Gerard Georges Pigeon

ITINERARY OF A CHILD OF THE TRADE WINDS

Memories of a Child Born and Raised in French African Colonies and Educated in the World

Black Studies

Collection Editor
CHRISTOPHER MCAULEY

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I would like to thank my wife Carol, who gave me a life; the courageous Black students

who occupied North Hall and gave me a mission, and finally my friends, who helped me dream.

Contents

Learning objective

The learning objective is to inform the readers about a history too often neglected or just simply obfuscated, about its contradictions and about its absurd pretensions. It also intends to educate about the problems of identity and alienation experienced by immigrants or by individuals subjected to willing or forced expatriation.

Key words

Martinique; Colonial Resistance; Black Studies; UCSB

Abstract

This book is about the life of a child born in the French colony of Senegal from West Indian parents in pre- and post-World War II. It is a testimony of life in the French colonies during World War II and of the author's subsequent navigation between Africa, the Caribbean, France, and finally the United States.

At first, this book depicts the family history in Martinique predating his arrival. It then moves to the depiction of the daily life of colonial subjects, their realities, their adaptations, their accomplishments, and also their contradictions and ambiguities.

This book then moves more specifically to Paris, France, where the adolescent writer matures and completes his political development during and until the end of the war in Algeria. It then moves to the United States, where the young father learns to adapt to his new environment.

This book then depicts the progressive adaptation of the newly arrived immigrant to the reality of a deeply fractured American society and his full involvement in the development of the Black Studies Department at the University of California in Santa Barbara.

Foreword

When imagining how to introduce a memoir written by a very accomplished person who is as humble as he is multitalented, whose work life has primarily focused on valorizing the work of others, who by now is an octogenarian and whom I've known for more than half his life, the invitation to write the introduction to that memoir is both thrilling and daunting. Of course, there are those first 40 little-known years that I would discover in reading the manuscript, but there is also the expectation that I will both know too much and too little to draw the reader in. For example, Gerard Georges Pigeon writes that he had conversations with Aime Cesaire but fails to mention that he translated all of that Martiniquan literary giant's plays! More than once he mentions learning to cook or having been hired as a cook to supplement his income while never mentioning his training, his own cookbook, *Flavors of the Trade Winds*, or the sumptuous feasts he routinely prepared for visiting scholars, students, colleagues, friends, and, of course, family. The ingredients might be peas and rice or might reflect his knowledge of French haute cuisine. Only in reading this memoir did I understand that filling us until we could hold no more was his intention. Hence forth, remember that he is a bit of a rascal.

This slim volume feels like his cooking intentions, so many fragments of a life in the midst of social and cultural histories that I am at once full to overflowing and wanting more. As I read, I repeatedly needed to seek more information about French colonial

history, its social impacts to this day, the quotidian nature of racism with its profound effects, and the more illusive but evident impacts of humor, generosity of spirit, and, yes, resistance that I know to be part of this life.

Above and beyond that, the literary nature of this memoir repeatedly delighted me, even when the subject was anything but delightful. Pigeon writes about "the absurd relativity of our existence" or of being "half white, half Arab, half something in the carnival of pure racism." Elsewhere, and seemingly in the same breath and as lovingly, he recounts "the wingspan of our dreams" and tells us of Gaston Monnerville judged good enough to serve but not good enough to govern. Ah, racism!

Not surprisingly, Gerard begins not with his own birth in 1938 but with the generations who preceded him first in Martinique and then on his family's own version of the Triangular Trade between Africa, Europe (France in this case), and the Caribbean. While legalized slavery in these regions no longer existed, its distance and impact were still fresh enough in the recollections of Pigeon's family that their move to France from the islands he recalled as the transport of fresh flesh from the Antillies. The family's departure from their homeland surely evokes the necessities which drive people to this very day to abandon all that is familiar, even if it is difficult for the possibility (never the promise) of better lives. Eventually, Pigeon will announce his arrival on the scene but it always is almost a footnote on the grander social and historical world that is recounted here. "Adieu foulards … "

As his journey progresses, we are treated to his memories of young adulthood, of being a part of the group of Gs (Gerard,

Gerald, etc.), of their mischievousness and neglect of duties of studies that make us wonder how he was able to enter a University professorship. Here, we must privilege the writer's intention while remembering his life's work. And we must embrace his bricolage which includes not only his academic research but also his ability and capacity to reconstruct an MG from four pistons to a fully functional roadster, his owning and running a French bakery in the heart of Santa Barbara, his musical talents, video filmmaking, his significant hand in building his family home, and more. The poetry herein is his as are his words such as recounting an "amusing somersault of history" that landed his family back in West Africa from where his ancestors were likely first enslaved.

This does not even touch his creation and careful maintenance of the Department of Black Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Whether it was the first or second academic department of Black Studies nationally can be debated, but not whether it was created in the face of great resistance from the University at large. Though Pigeon is amazingly forgiving and avoids personalizing this opposition, it must be known that attempts to marginalize, even starve, the upstart discipline exist still and are perhaps being undertaken with a new virulence. Pigeon will always credit many others while minimizing his own role, but we know better, and a light perusal of University of California history can affirm that. However, evidence of institutional hostility can easily be found, including that after other units had been furnished with spiffy new desks and so on, the Department of Black Studies continued to work from scarred and rusted blue and yellow metal

desks. This does not begin to address appointments and salary increases that were repeatedly denied, nor does it recognize the academic excellence that characterized the department's work and students.

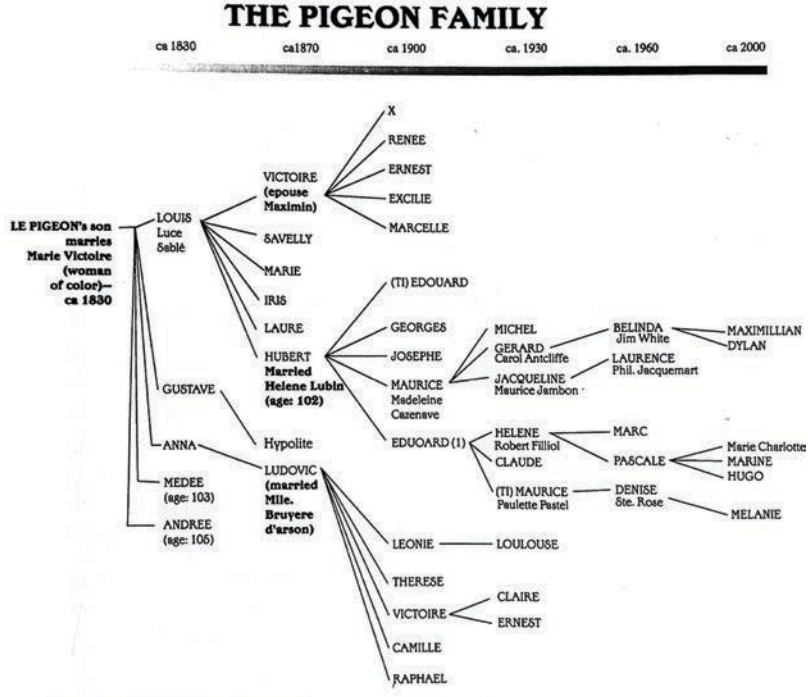
Finally, I would like to note how the personal memoir of Gerard George Pigeon reflects what is best about the discipline of Black Studies. Pigeon began his academic pursuits in dental school in France, then moved to the study of phonetics, then French literature, and eventually to francophone literature and study. For *Third World News Review*, he reported on the entire francophone world, including France, with its vast empire and populations from the Global South: the Third World. Black Studies as a discipline was very capacious, including students of all colors and nationalities and presenting itself convincingly as a necessary corrective to what was called Western history or Western civilization.

The discipline and its best practitioners continue to grapple with the issues that are both old and persistent. Pigeon was always bringing to the fore the realities of the dispossessed, the disfranchised, the disregarded, and exploited. Through his own experience as well as his academic and journalistic work, he introduced or reminded us of the "sans papiers" who, for decades, felt the sting of citizenship denied, the uncompensated colonial subjects whose societies continue to be debased, the massive displaced populations from Palestine to Sudan to the Philippines to the Americas whose resources and labor continue to be stolen. And he was a consummate teacher for thousands of students who carry on the intellectual and activist impulses the discipline demands.

Gerard Georges Pigeon's life reflects all that is best about the west and the rest of the world. I hope that the reader will use this memoir as a launching pad for a fuller historical understanding of our world. Or at least as point of respite before diving into more arduous tasks.

Elizabeth Robinson

1
From Martinique to France: The writer origins and West Indian Culture



This chart is primarily taken from notes hand-written by Maurice Pigeon (Doux Papa).

The early times: The departure from Martinique

As the boat pulled away from Fort de France, everything seemed to freeze in his mind. If his father and mother, standing on the pier, were waving timidly at what they thought to be his silhouette, they were, in fact, saluting the big steamer, the new slave ship à la mode, which, with its belly full of fresh colonial flesh, was ready to deliver it to its new masters waiting for them on the other side of the ocean. To commemorate their departure, a band on the pier was playing the unofficial hymn of colonial times [1] and the premonitory anthem of our family's endless journey:

Adieu foulards,
Adieu madras,
Adieu doudous,
Adieu colliers choux.

A hymn that was answered by a throbbing echo of the ship's orchestra gave to that moment all the allures of a holy rupture with the past.

As the music faded, the island, dominated by its volcano, looked so fragile and lonely that an immense sadness filled his heart. He had just lost a dear friend, the only home he had known, and all that was left were memories of the good times of his youth on the hill of Balata.

He had been preceded on this venture by his brother, Georges, his mother's first son, who, according to gossip, was more a Lubin than a Pigeon, but had become a Pigeon nevertheless and a dedicated one to that.

My grandmother, Hélène Lubin, was, according to our family oral tradition, the daughter of Lubin, a young man from the town of Rivière Pilote, who in 1870 was forced to present his excuse to a so-called offended white man after refusing to cede him passage. After this incident, Lubin decided to punish his accuser for his arrogant expectations and was subsequently condemned for his action by a *Beke* tribunal to 5 years in jail and 1,500 francs in damages. To put the penalties in context, we should note that in 1870, a sugarcane worker was barely making 1 franc a day, and any conviction of 5 years or more had to be completed in the penal colony in French Guyana.

Unhappy with such a decision which they thought to be unjust, the entire population of the island erupted in protest, setting ablaze the whole southern part of the island in support of Lubin. Nevertheless, the colonial powers had the upper hand, and many were deported to Guyana.

Hélène, who had been married before, married Hubert Pigeon, who recognized her son and gave him his family name, and they lived happily ever after.

They lived for a while in Fort de France where Hubert had a job at the dry dock of the harbor and, thanks to Uncle Georges's financial help, were able to buy a house in Balata, which became the cradle of the Pigeon family: a modest house hidden behind the church of the Sacre Coeur (a replica of the one in Montmartre in Paris) on the edge of a canyon dominating the bay of Fort de France, with a direct view of the volcano Mont Pelé.

In addition to Georges, they had a daughter, Josèphe, and two sons, Maurice and Edouard. Only Josèphe lived all her life in Martinique. All the boys exiled themselves from the island and had careers abroad in the colonial world.

As well as being a highly respected seamstress, Hélène also engaged in numerous "seances" with a lady who was to become, by pure coincidence, the mother of my mother, Mme. Cazenave, born Gervais, but that is another story.

Uncle Georges, who later will be known as "the Colonel," was the first despot of the bunch. He was light-skinned, slender, and elegant. Physically, the Colonel did not greatly resemble the rest of his brothers and sister, but emotionally and psychologically he possessed all the attributes of a true Pigeon: hard-headed, uncompromising, temperamental, but generous at heart. Stubbornly, he carried on to the end the unflinching certainty of his convictions. He had, more or less, sacrificed himself on the altar of colonialism to provide enough monetary support to his family and for the education of his two brothers.

A notoriously strict primary school teacher, he subsequently, after an "incident" with the parents of one of his students, decided to quit education and join the military. After military schooling and

training, he obtained the grade of "lieutenant"; unfortunately, this was in 1911–1912. World War I started in 1914, and he was therefore involved in the first of many wars of his military career. His experience and courage had made him by now a captain, and his salary had allowed him to fund his brothers' education. It was thanks to him that Maurice, standing on the sundeck of the steamer, was admiring the scene.

As Martinique, Sacré Coeur, and its mountain, Pelé, faded in the distance, Maurice one more time gazed at the last sunset of his childhood. The rupture being slowly consumed, the future had to be constructed. He quietly descended to his third-class cabin in the belly of the beast, assembled his memories, and tried to imagine what the future would be. As he fell asleep, images of France that had been amplified by the colonial propaganda flooded his memories.

Martinique seemed to have been built on the model of Parisian life. Everything was a copy of an original, either existing on the other side of the ocean or having been built by famous French individuals. Just to name a few, there was the Schoelcher Library built by Eiffel; the church of the Sacré Coeur, a faithful copy of the one existing in Paris; and a reproduction of the theater of the Comedie Française. Not a single place on the island lets you forget that you were a colonial subject, owing your life, welfare, and intelligence to the generosity of Europeans. The great *habitations*, where your parents or ancestors worked as slaves, were still arrogantly standing to remind you of the humiliating past. But this was still Maurice's home, where his house, history, and the insouciance of his childhood had taken place, and whose images and events were now filling his burgeoning memory.

About 14 days later, after having wallowed through the Sargassum sea and crossed the Atlantic, the boat, with its gloat of fresh flesh from the Antilles, anchored in Le Havre harbor on a grey and rainy day.

En route: First stop, Paris

Just like the boat he had left behind, the train that took him to Paris spewed its heavy panache of smoke through the green countryside. Although it was as green as his island, the scenery nevertheless looked more organized, more rigid, more sterile. The banana tree, the sugarcanes, the *bouies, cachimans*, papayas, and palm trees had given way to domesticated rows of apple trees and other new fruit trees that danced mechanically to the rhythm of the rails. In silence, the friends he had met on the boat, glued to the windows of their compartment, seemed hypnotized by this new spectacle unfolding in front of their eyes. They all came from the islands, all left to further their studies in Paris, and all were creole speakers. But for the moment, they were all speechless and fascinated by the novelty of the film unfolding in front of them. A few tunnels, a few strident whistles of the train, a chaotic slow down, the squeaking of the brakes, and it was Paris' Gare du Nord train station which greeted them with all its agitation and frantic commotion. He had left a luxuriant island to land in the smoky capital of the world.

The taxi dropped him in the Latin Quarter in a small hotel off the Rue Champollion that had been reserved, not too far from the lycée Louis Le Grand. Thus started, at the end of a sunny day in the moist evening of summer, the life of Maurice in the Paris of 1920.

Everything had to be learned: the streets, the buses, the subway system, the Luxembourg garden, the cafés, everything. And the Parisians, with their arrogant inquisitive gaze, with their constant frantic agitation, and with their pretentious expectations, were very similar to the *Bekes* he had observed on the island, perhaps with an additional dose of negligent aggressive behavior.

If his mother had given him the names of a few people whom he could contact in Paris, he had not much time to even think about them, for school, classes, and the intensive adaptation he had to undergo had priority over what he then considered to be trivial chitchat.

He had not been in Paris more than a month when one night, as he was walking and chatting in creole with friends, they encountered a group of entitled young and aggressive Frenchmen, who took it upon themselves to give "les Nègres," as they called them, a lesson. A pretty wild fight ensued with what was then referred to as "Les Camelots du Roi," a far-right, semi-fascist[2] organization well known by people of color for their aggressiveness and intolerance. If the night ended with a few scars, it certainly gave the islanders a dismal perspective of what was waiting for them in the land of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. So much for the philosophers and the revolution. The Enlightenment era was suddenly dimming.

Nevertheless, Maurice was becoming increasingly absorbed in his studies. One afternoon, as he and his island friends were coming back from an afternoon on the Grand Boulevard, they took the subway at the Opera station in the direction of Porte d'Ivry. As they were talking in creole, they noticed an old lady sitting on

the opposite side of the car who looked at them with insistence. Slightly annoyed by her attitude, but already used to this type of behavior, they started to joke in creole about her:

> Gadé madam là…. Ça qi rivei….hm hm hm fout y ka fè moin chié.! etc….
> (Look at the old lady. What's wrong with her? She's really pissing me off!)

As the Gobelins station approached, and as they were ready to get out, the old lady stood up, calmly came to their side and in a very asserted voice told them in creole language:

> Ça qui rivé zot band ti chenapan. Ou pas sav rekonet moun payi?
> (What happened to you? You cannot recognize "homies?")

Baffled and frankly embarrassed, they were starting to apologize when the old lady continued:

> En plus man sav qui ou yé i man connet maman ou.
> (Besides, I know who you are, and I know your mother.)

And then in a more tranquil voice and in French, she told them her name: Mme Cazenave.

> "Man Cazenave," of course, his mother's partner in "seances," her old friend that lived next to them in Fort de France, formerly known as Mademoiselle Gervais, who had married Monsieur Cazenave. Monsieur Cazenave, who was then a military nurse working for the prison system in Martinique. They had four children by then, Jeanne, Alphonse, and Madeleine who were born in Martinique and a fourth one, Roland, born in Cayenne French Guyana. The world was really a small place.

As they exited the subway car at Les Gobelins metro station, Mme. Cazenave left with them and, on the subway platform, gave Maurice her address. After many more cordial exchanges, Mme. Cazenave took the next metro after having summoned Maurice to come visit and meet the family or as she put it "old friends":

> Quan ou vlé ou pé passé a kaï nou, nou la…. Nou kai wèou. A plus…y tshimbe rèd.
> (Whenever you want you can visit us. We're home…. See you later… and hold tight.)

She disappeared with the next metro train, leaving Maurice and his friend happy yet humbled by the experience. They always had been taught to respect the elders, *Grands Mouns*, and in this specific case they had acted rudely. Were they becoming as arrogant as the Parisians, they asked themselves? Were they losing their culture and sensibility? Nobody could answer these questions at that point, but they were still a little embarrassed by the incident.

Mme. Cazenave was living not too far from them in the 13th arrondissement or district of Paris, Rue du Chateau Des Rentiers, in an apartment she had obtained thanks to her perseverance and her militant activities. Born Lise Gervais in Martinique, she had married Eustache Cazenave, an army medic on active duty on the Island. They had five children born on the diverse sites of his appointments: Martinique, Guyana, and Senegal. In 1918, at the end of World War I, the entire Cazenave family, minus Eustache the patriarch, was living in the town of Marseilles in southern France, for Eustache had disappeared. The only information about him was that he had been decommissioned in Morocco

but never again returned to live with his family. According to some family gossip, he had fallen in love with a sex worker and was presumably still living with her in Morocco.

Abandoned by her husband and having to survive, Mémé, as we called her, declared herself a "war widow" and got a few jobs as a seamstress for the army. While in Marseilles, she organized a group of women, who, like herself, had lost contact with their husbands and, in a very gutsy move, went to Paris to plead their cases and present their demands. Surprisingly, they were received by Louis Barthou, the minister of war in the Clemenceau government[3], who at the close of their meeting granted them free housing in Paris and gave their children the status of *Pupilles de la Nation* (Wards of the Nation)[4], a title which provided them with state support and free access to education. And that's the way rue du Chateau des Rentiers became an integral part of our history and how all Mémé's children were able to go to high school at a time when high school was not free.

Little did Maurice know then that if Balata was the cradle of the family in Martinique, the Rue du Chateau Des Rentiers, against all odds, was to become years later our family's mandatory stopover on our way to Martinique and even, at times, our domicile in Paris. In other words, it became the perfect refuge for a wandering family.

On his first visit to Martinique, when he was 22 years old, Maurice fell in love with Madeleine, Mme. Cazenave's stunningly beautiful 17-year-old daughter, who was studying to become a "dactylo," the equivalent of a typist or secretary. They lived with Mme. Cazenave for 4 years. Because of his excellent background in

math, Maurice found a job in a trader's office (*Agent de Change*) and life seemed to be fine for the moment. They married in 1927, when she was 22 and he 27, but as they were already thinking of starting a family, destiny decided to offer them the possibility of exiting a potential life of predictable routine.

Business had been good, money was sufficient, and they were already accustomed to life in Paris. They used to go dancing on weekends in *guinguettes* by the River Marne or at times at the "Bals Nègre" in la rue Blomé or at the one in the Rue de Valence. These dance halls catered principally to Paris' populations of color and were places where they could come and dance their famous Beguine while listening to Martinican musicians like Stellio or Léardee[5]. It was strange for Maurice to see people who generally viewed him as belonging to an inferior species let themselves go without inhibition and prejudice to the rhythm of creole music. Besides the supposed savagery of the African and their descendants, eroticism was viewed by many Europeans as the other specific trait of their culture. In 1907, for example, at the height of its colonial expansion, the French government had organized the Great Colonial Exhibition, where Africans were exhibited like animals and were shamelessly advertised to the French public as inferior savages, representative of African culture generally.

So, when in 1925 an American woman, Josephine Baker, appeared dancing with a costume made of bananas in *La Revue Nègre* (*The Negro Review*), it only helped publicize and propagate the seductive characteristic of African culture and render almost acceptable its integration into the French imagination. By then, in those "Bals Nègres," the eroticism of culture, whether African or

African American or Caribbean, was in fashion and the seduction of the other was momentarily acceptable.

But one of Maurice's preferred amusements was to go to Longchamps or the Vincennes racetracks, partially to bet on horses but mainly to meet a group of Antillean friends who, like him, were starting to get addicted to betting.

Not far from where he had his office, Uncle Roland was managing a café in front of the stock exchange and had at times helped rescue Maurice from difficult situations. In one case, he had helped him avoid the ire of Uncle Georges after gambling away the money he had just received to pay for his little brother Edouard's education, who had arrived sooner than planned to study in Paris. Fortunately, his job at Piconon was secure and his boss was extremely friendly. As a displaced person, it was somewhat reassuring to find a sympathetic ear and a friendly adviser, a mentor of sorts with whom he could confidently communicate.

One morning, after having been called up to the boss' office, Mr. Piconon announced that despite appearances, his business prospects were not as rosy as he imagined. Mr. Piconon could feel that something big was in the making and that the economy and the stock exchange would be impacted very soon. In other words, the Great Depression was lurking, and it would be best for Maurice to find a different and more stable position. Having connections, Mr. Piconon offered to help him find a stable position, either in the customs office or in banking, the only caveat being that those positions would not be in continental France but in France's overseas colonies. The choice was therefore between a career in customs in Africa or in banking in Indochina.

After a lengthy discussion with Madeleine, they opted for Africa and the customs office for, as Madeleine put it, "it was not as far as Indochina, and she could therefore come back more easily to see her family Rue du Chateau Des Rentiers." And so it was that on a bright morning in July, they left France on a boat for their first assignment in Cotonou, which was then in the colony of Dahomey[6], today the Republic of Benin. It therefore happened that, by a surprising coincidence, his first appointment happened to be in a place where his ancestor might have lived. An amusing somersault of history that Maurice took as a favorable omen for his stay, which as pleasant as it was, also had its share of traumas and dramas.