Place as Palimpsest –
Yon kote tankou Palimpseste

Kwynn Johnson

POMPEY: I have folded you up, the banner of my life.
Ah, Yette, chérie, I took your body down
To give enterrement in the Haitian earth.
You will turn into grass in a high wind,
You will have no regiments but the waving canes,
You will be a country woman with a basket.
Walking down a red road in the high mountains.

[He begins to dig the grave with a pitchfork, digging harder and harder. Fade-out.]
—Derek Walcott, The Haitian Earth, 1984

Place as Palimpsest / Yon kote tankou Palimpseste is the title of a thirty-foot drawing that I have been working on for the past three years. This drawing is an exploration of the theme of vestiges as located in the geology of Cap Haitien.

In continuing from my 2010 exhibition Black Gold: Playing with Oil, which explored the earth’s geological stratification in relation to the effects of twenty-first-century oil exploration, and my 2013 exhibition How the Light Enters, which explored life in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, this drawing is an exploration of place and meaning in contemporary Cap Haitien. Conceptually, place, like a palimpsest, changes with erosion as well as with the build-up of layers over time. Place is seen as an archive in which each layer of the earth houses artefacts or traces from events of history. These embedded
vestiges left in the geology, such as the artefacts from the Taíno people or emblems of Duvalierism and Lavalas, inform my visual representations of history as fossilised in the earth.

In considering the Haitian Revolution within the broader geology of Cap Haitien, this visual cultural geography draws from the main themes in Derek Walcott’s play *The Haitian Earth* (1984). Walcott’s focus on the life and labour of the peasant offered a way to thematically connect to the other ‘layers’ in this drawing. During a conference on Haiti (2004) at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus, Walcott staged scenes from the play, also set in Cap Haitien. Artist Carol Williams and I created the set design for this production. With the kind permission of the late Sir Derek Walcott, the forty-two scenes which make up Acts I and II of the play are represented in part of this drawing. I acknowledge that after the staging of the play in 2004 there was much controversy regarding Walcott’s treatment of the main themes and the characterisation of Dessalines. However, my inclusion of a ‘storyboard’ organically anchors the broader theme in the composition, but at the same time it does not overpower, for example, our understanding of the cholera bacteria in the ecology of twenty-first-century Haiti.

In this way, place is explored as a layered repository or ‘palimpsest’ of history, and comes to be known by excavating meanings in the present, in light of the past. I trace the geology of Cap Haitien to highlight some of the key historical, economic, political, social and cultural events which have left
physical and symbolic etchings in the landscape; thus showing that, as Paula Morgan has noted, “[a] feature of the palimpsest is [indeed] the sense that earlier inscriptions are never quite erased, for these narrative inscriptions become part of the whole”.

NOTES

1. Some of the works from this exhibition were featured in the Artist’s Voice section of CQ 62, no. 1 (March 2016).

Kwynn Johnson is a Trinidadian visual artist and a Haitian studies scholar. Since 2003, Johnson has had seven solo exhibitions. She has also exhibited in several local, regional and international group shows, in places such as Guadeloupe and New York, and in spaces such as the Alliance Française in Haiti, the Tate Modern in London, several Haitian Studies Association conferences, and the past three consecutive editions of the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince. Her works over the past ten years have been an exploration of themes of trauma and visuality, and place and meaning in Caribbean cultural geography. Johnson is currently a part-time lecturer at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine campus, teaching undergraduate and postgraduate courses. She maintains a studio practice in both Trinidad and Haiti. *Place as Palimpsest / Yon kote tankou Palimpseste* was premièred at the 2017 Bocas Lit Fest and later featured in Johnson’s eighth solo art exhibition.
Pages 172–76: Place as Palimpsest, details