

**WHAT THE
VOICES SAY**

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Jonathan Ali

I am sat at my kitchen table in London thinking of the rainforest, and of these lines from *Air* (1969), by St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott:

The unheard, omnivorous
jaws of this rain forest
not merely devour all
but allow nothing vain;
they never rest,
grinding their disavowal
of human pain.

My native island Trinidad is ecologically, geologically, and geographically closer to the South American mainland than it is to rest of the insular Caribbean. As such, the ancient rainforest of Trinidad is the rainforest of the Guianas, specifically of French Guiana, to whose diaspora the artist and filmmaker Maxime Jean-Baptiste belongs.

The Guianese rainforest is a steadfast presence in Jean-Baptiste's films. It is there in his short film *Nou voix* (*Our Voice*, 2018), in which the above lines from Walcott's poem are quoted. *Nou voix* marks the beginning of an examination into that human pain of which Walcott writes; specifically, the pain of colonial violence and trauma, and their continuation into the present. A present that remains very much a colonial one for French Guiana, still a department of France after hundreds of years.

Jean-Baptiste delves into this complexity, in *Nou voix* as in subsequent films, through the rigorous interrogation of archival footage relating to the history of French Guiana, the people, and the land. This interrogation intersects in different ways with familial collaboration. *Nou Voix* has, as its point of departure, the forensic manipulation of footage from a historical drama made in French Guiana by a filmmaker from metropolitan France. The film centres the exploits of a metropolitan Frenchman with a gold-mining concern; Jean-Baptiste's father, Gilbert Jean-Baptiste, had a peripheral role in this film in front of the camera. Through the exploration of this familial history, Jean-Baptiste detects echoes between the extractive violence of slavery and that of a colonial people performing for their colonisers.

Jean-Baptiste's interrogation of archive(s) and the extractive colonial violence visited upon the people and their land continues in the short films that follow. *Listen to the Beat of Our Images* (2021), another family collaboration (it was written and directed with his sister, Audrey Jean-Baptiste), considers how a native population was uprooted from their forest villages in the expropriations that preceded the building of the space centre in French Guiana in the middle of the last century. It is, arguably, the most elegiac of his films; anger at the displacement of a people is sublimated through a fictional character, a young woman who narrates the details of this profound loss with a poignant equanimity.

In *Moune Ô* (2022), however—another collaboration with his father—Jean-Baptiste continues his unsparing exploration of the trauma incurred in performing for the colonial gaze. Again, he finds an analogue to this extractive form of filmmaking, this violence, in the violence visited upon the land, specifically a gold-mining project set to pollute the rivers of the French Guianese forest. In its relentless manipulation of the archival footage, in the intensity of the language of the accompanying on-screen text, *Moune Ô*

palpably articulates a rage against the colonial project and the trauma its ongoing fallout has inflicted upon multiple generations and innumerable black bodies.

And so, to *Kouté vwa* (*Listen to the Voices*, 2024). Jean-Baptiste's debut feature, it marks the first direct engagement in his films with the absence (or perhaps, rather, the unseen presence) that has long accompanied his practice, that of his cousin Lucas Diomar, who was tragically murdered in 2012.

What can I say about *Kouté vwa*, with regards to the films it follows? I could note the repeated elements from Jean-Baptiste's previous work—the use of archival footage (personal, this time); the collaboration with his sister, Audrey, in the writing; the comingling of elements of both fiction and reality. And, yet again, the scrupulous concern with violence and trauma, as present as those things continue to be in the (post)colonial society.

There is more to the film, however, than these things. And by that I don't simply mean the fact of the participation of family and friends in front of the camera, in scenes both scripted and more traditionally documentary. The participants are there, of course: Jean-Baptiste's aunt Nicole Diomar, Lucas's mother; his cousin Melrick Diomar, Lucas's nephew and Nicole's grandson; and Lucas's best friend Yannick Cébret. Their presences (I hesitate to say performances) in the film are indelible.

No, what I'm suggesting is something else, though it is inextricably linked to working with Nicole, Melrick and Yannick as they, with their community, continue a long process of grieving and healing. We are listening as these voices, through the forms the filmmaker proposes, articulate new ways of transcending seemingly unending cycles of violence and trauma. Forms that understand they must refuse the violence with which they deliberate. And through this generosity Jean-Baptiste himself is listening to the voices, as much as he invites us to listen to them, as never before.

In *Kouté vwa* the filmmaker listens, and invite us to listen, to the land, that rainforest. More than the mere site of centuries of violence, but one that sustained our indigenous ancestors for centuries, and sheltered the maroons in their flight. This land allows nothing vain and has so much to tell us, if only we listen with care."

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the screening of *Kouté vwa* (*Listen to the Voices*) (2024; dir. Maxime Jean-Baptiste) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 11 May 2025.

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