)

Et l'air touffu des colères ambiantes
Saturait les rivières
Elles ne retrouveraient plus la mer
À force de charrier des mémoires flottées
Et la mer, sans rivières ?
Elle irait seule et morne réclamer aux vagues le sel qui rend fou (*Nous sommes*)[14]

I Talk Black's opening, on the left, is in many ways corporeal while that of *Nous sommes des rivières*'s is environmental. Starting with past aspects, the two artists or narrators drive the listeners into two navigational incipits. I think of the term "navigational" as a combination of practical moves and theoretical performances, the result of articulated actions or lived experiences, whether individual or collective. In the case of *I Talk Black*, a navigation is reflected through physical measures and sensitive maneuvers as Brion's lyrical position seems to be manifested through tangible elements. The verbs "to fold," "to bleach," or "to clench" conjugated with the continuous form contextualize the impact of the artist's intention: to start a poem that materializes personal thoughts on being black or talking black. By saying "I," Brion speaks of her name while at the same time representing the African-American community she belongs to, or a generation of young artists or citizens that manifest their identity or humanity. The words "shackled teeth" make me think about the image found in another poem's incipit, entitled *BLACK ART*, written by the African-American poet LeRoi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka: "Poems are bullshit unless they are/ teeth or trees or lemons piled/ on a step…."

14 The translation of this passage is proposed in the following pages.

(Baraka 302). What is it about the lexical field of organic matter that advocates a sense of linguistic resistance and systematic insistence? The image of Brion's "shackled teeth" associated with her words and sounds, "because the moment I open my mouth, uprisings spring from my saliva," mirrors a challenging quest, meaning a confrontational adventure. Interestingly, Brion's body language, so to speak, emphasized by the fact that she says five times "my" followed by her anatomical resources: "tongue," "language," "jaw," "mouth," and "saliva," could potentially be an ongoing movement linking corporeal status to environmental states. The word "saliva" and its fluid strengthens the point about navigation. In other terms, Brion's *I Talk Black*'s navigational incipit reconfigures, unconsciously, the gap between her body and Lagrand's voice. This point is about to become clearer within the following paragraphs as we detail the two poems step by step.

In contrast, the navigation unveiled by *Nous sommes des rivières*'s incipit moves from a toxic atmosphere to an insular madness while carrying solitary, mournful, and unsecured memories. When Lagrand decides to start her sung poem with the coordinating conjunction "and," seemingly having a storytelling function, she offers the listeners the opportunity to connect *Nous sommes des rivières* to a previous poem or another kind of cultural production or to imagine a new one. What could be behind these first lines, "And the ambient wrath's bushy air/ have been saturating the rivers"? Perhaps they are also a punchline referring to the noxious pesticide called chlordecone that still affects the health of locals decades after it was banned in 1993, in regions such as the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe. Perhaps Lagrand's first line refers to everything political, geopolitical, societal, or cultural that enrages or has enraged the population of Martinique, the Caribbean, Europe, the Americas, or anywhere else. Perhaps the harmful sargasso seaweed, global warming, suffocations, high cost of living, social injustices, marginalizations, unemployment, criminality, or any harsh realities and apocalyptic nightmares coincide with "the ambient wrath's bushy air/ [that] ha[s] been

saturat[ing] the rivers." There could be another way, however, of expressing the diverse violations or contradictions that happen in the present or in the past.

The transitive verb *saturer*, which means "to saturate" in English, embraces, with amplitude, the number of degradations one body can bear or the amount of deteriorations Mother Nature can hold:

> They [the rivers] would not find the sea anymore
> Away because they have carried floating memories
> And the sea, without rivers?
> She [the sea] would go alone and mournful to claim from the waves the salt that enrages.

This attempt to translate Lagrand's scenario gives access to her navigational incipit's core, which is the transition – by analogy – from an existing nature to transcendental horizons. On one hand, the repetition of the sound "rivers" associated with the repetition of the word "sea" is the salt and glue that binds human beings to nautical experiences here. To go from "floating wood" to "floating memories," or to tap into natural resources to create lyrical properties, is a way of stimulating the listener's imagination. On the other hand, Lagrand's aesthetic ambition can be connected to elements that are described in Vété-Congolo's *L'Interoralité caribéenne: le mot conté de l'identité, Vers un traité d'esthétique caribéenne*, where the Caribbean historical and cultural modes of expression are explained by what became a major concern for Africans: words (79). As she states,

> Le mot et la parole de l'Africain contestent, spécifient, rectifient, répondent et disent la pensée du contre, les particularités de l'esprit et le désir d'une subjectivité auto-choisie et exposée. Ensuite, ce même mot et cette même parole, avec le même caractère, sont prolongés à l'époque moderne puisque, c'est par l'intellection et la production d'idées philosophiques que les Caribéens issus de la majorité asservie se sont défendus contre la domination et l'absolutisme coloniaux et racistes. … Pour ce qui est de l'art, de sa production et de la pensée qui y gouverne,

> il fera que, à tout jamais, le sens véhiculé caractérise intrinsèquement une beauté. … Au regard des circonstances, cet accompli se rapproche du miraculeux. (79-80)

The African's words aim, among other things, to contest, rectify, and respond. Subjectively, these words blossom through a modern continuum where philosophical or intelligible notions such as "Caribbean," "sense," "beauty," and "miracle" signal successful introductions in the artistic spheres. In fact, Lagrand's aesthetic ambition seems to be the growing conviction that words need to be pursued relentlessly to be perceived critically. Vété-Congolo's "interoralité" is a conceptual key to the understanding of where the intersection between anagogical inspirations and subjective interpretations can be found. In search of ways of talking about problematic situations, Lagrand's navigational incipit converts ambient tensions into public poems that resonate with the course of Brion's navigational incipit. To that extent, the intertextuality located in Brion's passage is manifested by – but not limited to –Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," first published in 1978. In an interview held with the artist, I asked her why she titled her collection *With My Head Unbowed* and who the targeted audience was. She answered:

> It is paying homage to Maya Angelou, there is a line or stanza in "Phenomenal Woman" that says, "And now you know just why my head's not bowed I don't have to shout or jump about or have to speak real loud" so it is just paying homage to her in reference to that line and I think it also encapsulates just what the book is about, what the collection of poems is about, which is this unapologetic black woman's truth. … I think that my audience is first myself, and then I think that I write for black women, black girls, but I also think that there is some universality in the critiques that my poems bring up that can be useful for people across, you know, nationality, religious affiliation, etc., and so I don't know that I limit who my poetry is for necessarily because for some people it's a mirror, and for other people it's a window, and to someone else it's reality. (2017-2018)

If putting truthful elements in the art of poetics isn't a new deal, it is important to recognize that today's generation – of spokesmen and spokeswomen – creates the restorative language that will enrich the onset of collective awareness. The triple possibilities of Brion's words being a mirror, a window, or a reality can be visualized as a lesson, a form of entertainment, or a type of shared understanding.

Although the context in which Angelou felt the need to write "Phenomenal Woman" is different from Brion's, there is a possible bridge between the two. They both navigate distinctive readings of female narratives. Angelou was a remarkable Civil Rights activist – organizing meetings with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., comparing notes with James Baldwin, earning a Pulitzer Price nomination for her "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," and so on (Nicholls) – Brion has trodden a similar path. The former has been fighting the right fight, while the latter carries the torch by being simultaneously an active force and a profound voice in the Black Art District in the historical and cultural Pennsylvania Avenue and North Avenue in Baltimore.[15]

The gap between African-American oral practices and Franco-Creole-Caribbean oral practices is not too wide. The proximity between *I Talk Black*'s navigational incipit and *Nous sommes des rivières*' navigational incipit involves the words' aptitudes and multitudes. As Vété-Congolo clarifies, "Par sa force, le mot permet d'imposer au dehors, les profondeurs de l'en dedans. Ainsi, Aimé Césaire dira que: '… le mot est une sorte de noria qui permet de racler les profondeurs et de les faire remonter au jour'"[16] (80). This approach crystallizes a sense of creative requirements in the art of poetics through orality in the Americas after the frontier between real enunciations and symbolic stories has collapsed. Another intricate link between Brion's and Lagrand's lyrical orchestrations appears in what Monchoachi expresses in the chapter, "La Règle. '*L'harmonie invisible est supérieure*

15 More information about this district can be found at: https://www.blackartsdistrict.org/about-us.

16 "By their strength, words impose on the outside the profoundness of the inside. Thus, Aimé Césaire will say that: '... the word is a sort of noria which allows one to scrape the profoundnesses and enlighten them."

à une harmonie visible"[17] found in *Partition noire et bleue (Lémistè 2)*: "L'arbre est le premier monde. … Dans l'écorce,/ salive et souffle du dieu"[18] (73). Far beyond mere frightening causes, Monchoachi's words function as the quintessential formula that reshuffles what Brion's and Lagrand's navigational incipits display. The coordination between corporeal, environmental, and spiritual motifs permits a greater knowledge of words' potential in the Americas. The most striking point in this triangle is that the uprisings that spring from Brion's saliva could be Lagrand's climatic point, as personified in Monchoachi's representation of the tree as God's saliva and air. The connection between Lagrand's and Monchoachi's works is also perceptible in *Lakouzémi, Retour à la Parole Sauvage*. Symbolically, alongside the scientific facts that saliva, rivers or air are truly made of water, it is now clear that Brion's navigational incipit reconfigures, instinctively, the gap between her body and Lagrand's voice.

ONE METAPHORICAL DESIGN

My dialogue is sullied,
trampled with the muddy boots of trade and migration.
Battling nations in my diaphragm
so the rhythm in my diction sounds like a war cry
and despite – the white – stuffed down my windpipe.
I talk Black with nappy language –
syllables that kink and twist,
knotty expression that beads on my palate,
Soul Glo in this spit shine flow,
Jheri Curl jargon,
bongo drums in my diction. (*I Talk*)

Nous sommes des rivières
Ruisseaux infimes
Nourris par le temps qui passe
Magique contemplation
Avancer, garder trace
Nous sommes des rivières
Body tripant dans un voyage vers nous-même
Charroyant nos rives nomades de legs en dilemmes. (*Nous sommes*)

The juxtaposition of Brion's dialogue affected by the causal impacts of "trade and migration"

17 "The Rule 'The invisible harmony is superior to a visible harmony.'"
18 "The tree is the first world. … Inside the bark,/ God's saliva and breath."

and Lagrand's fluidity of being, with one more person or several anonymous inner selves, rivers or streams "nourris par le temps qui passe"[19] lead to a groundbreaking exercise. Brion's rhythmic diction, nappy language, or braided syllables are illustrative rather than exhaustive; analogical rather than paradoxical. The chronological movements initiated by the way she expresses what is inside herself can be understood as the flowing landmarks established by Lagrand's active desire to "Avancer, garder trace."[20] While Brion verbalizes collective struggles with the words "battling nations" or "war cry," Lagrand seems to keep in mind that it is mandatory to make progress on a large scale, either as an individual or as a group. According to Édouard Glissant, in his *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, to think about the "trace" – which is connected to his definition of "creolization" – starts with recognizing that,

> le peuplement par la traite africaine est celui qui a déterminé le plus de souffrance et de malheur dans les Amériques. ... Si ce Néo-Américian ne chante pas des chansons africaines d'il y a deux ou trois siècles, il ré-instaure dans la Caraïbe, au Brésil et en Amérique du Nord, par pensée de la trace, des formes d'art qu'il propose comme valables pour tous.[21] (16)

From there, historically, the African arrived in the Americas with nothing but traces based on the power of memorizations. This is the reason why this "migrant" has been able to create unpredictable things and to develop Creole languages, for instance, or other artistic forms such as jazz music (Glissant 16-17).

This historical way of perceiving the term "trace" can also be related to the psychological meaning of the same word defined by Aubeline Vinay in her "Introduction. La trace dans l'évolution de l'homme:"[22]

La trace constitue le seul message d'espoir d'un passage, d'une existence de soi dans le monde et

19 "Nourished by time passing."
20 "Move on, keep track."
21 "The colonization generated by the African slave trade is the one that have caused the biggest amount of suffering and misfortune in the Americas."
22 "Introduction. The trace in the mankind's evolution."

> son histoire. Les traces sont multiples, de l'empreinte sur le sol aux traits laissés par la peinture ou l'écriture, elles témoignent toujours d'une vie active et/ou d'un effort réflexif. Chaque trace laissée par l'être humain est engageante en ce sens qu'elle démontre la capacité de mise en mouvement, les possibilités gestuelles et d'élaboration de la part de son auteur. À travers ses traces, l'être humain fournit au regard d'autrui une part de son identité personnelle, une part de qui il est et de ce qu'il peut donner à voir. Autrement dit, la trace participe à la mise en contact avec l'autre, son regard, et donc à la relation et à la communication. Laisser une trace de soi, c'est être en mesure d'entrer dans une logique langagière. La trace prend sens au fur et à mesure que le sujet se développe, elle prend sens en raison non seulement de son caractère durable, voire permanent, mais aussi par le retour qui en est fait lorsqu'elle est repérée par autrui. (2)

In essence, she associates the word "trace" with someone's right to exist and share a hopeful message or a personal story with the world. Traces can thus take multiple forms; whether they are identity-related, physical, visible, or verbal, they always coincide with an engaging testimony where the person moves on and keeps in touch with the other. Simultaneously, to leave a personal trace is to enter a logical language, a communicational development, or a permanent relationship with either someone else or a group of people. The groundbreaking exercise characterized by Brion's and Lagrand's traces looks like a journey of recovery through the matrix of Black history. Brion's specific jargon, or "knotty expression," is the avatar of Lagrand's introspective or retrospective voyage. The *pawolèz*'s magical contemplation, potentially pictured by the endless resources located in Martinique, such as the vegetation, the waterfalls, the volcano, the hills, the beaches, the vegetables, the fruits, the Creole pharmacopeia, combined with the conclusive announcement that "we are rivers," gives the

listeners food for thought. Does Lagrand's "Nous"[23] represent women, Black women, Franco-Creole-Caribbean women, Martinican people, Francophone people, or even humankind as a whole? As complex vehicles, Brion's and Lagrand's respective uses of English and French/Martinican stylistics play the role of an informational tool aiming to recover from historical facts or traumatic sensations.

Moreover, the act of using particular words and sounds for therapeutic or cathartic ends is frequent among other similar lyrical works. For instance, Guadeloupean novelist Daniel Maximin, writes in *L'Île et une nuit* that, "j'appellerai tous les maux par leur son"[24] (97); African-American author Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie, in her "Global Warming Blues," writes that, "There's no talking to the water/… now my town is just a river/ bodies floatin, water's high" (104); Jamaican dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, in *Tings an Times*, states, "Chanting freedom! Chanting justice! Chanting blood and fire! … Taking the struggle to a higher stage" (Penguin Books); Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, said, "Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont point de bouche"[25] (22); and African-American lyricist Aja Monet, says in "The Devil You Know" that "The devil you know taxes the air we breathe, privatizes the water" (NPR Music). These excerpts serve the comparative study of Brion's *I Talk Black* and Lagrand's *Nous sommes des rivières* since, once again, the authors address a need to contest, rectify, respond, or trace. In the form of lyrical enlightenments, particular words and sounds like ocean, river, salt, freedom, justice, air or water are rooted in a spatio-temporal contextualization. In other words, the musicality and orality of these excerpts resonate with Brion's and Lagrand's historical and intersubjective reflections on palpable watersheds in the Americas. Vété-Congolo underlines this as well:

> La réflexion sur la valeur symbolique, philosophique et ontologique de l'interoralité caribéenne rend nécessaire l'identification et l'examen de la situation lui ayant donné

23 "We."
24 "I will call all my hurts by its sound."
25 "My mouth will be the mouth of misfortunes which have no mouth."

> naissance, ainsi qu'à son contenu et à ses particularismes. Il faut bien savoir, mais surtout bien comprendre le contexte ayant mené à la contre-action de l'esclavagé. Ce sont les faits historiques particulièrement lourds d'inhumanité, mais par-dessus tout, leur indicible ampleur et durée, dépassant presque l'entendement humain, qui donnent tout son sens, tout son poids à l'accomplissement de l'esclavagé, à sa réponse par le Beau, l'esthétique et l'humanisme. La parole ne prend sens qu'à la situation en raison et au sein de laquelle elle est émise. Pour l'interoralité, le contexte exclusif est celui selon lequel son créateur n'a ni le droit à la parole ni le droit de se défendre. (129)

A convenient way to explain this quotation is to say that, to think about Caribbean "interoralities" under symbolic, philosophical, and ontological conditions, depends on the detailed identification and examination of the historical situation that gave them birth. It is of interest to link the aftermath – of the 1848 abolition of slavery, the 1946 departmentalization law, the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment, the 1950s and 60s Civil Rights Movements, or the 2013 Black Lives Matter movements – with the aesthetic creations taking place in the Americas. As an example, to better understand why Brion's and Lagrand's straightforward and elusive words resonate with such heaviness, it is imperative to read the irreducible and multilayered circumstances from which they derive. This is the reason why there is a gradually increasing intensity in Brion's voice. From the traces in her dialogue to the tuneful "bongo drums" in her diction, there are decades, even centuries, of blackness that rise to the surface. Similarly, Lagrand's ideological lines about a "voyage vers nous-même"[26] involve a quest where the destination is "our inner selves." In the Creole language, the verb "charroyant," meaning transporting fiercely, associated with "nos rives nomades de legs en dilemmes,"[27] brings a furtive trajectory to Lagrand's voice. The itinerant dimension of her internal voyage makes her

26 "journey inside ourselves."
27 "our nomadic banks from legacies to dilemmas."

multifaceted truth noticeable. Taken together, Brion and Lagrand have one metaphorical design: to answer the question, who am I? This design to define themselves is infused with linguistic resistance and systematic insistence.

The route to the artists' inner selves is being articulated by the concern for unapologetic terms and pluralistic sources. Metaphorically, every single line goes down to social patterns in the Americas:

This slang is semantic resistance.
Off with the head of the king's English.
Can't you smell the riot on my breath?
Char in my esophagus?
My laugh is arsenic.
And ain't enough opiates in this elementary education
to hook me on phonics
or gentrify the djembe out of my pronunciation.
Love the taste of this cornbread accent,
Sugar cane slang. My tongue is: Motherland-mama of civilization-birth of every
nation-scat-boom-bat-high hat-jazz-sax.
There is music in my melanin and I be talkin' hella Black. (*I Talk*)

Il est dit que toutes les rivières descendent à la mer
Mais parfois, aux confluents de nos tribulations
Nous remontons vers l'amont
Lui demander son aval pour suivre nos chemins
Nous sommes des rivières
Parfois, nous émergeons en crues
Dévastations des alentours. (*Nous sommes*)

If Brion's *I Talk Black* could be interpreted as "I am the way I speak," or "I am the discursive points I make," or "I am what I signify," or "I am the figurative and allegorical efforts I put into my writing or musicality," or "I am the stories of my skin," Lagrand's *Nous sommes des rivières* could mean "I am very plural and deeply fluvial," or "I am the intersection between wide diversity and abundant confluence." However, what if Brion's and Lagrand's lyrical voices were interdependent?

All the aforementioned extracts of *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* suggest the depiction of Black appropriations, memorizations, and innovations. Brion's corporeal words associated with

Lagrand's investigative peregrinations confront the tension between a drastic language and a back-and-forth motion. Brion's special assertiveness is manifested in her questions, while Lagrand's hypothetical posture seems to be based on her "Il est dit que," "mais, parfois," and "parfois."[28] Lagrand's line "Il est dit que toutes les rivières descendent à la mer" can refer to both the Creole proverb made up after the Bible: "All rivers go down to the sea" and Kassav's lyrics "Tout larivyè ka désann an lanmè."[29] Line after line, Brion's serious semiology – on slang, phonics, pronunciation, accent or tongue – can be interpreted as a relative warning to identify previous realities in the Americas. Indeed, Brion's reversible English provides critical legacies when Lagrand's ups and downs – illustrated with the chosen verbs "descendrent," "remontons," "demander," "suivre," "émerger," and "sommes"[30] – find their way into a substantial disruption empowered by this personification, reification, or maxim: "we are rivers."

Taken together, the similes in the poems are suggestive instruments – of power, education, and culture – filled with nurtured harmonization. The purpose of expressing *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* is to develop a vivid sense of community:

28 "It is said that;" "but, sometimes;" "sometimes."
29 "Every river goes down to the sea."
30 "to go down;" "to go up;" "to ask;" "to follow;" "to emerge;" "to be."

With a neck roll to articulate my tone.
Conversations get you high as my cheekbones.
Lingo 'bout lush as these hips done grown.
Thick thighs and deep-fried vernacular.
Hand motions and sound effects.

Hieroglyphics hidden in my messages.
My breath is the building of the pyramids on repeat.
I'm like a Negro Spiritual sampled over a Trap beat.
There is a Black anthem inside my belly
so I will lift every voice and speak. (*I Talk*)

Nous sommes des rivières
Ouvrez barrières
Pour laisser passer nos prières
Lavandières de poussières
Incantations de poudrières
Gênées par les décantations généalogiques
Nous sommes des rivières aux histoires fleuves et dramatiques
Nos paraboles captent nos ascendances
Et les étreignent pour les éteindre
Mais de nos cendres nous saurons faire un lit
pour que la paix devienne. (*Nous sommes*)

Metaphorically, there is a fantastical verisimilitude between Brion's "deep-fried vernacular" and Lagrand's "prières"[31] that is mapped out by the time-space they both create with the images of "hand motions and sound effects," "hieroglyphics" or "lavandières,"[32] "incantations," "décantations généalogiques," and "histoires fleuves et dramatiques."[33] This fantastical verisimilitude is the appropriating emphasis that helps the listeners combine Brion's black music with Lagrand's "paraboles."[34] The metalepsis and intertextual messages that the artists suggest vindicate this one metaphorical design they both have. Lagrand's "Ouvrez barrières" also refer to the Legba's anthem in Haitian Creole, "Ouvri barriè," which means in English "open the barriers." The striking point of their exclamatory statements is the eulogy for interpersonal words and intercultural sounds in the measure that, as Black women in the Americas, they both speak to enlarge a strong lyrical foundation for current and future generations. Although *I Talk Black*'s and *Nous sommes des rivières*'

31 "prayers."
32 "washerwomen."
33 "decanting genealogies;" "fluvial and tragic stories."
34 "parables."

metrical structures differ, Brion's and Lagrand's verbal dynamics both decode ancestral chapters and regenerate calls. As an example, by saying "There is a Black anthem inside my belly," Brion alludes to the memorable anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing," written by the Civil Rights poet James Weldon Johnson in 1900.

The question of "who I am" is always on the move, never static or monotonous. To illustrate this last point, it is essential to highlight that the attempt to answer this zigzagging question goes beyond *I Talk Black*'s musicality or *Nous sommes des rivières*' orality. The provisional answers are to be found, not only inside the authors' dialectical features, but also outside of their many lyrical productions. In her poetry collection, *Trois temps, kat pawòl*, Lagrand expresses, again, a concern related to natural elements and historical traces:

Par la vague[35]

Par le vent

Par l'atoumo en toute chose

Par le chant du kòd yanm

Par la corde de la liane

Wabab

J'en appelle au zayann

J'en appelle aux ravines

J'en appelle aux mornes

Venez

Naissez

Dansez. (57)

35 By the wave/ by the wind/ by the *atoumo* in all things/ by the *kòd yanm*'s song/ by the vine's rope/ *Wabap*/ I call upon *zayann*/ I call upon the gullies/ I call upon the hills/ Come/ Live/ Dance

Another singular instance of Lagrand's national quest is equally reflected in her poem *Kòd*,[36] where she affirms that, "nous sommes pris dans des codes, trop de codes, nous sommes pris dans des cordes, trop de cordes … le poids de la déveine héréditaire est déjà assez lourd."[37] Furthermore, Brion's attention – to the sacred hieroglyphics, pyramids or signs enthroned in her messages or breath – advocates other symbolic voices or literary themes to figure out or to trace her extensive identity. Taken together, these Black women's pieces of work call for demonstrative freedom and compelling peace.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I have argued that Brion's and Lagrand's words and sounds are parts of who they are as sensorial persons and thoughtful artists. There are correlations between their native languages and their metaphorical inventiveness. The first half of the analysis sowed the seeds of preliminary cornerstones in the picturing of *I Talk Black* compared with *Nous sommes des rivières*. Their two navigational incipits have been the lyrical forecast for a more intelligible investigation inside the French, Creole, and English languages. The second one plunges us into the narrators' sense of both circulatory and furtive flow. To place *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* in the spotlight has been an opportunity for me to show authentic aspects of the lyrical situation in the Americas. Brion's and Lagrand's love for the art of poetics through orality is greater than their geographical paths or rhetorical articulations. As Lagrand puts it in our 2018 interview: "la parole, c'est le centre."[38] She does not distinguish Spoken Word from poetry or rap music. She highlights the example of the 1990s Martinique rap group *Nèg ki pa ka fè lafèt* by calling them poets. Additionally, she refers to the artist Christophe Rangoly, known as Papa Slam, and says "il est à la croisée de tout ça … le flow est tellement

36 In Creole the word *kòd* could mean both code and rope.
37 "we are caught in codes, too many codes, we are caught in ropes, too many ropes... the weight of hereditary misfortune is already heavy enough."
38 "Words are in the middle."

ancré"[39] (2018). To insist on this idea of movable frontiers between different lyrical genres, she adds:

> Je dirais pour simplifier les choses, c'est de la parole. C'est pour ça que je me définis comme étant paroleuse, parce qu'aujourd'hui je dis des textes sans musique, mais je peux en dire avec de la musique, je peux en dire sur un beat qui a été prévu pour un rappeur, je peux me retrouver dans un tournoi à faire quelque chose de très trois minutes, je peux dire de la poésie avec un danseur, je peux donner ma parole avec un peintre qui dessine derrière. Si on devait vraiment là aujourd'hui reprendre les choses à zéro, je dirais: performance oratoire. (2018)

To define the *pawolèz* is to define what she does or to explain the social impact that her words have at a particular moment. Likewise, Brion described her relationship with music in our 2017 interview, referring to the strong influence of Hip-Hop, Soul, R&B, and jazz have in her life and poetry's flow or cadence: "When I think about the way in which I write, there is a certain sort of musicality to it, a certain rhythm, a certain feel that I think is accounted to jazz music in the way that it makes you feel, the instrumentation of it." Her melodious writing is therefore not only the result of early musical or oral literature but a resounding creation.

The complex fusion of *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* also reveals the indispensable use of rhythm and flow in the resistive discourses proposed by the artists, whether in poetical or prosodic forms. When Lagrand uses the expression "performance oratoire" to describe her lyrical flexibility, Colette Maximin argues in her *L'oralité comme matrice*:

> Hormis l'exemple unique des Saintes Écritures, le texte, très longtemps chez les Caribéens, l'a cédé en importance à l'oralité. Peuples mélomanes et amateurs de fêtes, les insulaires disposent de divers paradigmes: cérémonies dansées, réjouissances carnavalesques, ou veillées mortuaires. Il convient d'en rappeler les caractères fondamentaux: interaction très dynamique de l'auditoire et du conteur, production en alternance de l'appel et du répons, penchant très

39 "He is at the crossroads of all that ... the flow is so anchored."

> prononcé pour l'improvisation. D'où une esthétique qui fait la part belle à la polyrythmie, à la participation et à la plurivocalité. Oratoire ou musicale, la performance triomphe. (353-401)

According to Maximin, people with Franco-Creole-Caribbean backgrounds have a natural taste for music, festivities, celebrations, and ceremonies because dynamic interactions and improvisations are parts of their identities. Almost instinctively, they navigate inside call-and-response vocals. This is why their aesthetic performances comprehend exponential polyrhythmic and participation. To go further into this comparative study between *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* – incorporating words, sounds, musicality, orality and lyrical performances – the concept of "transdiction" developed by musicologist Nicolas Darbon synthesizes the ideas of physical practices, memorial resonances, and musical texts. According to Darbon, the "transdiction" – which comes from "trans," beyond, and "dictio," to express – is a neologism and a tool to approach the intertexts beyond words, sounds, gestures, polyrhythmic expressions, etc. As a tone theory, it is interesting to link what *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* contain with this musical-literary method. From what happens inside to what occurs on the outside of Brion's and Lagrand's lyrical productions, the "transdiction" viewpoint instills in their creative realities a common story: one will be describing her corporeal language and heritage to talk about her blackness, meaning her African-American identity, while the other depicts the fluid element of rivers in order to express her Martinican or Franco-Creole-Caribbean origins. Although both artists use different words and sounds, they nonetheless talk about the same subject: their inner selves. One of the clearest examples of this configuration appears when Darbon argues "transdiction" is somewhere "dans le polyart et l'intermodalité, elle compare les cultures et tient compte du temps"[40] (1). Full of life, full of hope, *I Talk Black* and *Nous sommes des rivières* range from immeasurable musicality to hyperbolic orality, the lyrical leitmotif of Brion's and Lagrand's inner selves.

40 "In the polyart and intermodality, it compares cultures and takes time into account."

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