HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, *PhD*

WEST INDIES: The Fugitive Slaves / Les nègres marrons de la liberté (1979)
Med Hondo (1936-2019)

OVERVIEW

Auteur: Med Hondo, whose real name was Mohamed Abid, was born on May 4, 1935, in Ain Beni Mathar (Morocco). Hondo was born of Mauritanian and Senegalese parents. His father was from the Mauritanian slave caste (the Haratin ethnic group). After some culinary studies in Morocco, Med Hondo went to France in 1956, where he did several jobs, as a cook, a dockworker, and a farmhand. Hondo studied theater in Marseilles and later went to Paris, where he appeared in several classic plays by Molière, Racine and Shakespeare. In 1966, with a few friends from Africa and the West Indies, Hondo founded the Griot-Shango theatrical group to feature works by African and Caribbean playwrights. Hondo has produced several documentaries and five features, including *Oh, Sun* (1969), *West Indies* (1979), *Sarraounia* (1986), *Black Light* (1994), and *Fatima, the Algerian Woman of Dakar* (2004). Hondo did the French voice on screen of actors like Sidney Poitier, Eddy Murphy, Danny Glover, Muhammad Ali and Morgan Freeman. Med Hondo died in Paris on March 2, 2019.

Film: West Indies is a 116-minute musical drama. The film is an adaptation of *Les Négriers* (1971), a play by Martinican playwright Daniel Boukman that depicts the emigration of West Indians to France as a second form of slavery. *West Indies* tackles themes of colonization, resistance, orality, assimilation, zoomorphism and objectification.

Background: For the realization of *West Indies,* Boukman collaborated with Med Hondo. The set of is a huge slave ship built in an abandoned Citroën factory in Paris by renowned French set designer Jacques Saulnier. The film was shot on a budget of 1.35 million dollars, a phenomenal budget at the time for a film by an African filmmaker. Hondo made *West Indies* with a grant from France and commercial investments from Algerian television and Mauritanian and Senegalese companies. The languages spoken in the film are Creole, French, and English.

CHARACTERS

Death (Roland Bertin): A French stateman, whose plan is to wipe the French West Indian cultures off the map of the earth and force the people to emigrate to France as a cheap labor force.

Mr. Justin **-** the parliamentarian (Robert Liensol): A West Indian parliamentarian who works at implementing Death's plan.

The priest (Philippe Clévenot): A priest who collaborates with Death to implement his plan by brainwashing West Indian children.

Mr. De la Pierre (Gérald Bloncourt): A resistant fighter, who believes in self-determination for West Indian people and dies fighting for it.

SYNOPSIS

West Indies is not a film with a linear plot. The movement is like that of a pendulum, swinging back and forth through the various moments of French imperialism, from the 16th century to the early days of the 20th century. In a musical of dance and song, ordinary or historical characters take turns telling the story of the first contacts between Africa and Europe, the establishment of the first sugarcane plantations in the West Indies, the extermination of the Arawak Indians of the Caribbean, the slave trade and the importation of black slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, the various revolts of the West Indian peoples, and the transformation of the West Indies into French departments and the emigration of West Indians to France

for another form of slavery. The film begins with a meeting between a French statesman named Death and his collaborators on how to empty the French West Indies of their population and turn them into migrant workers for France. From there, a whole strategy of rigged elections, enticements, threats, rebellions and betrayals unfolds. Each time, the filmmaker takes viewers back in time to show that, between France and the West Indies, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

SCENES

Death and his collaborators A royal chair with the French coat of arms is placed on a platform. In the backdrop, a map of the French colonial empire. A French statesman named Death arrives and takes a seat on the chair. His collaborators include a white priest, a white hotel manager, a white female social worker, and a native West Indian politician named Mr. Justin. They sit on either side of Death, in front of a table filled with tropical fruits. They eat and drink in the dark while watching a documentary about the agricultural industry in the West Indies.

An agricultural colony The documentary offers a bird's eye view of the farm workers' neighborhood on a Caribbean island. It is an agglomeration of wooden huts covered with tin roofs, huddled together in a valley. The camera pans to sugar cane cutters at work in the smoky cane fields and a long convoy of trucks loaded with cane being transported to the processing plants. The camera rests on a mixed-race farmer with a broad smile, sitting under the shed of his banana plantation, explaining farming methods.

Wipe them off the map The film ends. The lights come back on. Death in the royal chair reminds his guests of what he calls “the program” or “the plan” to be carried out: to wipe “those tiny little peoples of those microscopic, little islands” of the Caribbean off the world map as peoples. Death tells his collaborators that this is their mission.

A reluctant handshake Death rises and heads for the map of the French colonial empire on the wall. His guests meet him there. Death raves about the jewel that the West Indies represent for France. He bids his guests farewell with a handshake. When it comes to shaking Mr. Justin’s hand, Death clasps his hands behind his back. Monsieur Justin insists on shaking his hand. Death holds out his hand in annoyance.

Mr. Justin is a candidate A wide angle shot from the camera reveals a slave ship bearing the sign “Liberté, égalité, Fraternité”, built in a dilapidated warehouse. On the deck of the ship, a ballot is held to elect the parliamentarian who will represent the interests of the West Indies in France. Large banners carried by voters call for independence. Other banners urge the island to remain under French rule. Mr. Justin is running for election.

This vote will change nothing In the ship's hold, some Antilleans are enthusiastic. With their voting cards in hand, they want to go up on deck to vote. Mr. De la Pierre, a pro-independence nationalist, and his many followers light a candle to their animist gods. They urge their compatriots not to bother voting in an election that will change nothing. Their appeals are dismissed. Many West Indians vote.

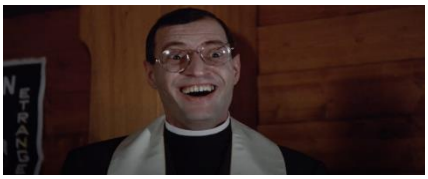
Rigged elections The first to be admitted to the polls are members of the West Indies' wealthy class: rich planters and exporters, schoolteachers, pharmacists, and members of the clergy. As they cast their votes, a man in a white suit and hat, wearing dark glasses, stands behind the ballot boxes and doubles their votes by staffing the ballot boxes with illegal ballots through a hidden slot, under the apparently satisfied gaze of Death's collaborators.

Mr. Justin stops the vote Next come the little people of the lower deck, who are allowed to cast their vote. The man in the white suit continues his maneuver. The flow of voters from the lower deck continues unabated. Mr. Justin, one of the candidates, decides to stop the little people from voting. Placing his hand on the ballot box, he announces that the sun has already set, and that it is too late to vote.

Mr. Justin is elected The contents of the ballot box are tipped onto the table to count the votes. As if by magic, only one vote emerges from the ballot box. The vote is revealed: Mr. Justin is declared the winner. The crowd erupts in applause.

We fooled them The voters upstairs on the deck are celebrating Mr. Justin's victory with waltzes and champagne libations. The people below, who were unable to vote, are visibly disappointed. A voiceover reveals what the people upstairs think of the people downstairs: "Poor rats! We fooled them again."

“He is born, the divine child” At the end of the election celebrations, the priest and a black nun get some West Indian children to sing the hymn of the birth of Jesus. The priest is overcome with joy and starts dancing to the hymn as the children look on in astonishment and scurry away.



Overwhelmed by the misery of the islands The French Overseas Territories social worker receives the grievances of the women of the West Indies. They tell her about the high cost of education and their inability to send their children to school. The social worker promises that the French government will see to it that these problems are addressed. The social worker confides in the priest that she is overwhelmed by the misery of the islands.

They multiply like mice A voiceover reveals the priest's thoughts. He thinks that there are too many inhabitants on the islands. He thinks that they multiply like mice or flies. The priest asks the social worker if she knows the history of the islands. She opens her binder and starts telling him about it from 1640, when a French man by the name of Jean Robert introduced sugar cane to the Caribbean islands.

The beautiful gift to France The camera pans over a choreographed ballet: Black dancers imitate the sugar cane harvest. The King of France appears smiling on a balcony behind a sign that reads, “God and the King protect the Kingdom.” He marvels at the “beautiful gift” carried in a basket from the lower deck by a black man.

A black child for the King of France The gift to the King is a young black child, revealed by removing the linen that covered the basket. The child climbs out of the basket, seemingly astonished to find himself in the midst of such a cheering crowd. He looks around, disoriented. He looks up at the king on deck. The boy is taken away and returns dressed as a page, with tears in his eyes.

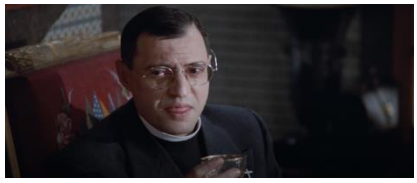
Cane in the West Indies Several narrators, dressed in 17th-century costumes, including a planter, a courtesan and a priest, take turns narrating the introduction of cane cultivation in the French Caribbean, the advent of France as a sugar-exporting country, the demand for abundant labor, the failure of European labor, the non-existence of native American populations (all exterminated) and therefore the need to copy what the Spanish had been doing since the 1500s, the slave trade, importing 2,000 slave workers a year from the African coast.

Export and birth control In a slip of the tongue, the social worker suggests that the solution to the islands' problems is “export”. She corrects herself and says “immigration”. Death also suggests that the growing number of islanders should be reduced by “turning off the fertilization tap,” that is, by birth control measures to suppress male fertility.

The priest protests The priest retorts that, according to the Pope, only God is the qualified “plumber” in this matter. Death replies that political imperatives take precedence over the Pope's beliefs. He therefore proposes controlled immigration, which can be slowed down or accelerated according to the requirements of the “plan”.

The invention of the white dream Death and his collaborators devise how to attract black labor to France like flies: one suggests covering villages, plains, savannahs, tree branches and church tops with loudspeakers urging blacks to go to Paris. Another suggests covering rivers, blue skies and the tropical sun with redheaded white dancers in rolled-up skirts from the *Folies Bergères.*

Give them some snow The priest insists that snow is a notion that blacks carry embedded in their memories from the benches of school and catechism. It is a notion they all dream about. So, the priest proposes that the naïve, galloping and infantile imagination of the blacks be promised not just imagined snow, but actual snow to be discovered in Paris.



We are so beautiful! On the deck, a group of mixed-race and white dancers dressed in white suits and hats and rolled-up red skirts, boast about how lucky they are to be so beautiful and elegant. And they taunt and scorn Mr. De la Pierre and the people below, who refuse to go to Paris.

Generous France will breastfeed you all Down in the hold, a policeman warns the people that, given the rate of reproduction and the uncontrollable growth of mouths to feed, the island will soon be too small and the motherland too dry to feed everyone. The policeman tells them that generous France has decided to take them in and breastfeed them all, like her little babies.

It is like paradise given to you The policeman joins the group on the deck. Together they tell the people below that everything is in place for them to settle in Paris. They promise that the metropole will provide them with plane and boat tickets, and settlement allowances when they arrive. It is like "paradise falling into their arms," says the policeman.

Selling a Caribbean to French tourists Some of the people below seem seduced by the idea of going to Paris. While they contemplate the prospect of going to France, French tourists, sporting felt hats and dark glasses, and carrying cameras, are brought on deck. The people already there try to sell them the idea of permanent sunshine, the beautiful beaches, the palm trees, the scuba diving, the good tropical cuisine, and above all the Caribbean's lack of snow. French tourists are promised unique spectacles from the windows of their bungalows, protected from the natives by barbed wire and dogs: they see a woman in agony, a teenager dying of boredom, cane cutters in the fields. The policeman tells the people below to get out of the way and let the tourists through.

Selling France to West Indians migrants Two West Indian jokers sell French marvels to Caribbean people to contemplate in French museums, from the good French civilization: La Marseillaise, the genius of the Bastille, the Mona Lisa, the Thinker, and the Eiffel Tower. Sitting in a chair carried by four of his compatriots, Mr. Justin takes the microphone to reassure the folks down below that Paris really is paradise on earth. As proof, he says, he, a child of the island who once played barefoot and wore pants with holes in them, lives there ten months out of the year. The proof, he says, is that an island soprano dazzles audiences in Paris, and an island boxer is European champion, and a West Indian writer has won an award in Paris.

I am going to Paris Mr. Justin's words convince some people in the hold. They say the misery on the island is too oppressive. They say that they are ready to go seek a better life in Paris. A motley crew of people from down below (unemployed young people, young graduates without jobs and cleaning ladies) all decide to go to Paris.

Old and new slaves An anachronistic temporal juxtaposition: on the way to Europe, the path of modern-day immigrants crosses that of chained slaves arriving in the Caribbean to work in the cane fields. The slave traders are black nobles, who exchange their fellow tribesmen for muskets and jade necklaces. The ship's deck is transformed into a slave market. Speculators auction off black men and women to the planters of America and the Caribbean.

Slave trade goes global Spain's symbols of superiority (Spain's coat of arms) are thrown overboard by British soldiers. England controls the slave trade and colonizes other peoples. France follows England's lead and colonizes Guadeloupe and Martinique. British America enters the slave trade. Slaves load the ship with a variety of products bound for all parts of America. Like the countries of Western Europe, America becomes rich through the slave trade.

Disillusionment The beautiful greeting promised to the immigrants does not materialize. The migrants are stuck in the middle of Paris, with their luggage in their hands. The Parisians refuse to rent apartments to the newcomers. A life of debauchery starts. A dance featuring a bar fight between the Antillean immigrants in Paris ends up with one of them being stabbed. The immigrants complain about the lack of jobs in France and the look that they get from the native French. They complain of being looked at as animals.

Stay at all costs The migrants confide in one another that they have been obliged to become prostitutes, musicians, pimps and housemaids. A voiceover offers some comparative statistics: in just one week, 15,000 Antilleans decided to leave their islands for France against only 100 who chose to return to their islands. Death feels that 100 returns is far too many and calls for an investigation to determine the cause of these massive returns. Death complains that the plan is going slowly, that the workforce is shrinking. He thinks that, rather than assimilating, the migrants have imported their cuisine and their way

of walking, laughing and making love, and that they live in closed communities. Moreover, the plan to cleanse the island of its population seems not to be working.

Cut them off! If the migrants, like octopuses, cling with all their tentacles to their native land, suggests Death, then those tentacles must be severed. And what if, out of cultural resistance, they make tons of children to perpetuate their culture? asks the social worker. “Then, you must seal the women's wombs with cement and harvest the men's genitals," replies Death. The priest protests. Death brushes aside his objections. Mr. Justin asks where his future constituents will come from. Death reassures him. The businessman asks who will play the guitars and banjos in his casino? Who will sing and dance for the pleasure of the French? The plan must remain the objective, Death answers.

Emigrate or starve! The people below confront Mr. Justin. They accuse him of promoting factory closures and unemployment. Monsieur Justin advises them to emigrate to France or starve on the islands.

A fighting people A young man in the hold tries to organize his compatriots for revolt against those above. His compatriots are hesitant. He calls them cowards. An elder tells him to be careful of the words he uses, for he is here, a runaway slave, to bear witness to the fact that his people have always been fighting people, some of whom have never agreed to bow down. A ballet in the hold repeats scenes from the slaves' struggle for freedom. Slaves gather to the sound of horns and drums. Armed with torches, machetes and spears, and galvanized by their traditional songs, they storm the ship's deck. French soldiers put down the revolt with violence and bloodshed. Many slaves are killed

You have it better than free people The Minister of the Navy and Colonies, Justin Aragon, protected by his army, appears on the balcony of the ship’s bridge to tell the slaves that the French government is looking after their welfare, and that they must remain docile. He explains that freedom is more trying than slavery because in France, free men work even harder than slaves and are far less happy than slaves.

Free through our struggle Back to the present. An elder takes the floor to counter the story that the freedom of the slaves was achieved by the masters. No, says the elder. Don't listen to their books, for it was through our knives, our struggle and our spilled blood that freedom was achieved. A ballet featuring slaves with torches in their hands, burning and looting the properties of planters, illustrates the elder's narrative.

The bourgeoisie worries The people below turn on Mr. Justin and demand independence. The planters and businessmen worry that independence would mean their ruin and death at the hands of the people below. The black nun worries that independence will bring communism and the end of religion. The delegates of the island's bourgeoisie parade before Mr. Justin and Death to offer their greetings. The delegates affirm their unwavering allegiance to France: “Martinique and France,” they sing, “are united like the two eyes of the same face." The celebration is interrupted by clamors of protest from below.

Behold Jesus! The black nun remarks that true freedom is the freedom offered by Jesus Christ. A child draws the nun's attention by shaking her robe and tells her that Jesus is there. The child points to Mr. Justin, re-elected and celebrated by a crowd of West Indians.

Death of De la Pierre Death calls for reinforcements. He demands that the demonstrations be crushed and banned, and that the nationalist leaders be arrested and tortured. The police intervene and club the demonstrators. The nationalist leader, Mr. De la Pierre, dies at the hands of the police. Women wail over his body. His lieutenants are arrested.

Open the negotiations! Death is satisfied with the arrest of the nationalists. He now orders that a dialogue be opened with the islanders sympathetic to France. The moderates are invited to appear before Death. Death announces that the meeting is open. The guests launch into a song, declaring their assimilation from head to toe and glorifying beautiful France, its wonderful civilization and its lovely regions.

Paris, the greatest place to be Death applauds and invites the island bourgeoisie to speak. The bourgeoisie sing a song, proclaiming themselves in favor of French law. They then read a petition condemning the acts of violence, declaring themselves anti-independence and in favor of the West Indies' integration into France. Finally, the assimilated and the bourgeois dance to the glory of "Paris, the greatest place to be."

Mr. Justin has visions of a king Mr. Justin imagines himself being crowned in the manner of the Sun King, sprayed with perfume by the social worker, whom he makes his queen, and falling asleep to the sound of a lullaby sung by Death, the social worker, and the hotel owner. The new imaginary king treats himself to Roll Royces for his walks. For his safety, he builds prisons to lock up his opponents. He imagines Death as his new valet.

Back to reality Mr. Justin emerges from his daydream. He hears demonstrators chanting for independence. He hears the runaway slaves advising the young never to forget the trails they have blazed for them. He hears all the West Indians unite and jump from the sinking ship of France. He hears the song and dance for the unity and independence of all black people in the Americas. He sees the dancers burn his effigy.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DEATH Death is a ruthless character, who has devised for the people of the French West Indies a program of cultural annihilation. The black Antilleans are for him insignificant people with a worthless culture, who can better serve humanity by being a cheap labor force for the superior French people.

Ruthless Death is an unscrupulous character. Right from the start, he sets out his agenda for the French Caribbean: wipe the people off the world map and turn them into cheap labor imported into France to make the French happy. And if the people resist, clinging to their culture and land, like an octopus clinging to an object with all its tentacles, then those tentacles must be severed, he suggests.

Racist Death's view of the blacks of the West Indies is one of disdain. He calls them insignificant little people. He compares them to flies that multiply uncontrollably, and he demands that women's wombs be cemented shut and men's reproductive organs mutilated. Death finds that the black people's food stinks all over Paris. And if it were up to him, he would avoid shaking hands with Mr. Justin, his secular wingman in the West Indies.

Greedy Death wants the black people of the West Indies to serve France as cheap labor, and he wants them all in that role. He finds that West Indian emigration to France is not happening fast enough, and this exasperates him. When he learns that 200 out of the 15,000 West Indians who emigrate to France every

week return disillusioned, Death gets angry and orders that the causes and means of avoiding these 200 returns, which he considers inadmissible, be found. Death, a synecdoche of France, benefits from the trade in cheap labor from the islands. This new-found slavery, the film tells us, just like the old one, continues to enrich French ports and cities.

MR. JUSTIN Mr. Justin is a traitor to his people. For his own interests, he associates with Death and undermines the independence of his people. He is an alienated individual, fascinated by the culture of the French oppressor.

Traitor It took Death's promise of a parliamentary post and a chair at his table for Mr. Justin to agree to betray his people and undermine the independence of the Caribbean. As such, Mr. Justin is a traitor to his own people and to the ideal of Caribbean autonomy.

Selfish Everything Mr. Justin does, he does for himself, not for his people. This is the great contradiction in his character. As a parliamentarian, he is expected to represent the interests of the West Indies to the French government. Yet he is doing the exact opposite. He pledges his allegiance to France, and defends the interests of France before his people, in the hope of being personally rewarded with a comfortable political and social life.

Alienated Mr. Justin is the prototype of the alienated black man. With his sights set on France, he shuns his own people and culture in favor of French civilization and culture, which he considers superlative. To be accepted by Death, he welcomes the denigration of his own people. He proposes that the West Indians be lured to France as cheap labor with the promise of redheaded women with rolled-up skirts. He projects his own fantasies onto his people.

THE PRIEST The priest is a corrupt character as well as a corruptor of souls. In his practice, he distorts the Catholic gospel in favor of the French colonial policy. Under his guidance, the West Indians children learn to associate Mr. Justin with Jesus.

Corrupt The priest is a corrupt character, who spends more time with Death promoting his program to annihilate the West Indians than at the altar of his church consoling the subjugated people. Instead of a mission to save souls, the priest prefers a lifestyle of pleasure, feasting and drinking alongside Death. He has betrayed his evangelical vocation.

Corruptor The priest is a brainwasher. The catechism he teaches West Indian children is not for the worship of God but for the idolatry of Mr. Justin, the Caribbean representative of French subjugation policy. He presents Mr. Justin as Jesus to the West Indian children to better prepare them to accept the slavery that Mr. Justin promotes on behalf of France.

MR. DE LA PIERRE Like the fundamental leader of West Indian independence, Mr. De la Pierre has no faith in the declarations of the French government or the role of the Catholic Church in his country. He is a rebel who gives his life fighting for the ideal of West Indian self-determination.

Rebellious Mr. De la Pierre refuses to submit to the program of subjugation of his island to France. He asks his compatriots not to vote for a Caribbean attached to France as a French department. For him, freedom presupposes total independence and self-determination. But Mr. De la Pierre is not just a rebel against French institutional government. He also rejects French Catholicism and clings to the pagan rites of his ancestors, the worship of a stone on which he burns candles.

Skeptical Mr. De la Pierre never believed that the elections organized by the French authorities nor the French government’s promise of better life in Paris for the West would change the lives of his compatriots for the better. He tries to dissuade those who are scurrying up the deck to vote, and after the vote, he urges his people not to emigrate to France but to stay and fight for full independence at home. His warnings are ignored.

Inflexible Mr. De la Pierre is the leader of the West Indian revolt. He is, in a way, what the literature of negritude represents as the “fundamental negro”, that is, a negro who remains rooted in and faithful to his black culture, and who leads the fight for freedom to the end of his strength. Mr. De la Pierre remains inflexible in his ambitions, and he dies defending them.

THEMES

Colonization The film is a denunciation of colonization and its evils. The record of French colonization is fraught with inhumanity. In Africa, as in the Americas, colonization started with the invasion of the local peoples by the French. This invasion was initially persuasive (through religion and education). Priests, nuns and teachers were sent on a mission to shape the memory of the natives. When this first mission met with resistance from the native peoples, violence was used to subdue them. If the resistance was fierce and far from being pacified forever, then the response was elevated to the urgency of extermination. Resistance fighters were purely and simply eliminated, wiped off the world map as peoples to make way for the exploitation of their land and resources. This is the story of the French West Indies, as told by Med Hondo through snatches of words, and through song and dance.

Illustrative moments: The film opens with Death outlining his “plan” for the peoples of the French West Indies, the colonies he calls “those microscopic, little islands” inhabited by "insignificant little peoples." They are to disappear from the world map as cultural entities and merge into the larger French community; the land will become agricultural and tourist complexes, and the men a labor force available to France. Death's program, which takes place in the 20th century, at a time when France, now an industrial nation, needs cheaper labor to run its factories, is but the logical continuation of other programs that have preceded it since the 16th century, which characters, including the King of France, explain with pride: The establishment of cane fields on the islands, the decimation of the local population (the Arawak Indians), the importation of a European workforce found to be too weak, vulnerable to tropical diseases and therefore unable to work in the cane fields, and the “ingenious” idea of importing African slaves to replace them, thanks to the slave trade. As France has been industrializing since the 19th century, the West Indians need to be alienated from their African heritage, and lured into France, where they can keep the factories running. This is where Death and his collaborators come in.

Appearance Colonization was a great game of deception and thwarted illusions. Europe conquered the black continent and exported its sons and daughters as slaves to the Americas by offering Africa glitter and pretending to be its friend. *West Indies* shows how African kings accepted insignificant pearl necklaces and muskets in exchange for their peoples, whom they offered as pledges of loyalty to the “white brother”. If the white slave trader appeared as a false brother, surfing on the naïveté of the Negro king, it was even more disappointing to see that the Negro king, who is supposed to be the protector of his people, is so only in appearance. His power is his allure and the ritual that he gives himself - his impressive royal retinue, his clothing, and all the ceremonial that surrounds him. Behind this deceptive appearance, the black leader is nothing more than an unaware neurotic incompetent, a depersonalized subject shaped by the colonizing machine for the benefit of colonization.

Illustrative moment: Death's program is based on a great deception, that of making the West Indians believe that everything done in their name is for their own good, when the real beneficiary of this plan is France. Mr. Justin is the first to fall into the trap of deception. Elected to parliament thanks to rigged elections, he is dressed in French garb. While he believes he is accepted by France, he is merely a pawn in the alienation and subjugation of his people. Death secretly hates him and recoils at the very idea of shaking his hand. Mr. Justin plays his role of savior with such perfection that a little girl mistakes him for Jesus, a Jesus who turns out to be corrupt and corrupting, and whom, in the end, the people of the West Indies will immolate symbolically by burning his effigy.

Colonial religion and education In the colonies, the missions of religion and the school system coalesce: religion and education collude to format the colonized subject according to the program of the colonizing country. From this point of view, colonial education does not aim to train critical thinkers. Its mission is to train docile civil servants who will serve as transmission belts, intermediaries between the natives and the colonial power in which they will invest blind allegiance. These alienated representatives of the colonial power to the local population, sometimes referred to as “evolués” or ‘assimilés’, also become the local showcases of the imperial power's “exceptionalism”. They learn with pride to imitate the dress and speech of the natives of the metropole, and are given a better treatment than the rest of their compatriots, making them lures for the assimilation of the natives but, as *West Indies* shows, these imitators of the culture of the metropole will never be fully accepted by the metropole, too eager to mark its difference from its colonial subjects.

Illustrative moments: It is no accident that Med Hondo makes the white priest and the black nun the collaborators of Death. They are his secular arms, albeit invested with a mission of salvation. When Mr. Justin is elected to Parliament following rigged elections, the priest cannot contain his enthusiasm, and he celebrates the event by getting the West Indian children to sing the hymn of the birth of the infant Jesus. So, in the gospel according to the white priest, Mr. Justin is the savior born to lead the West Indies out of obscurantism and poverty. The priest's effort is so successful that a little West Indian girl, seeing Mr. Justin on the balcony, believes she has seen Jesus, who will offer the West Indians true freedom. Of course, all this is ironic when one considers that Mr. Justin offered the West Indians nothing but false promises, poverty and subjugation under the regime of dependence on France. Religion and the colonial education system are thus revealed as an artifice of spiritual and intellectual violence, which, by formatting the West Indian to believe that his salvation lies in Paris or anything associated with Paris, delivers the West Indian to the domination of France. Monsieur Justin, like the assimilated West Indians who boast of their beauty and elegance because they live in Paris and dress like Parisians, is merely an instrument of the colonial power in its desire to dominate the colonized peoples.

Tradition-Orality Through its structure, *West Indies* celebrates the continuity of the oral tradition of the West Indies. Here, it is the West Indian people, in all their diversity, who speak out, through song and dance, to tell their story, whether heroic or treacherous. The oral culture of the West Indies, born of the ancient tradition of African griots, has survived the forced voyage of millions of slaves from Africa to the Americas, and has established itself as a paradigm of communication for West Indians. In their book *In Praise of Creoleness* (1993), West Indian authors Jean Bernabé and Raphaël Confiant note that orality is one of the hallmarks of the West Indies. Here, the “paroleur” or “oraliturain”, who is the counterpart of the African *griot* (storyteller), transmits the history of the West Indian peoples to younger generations. This transmission of cultural and historical information, which often takes place in the evening, under the moonlight or around a fire, is accompanied by rhythmic singing to the sound of the drum or clapping hands. The story told by the *paroleur* comes as a counterweight to the history written by Western literature, in which the West Indian too often appears as the vanquished and the Westerner as the victor. Hondo shows how the capture of the spoken word through orality aims to restore to the course of history the intentionally omitted pages of the West Indian hero.

Illustrative moments: In the film, a young West Indian exasperated by the French government's treatment of his people calls for revolt. His calls are met with reluctance from his compatriots. The young West Indian, furious, labels his compatriots cowards. An elder, who has lived through the history of the West Indies as a fugitive slave, calls him to order and tells him to stop regurgitating the lies taught to him by the white man's books; books that portray the West Indians as cowards who received their freedom thanks to the benevolence of the slave owners. The elder's counter-narrative is then played out by a ballet of slaves, assembled to the sounds of horns and drums, armed with spears, machetes and torches, attacking their white victimizers. The voice of the elder is heard, loudly proclaiming that it was through struggle, bloodshed, and the instilling of terror in the white man to his very last entrenchment, that

the slave wrested his freedom, not through some French law. And at the end of the film, when once again the West Indians take to the streets to drive out Mr. Justin and burn his effigy, the ballet that plays this musical scene restores the oral history of the West Indies by celebrating the heroes of the past, like Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the heroes of Haiti, the first independent black state in the history of the West Indies. *West Indies* is praise to orality, to West Indian orality.

Resistance *West Indies* rehearses the social and cultural inequities brought to the French West Indian colonies by the French government before and after the French Revolution. The social condition of the Antilleans, which it was hoped would change for the better in the wake of the French Revolution and the adoption of the triptych “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternite”, did not materialize. In the West Indies, the clear master/slave dichotomy was replaced by three new classes, staring at each other, only waiting for the right moment to pounce on each other: the wealthy bourgeoisie (made up of planters, businessmen and the clergy); the mulattos (sons and daughters of former slave owners not recognized by their fathers, and aspiring to French citizenship); and the slaves (aspiring to freedom). Between these three groups, alliances were made and broken according to the interests of the moment. Med Hondo's film shows how the mulattos rejected their compatriots' call to fight for independence and instead joined forces with the whites to remain in the French fold and gain French citizenship.

Illustrative moments: West Indian resistance to French hegemony bears the epical characteristic described by Césaire in his long poem ‘Notebook of A Return to the Native Land’. Césaire wrote: “And the nigger scum is on its feet/ the seated nigger scum/ unexpectedly standing/ standing in the hold/standing in the cabins/standing on the deck/standing in the wind/standing under the sun/standing in the blood/standing/and/free.” As in Césaire's poem, the struggle for freedom is led by the subjugated, from the depths of the holds to the deck, which is the province of victimizers. But this resistance comes gradually from the horizontality of oppression to the obliqueness of awareness, to the verticality of taking up arms and fighting for freedom. Indeed, the West Indians, lying in the hold, reluctant to wake up, called cowards by an exalted young man, become aware of their inner strength when the elder fugitive slave reminds them of the great deeds of the resistance fighters of the past. And with this awareness comes the call to arms: "We must arm ourselves with guns ... compasses and hammers ... hoes, spades and machetes! Rise up! Now is the time!" And from the taking up of arms, the West Indians break free from their chains and drive away their oppressors.

Zoomorphism Colonial literature abounds with examples in which black people are compared to animals or declared to be closer to animals than to humans. Fanciful scientific theories have been developed to support these assertions. Thinkers such as Gustave Lebon and Gobineau painted the white man as emanating from the perfect race, and the black man as being from the imperfect race, based on physical and mental standpoints. The repetition of this Aryanist axiom has fossilized not only in the mind of the racist white man, but also in that of the neurotic black man, to the point where a kind of colorism has set in, which, in the colonies of the Americas, as Frantz Fanon denounces in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), leads the black man to seek to whiten his race through all the contortions of association with the white man; a phenomenon which Fanon calls “lactification”. Hondo shows, however, that no matter how hard black people try to lactify themselves, in the imaginary of the racist white man, black people remain animals: they look like animals; they gesture like animals; they eat like animals; they vocalize like animals.

Illustrative moments: They swarm, they bellow, they holler: The West Indians, to whom the French government has sold the idea of France as an earthly paradise, arrive in France. Their numbers range from assimilated people of mixed race, who pride themselves on their beauty and gallantry, to the descendants of nationalist slaves who have long hesitated to try the Parisian adventure and now find themselves there by force of circumstance. In France, Paris is anything but the promised paradise. Immigrants suffer from French racism and inhospitality. To survive, they hunker down in communities and live according to their West Indian traditions. The French, starting with the French government represented by Death, see this as a bestial tendency. The French accuse the West Indians of swarming like bees, of mating and multiplying

like flies, of bellowing like cattle instead of talking like humans, of hollering like monkeys and of poisoning the whole of Paris with the fetid odors of their strange cuisine, which is not part of the civilized world.

Objectification In 1685, King Louis XIV of France decreed “Le Code Noir” (The Black Code), an edict supposed to govern the relationship between master and slave in the French West Indies and that said “the slave is considered furniture.” In other words, slaves had no humanity, were just like any other furniture in their master's home, and could be transformed, modified, lent, sold or pawned at the master's whim. As a result, slaves were mutilated, branded or killed by their masters, who owed no one an explanation. Although the Code Noir was abolished with the abolition of slavery by France in 1848, its article 39, which objectified the slave, did not so easily leave the French imaginary, and it resurfaces frequently through Freudian slips. In *Oh, Sun* (1968) as well as *West Indies*, Med Hondo criticizes this French reflex springing from France's shameful history, which characterizes the black man as a mere object without a soul.

Illustrative moments: Brainstorming on what needs to be done to solve the issue of unemployment in the West Indies and the need for manpower in France, the social worker suggests “exporting” en masse, then she corrects herself and says “emigration” of the populations. This Freudian slip of the tongue reveals what the colonized person represents in the imperial imagination: when he is not an animal, he is simply an object for Europe to dispose of according to its desires. And like any object in one's possession, imperial France believes it can modify the colonized at will. Is the birth rate in the French West Indies too high according to the French government? If so, Death suggests “cementing” women's wombs and “cutting off the fecundating faucet” of men, just as one would wall up or fill in a doorway or a window or eliminate a useless pipe in a house undergoing renovation. Here, the West Indian is nothing more than an object over which the master has the right of transformation.

Assimilation France's policy of integrating overseas peoples into the French social body to the point of making them fully-fledged French citizens, was born of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It was the principles of the Enlightenment, according to which all men are born free and equal in rights, that gave fuel to the French Revolution of 1789. Seizing on the preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen born of the Revolution, the men of color in the colonies, some of whom were free and even slave-owners, demanded that their rights be assimilated to those of white Frenchmen. The most vocal in this demand were the mulattos, the offspring of slave owners. Having always been privileged on their fathers' plantations, where they worked as foremen, their most ardent wish was to be recognized by their fathers' world, to which they were closer, they thought, thanks to their low level of melanin. While assimilation was a godsend for the mixed-race people, for the blacks, who were closer to their Afro-Caribbean cultures and matured under the master's whip, being free meant breaking away as far as possible from anything reminiscent of the master. For them, assimilation was a doctrine to be rejected with all their might. Med Hondo dramatizes this racial understanding of freedom, which for the black man was synonymous with a pure, brutal break from the white man's world, but for the mullato meant merging into the white man's world.

Illustrative moments: How beautiful and elegant we are! The West Indians who dream of assimilation are on the deck, alongside the whites. Dressed in white suits and white hats, they were quickly seduced by the promise of a better world in Paris. It took them no time at all to ditch their local clothes for dandy uniforms. Smiling with satisfaction, they sing and dance, mocking their compatriots in the hold for refusing to come up and join them in Paris, paradise on earth. These assimilated people have always cherished the dream of passing, of belonging to Parisian society. And for this, they acquiesced, like Mr. Justin, to Death's denigration of their people as animals. They support Death's program to wipe their people off the map. They accept Death's birth control program. They cheat in the elections in favor of Mr. Justin, Death's candidate, by stuffing the ballot boxes with illegal ballots, thereby undermining the independence efforts of their compatriots.