

...the fabric of...

Thinking about madras fabric in martinique and its
relationship to its past, present and future on the island.



ca.1851: East Indians from the city of Madras among others, were brought to martinique as indentured servants bringing with them, a handmade material called Madras. The material became a part of the social fabric of the descendants of enslaved africans. I became interested in the material during my first visit to martinique in 2013. I saw it being used to make souvenirs for tourists. Bags, shirts, aprons, caps, dolls, plastic cups, blankets and pencils, all with madras print, were bought and sold. I wondered if the black population, who traditionally wore it, still viewed the material as an important reflection of heritage. I also wondered about Madras' contemporary use apart from commercialized products and souvenirs.

Returning to Martinique has given me the opportunity to engage the questions I had about Madras. I have learned much from spending time speaking with a cross-generational sample of the local population about their knowledge the fabric's history and its current place in contemporary Martinican society as it relates to identity, heritage, customs, costumes, and politics.

In further thinking about Madras, I became interested in examining:

- 1) relationships between the politics of the Madras and that of the three flags that are most commonly seen and used in Martinique, the [French flag](#), the [Martinican flag](#) and the flag of the [Independentist movement](#).
- 2) the parallels between Dutch wax fabric that was brought primarily to West Africa [\(1855-1872\)](#), and Madras fabric brought to Martinique by East Indians ca. 1851.
- 3) the use of Madras in the commercialization of Martinique.

...a new national flag using the design of the independentist movement and pan-african colors...



*a photographic mock-up

...on the flag...

Some questions and ideas that guided the process and development of this project were:

- 1) What is the Independentist movement and what are some of the arguments for and against Martinique's independence from France?
- 2) How can the historical associations between race/class and Madras in Martinique be co-opted to present a counter narrative?
- 3) What flag of Martinique would I use as the foundation of the design?
- 4) What are the ramifications and politics of working with the flag?
- 5) Outside of the symbolic attributes of the flag, how can it hold more meaning?
- 6) What do I do with the flag after it is produced?

...charging the flag...

For the flag to “hold more meaning”, I carried a selection of Madras fabric with me to conversations with historians, politicians, students, and everyday Martinicans. The fabric absorbed the conversations about itself. To some, it was highly regarded for its current cultural significance and disregarded in other conversations. I took them to cultural events such as Bélé dance. They went with me to the beach on leisure time and they were worn on bodies that “performed” in them. They were hung outdoors to absorb the sun. The fabrics were used in my performance at the Schoelcher Library and they remained present during the question answer period with the audience. All of this was being absorbed. The hands that sewed the flag is a Martinican seamstress named Sandra who lives in the town of Saint Joseph. I considered all of these actions methods of “charging” the flag with meaning and context.

...charging...





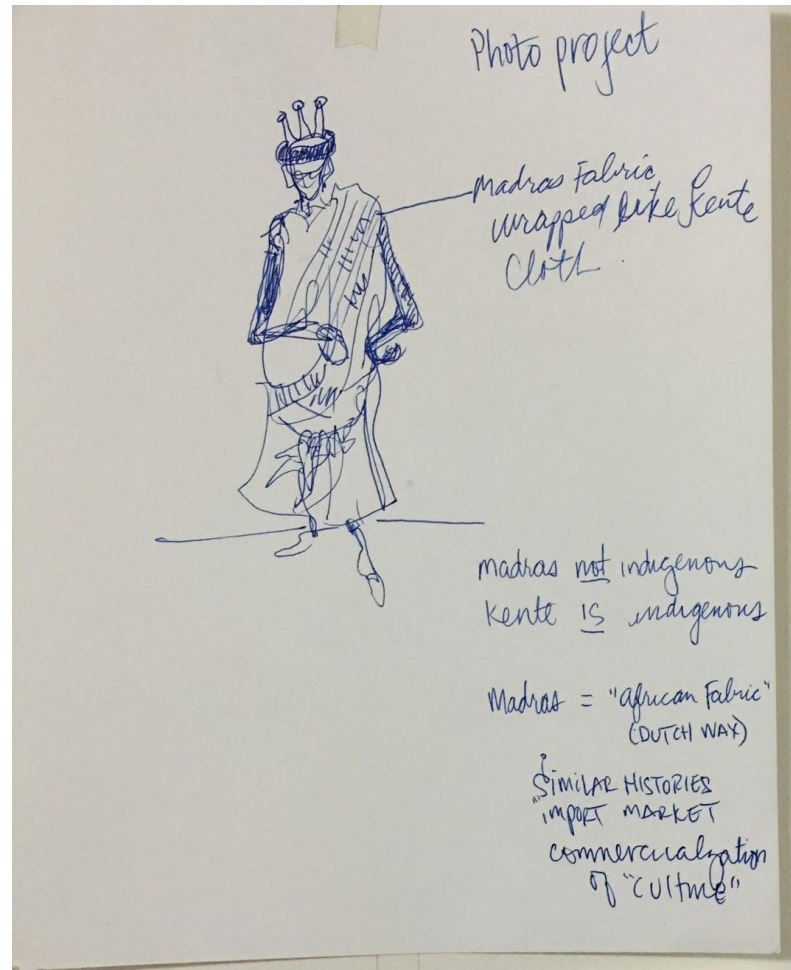
...considering parallel histories...

I began to think about the history of Dutch wax fabric in West Africa and its shared historical path with that of Madras in Martinique. Considering the traditional ways that the body is draped with fabric (Dutch wax and other fabrics) in West Africa, I wanted to turn from the Eurocentric style of dress which incorporated Madras and embrace “body draping” as a way to symbolically elevate the status of the fabric and that of its wearer.

This concept led to a photo series and video project that conjures a mythical indigenous Martinican origin of the fabric.



<https://goo.gl/images/vL1syJ>







...red carpet treatment...

Another concept I am developing is the Red Carpet: Madras Edition

Considering the race and class associations with Madras, I am proposing using Madras fabric pattern to create a carpet (runner) that would be installed in strategic locations. It is a way to metaphorically and literally trample on the institutions and structures that enslaved Africans on the island and held African descendants in subservient roles post-emancipation.



...flying the flag...

After the flag was created, I performed a number of symbolic actions and strategic placement with it. These actions and placements were meditations on ideas of nationalism, conquering territory, reclamation of space, reclamation of the black body, re-thinking historical narratives and proposing new ways to re-shape cultural identity.

- 1) Running through the beautiful Savane des Pétrifications in the south of Martinique holding the flag so the wind and I could make it wave.



photo by Jean Baptiste

2) Placing the flag atop previously stacked piles of stones momentarily so it could wave in the wind ...



3) Self as flagpole: standing on a pile of weathered rocks on the shore of Savane des Pétrifications allowing the flag to wave in the wind.



4) Flag as “beach towel” for black and mixed-race Martinicans to enjoy leisurely activities.



5) Flag hoisted and waving on a sea faring vessel off the shores of Fort de France.



6) Flag hanging on the flagpole of the Musée Départemental d'Archéologie et de Préhistoire de la Martinique.



7) Flag hanging out of one of the embrasures of Fort Saint Louis in Fort De France



...madras as language...

During an afternoon I spent with three Creole language teachers at the French Language school in Fort de France, I learned that the Creole spoken in Martinique contains words from the Yoruba language. This detail allowed for a deeper contextualization of a playful gesture of completely covering the body with Madras that I had begun to explore. For me, the presence of Yoruba words in Creole serves as a preservation of an ancestral link just as Madras in Martinican culture is a visual and functional connection between the African descendants and their ancestors. I viewed the masking of the body with Madras as kin to the sacred Egungun masquerade of the Yoruba (Oyo) people. Egungun, is “a descendant’s commitment to continuing the traditions of his predecessors and maintaining the reputation of his lineage.”* **

*Greenfield, M. (n.d.). CATALOGING A MYSTERY: A YORUBA EGUNGUN. Retrieved April 27, 2017, from <https://sohe.wisc.edu/research-development/textile-collection/textile-resources-2/featured-textiles-collection/cataloging-mystery-yoruba-egungun/>

** Further research needed here to know if the language of the Oyo people is contained in the Creole in Martinique.

Egungun Yorubaland



<https://goo.gl/images/3V7X63>



<https://goo.gl/images/W8U2bL>

Egungun au Madras



...fin...

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