May 3- June 23 2010 I was fortunate enough to return to Réunion Island, the only Outer Seas Department of France located in the Indian Ocean via the cultural, political, and economic nucleus of the French identity: Paris. The emphasis of trip (for I had lived there as an English teacher from 2006-2009) was to penetrate an already familiar façade in pursuit of sharpening while deepening my research questions. The 4 day pause in Paris, made possible by a further generous grant from the Smucker-Wagstaffs, was a brief but valuable chance to investigate the conditions of “otherness” (that I sought primarily in Réunion) in the context of the metropolitan (the capital of France) and the institutional (the museum) seats of power. My agenda for the overall trip was tightly packed with several different activities and objectives that seemed to multiply exponentially upon my arrival. Although the focus of my research evolved through the people I encountered, their varied contributions nevertheless intersected in the common themes of marginality, adaptation, and resistance.

Here is my distillation of the main points of Reunion’s social history. This is the fact-rich yet sensory/emotionally anemic explanation of the events that brought together such unusual phenotypic, linguistic, religious, and culturally diverse group of peoples:

Réunion is an island populated by the descendants of Europeans (French sailors from Brittany & Normandy) whose Malagasy wives/concubines/servants/slaves came with them to the first settlement in 1664. With the expansion of the French East India Company's trade routes into the 18th century, slaves were increasingly brought from Madagascar, Mozambique, Zanzibar, as well as from the West African sources of the Atlantic Slave Trade. France’s increased investment in “Ile Bourbon” (what the island was called) transformed the social climate from small communities of inter-racial cohabitation (and “métisse” descendants) to the expansive, inhumane plantation system. Racial segregation suddenly became urgent and severe. In order to meet labor demands upon the abolishment of slavery, indentured servants from the Malabar Coast, Pondicherry, and other French outposts in Southern India replaced the emancipated “Cafre” (African decendent) population. The work conditions of “Malbars” differed little from that of the African-origin slaves they replaced, although they were (and continue to be) slightly better off in the emerging créole society. The Malbars who came to work in Réunion were almost exclusively men and took Cafrine wives. The majority of Malbars in Réunion now are just as African as they are South Asian, but many will prefer to identify with their Tamil ancestry because of the implicit and explicit advantages. The Muslim portion of Reunionese society comes from two sources: the first were, along with the Malbars, brought in from Gujarat as indentured servants (although many were able to establish their
presence as shop keepers and vendors). The other is a more recent and voluntary immigration from the Comoros Islands and Mayotte (another Outer Seas Territory of France), both impoverished, politically unstable societies situated between Madagascar and Mozambique. The Réunionnais with Gujarati roots are well respected and, although they maintain separate religious and social circles, still identify as “creole.” They are called “Zarabes” to distinguish them from other creoles but their fellow Comorians and Maoré Muslims are antagonized and excluded.

Privilege, wealth, and advancement in Réunionnese society is not determined therefore by as strict racial lines as in other colonized populations. Chinese merchants and Zarabes have fared fairly well, in part by their resistance to intermarriage. Whiteness, or lighter complexion in a cafre or malbar, does not necessarily translate to higher socio-economic status, privileged health and education, etc. The topography of the island is inherently connected to the social history: marrons (the escaped slaves) and ‘Ti Blancs (poor whites) fled the terror of the coastal plantations and established small, insular, self-sustaining settlements in the crevices of the mountainous interior. A combination of geographical insularity competitive survival has created a social environment of protectionism and fear of the outsider.

Above: reproductions of historic renderings of Reunion’s ethnic origins as part of an installation at Maison Villele, a historic museum established on the site of the largest and most notorious sugarcane plantation in Reunion’s history. Horror stories about the heiress Mme. Deybassins continue to be told to scare children.

Below: Looking down at “Ilet Bois Rouge” a small settlement first established by “marrons” (escaped slaves). This trip I retraced the route of one such route: the road to Ilet Quinquina near a pilgrimage site of the “Vierge Noir” in St. Denis, Reunion’s capital.
Upon my arrival in Michigan and throughout my first year of the MFA program I attempted to integrate disparate and recalcitrant realms; I investigated academically framed discourses ("post-colonial," "ethnographic," etc.) based on the perceived relevance of these themes in my lived experience. I soon found it problematic to superimpose terminology such as "oppression," "exclusion," "creolization" etc. over my own handle on the island's history since the manifestations of these concepts seemed more complex and tenuous than the academic jargon and categories were able to express. My retroactive gaze at my time lived among the Réunionnais paired with geographic and cultural distance only seemed to further entrench my creative expression into simplistic and generalized visual vocabulary. By March 2010 I was convinced of the need to revisit Réunion in order to actively pursue an answer to the contemporary Creole's understanding of his own experience. I needed to investigate the circumstances and conditions of social membership in situ, not only to excavate an “authentic” response (from the mouth of Réunionnais) but to reconnect to my own psychological and emotional experiences of having lived there as a foreigner.

I departed Michigan with the three-tiered plan of 1) learning Réunionese Creole, 2) meeting with categories of people that I had little or no connection with during my time there before, and 3) retracing the physical landscape relevant to the topics elicited by my interest in social history.

My first, and most significant mental undertaking was to learn Réunionese Creole (RC). I came to the island in 2006 with the goal of learning standard French as it would have a vast and lasting application in further scholarly work. I have long been interested in Francophone Africa and the experiences of these post-colonies in relationship to mainland France). RC is superficially "French," meaning that the superstrate language (where most of the lexicon comes from), like that of many creoles,
is that of the culture in control. The culture with socio-economic power often wields it through determining “legitimate” avenues of communication. RC, therefore sounds like, and is believed (by its own speakers!) to be a patois at best and a bastardization of French at worst. This mentality is difficult to avoid since this attitude of RC’s inferiority (and the implicit inferiority of the culture) is prevalent in everything from colloquialisms, to the educational system’s historical resistance to its curricular appropriateness, to the perpetual social ills of violent outlashes, preceded and followed by the passive behavior of the criminal. In order to ask some of my questions about the Réunionnese’s degree of belonging to their “French” society, as well as their framework for their own social memory, I needed to know more of the nuances of their language.

In returning to Réunion in May, I sought to take RC lessons and investigate the extent to which RC is appearing in traditionally French realms: formal education, the media, literature, administration, advertising, social events, etc. I gathered pamphlets, bought volumes of créole poetry, recorded televised and live events, and tried to converse with those I met on the bus or at a carri (typical cuisine) stand. I created a self-structured immersion program which included taking formal RC lessons from Audrey Lefevre, an elementary school teacher who is part of the new generation actively promoting and using RC in their lesson plans.

I interviewed Ms. Lefevre (pictured below) as well as her colleagues at the small Ecole Elementaire Jules Féry, a typical example of a rural community’s only contact with French culture: through the homogenized curriculum of the national education. The faculty at this small establishment, a Caffrine creole Directrice, a white metropolitaine (from mainland France), a Réunionese-Maurician (from Mauritius, a culturally similar island), and a ‘Ti-blanche, were all of the opinion that teaching RC was in their students’ best interest. There is a simultaneous establishment of the linguistic building blocks necessary to eventually learn French, English, and any other language while effectively promoting their Reunionese Identity.

At the University of Reunion I attended the Forum for Jeunes Chercheurs (an annual conference for doctoral candidates across disciplines to share their research). Among others I met Sully Santa whose research in the subject of Malbarite was intriguing to me as a sub faction of creole society. Jean-Michel Dennemont, a special educator, among the minority of Creole who have higher education and yet remain accepting of his creole roots, was one of the most thoughtfull and wholistic analyses

![Image](image.png)
of my many interviews. M. Dennemont expressed a sadness about the severity of some of the society’s issues while not dismissing the community as somehow inherently inferior as so many have judged it to be.

Activist Group: Rasine Kaf

The third group I had not previously connected with were activists. Although it is arguable that everyone has a degree of political awareness and a spark of partisan passion, I was interested in meeting and interviewing those involved in discourses (and action) related to Créole identity and the compact sedimentation of social injustices. My contacts with educators had led me to Philippe Bessière a high school history teacher at Lycée Polyvalent Jean Hinglo in one of Réunion’s roughest cities: Le Port. He was one of the founding members of Racine Kaf, a group dedicated to promoting visibility of the issues of importance to Reunionese of African descent as well as recent immigrants. Bessière had also written an article I found illuminating that I found here at the UM campus, but the only way that I found to contact him was to deliver a hand written letter to the high school where he taught. Not expecting a reply, I was pleasantly surprised to be called up and invited to their weekly meeting in St. Denis. This was one of the few contexts where I perceived an urgent and angry ethos relating to the invisibility of the Cafre community in the eyes of the society. I was fortunate enough to meet with one of their members, Patrick Fary-Olax, outside of the meeting to hear his thoughts and experiences concerning creolization.

I hadn’t realized how the attention paid to Créole heritage, (a recent trend in France and many post-colonial powers trying to reconcile their pasts), meant the further alienation of its historically disadvantaged contributors. Mr. Fary-Olax’s personal narrative has roots in the Antilles, mainland France and some of the earliest inhabitants of Reunion. Above is a still from his interview.

As an artist I was naturally drawn to finding ways to interact with the materials around me. I found an intersection between my need to weave and my mother-in-law’s history in learning how to braid straw hats. In harvesting vetiver (grass-like fiber) I came across other older women in the community who gave me suggestions to their personal “hat raising” techniques. As I braided it while waiting for various appointments in the city, I immediately opened a line of conversation about
creation and visual artists. I hadn’t actively pursued the artist’s community in Reunion before because of preconceived notions that they were either Zoreil (mainland French), steeped in the canon of the Parisian tradition or créole, but utilitarian craftspeople.

I kept hearing over and over that Réunionnese society is “ill” or “defunct” or “schizophrenic” because of it’s uprooted peoples from such drastically different origins, who have not had the time nor the solidarity to forge universal customs (including artistic expression, religious practice, social rituals, etc.). Some art traditions have been brought by Malagasy ancestors, appropriated from European techniques, or invented in situ, but most artistic tradition is closely linked to the utilitarian or is a transient act (Sega or Maloya dance).

This time I was anxious to meet other artists in order to better understand if they were dealing with their créole identity through their work. Inherent in this question of hierarchical vestiges of colonial culture is the simultaneous admiration/resentment that Réunionnese have for the mainland. I wondered if Réunionnese artists felt marginalized from the powerful western art world or if they operated in a mental framework independent from this. I found various responses to these questions: from Charly Lesquelin, a painter who, despite his involvement in international exhibitions in New York, Quebec, Paris, etc., didn’t even understand the premise of my question. Nathalie Maillot and Nelson Boyer, husband and wife, independent sculptors tucked away in the remote mountainous “highlands” of St. Phillippe, both work depicts explicitly themes of Reunionese identity. An interview with them revealed their experience living in both France and Reunion that highlighted their understanding in both contexts.
I was fortunate enough to meet Laurent Zitte, not only a well known and exhibited artist but someone whose work addresses the questions of privilege, social inclusion/exclusion, and above all underscored the fact that the very nature of post-colonial discourses is so often Eurocentric. He resents the fact that he is routinely labeled a “black” or “Reunionese” artist instead of just an artist. He passionately questions the legitimacy of a “dialogue among artists from the global North and South,” but preferred rather a “South-South” framework in which artists from Réunion would exchange and collaborate with artists in South Africa, India, Indonesia, etc. He spoke at length about the Réunionnais-Zoreil (France) conflict and about how Réunionnese are conditioned to see the world by the influences of their particularly confusing past. He would not let me record our interview and when I asked if he had a website or a means by which to keep in touch, (for I was profoundly moved by this conversation), he promptly and coolly said, “No” and walked away.
Images from the Maison Villele: the Entrance plaque indicating the various buildings on the grounds, the mansion itself (through which I took an incredible docent tour with Alexis Miranville, a retired History professor and descendant of slaves of Mme. Deybassins). “Code Noir” was the French code of law dictating the lives of slaves which declared them “commodities” among other atrocities.

My existing knowledge of the island’s roads, culture, lingua franca, etc. enabled me to focus more on the intended research objectives than the nuances of culture shock, communicative constipation, and sensory overload. Thus I was able to better focus on my research objectives, pushing further, (knowing the right questions), than had I gone somewhere completely new. I planned on meeting with members of the educated class including professors, doctoral candidates, and educators, but found myself equally enthralled in the roadside or supermarket conversations that I suddenly had an understanding of. This trip gave me the mandate to dive deeper into the issues central to the academic side of my creative work. I didn’t anticipate that I would encounter in two months many of the loose strands of my initial experience. Being able to return was an incredible gift in that it gave me a sense of authority and clarity in my own search for creating visual work. Reunionese stories were valuable not only in their own right as oral artifacts but also as a means by which I view my own processes of adaptation, assimilation, and transformation.
I cannot express the extent of my gratitude to the School of Art & Design and the Smucker-Wagstaffs for the support that made this trip possible. My work's integrity and richness have benefited greatly.

Below left: Musée Leon Dierx, Réunion's main art museum located in the capital, St. Denis where there was an exhibition on the ethnic Chinese experience in Reunion. Below right is a view of St. Denis from mid way up “La Montagne,” a wealthy neighborhood nestled in the highlands above the city.

Below left: Mosque in St. André. Below right is a Tamil temple near the site of Maison Villele. The Cafre population fled this region upon their emancipation. The Malbars who replaced their labor ultimately stayed in the area even after the plantation system crumbled.

Below: The “Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration,” formerly the Museum of African and Oceanic Art in Paris. This permanent exhibition on the immigration patterns and their impact on French society was an inspiring and informative first step to this trip.
L’histoire de l’immigration appartient à l’histoire de France. Elle est le récit de milliers d’histoires personnelles et familiales. Chaque histoire unique, chaque destin migratoire devient mémoire voire « légende » par la transmission familiale. Les objets familiaux, les photographies, les récits, les « reliques » sont autant de traces d’un passage de « là-bas » à « ici ».

La Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration se crée avec celles et ceux qui vivent cette histoire, qui en portent la mémoire et dont les traces singulières font aujourd’hui « collection ».

Ainsi, les objets familiaux, les images, les correspondances, même perdus, laissés ou absents, associés aux témoignages confiés ont bien évidemment leur place au sein des collections du musée de la Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration, et viendront garnir progressivement les vitrines de la Galerie des dossiers.

Immigrés ou descendants d’immigrés, célèbres ou anonymes, peuvent participer à la constitution du patrimoine de l’immigration par un don, un dépôt ou un prêt.