



# ARTISTIC PORTRAIT: CASEY, THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN CASEY'S MUSIC

Mylène Mauricrace

For several years, the hip-hop scene in France has witnessed several rap artists who have addressed the history of slavery and its repercussions. Amongst them, the artist Casey, renowned for her frank and acerbic pen. Her music draws on multiple historical references, expressed through the lyrics, the musical arrangement, and the accompanying video clips.

## The history of slavery in Casey's music

In her two solo albums released in 2006 and 2010, but also in the album with the hybrid-rock collective Ausgang, there are distinct references to the history of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial slavery. Casey explores these references through the evocation of her Caribbean roots. Martiniquaise, but born in mainland France, this “anomaly of the 93\* with a Caribbean mouth”—an excerpt from the song Chuck Berry, Ausgang, 2020 (A Parte)—explores Martinique's colonial past from her very first solo album, particularly in the album Tragédie d'une trajectoire (Tragedy of a trajectory), featuring the eponymously-titled track, as well as Chez Moi (My home). A similar strong evocation can be found in her second solo album Libérez La Bête (Unleash the beast), with the song Sac de sucre (Bag of sugar), (2006, Anfalsh). This tells of the different stages of the slave trade and enslavement, including purchasing (“I was pursued, enslaved, kidnapped from Africa and delivered”), and forced labour (“in the morning when I get up, I perform my chores”) in order, to produce consumable economic foodstuffs, like cocoa and sugar.

By personifying the day of an enslaved person, accompanied by the slow rhythm of the melody, Casey describes the physical and psychological pain of forced labour on slave plantations, while also evoking acts of resistance: the character depicted in the song gradually rebels as the song progresses.

The title Un sac de sucre (Bag of sugar) can be interpreted in two ways: both as the story of a day of an enslaved person in the French West Indies and as an analysis of the current situation on the island. References to the past mingle with the present social situation, reflected in the lexical field used by the artist.

\*93: a disadvantaged suburb of Paris



*"Descendants of those vicious slave-trading cruises" [...]  
"Our former torturers are our new employers / With little pride returning to yesterday's plantation".  
Sac de Sucre, Libérez La Bête, Casey (2010, A-partie)*

## The history of slavery in images

The history of the transatlantic slave trade also appears in Casey's videos. In *Créature ratée* (Failed creature) from the album *Libérez La Bête, Sac de Sucre*, track 3 (2010, A-partie), Casey uses the same process as in *Sac de Sucre* but here changes the focus and instead tells the story from the settler's point of view. Adding to her exploration of the history of slavery, Casey questions the perception of the body of the black slave.

*"Thighs that are too fat/ Flaring nostrils, the sides of the face/enormous bum [...]  
Lips so thick it's like a grimace".  
Créature ratée, Libérez La Bête, Casey (2010, A-partie)*

In the same track, she refers to deportation and slavery, while evoking "the civilizing mission" that was one of the main arguments in the 15th and 16th centuries serving to inaugurate the process of colonization and extra-European conquests.

*"A humble subject of the All-Powerful turning to the holy books / Let's teach them to pray to Jesus Christ without shouting".  
Créature ratée, Libérez La Bête, Casey (2010, A-partie)*

In this video, directed by Chris Macari, the representation of the body is given centre stage. We see multiple, anonymous bodies, twisting and turning, in imitation of archetypical poses from a ritual often practised by enslaved people.

In order to approach the body and the violence of the slave system, the director repeatedly shows a photograph of the lacerated back of African American slave Gordon (at 0.41 sec in *Créature ratée* (Failed creature) and at 1.37 in *Chez Moi* (My home)). This photograph was frequently used by abolitionists to show the reality of the violence of colonial slavery.

## The history of slavery through her own personal story

Casey continues to tell this story through a more personal, even intimate discourse, evoking the consequences of this historical period on the Caribbean diaspora. Visually, this idea is embodied in the video for the track entitled *Chez Moi* (My home), directed once again by Chris Macari and shot in Martinique. In the introduction, scenes from everyday life on the island alternate with more



personal images showing Casey in conversation with her grandmother and speaking in Martinican Creole. In addition to this highly personal echo of a little Martinican girl, Casey voluntarily positions herself in a geographical space marked by the history of slavery in Martinique. She is filmed at some important sites, including the Cap 110 Memorial at Anse Cafard located to the south of the island, which commemorates the shipwreck of a slaver off the island's coast. Furthermore, Casey encourages listeners to move away from the saccharine images of the French West Indies, preferring instead to evoke the French West Indian cultural heritage by means of references to the politically-engaged psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, writer Aimé Césaire, and barefoot singer, Eugène Mona ("Do you know Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire / Eugène Mona, and Ti Emile?").

## Exploring history through the influence of French West Indian music

All these references also exist in her choice of musical arrangements. In her songs, Casey uses traditional music from the French West Indies, born during the period of slavery, known as gwo ka and bélé. These can be found for example in the introduction to the track Un sac de sucre (Bag of sugar) and the conclusion to Créature ratée (Failed creature). A bridge to an artistic practice with a strong socio-political conscience that she pursues through the ExpéKa Trio project, presented on stage with flautist Celia Wa and drummer Sonny Troupé.

More recently, Casey has developed projects combining rock and rap, like Ausgang (with Sonny Troupé, Marc Sens, and Manusound). These projects evoke the essence of musical traditions which have, in part, the American continent and the history of slavery as their cradle.

*And in the fields at the end of the scale, yes, it's my people bound in chains (...)  
My race poured their dignity into music for fear that it would be taken from them.  
Making blues, jazz, reggae, and rap to fight and stay human (...)  
I have it in my flesh, I have it in my veins, what do you expect? This is my history".  
Chuck Berry, Ausgang, 2020*

*Translated by Emma Lingwoods*



## About the author

Mylène Mauricrace is a music journalist and radio producer behind programmes and sound documentaries. She addresses the history of music and occasionally musical hybridity. She is also a young researcher in History.

## Discography

- 2006, Tragédie d'une trajectoire (Anfalsh/Dooen Damage/Aparte)
  - Tragédie d'une trajectoire
  - Chez Moi
- 2010, Libérez la Bête (Ladilafé/Aparté/Anfalsh)
  - Regard Glacé
  - Créature ratée
  - Sac de sucre
- 2020, with Ausgang - Gangrene (Aparté)
  - Chuck Berry

## Bibliography

Myriam Cottias, Elisabeth Cunin and António de Almeida Mendes (ed.) Les traites et les esclavages, perspectives historiques et contemporaines. Paris: Karthala, 2010, p. 396.

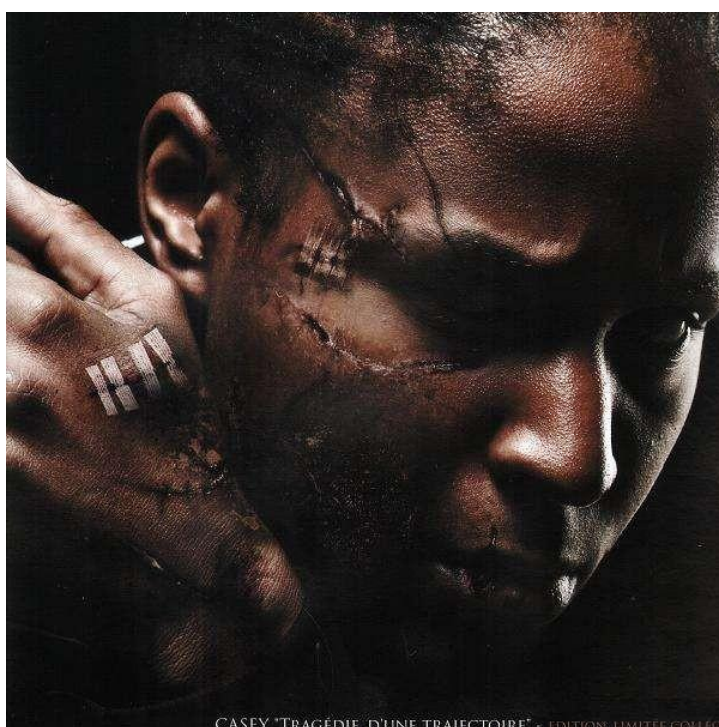
## Further information

Portrait and interview with the artist, ARTE "28 MINUTES", France, 2021.

## Illustrations

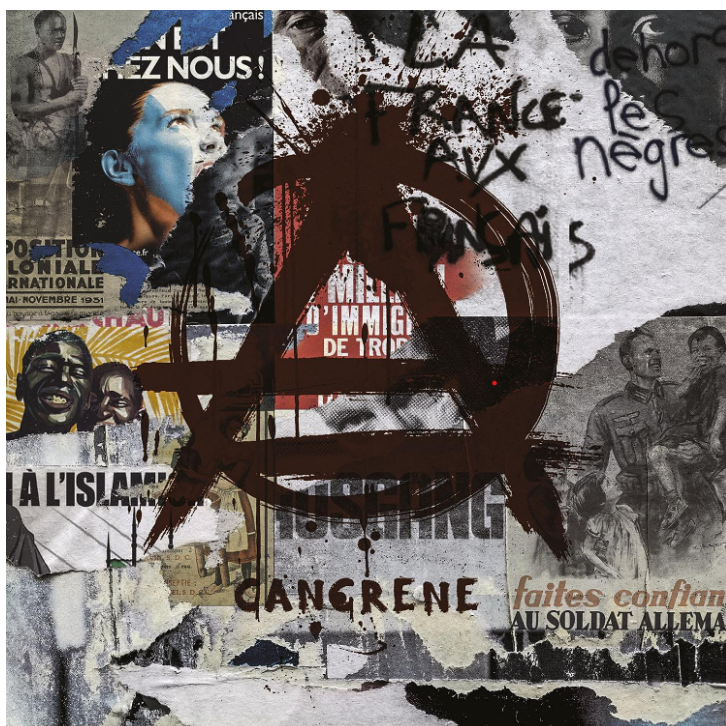


Casey © Kenza Wadimoff



Casey, album cover Tragédie d'une trajectoire (2006)





Casey, album cover “Ausgang” (2020) ©Casey, BACO RECORDS



Casey, with Asocial Club, at Festival Terre(s) Hip Hop 2014.©