

ARTICLE

Re-Membering Our Impossible Worlds: Black Archaeology for Amazonian Africans

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(Received 1 March 2024; revised 16 May 2024; accepted 13 June 2024)

Abstract

This article stems from the encounter of ancestral stories and archaeological knowledge for Africans in Amazonia. Against colonial fragmentation and anti-Blackness, these theoretical reflections are rooted in Black Archaeology as a praxis of redress. The continuing struggles of ancestral and contemporary Black Amazonian communities, who insist on anti-colonial modes of existence, connect with the need to indigenize the archaeological mode of knowledge through otherwise world-senses as ontoepistemological references. These questions emerged during the first steps of the ongoing collaborative archaeological project *Pitit'Latè*. The founding story of Mana, an Amazonian village built in 1836 by the hands, heads, spirits, and technologies of more than 400 West Africans captured in the illegal transatlantic trade, serves as the epistemological bones of this research about Black Amazonian territorialities and materialities that remain erased in dominant colonial discourses.

Resumo

Este artigo surge a partir do encontro de histórias ancestrais e do conhecimento arqueológico para pessoas africanas na Amazônia. Contra a fragmentação colonial e a anti-negritude, essas reflexões teóricas encontram suas raízes na Arqueologia Negra, constituindo uma práxis de reparação. As lutas contínuas das comunidades negras amazônicas ancestrais e contemporâneas, as quais insistem em modos de existência anticoloniais, conectam-se com a necessidade de indigenizar o modo de conhecimento arqueológico por meio de outros percepções do mundo como referências ontoepistemológicas. Tais indagações surgiram a partir do projeto arqueológico colaborativo em andamento *Pitit'Latè*. A história de fundação de Mana, uma aldeia amazônica construída em 1836 pelas mãos, cabeças, espíritos e tecnologias de mais de 400 pessoas oeste-africanas capturadas no tráfico transatlântico ilegal serve como os ossos epistemológicos dessa pesquisa sobre territorialidades e materialidades Pretas Amazônicas, ainda apagadas em discursos coloniais dominantes. O chamado para outras bases ontoepistemológicas ecoa com diversos pensamentos críticos Afrodiaspóricos, a exemplo do conceito de Longa Emancipação de Rinaldo Walcott.

Keywords: Black Archaeology; African Diaspora; Amazonia; ontoepistemology; Black indigeneity

Palavras-chave: Arqueologia Negra; Diáspora Africana; Amazônia; ontoepistemologia; Indigeneidade negra

Re-Membering One African Diasporic Story

Ago mo Gangan Mana, Ago Man Alais!

(Ago to my Ancestors from Mana, Ago Man Alais!)

I ask the Ancestors for permission to remember and tell this story, the story of their lives and the story of ours.

One hundred and seventy-seven years ago, a woman sang and danced with her children, their small feet accompanying her rhythm as they were planting manioc roots in the wet ground

made of soil and ashes. It was the rainy season, and their singing seemed to be engulfed by the vastness of the forest around them. As she looked at her fourth child, she remembered her own grandmother taking her to the yam field when she was that same age. It was before the crossing, before the estates, before they came and built the village. The woman touched the ground with her right hand before bringing it to her forehead, in reverence of all Ancestors. She remembered those who had shared love and tears with her in the holds of the ships and at the estates. She promised to offer them a calabash full of liquor when she returned to the house after today's work at the *Bati*. She tightened the cloth on her lower back and felt her sleeping baby closer to her. It was time to go to the canoe and return to Mana. The woman looked at the space around her, satisfied, but suddenly felt a familiar rush of fear. She did not know if they would be able to come back and collect the manioc.

This woman is my direct maternal Ancestor, whose name appears in Euro-colonial registers as Alaïs. She and over 400 West African people are the founders of a village on the left bank of Mana River, in Guianese Amazonia. Named after the river, the village of Mana was built by the hands, heads, spirits, and technology of survivors of severe disease, ill treatment, heartbreak, uprooting, and other traits of enslavement. In all the territories colonized by the French, such as this part of the Guianas, the first half of the nineteenth century was marked by political turmoil: trafficking and enslaving African people was gradually being prohibited because of global pressure from other European colonizers. Mana founders were people whose lives were at the epicenter of the global and complex transition within European colonial occupation of the Americas that would be called “abolition” (or “emancipation”).

My great-great-great-great-grandmother Alaïs, at the time a 14-year-old child, was but one among the hundreds of other West African people transported in the hold of the recidivist, illegal ship *Le Navarrais* before it was noticed near the northeastern coast of Martinique on a stormy night in August 1827. Like most of those seized on illegal slave ships, she was sent to Guiana to increase the number of enslaved Africans at the colonial government estates. For years, the French colonial authorities benefited from the gray area surrounding their administrative status, which simultaneously made them non-enslaved and non-free *Noirs* (Blacks). This contradiction never prevented the violent exploitation of their free labor on the same terms as their enslaved companions. The increasing pressure caused by abolitionist political leaders and lawmakers eventually led to the decision to allow them to gradually access juridical freedom in a controlled environment, isolated from the rest of the colony and especially at a distance from the enslaved population. Only at the end of a seven-year engagement would these Africans receive an official document confirming their status as free men and women.

At the time of the story that begins this article, in 1847, my Ancestor Alaïs and most adults among Mana founders had already received their title of freedom. Their former companions who remained at the estates would only receive their own at the time of formal abolition in 1848. During the rainy season, a conflict with the French colonial administrator emerged in the village. The colonial government created a prohibition regarding the founders' free circulation in the territory and their use of an important portion of the land surrounding the town, in which they had established their *Bati*—a space for their slash-and-burn food crops—in order to focus on the government-controlled cultivation of colonial goods. After multiple failed attempts to negotiate with an administrator convinced of their racial (and therefore intellectual) inferiority, Mana founders silently went back to their homes. The next morning, to the astonishment of the French administrator, half the town had quietly taken their canoes and gone several kilometers upriver to collectively create other *Bati*, another life space, on their own terms, rooted in their own lifeways.

This is but one of the countless stories that narrate the rooting of Africans in a new territory of the Americas, one more African Diasporic story. As is the case with so many others, this story speaks of enslavement, of uprooting and separation, of European colonizers. To me, it is not just a story among others. It is the story of my Ancestors; it is the story of my people, my own story (Hartemann 2019). I am an African Diasporic person who was born in the Amazonian region called Guiana. My roots have been planted in the white sand of Mana by Alaïs, and although other Ancestors and their lands also

make up who I am, one of my callings is to remember and tell her story and the stories of Mana founders. This calling, to tell the stories of the Ancestors, is what has always been at the root of my interest in the archaeological mode of knowledge. For many children of the Black Diaspora, archaeology has appeared as a possible pathway shown by the Ancestors—in order to have us bring their memories back to life and break the silence surrounding their existences in Euro-colonial archives and their official written narratives.

This article intends to share critical theoretical reflections stemming from the elaboration of the archaeological research project “*Pitit’Latè*: Anticolonial Archaeology of Afroguianese Lands, Peoples, and Memories.” In the Afroguianese language, *Pitit’Latè* means “Children of the Earth/Land/Ground.” The relationship with *Latè*, the earth, constitutes the basis of this ongoing collaborative project, of which the main goals are to remember, locate, and show the connections between past, present, and material and immaterial stories of Black Amazonian communities of Guiana.

As a Black Archaeology project rooted in Guiana, a contemporary colony of France, a main concern of *Pitit’Latè* is to further interrogate and imagine possible pathways for an archaeological mode of knowledge that neither reiterates nor participates in structures of colonial violence and anti-Blackness. Although the project is guided by the remembering of Mana founding Ancestors, it seeks to connect this African Diasporic story of rooting with those of other Black Amazonian communities while elaborating an archaeological mode of knowledge that is meaningful to us, Black Guianese people. The current collaborators of the project *Pitit’Latè* are eight Black Guianese people who tie their ancestral origins to different territories of the Guianas and broader Caribbean region. Four of them are *Moun’Mana* (People of Mana), the direct descendants of Mana founders. Among them, two are my elders, Tante Manotte Bourne and Tante Éliane Gazel, joined by M’meri Swalasi M’Buundi and Soeur Christine Maria. The other four collaborators—Frank Anakaba Abisiké, Lysiane Némouthé-Calumey, Jean-Pierre Belgarde, and Cinthia Mac Derby—respectively state their territories of origin as being Saamaka traditional territory, the Guianese territories of Malmanoury and Sinnamary, the city of Saint-Pierre in Martinique, and the villages of Mocha/Arcadia and Plaisance in Guyana.

The initial phase of the project, which began in 2022, has centered on the establishment and strengthening of relations of collaboration. Previous collaborative research had been initiated with my elders and other descendants of Mana founders since 2017, laying the foundations for the theoretical and methodological reflections I have called the Griotic Archaeology approach (Hartemann 2019, 2022). Although archival research in colonial documents has been conducted to “listen” to the traces left by the founding Ancestors, orality and memory constitute the central root from which the project is conceived. To date, research activities with collaborators have included a number of study workshops about archaeology, African and African Diasporic histories, and world perceptions, but these have focused on ethnographic interviews. Drawing from reflections of Griotic Archaeology, the ethnographic component of the research was designed by centering ancestral memory and the ongoing presence of the Ancestors as co-storytellers. The relationship with *Latè* was therefore remembered by invoking and connecting with memories of Ancestors, their own connection with the earth, and images of their materiality and territoriality. Interviews were conducted in languages that carried less colonial weight for the collaborators: for the most part, Afroguianese was used but also English and occasionally French.

Within the project, the founding of Mana is therefore not limited to being a study object but rather emerges as an ancestral story that constitutes the epistemological bones of the research. Remembering the founders’ refusal of the French colonial system of land management, and their choice to root their existences in the Amazonian soil on their own terms, connects with broader, shared, and uninterrupted strategies of Black resistance through place making across the African Diaspora. And intertwined with this memory the reminder of the heavy repression by colonial authorities that followed their autonomous establishment emerges—a story of land dispossession that speaks to the continuation of historical violence enacted against multiple Black communities, territories, and ways of being.

The struggles for autonomous place making, as they are experienced and shared by Mana Ancestors, their Guianese descendants, and so many Black communities in past and present times, can be analyzed through the notion of Long Emancipation, coined by Barbadian author Rinaldo Walcott. According to Walcott (2021:3), legal abolition/emancipation did not create “a sharp and necessary

break with the social relations that underpin slavery.” Despite accessing *legal* freedom, Black Diasporic people remain unfree in an ongoing time of emancipation, negotiating true freedom against enduring ideological and material structures of anti-Blackness (Walcott 2021:1).

Walcott’s idea is part of a long tradition of Global Black scholarship, which has worked against the idea of a radical rupture between a past time of enslavement and a present supposedly marked by freedom and progress, choosing instead to point to the continuities, afterlives, and ongoing effects of enslavement, racially based violence, and colonialism (Hartman 2007:6; Mbembe 2019; McKittrick 2011, 2014; Wynter 2003). The continuing struggles present in Black place making, such as those manifesting in Mana and Guianese Amazonia from the nineteenth century onward, constitute an essential aspect of the persistence of colonial and anti-Black structures.

The continuity of structural land dispossession for Black and Indigenous Guianese communities has become a significant cause of for ethnic conflicts and disputes over land ownership and occupation. Over 90% of Guianese land is constituted as private possession of France (Agence France Presse 2019), which persists in refusing to ratify international treaties and conventions that recognize the existences and the rights of Indigenous and traditional communities, such as the International Labor Organization Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 1989 (No. 169) (Palayret 2004:143–144). France’s colonial domination manifests through the continuity of its strategy of annihilation of relations with the land/territory that are not defined by Euro-colonial ontological references and therefore do not serve the Euro-colonial agenda.

Black Archaeology can be understood through two of its main objectives: (1) the archaeological study of peoples of African descent now and then (Flewellen et al. 2021) and (2) the reconfiguration of archaeological knowledge as anti-racist (Franklin et al. 2020). Both goals are explicitly political and rooted in a search for redress for the structural harms committed against past and present Black communities, including those caused by archaeology and heritage practices (Flewellen et al. 2021:5). This mission informs the shared epistemological and methodological strategies of Black Archaeology: it is inscribed in a legacy of Black studies and Black feminist praxis, and it entails collaboration with descendant communities (Flewellen et al. 2021:5) who are centered as the primary audience of the research. *Pitit’Latè*’s study of Black Amazonian place making follows Black Archaeology’s goals. Answering the call to make “discussions of the material and ideological configurations of Blackness and racial geographic domination of the past and present central to project design and the interpretation process” (Flewellen 2017:73), it also seeks to make visible the continuities of colonial and anti-Black structures as they manifest within the epistemological and ontological bases of archaeological knowledge.

Global South scholars such as Agiküyü author Ngügi wa Thiong’o (2009) and Zimbabwean professor Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2021) have conceptualized colonial violence as a dismemberment, the fragmentation and erasure/forgetting of ways of being, knowing, and belonging. The commitment to redressing colonial harms therefore is tied to restoring existential integrity through remembering noncolonial and other ways of being in the world, a process they call “re-membering” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021; Thiong’o 2009:88). Re-membering represents but an additional notion that merges with the different strategies of redress and refusal of colonial violence undertaken by Indigenous, Black, and colonized communities that undergird a shared quest, the yearning for wholeness (Alexander 2006; Myers 2023; Thiong’o 2009).

This article shares ideas that are part of such a quest for wholeness. It seeks to connect the ancestral and contemporary stories of Black Amazonian place making, given that they emerged from the memory of *Pitit’Latè* collaborators with theoretical reflections and concepts elaborated by Black study scholars to understand the continuities of anti-Black and colonial violence as it manifests in processes of territorialization, such as Rinaldo Walcott’s *Long Emancipation*. More importantly, it weaves this discussion with a reflection about the archaeological mode of knowledge as well as the limits of archaeological research when it does not recognize and oppose its colonial and anti-Black ontoepistemological bases.

I will first discuss and problematize the elements that underpin the notions of reality and materiality as they are tensioned in archaeological knowledge about Black Amazonians. Then, I will approach

(1) the colonial continuities and anti-Black structures that created and maintain ontological and spatial divisions between Mana founders, (2) their contemporary reiteration for Black and Indigenous Guianese people, and (3) the colonial complicity of archaeology in historicizing and materializing them. I turn to the *Bati*, an Afro-Indigenous slash-and-burn cultivation space as an anticolonial Amazonian life mode that provokes the reimagining of what a Black Amazonian sense of place and materiality is, and I interrogate how archaeology can study it.

How to Tell Impossible Stories of Black Amazonian Materiality

As a teenage Afroguianese person fascinated by archaeology, I had the opportunity to participate in some excavations as a volunteer. At the time, more than 15 years ago, I did not really question why all the archaeologists were White and French. After all, almost all my teachers at school were White and French, which is common in a colonized territory such as Guiana. Most of the excavations that I participated in happened to be at sites of African enslavement, specifically sugar plantations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries located both on the coast and in the interior. I yearned to learn more (anything really) about the lives of all these African Ancestors, whose stories, names, and territories were never part of the French school curriculum in place in Guiana. My yearning was always met with deep frustration, because the research questions were always focused on the things, places, interests, and lives of the White planters. The names, origins, and materiality of the enslavers were known and studied by archaeology but not those of the numerically higher people who had actually lived on and built these sites. My inquiry about possibilities to focus on an area known on historical maps to be a place of life of the enslaved Africans received the answer that archaeologists would never find anything, given that “they had nothing,” or that their belongings were made of organic material. Tied to this memory, I recall White archaeologists explaining to me the absence of Créole (Black/Afroguianese) people in archaeology to me with the statements—often expressed in a mocking tone—that “they don’t like working the land,” “they don’t like working under the sun,” or “they are afraid of being in the forest.”

At the time, I was confused and silently hurt, not only because of the veiled racism present in these words (which I could not really grasp) but because this narrative did not fit at all with the cultural identity of my Afroguianese people, which is fundamentally related to the rural world. In my mother’s culture, we had songs and dances based on the way of life of the *Bati* (spaces of slash-and-burn cultivation), *kont’* (stories) and *dôlô* (proverbs) about the forest and the myriad of beings living in it, our healing practices were linked to plants in the *lakou* (backyard), and our traditional cooking depended on food grown and prepared by family. In addition, memories about Ancestors or family members who were hunters, gold prospectors, or cultivators abounded, and people frequently mentioned the next *mayouri* (a set of collective practices for cultivating and caring for the *Bati*). In sum, any Afroguianese cultural element was closely or distantly linked to the land and to a visceral belonging to the Earth.

How does one deal with this contradiction? Who was telling the truth? The White French archaeologists, from their two-dimensional position as scientists and colonizers, or my Black Amazonian family stories? Colonial domination operates through the establishment and maintenance of regimes of truth that exclusively legitimate and serve Euro-colonial geopolitical interests and ways of engaging with the world (Kilomba 2010; Myers 2023; Wynter 2003). Knowledge and knowledge-making processes are at the center of colonial power dynamics; namely, a violent hierarchy that defines who can speak, who can know, and who has the right to decide (Kilomba 2010:28; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). According to African Diasporic scholar artist Grada Kilomba (2010:29), science does not constitute “a simple apolitical study of truth, but the reproduction of racial power relations that define what counts as true and in whom to believe.”

The continuing impact of colonial and racial violence against Black Amazonian communities is manifest not only through their historical and geographic erasure but also in other ways. The production of absence and the silence regarding the presence of African people in the Amazonian region both in the past and in the present remains a central issue affecting contemporary struggles for territorial rights (Moraes 2021:134; Sampaio 2011). There is an “active silencing” (Trouillot 1995:25) at the center

of historical and archaeological knowledge that serves to maintaining the current colonial power order. The creation of a discourse of disconnection between Blackness and the Amazonian territory can be witnessed across colonial and national borders (Jackson 2012), through a spatial and ontological divide between the coast, where Black people would be living as non-Amazonian and more Caribbean, and the interior would be portrayed as simultaneously empty and Indigenous. Through these discourses, Amazonia appears as an impossible place for Blackness: Black Amazonia is rendered ungeographic and unimaginable. Black Amazonian stories are therefore impossible to remember and tell (Hartman 2008:10; McKittrick 2006:33).

Additional elements regarding the spatial, demographic, and historical context of the broader Guianese region, with a particular focus on the area that is still under French colonial control, appear important to gain a better understanding of the underpinning of such official narratives. Although it can be challenging to tell such a story in ways that do not simply reproduce Euro-colonial narratives and categories, the following paragraphs represent an attempt to provide readers with a succinct context through the centering of Guianese rivers and inhabitants.

Mana River, the one that gave its name to the village founded by my Ancestors, is but one of many great rivers of the mountainous territory of northern Amazonia called Guiana, “the land of the many waters.” For its past and present inhabitants, Guianese rivers have long been perceived and are still experienced as important spaces of connection, as witnessed in the centrality of fluvial transportation and kinship networks spread across river shores. However, from spaces that connect rivers are transformed into colonial borders demarcating power struggles between European nations and their enduring legacies. The Guianas, now pluralized, designate the territory that lies between the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers, currently divided into eastern Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French-colonized Guiana, and Brazil (Amapá State). The Oyapock River constitutes the border line between Brazil and French-colonized



Figure 1. Guianese region: (center and right) some of its main waterways; (left) its geopolitical borders (Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French-colonized Guiana, Amapá State [Brazil]).



Figure 2. The Maroni River, space of Black Amazonian connection and colonial border. (Color online)

Guiana, a matter finally settled in 1900 after recurring contestations—whereas to the west, close to Mana River, the Maroni River forms the border with Suriname (Figures 1 and 2).

The Guianas are the ancestral home to multiple Indigenous communities of Arawak, Karib, and Tupi-Guarani languages. Indigenous villages established near the mouths of the Mana and neighboring Maroni Rivers are mostly Kalin'a and Arawak Lokono communities, whereas the territories of the Wayana people are mostly spread upriver, in the highlands between Suriname, Guiana, and Brazil. Along the Oyapock River are Paykweneh, Wayãpi, and Teko communities whose kinship ties extend in regions throughout Brazil and Guiana. All these communities have been renegotiating their place-making strategies in the region following colonial European invasions that started as early as the sixteenth century (Van den Bel 2015:474). Radiocarbon and thermoluminescence dating in archaeological sites of the broader Guianese region has yielded data pointing to earliest dates of occupation between 14,000 and 9000 BP (Van den Bel 2015:99), and for French-colonized Guiana, circa 4000 BC (2015:135). Although a more structured approach to archaeological research is fairly recent (the 1970s for the broader region and the 1990s for Guiana), the persistent lack of community-based archaeological research is at the root of a disconnection between narratives about the past built by Euro-Western researchers and Indigenous narratives regarding their ancestral histories (for exception, see Cabral 2016).

Guianese rivers appear as central elements in the European colonial strategies to occupy the region over the centuries. Both the coast and rivers constitute central colonial spaces for French, Dutch, English, and Portuguese colonizers, who successively attempt to gain control of the area, first through a period of trade with Indigenous communities and the creation of settlement posts in the early seventeenth century (Van den Bel 2015). This is followed by the establishment of forts and plantations of tobacco, cotton, sugar, annatto, and spices, as well as evangelizing missions along rivers (Losier 2016:15). The area of Cayenne, situated near the coast between the mouths of two rivers, becomes the main settlement of the Guianese territory that will more permanently turn into a French colony more permanently. Although the increasing number of contemporary French settlers in Guiana originate from much more recent migration fluxes and do not claim a direct descentance

from the planters and colonial administrators of the past centuries, their occupation of the territory, and the multiple socioeconomic privileges from which they benefit reveal enduring legacies of the same historical colonial hierarchies of race, class, and space (Hidair 2007).

Historical research designates the seventeenth century as the moment African Ancestors first arrive in the region as captives, being brought to labor at plantations as enslaved people. In the French colony, such plantations are mostly situated in the area around Cayenne, but they eventually spread in plantations situated along the Approuague and Oyapock Rivers during the eighteenth century. A recurring colonial discourse, reproduced by Euro-Western researchers, describes Guiana as a “failed” small colony situated “at the margin” of the French colonial system, struggling economically and suffering from recurring epidemics, failed projects of settlement, and a “low” number of enslaved people (Losier 2016:17). This has led to some deeply problematic affirmations regarding a supposedly paternalist or “easier” form of enslavement for African Ancestors, given that plantations and urbanized Cayenne had so few captives compared to the Caribbean colonies, which would have entailed a relative absence of marronage. Both of these arguments are foundational to the discourse of Black Amazonia as an ungeographic, impossible space.

Such official narratives are contradicted by the persistent presence of very diverse, numerous, and vibrant communities of African descent both on the Amazonian coast and in the interior. Recurring mentions of both antislavery resistance over the centuries and multiple sites of Maroon settlements in French-colonized Guiana are reported in colonial documents (Ébion et al. 2014). The region across Guiana and Brazil appears in nineteenth-century archives as a space of intense marronage tied to solidarity networks existing across colonial borders (Costa 2016:205). Black rural and Quilombola¹ communities abound in Brazilian Amazonia as the proud descendants of Africans resisting in Maroon settlements and places of enslavement established as early as the seventeenth century (Costa 2016:200; de la Torre 2018; Moraes 2021). In Surinamese and Guianese Amazonia, continuing struggles against colonial governments led to the rooting of multiple Maroon communities politically organized in several ethnic groups and territories. Such communities—namely, the Saamaka, Okanisi, Paamaka, Aluku, Kwinti, and Matawai—have been thriving in territories of the Upper Saramacca, Suriname, and Maroni Rivers since the eighteenth century (Price 2010) and continue to negotiate their political and territorial rights to date (Price 2012).

After a first abolition of enslavement in 1794 in the aftermath of French revolution, enslavement is reinstated in 1804. Following the impact of the Haitian revolution and of the Portuguese occupation of Guiana from 1809 to 1817, and in the midst of different abolitionist movements, the nineteenth century shows the emergence of different French colonial strategies for the region. This is how the region of the Mana River becomes the object of one of many new projects of settlement—first by European settlers—which, when these prove to be unsuccessful, lead to the 1836 founding of Mana by the African Ancestors trafficked on ships rendered illegal by France since 1818 (Cornuel 2006:377). Although colonial historiography and heritage discourses have referred to the foundation of Mana as a historical “exception,” I instead call for the need to connect it with the multiple, untold parallel stories of Black and African Ancestors who negotiated abolitionist transformations on both sides of the Atlantic (Agbelusi 2024; Reilly et al. 2024).

The final abolition in 1848 is followed by periods of indentured work by Asian and African workers (Flory 2006), the transformation of Guiana into a penal colony for convicted men from France and its colonies, and the arrival of newly emancipated African Diasporic migrants eager to participate in the quest for gold, rubber, and other prime materials of the forest that defines Amazonian nineteenth-century economy (Strobel 1998:95). This is experienced in Mana, given that the 1836 foundation is quickly accompanied by such strong fluxes of migration from the neighboring British-colonized colonies—corresponding to present-day Guyana and Caribbean islands such as Saint-Lucia, Barbados, or Dominica—as well as the French-colonized territories of Martinique and Guadeloupe. These Black migrants continue their migration beyond Mana to create new villages upriver. This ability to move, and to move to the interior of Guiana, can be analyzed as a trait of Long Emancipation, a territorial negotiation that acts as “a central dynamic of freedom,” an “element of the newly emancipated selves” (Walcott 2021:36-37).

This movement of these Black migrants to the interior is allowed by the presence of Maroon Saamaka men, who, through their expert and ancestral knowledge of Amazonian terrestrial and aquatic spaces, acted as boatmen responsible for transportation and supply throughout the extensive Guianese region. Their exclusive monopoly of the navigation on the Mana, Approuague, and Oyapock Rivers—the three main waterways of French-dominated Guiana—is signed following a formal agreement between the *Gaamá* (paramount chief) and the colonial governor of Cayenne in 1883 (Price 2012:55–56; Strobel 1998:93). Such migration then results in their reencounter with other children of the African Diaspora on different terms and spaces than through the opposition plantation / Maroon village.

This is remembered by Mana elders I interviewed, given that their territory, in the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, becomes a hub of reconnection of the African Diaspora, materially manifested in shared households. Mana houses, built and inhabited by the children of West African founders who survived the illegal slave trade, become African Diasporic homeplaces that reunite them with Black Caribbean migrants who rent a room before embarking to the gold camps of the interior and with Saamaka boatmen and their children who establish camps in the yard (Hartemann 2019). At dusk, when the mosquitoes rush and people start making fire in the yard so that the smoke keeps them away, what stories were told and shared by all these children of African territories? And in which languages? Were the Ancestors remembered and mourned, transcending the barriers of words that centuries or decades of colonial violence had erected?

This diversity of African Diasporic Ancestors, stories, experiences, and territories that form Black Guianese peoples continues to be manifest in the multiplicity of languages spoken and ethnic-territorial relations of belonging. Contemporary migration fluxes from Haiti, Brazil, Santo Domingo, and West Africa add to the multifaceted aspect of Guianese Blackness. Whereas independence from colonial nations of neighboring countries of Guyana and Suriname are respectively achieved in 1966 and 1975, Guiana goes through a process called “Departmentalization” in 1946, an administrative change that transforms its official status of colony into one of “overseas territory” while keeping it stuck in Frances heavy colonial structures of dependency.

A relatively recent movement in Amazonian historiography has explicitly called for the end of the silence surrounding the past lives of Africans in Amazonia, with a focus as much on their experiences of enslavement as on their negotiations of freedom (Acevedo Marin and Ramos de Castro 1998; Bezerra Neto 2001, 2002; de la Torre 2018; Funes 1996; Sampaio 2011). Amazonian archaeology also shows remarkable initiatives of collaborative research, many led by Black archaeologists, that aim at giving visibility to the stories and knowledge of Black Amazonians. In Suriname, Cheryl White’s (2010) research with Saamaka people connects with archaeological work happening in Brazilian Amazonia, such as Iris Ewejimi Moraes’s (2021) research with Quilombola communities of the Capim River in the state of Pará and Lúcio Costa Leite’s (2014) research with communities in Maracá region of the state of Amapá. While referring to a neighboring region, it is worth mentioning, despite it being based on a neighboring region, the ongoing collaborative archaeological work with Afro-Ecuadorian communities focusing on their continuing resistance against enslavement and colonialism (Balanzátegui and Delgado Vernaza 2024).

In order to counter erasure efficiently, it appears necessary to further understand and oppose the colonial mechanisms present in archaeological knowledge that work to produce that erasure. The discourse of absence and impossibility of Amazonian Blackness is crystallized through the exclusive use of Euro-colonial notions of materiality within colonial archaeological research, which was presented to my teenage self as “they [enslaved Africans] had nothing” or at least nothing worth doing research on, since nothing of theirs could possibly be retrievable in the archaeological record of the “extremely acid” Amazonian soil. In this case, the supposed absence of a materiality that fits Euro-colonial criteria around what is worth doing research on works as a “proof” that African people were not present in Amazonian spaces. Although recent research on plantation spaces in Amazonia has since debunked this affirmation regarding the supposed impossibility to find the belongings of African Ancestors in the archaeological record (Clay 2021; Costa 2016), I wish to suggest a deeper reflection—one that tackles the colonial understanding of materiality and the notion of reality that underpins it.

The notion that different realities, or worlds, coexist is unacceptable within the colonial power order. Colonial domination operates through the creation of a universalizing discourse to explain what is true and what is not. The countless understandings, perceptions, ways of being, and knowledge systems of the colonized, Indigenous, and Black communities about the world and the beings that inhabit it are therefore dismissed as potentially valuable sources of knowledge and are typically reduced to being anthropological study objects. This epistemic violence—the delegitimizing of other knowledge systems—has been tackled by decades of postcolonial, decolonial, Indigenous, and Black critical scholarship (Ani 1994; Chilisa 2019; Collins 2000; Mignolo 2013; Spivak 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 2012), including in archaeology (Atalay 2006; Battle-Baptiste 2011; Bezerra 2017; Flewellen 2019; Gnecco 2009; Haber 2012, 2015; Rizvi 2015).

Black Archaeology has stressed the need for a reconfiguration of archaeological epistemologies (Flewellen et al. 2021:5). I would argue that we specifically need to rethink the intricate bond between epistemology (knowledge-making, the theory of knowledge) and ontology (understandings about reality, being, existence, “what is”) in order to move farther away from the reiteration of colonial violence. Such movement implies the rooting of our research in other noncolonial notions of reality and knowledge that are truly meaningful both to the communities we work with and to us.

Generations of Black and African thinkers have rooted their multiple, global, and diverse theories in the awareness of a need for different ontoepistemologies. The understanding that racial and colonial violence is tied to the destruction of worlds and world-senses² is at the center of Black critical knowledge (Fanon 2005). Drawing from a long legacy of intellectual Ancestors, Black feminist theory (Collins 2000), Afrocentricity (Mazama 2002), Africana philosophy and Black existentialism (Gordon 2023), Afropessimism (Wilderson 2020), and Black study (Myers 2023)—to name only a few Black theoretical traditions—share the common ground of a refusal of colonial notions of reality and knowledge.

Black Study scholars reveal how the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness is manifest in ontological structures of the colonial, modern Western world. The annihilation, social and physical death, and continuing unfreedom of Black communities constitutes the very ground on which modern colonial societies are built (Mbembe 2019; Sharpe 2016), a reality that is rooted in the exclusion of Black people from humanity (Walcott 2014:93; Wynter 2003). Freedom, then, is envisioned within Black Study as an ontological pursuit: “ways of being human in the world that . . . allow for bodily sovereignty. . . . It marks, as well, the social, political, and imaginative conditions that make possible multiple ways of being in the world” (Walcott 2021:2). Against Euro-colonial notions of reality and knowledge marked by existential and epistemological fragmentation (Ani 1994; Ferreira da Silva 2020), Black Study scholars express the desire to remember or reconfigure otherwise worlds (Lethabo King et al. 2020) and other ways of being (Crawley 2020:28), turning to different conceptions of personhood (Wynter 2003), time (Hartman 2007, 2008; Sharpe 2016:13), and space (McKittrick 2006, 2011). The perspectives brought by Black scholars who are also members of Traditional and Indigenous communities appear central in such re-membering, by reminding others of the possibilities to root these critiques within *existing* ancestral African and African Diasporic ontoepistemologies (Alexander 2006; Bâ 1981; Coleman 2023; Flor do Nascimento 2018).

Following the so-called ontological turn of anthropological knowledge (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2004), a growing number of archaeological research projects continue to emerge that engage with noncolonial ontoepistemological notions as valid theoretical and methodological bases, building forms of archaeological knowledge that are more meaningful for the communities and less violent. Such movement is directly indebted to Indigenous Archaeologies (Atalay 2020; Gonzalez 2016; Laluk 2017; Million 2005; Wai Wai 2022) and their political rooting of archaeological research in Indigenous world-senses.

Against the Euro-colonial notion of domestication tied to the domination of nature, Argentinean archaeologist Alejandro Haber bases his research in the concept of *uywaña*, an Aymara word for raising, caring, and nurturing, which “evokes a whole set of ideas and possible relationships through which the archaeological record can be seen” (Haber 2016:475). In Amazonia, Brazilian archaeologist Mariana Petry Cabral’s (2016) collaborative research with the Wayãpi people engages Indigenous ways of being and knowing to craft an archaeological storytelling about the marks of the past. Such

undertaking provokes a reconsideration of what can be considered an archaeological remain, which for the Wayãpi can be a living bird (Cabral 2022). Additionally, it enables the embracing of possibilities to access archaeological materiality through other senses, such as hearing the roar of a stone ax (Cabral 2017). Amazonian archaeologist Queiton Carmo dos Santos (2021) weaves an elaborate reflection on temporality, landscape, and materiality rooted in the interrelational world-sense of his ancestral *ribeirinha*³ community in Ilha do Pará in the state of Amapá. Afro-Brazilian archaeologists and Candomblé elders Iyá Odolewa / Luciana Castro Novaes and Ekedí Ewejími / Iris Moraes also offer deep and provocative reflections about notions of materiality and archaeological praxis that are rooted in traditional African Diasporic ontoepistemologies (Moraes 2021; Novaes 2021).

Indeed, questioning the ontological notions at the basis of archaeological research is crucial to both understanding how the people whose stories are being told understand materiality and ensuring the relevancy and meaningfulness of the archaeological knowledge mode for them. Somali archaeologist Sada Mire (2007, 2011) offers critical reflections regarding the divergences between Euro-Western and Somali conceptions of knowledge and materiality and how they impact the role of archaeology and heritage preservation. The Euro-Western importance given to the material dimension of an object and the duration in time of such materiality simply does not match the Somali ontoepistemology, for which it is the knowledge about this thing, the skills used to realize it, and the relations of apprenticeship tied to it that matter most (Mire 2007:64). Mire further explains that “the Somali approach to preserving knowledge rather than objects, challenges the western paradigm of a ‘tangible’ vs. intangible’ dichotomy. By possessing the knowledge, Somalis are able to turn this skill in to a tangible (visual and/or verbal) product” (2007:64).

Such understanding of materiality—outside the Euro-colonial binary opposing material/immaterial dimensions—is perceptible in the ontologies of Mana communities and more broadly of Black Guianese people. Mana world-senses point to a constant connection between the visible/tangible aspect of existence and what is invisible, nontangible, verbal, and spiritual. Such ontoepistemological interrelationality between physical and nonphysical dimensions informs notions of personhood, space, time, and things, as well as choices, social practices, and their materialization. For example, for us, descendants of Mana founders, both the cemetery and the sea are understood as places characterized by a certain porousness between the material and spiritual realms. For this reason, there are prohibitions to go to such places when one is also situated within the liminal space between material and spiritual state of existence, such as during periods of menstruation, pregnancy, or illness (Hartemann 2019:158). The tamarind tree by the riverside, marking the entry point of the town at the time that Mana was exclusively accessible by the river, is repeatedly mentioned in stories as belonging to such liminal space and therefore commanding the uttermost respect (Figure 3). The constant connection and interaction between these dimensions and their different inhabitants, such as between the living and the Ancestors, are made visible and materialized either through social practices where all can commune or through different material and bodily supports. This can manifest through drinking with the Ancestors while sitting on their graves and asking for their guidance (Hartemann 2019:160); the marking of the skin; or carving of wood windows for protection (2019:174), the use of other material beings, such as cowrie shells, for communication between realms (2019:171), or specific plants to act as guardians of a household, among others (Figures 4 and 5).

How, then, can we perceive, remember, and tell material and immaterial stories of Mana founders *with* their descendants if our archaeological storytelling is not rooted in our own understanding of reality and knowledge? How can we craft a kind of archaeological knowledge that does not reiterate colonial and anti-Black violence through the erasure of ancestral understandings of the world in its ontoepistemological basis?

Within its praxis, *Pitit’Latè* centers Black Diasporic memory as both its primary archive and its theoretical basis. Against colonial fragmenting, all theoretical and methodological choices are elaborated as connections: of people, archives, languages, and knowledge systems (Hartemann 2022). The first step of the project—the ethnographic interaction with collaborators—acts as an initial connecting space that allows for the emergence of our knowledge, memories about the past, our Ancestors, our ancestral territories, our negotiations of colonial and anti-Black violence in the present, and our



Figure 3. Tamarind tree of Mana on the riverside. (Color online)



Figure 4. *Kaz Mana* (house of Mana) in connection with the presence of plants protecting its doorways. (Color online)

Black Diasporic ontologies. As Black Amazonians remember *Latè* and its materiality, this excavation of memory brings to the surface a complex intertwining of stories and feelings simultaneously speaking about the past and the present, ancestral resistance, and colonial wounds. The storytelling about *Latè* is therefore as much about remembering the contradictory coexistence of joy and pain in our Ancestors' struggles for place making as it is to witness it in ours. It makes visible the continuities of external, tacit, material manifestations of colonial structures of violence at the same time as their internal, implicit, immaterial dimensions and strategies of erasure (for further discussion set on the Caribbean Island of Ay Ay / St Croix, see Flewellen 2024).



Figure 5. A wooden door in Mana carved in geometric patterns. (Color online)

More importantly, it is the collaborators' ontoepistemologies, emerging through the connecting space of ancestral memory about *Latè*, that guide theoretical and methodological choices of the research. For instance, the recurring mentions of *Bati* in the knowledge about the earth point to the need to study this space beyond an understanding of a simple place for cultivation but as a

place of life that acts as a central element of Black Guianese and Amazonian reality. Ontologies of relationality shared by Saamaka and Moun'Mana collaborators demand a conceptualization of the very notion of *Latè* as a space of connection for different beings—human and nonhuman, material, and spiritual. This dimension requires that the archaeological knowledge of the project Pitit'Latè be grounded in Black theoretical reflections that ask to consider the ancestral and the spiritual as epistemological (Alexander 2006; Coleman 2023). This implies rooting our conception of materiality in Indigenous and Diasporic African ontological notions, according to which the invisible/spiritual makes known its constant presence through material manifestations, as expressed by Black Caribbean scholar M. Jacqui Alexander: “We see its effects, which enables us to know that it must be there. By perceiving what it does, we recognize its being and by what it does we learn what it is” (2006:307).

When asked about the kind of research questions they wished archaeological knowledge could contribute to answering, most collaborators responded that they wanted to know about the lives of the Ancestors. I understand this as a direct request for a kind of archaeology that re-members: through the remembering of the unbreakable bond between Ancestors and their descendants, it defends and takes care of the dead and dying (Sharpe 2016:10). Such care can be achieved through the refusal of the destruction of our world-senses in the stories we tell about the past and present. As the Ancestors call us into remembering their stories in order to remember who we are, we are called on to live in “the radicality of the impossible” (Mombaça 2021:21). And what if, through these ancestral stories, we were finally able to perceive that our impossible Black Amazonian worlds, with their invisible (im)materialities and “unimaginable geographies . . . have always existed before our very eyes” (McKittrick 2006:8)?

Bati Lifeways and the Re-Membering of Black Amazonian Indigeneity

The November 1847 letter written by the administrator reporting on the departure of the founders from Mana to the colonial governor of Guiana expresses bewilderment, frustration, and fear. Following the elaboration of strategies of repression to be adopted, he insists on stressing the following: “under no circumstances should the establishment of Negro villages be tolerated upriver” (Mélinon 1847).

As a matter of fact, the autonomous rooting of West Africans in an Amazonian space that is outside of colonial control does not just counter the French plans of land management. It is considered a direct threat to the colonial order. Black place making is at the center of the ontological disputes undergirding colonial struggles. What happens when Black people decide to re-create their own ways of life regardless of the needs of Euro-colonial society? The panic conveyed in the words of the administrator is the same as the one expressed by White planters a few years earlier regarding the founding of Mana: Would these formerly enslaved individuals join the nearby Maroon communities? Would they come back to the Cayenne estates to avenge and save their companions? Would they go as far as their Haitian counterparts did and call for a revolution?

This strong feeling of fear touches deeper than the inherent guilt for the violence enacted against African Ancestors. It points to the ontological dependency of the colonial order on anti-Blackness. Euro-colonial society—its power structures, economic interests, and ontoepistemologies—need Blackness as an opposite pole against which it can be defined (Walcott 2014:93). Black geographer Katherine McKittrick affirms that the plantation and its working logics “marked black working bodies as those ‘without’—without legible-Eurocentric history narratives, without land or home, without ownership of self” (2011:948). Hence, the continuity of colonial projects relies on the establishment and maintenance of Black people as simultaneously out of humanity and out of place (Walcott 2014:97). This is illustrated in the colonial discourse of erasure about Black Amazonians, itself “part of a broader geographic project that thrives on forgetting and displacing blackness” (McKittrick 2006:33).

Furthermore, Black placelessness appears as one facet of the colonial violence that aims at de-indigenizing the colonized subjects (Loperena 2022:7). The colonial power order requires the destruction of Indigenous modes of being, knowing, and belonging to the earth. As analyzed by Shona Jackson (2012:3–4) in Guyana, this colonial strategy operates through the real and figurative

displacement of Indigenous Peoples, and through the establishment of new modes of being/belonging that are centrally defined by labor. Within such a strategy, a binary boundary made of an entanglement of ontological, geographic, and material dimensions serves to separate and oppose beings according to their “degree” of indigeneity—that is, their proximity or their distance to the colonial references. Consequently, the refusal of Mana founders to root their belonging to the land according to the colonial need to produce and sell colonial goods goes beyond simple cultivation preferences: it is a statement that they choose their own, Indigenous African world over the colonial world.

Contemporary conflicts over the land in Guiana and their ethnic dimension appear as direct products of this colonial opposition of the colonized according to their choices and negotiations of survival. Due to international pressure, French colonial strategy on land management has now shifted to include the granting of a few land concessions and zones of land use to Indigenous and Maroon communities (Filoche et al. 2017:viii). However, such authorization to *use* (and not own) the land is conditioned on the performance of “traditional itinerant activities,” a criterion established within the French colonial understandings of what constitutes such activities. This new strategy is not tied to a formal recognition of Indigenous and Maroon communities as peoples, or a will to attend to their decades-long political revindications (Tiouka 2023). Rather, it fits colonial interests and geopolitics of the twenty-first century that place Amazonia as a critical space for environmental issues.

Ethnic disputes enmeshed with centuries-old colonial wounds arise as these recent, controlled, and insufficient concessions of land use are exclusively granted to Indigenous and Maroon groups while occurring a simultaneous movement stripping Afroguianese communities (those who do not identify as Maroon) of the scarce land ownership they obtained in the years following abolition. This phenomenon happens through strong economic and legal pressures, as well as the “illegal” occupation of their lands by newly arrived, landless migrants attempting to negotiate survival modes rooted in agricultural practice, such as Haitians. The colonial binary that creates a compartmentalized “world divided in two” (Fanon 2005:3) according to distance to indigeneity is at the root of such conflicts in that it upholds antagonistic notions of people, spaces, and times. Eurocolonial domination in Guiana depends on the following oppositions: Indigenous/Maroon versus Créole (Afroguianese), Créole versus Haitian, plantation/town versus Indigenous/Maroon village, coast versus interior, assimilation versus tradition, and enslavement versus abolition.

Discourses about the past that naturalize and justify these oppositions become central to the maintenance of the colonial order. In this context, archaeological knowledge is used to sustain and materialize the reiteration of the power structures underpinning Euro-colonial reality. Archaeological coloniality manifests through the materialization of elements present in colonial discourses, such as the production of absence of Black Guianese communities from Amazonian spaces, the radical opposition between spaces of plantations and Maroon villages, and a notion of rupture and progress between times of enslavement and post-emancipation. Therefore, the “jokes” by White French archaeologists about Black Guianese people’s supposed aversion to the land are to be understood as more than isolated racist statements; they are part of an elaborated colonial mechanism created to maintain a power structure.

Insisting on refusal and fugitivity, the ancestral stories of Mana also resist the forceful fitting into historiographic, spatial, ethnic, and ontological colonial binary categories. Prior to the founding of and during their experience of enslavement at the government estates, the legal status of the Ancestors made them simultaneously juridically non-free and non-enslaved. It is the impossibility to predict what will happen when they access juridical freedom that leads to their isolation in Mana, where their choices continue to escape what is expected of them. Their refusal to grow colonial goods, to convert to Catholicism, or even to marry (Hartemann 2019) is met with repression because it shows their insistence on indigeneity, on belonging to their own world-senses, which threatens the colonial order. As generations pass and other Black Diasporic communities root in Mana, this refusal of colonial ontological fragmentation continues to manifest through the connection of these children of Africa, through shared households and *Bati* spaces, languages learned, healing practices, family unions, and loving relationships.

This allows us to raise the following questions: Is this Black Amazonian story of Mana Ancestors so radically different from Saamaka stories, from other Black Guianese, Black Amazonian, and Black

Diasporic stories of rooting and place making? Do we need to classify Mana founders as Maroon or as Créole in order to tell their stories? And what of their materialities? Will they fit Euro-colonial notions opposing enslavement and freedom? Will we even be able to perceive them through the Euro-colonial sense of reality?

An increasing number of initiatives in archaeological research center Black placemaking as an essential dimension of resistance (Aubey 2023; Balanzátegui 2022; LaRoche 2014; Moraes 2021; Morris 2017). Black archaeologists Ayana Omilade Flewellen and Justin Dunnivant have emphasized the importance of locating and studying spaces rendered ungeographic (Flewellen 2017:85) and of studying a Black sense of place (Dunnivant 2021:8). Understanding a Black sense of place “as the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter” (McKittrick 2011:949) points to the need to root archaeological research and praxis in the context of Long Emancipation. Archaeological knowledge about Black communities needs to “contend with our entangled histories of power, knowledge, and land . . . how land, power, and knowledge have come together to enact and unfold one of the longest unbroken colonial periods in human history. It might also provide a better explanation of the past and the ways that current conceptions of the present find their sustenance in the past—ideologically and otherwise” (Walcott 2021:30).

Black Indigeneity appears as a concept that can be useful to root both the goals and the ontoepistemologies of this archaeological storytelling of Long Emancipation. It requires us, as Walcott reminds us, “to think of indigeneity as more a flexible process of critique and resistance to modernity rather than an organic identity” (2014:95). Against Euro-colonial notions of Black and Indigenous as opposing categories of difference, I follow anthropologist Christopher Loperena’s call for “a more expansive conceptualization of Blackness, one in which Black peoples in the Americas can be understood as Indigenous—that is to say, historically, spiritually, and culturally connected to place” (2022:7).

When emerging from the memory, knowledge, and feelings of Piti’Latè collaborators, *Bati* appears as a place that refuses coloniality and its fragmenting classification. More expansive than its definition as a space for slash-and-burn cultivation in the forest, *Bati* constitutes a shared Amazonian way of life, one that connects Indigenous, Maroon, and Afroguianese communities. Drawing on Sylvia Wynter’s (1971) conceptualization of the plot, McKittrick’s own analysis can be useful to apprehend *Bati* as a “social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spatializes what would be considered impossible under slavery: the actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize the deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence” (2013:10). Against the mechanisms of silence and erasure of Black Amazonians, *Bati* screams countless stories of continuing insistence in relational world-senses that are rooted in the indigeneity of African Ancestors. As such, it constitutes a space of resistance through Black Amazonian joy, as expressed by many collaborators: “We were happy!” or “It was real life.”

To remember *Latè* means acknowledging the ontological centrality of the interconnectedness between beings, as stated by collaborators. *Bati* lifeways only emerge in an entanglement of memories of family members, neighbors, and ever-present communities of Ancestors. When asked what he felt when he heard the word *Gon*, which means *Latè* (Earth) in his language, Saamaka collaborator Frank answered: “I think of who I am, of where I am from, and of all those that I have known and who are not here anymore. Without the earth, there is no life” (F. Anakaba Abisiké 2022). Afroguianese collaborator Soeur Christine Maria, who is a descendant of Mana founders, stressed how *Latè* evokes nourishment and “something that is part of you” (Soeur Christine Maria 2022). Another descendant of the founders, M’meri Swalasi, stresses that at the *Bati*, “tout’moun’ té ka fè tout’ ansanm” (“everybody did everything together”; M. S. M’Buundi 2022), connecting with what Frank remembered about Saamaka system of mutual help.

Bati constitutes a space of life that is not subject to Euro-colonial human domination: it is simultaneously cared for and inhabited by *Moun-yan* (people) and recognized as a potentially dangerous place, subject to the actions of other powerful beings such as animal and spiritual beings. The need to ask for permission before coming into a space and being respectful of other visible/invisible presences is emphasized in M’meri’s shared knowledge: “ló nou annan Bati, nou pa ka fè nimport’ ki bèt”



Figure 6. A Mana mural telling a story of *Bati* lifeway: “On a late Sunday afternoon, a loaded canoe at the *dégrad* (fluvial port) coming back from Baticane. 3 live Aimara fish, 4 bags of *couac* (manioc flour), pieces of smoked *pakira* (peccary), hewed logs, açai, bananas, 2 bags of peanuts, vegetables . . .” (Color online)

(“when at the *Bati*, we cannot do as we wish”; M. S. M’Buundi 2022). Frank emphasizes the countless rules and prohibitions related to *Gon/Latè* and their serious consequences for the one responsible from breaking them—from hitting the ground with a stick to throwing something in the forest: “The spirits do not like it. They come and complain about what happened” (F. Anakaba Abisiké 2022).

This ontology of a relationality rooted in the interconnectedness of beings, things, and places beyond their tangibility/visibility manifests in *Bati* materiality. As I asked about which *Bèt’Bati* (*Bati* things) could be characteristic of the *Bati* lifeway, most collaborators stressed the prevalence of things made of organic materials, such as calabash, wood, straw, leaves, fibers, and cotton. The *Féy Way*, a palm tree leaf, constitutes the basis for the confection of many things, such as the *walwari* (fan), *katouri* (hat), *katouri-do* (backpack for heavy lifting), and *pamakari* (portable roof for the canoes). While other things that were mentioned can be made of metal and have some durability in time—such as machetes, knives, hoes, and shovels—they are remembered as being old, in small number, and strictly chosen for their use. (Figure 6) *Bati* (im)materialities remind us that Euro-colonial ontoepistemological notions of materiality are insufficient to tell the stories of Black Amazonian ancestral stories. They point to the need to further insist on elaborating different, anticolonial archaeological paradigms, ones that allow us to perceive the archaeological remains of this ancestral, Amazonian Black Indigenous lifeway against colonial erasure.

I argue that it is through such movements of ontological redress that we can truly achieve a kind of archaeological knowledge that tells the stories of our Ancestors without reiterating colonial violence. Indigenizing Black Archaeology and its ontoepistemologies constitutes an additional refusal of the persistent Euro-colonial fragmentation and anti-Blackness. To tell the stories of our Ancestors according to their/our world-senses and knowledge and to direct our stories to our own represents a practice of care and healing. It is about remembering our worlds and fighting for them.

Acknowledgments. *Orí mo dúpè* (Giving thanks to Ori)

Orìṣà mo dúpè (Giving thanks to Orìṣà)

Gangan mo dúpè (Giving thanks to Ancestors)

I extend my gratitude to all beings who are part of my search for wholeness through the re-remembering of our worlds. My fierce Ancestors; my *Egbe*; my elders; Queiton; Obayomi; Mariana; Anthony; Táíwò; *Pittit’Latè* collaborators; Interrmun’á

Institute of Amazonian Languages and Cultures; the Society of Black Archaeologists; a Rede de Arqueologia Negra. A special and heartfelt thank you to all who helped me tell this story in more intentional ways. All photographs are courtesy of the author.

Funding Statement. This work was supported by the CAPES Foundation – Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education and the Society of Black Archaeologists Archaeological Field Research Award.

Data Availability Statement. There are no original data used in this study.

Competing Interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. Quilombola is the Brazilian concept of “Maroon.” More expansive than the historical concept of a “runaway” from places of enslavement, it refers to an ethnic and territorial identity built in opposition to colonial society.
2. World-sense is a term coined by Yoruba scholar Oyèrónkè Oyèwùmí (1997) to refer to the multidimensional way of perceiving and being in the world against the Euro-colonial concept of worldview.
3. Ribeirinho: Traditional communities of Amazonia whose livelihoods are established in relation to rivers.

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