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"House-ing" the river. Trans-border configurations of houses on the lower Marowijne (French Guiana/ Suriname).

The Marowijne river is a porous border between Guiana, French territory, and Suriname, independent country formerly Dutch. It was populated by Amerindians and Maroons, resisting to colonialism. Nowadays, people living on the lower Marowijne develop ways of dwelling on both sides of the border. They do not only cross the river, but are “house-ing” that border, creating an intimate relationship to space. French phenomenologist geographers defined *habiter* as an activity of building a territory in the world¹. In that sense, I will describe the ways people live on both banks of the Marowijne river, in spite of European repressive politics of bordering.

The thread of that description will be the case of a family group I met in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, the town located on the Guianese side of the estuary. Lili, one elder woman of this group, once said: “If the State demolishes my house (which is highly probable since her dwelling is considered illegal in many ways),² I will build a stilt house *on* the river”. Beside the joke (stilt dwellings are not constructed anymore in town), she outlined her conceptualization of “house-ing” the border. Lili has spent her all life on both sides of the river. She never calls this space a border, but refers to its “two sides”. One afternoon as we were sitting on her terrace with her sister, she said, laughing: “I am eating from both lands.” This formula is usually employed as a justification of male polygamy, like “eating from” different women. Lili extrapolates it out of the context of gender relations, and thus puts herself in a position of superiority on this two-sided territory, enjoying both lands at the same time. She belongs to one of the Maroon groups, called Ndjuka, whose kinship system has been described as

¹ Hoyaux, André-Frédéric. “Entre construction territoriale et constitution ontologique de l’habitant : Introduction épistémologique aux apports de la phénoménologie au concept d’habiter.” *Cybergeo : European Journal of Geography*, May 29, 2002. doi:10.4000/cybergeo.1824.

² She has no personal autorisation to stay on the French territory (*titre de séjour*) ; nor any property title or tenure for the land (*titre de propriété* or *bail*) ; nor any building permit (*permis de construire*).

matrilineal³. Those groups are undergoing profound social transformations due to massive migration to towns in the last decades.

To understand how people live *on* the border, I draw on the concept of “configurations of houses”⁴ of Louis Marcelin: people do not live in one single house. Houses are interrelated in a way that materializes active and chosen kinship ties. These configurations encompass houses on both banks: they are trans-border. However, these configurations are fuzzy and constantly changing. In our case, a woman of that group had to shift from one side to the other: it reveals that those configurations may be shaped by conflicts. I will thus follow Eugenia Motta, arguing that neither the observer, nor the dwellers of those configurations themselves can objectify them in a discrete and empirically identifiable way⁵.

Configurations of houses: across urban and national borders.

I first went to *Baaka Wataa* to visit Lena, a woman of my age (25), the wife of Lili’s nephew. *Baaka Wataa* is a peripheral neighborhood you can reach by a lateritic path called “*piste des Vampires*”. It is not exactly what I would call an urban landscape: the path winds up and down, through dense vegetation. Lena and Lili were living in a small group of houses perched on a hill. That hill was actually the relief left by the bulldozers of a layout society which had already started to level the ground to construct three-storey buildings. On the top, two wooden houses were divided into four homes. Franz was living with his wife and her ten children in the first house. The second house was partitioned into three different homes: Lili’s; Lena’s (Lena was living there with her husband and her three children); and the one of the wife of another Lili’s nephew’s.

According to Louis Marcelin, a house is not isolated, but it is a “position participating in a configuration of houses”⁶, which is itself “a representation of the disposal of positions”⁷. Within the configuration, the denizens of these houses are engaged in relations of exchanges of goods and

³ For exemple, see the summary of Roger Bastide, *Les Amériques noires*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2000 [1967], p.59-60.

⁴ Louis HERNES Marcelin. *L’invention de la famille afro-américaine : famille, parenté et domesticité parmi les Noirs du Recôncavo da Bahia, Brésil*. UFRJ, PPGAS, Thèse de doctorat en anthropologie. Rio de Janeiro, 1996.

⁵ Eugenia Motta, *House and economy in the favela*, to be published.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.126 : la maison est une « position participant d’une configuration de positions ».

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.142 : la configuration est une « représentation d’une disposition de positions articulant des réseaux de relations ».

services. This practical kinship could also be described through the concept of *maisonnée* (“houseful”). Florence Weber defines it as a group of production oriented toward a common goal, in which exchanges of goods and services are not made according to a rule of reciprocity between two individuals, but are based on solidarity⁸: there is a spiral of exchanges in which A give to B, that in return helps C, and C will help A. This is what Louis Marcelin describes in his configuration of houses, where one can sleep, eat, circulate within each other’s houses, and let one’s children there to be looked after. We will, however, see later that the two concepts are not exactly equivalent.

Lena was practicing these ways of dwelling together. Between the four homes on the hill, many exchanges existed: children circulated from one home to the other, and could beg for food anywhere where some dish had been prepared. All women could occasionally take care of the children of the others. Lena was often without resources, since neither she nor her husband⁹ had documents or State benefit, and they did not cultivate any fields either – unlike Franz. Lili would sometimes give Lena a small amount of what she needed to feed her children. Franz and his wife also gave her products from their fields. However, this mutual assistance had limits. Lena, when her husband could not find a job, had to go to communal services that distributed food, above all macaroni. Even if she hated macaroni, she had to take them because she could not only count on the help of her neighbors.

These *Baaka wataa* inhabitants also used to live in close connection with other houses of the town. They would often go at Lili’s sister, Ine, Lena’s mother-in-law, who was living just on the opposite side of the Vampires path. One of Lena’s daughters, who was 5 years old, took me there first, leading me along a sinuous path. She was used to going to her grand-mother by herself without asking permission. That reveals how often Ine would take care of her. The extensive exchanges between Ine and Lili also result from past cohabitation. A few years ago, after a separation, Ine had to live at her

⁸ Weber, Florence. “Pour penser la parenté contemporaine. Maisonnée et parentèle, des outils de l’anthropologie.” In *Les solidarités familiales en questions: entraide et transmission*, by Danièle Debordeaux and Pierre Strobel. Paris, France: L.G.D.J., 2002 ; Even if it was first created to describe people sharing a single house, it can be applied to situations involving several houses: Sybille Gollac, « Maisonnée et cause commune : une prise en charge familiale » In Florence Weber et Agnès Gramain, *Charges de Famille*, Paris : La Découverte, 2003.

⁹ When I speak of marriage, husband and wives, I mean marriage in a Ndjuka way (“ndjuka fasi”). Alliances in that group are generally not consecrated by any administration or church, but contracted in a simple ceremony between the respective Imatrilineages of the couple, that can then live together, until “the life does not go anymore”.

sister's Lili, until a friend of Lili "gave" Ine a land where she could build her house (although, as in *Baaka Wataa*, the land was legally property of the State). A year later, as I came back to the field, Lili was sick and she was accommodated by Ine, who was taking care of her. One of Ine's daughters had replaced Lily in her former house in *Baaka Wataa*. Occupants of the houses thus frequently move in and out, depending on life events. This changing configuration was made of moving relationships. Lena and Bobby had come to *Baaka Wataa* in 2011, replacing another niece of Lili, Kiki. Long before he married Lena, Bobby, as young boy, lived there with Lili: the configuration thus results partly from past arrangements.

Lena and her husband, Bobby, also kept going to her family in Baka Lycée, a social housing estate which is located a 15 minutes' walk from *Baaka Wataa*. In the past, Lena used to live there at her *sisso* Silvia (sister or cousin). Silvia was the daughter of Lena's foster mother who raised her in Suriname, and whom she called *Tante* (aunt in Dutch). Fosterage is a common practice in Maroon societies that results in a redistribution of children within or without the matrilineage¹⁰. Silvia was living in an individual governmental house, which she had enlarged to shelter several homes. Lena or Bobby would go there several times a week, for example, to charge their phones, as *Baaka Wataa* is not connected to an electricity supply. The relatives also gathered at Silvia's when Lena's disabled child died, in July 2013. Lena would also go to the more faraway estate of Charbonnière, to Silvia's sister, Mora, not on a daily basis but in the event of a crisis. When Mora's daughter, Amalia, was in the hospital following a miscarriage, Lena went to visit her several times. Lena thus lived in what we can describe as a configuration of houses. More precisely, as I later understood, she evolved within two configurations of houses: the configuration of Bobby's relatives, that would include Lili, Franz and Ine; and the configuration of her foster mother's relatives.

More than the concept of *maisonnée*, the concept of configuration of houses also emphasizes the material dimensions of dwelling, offering a window on appropriations of inhabited space. In this

¹⁰ Diane Vernon, *Les représentations du corps chez les Noirs marrons Ndjuka du Surinam et de la Guyane française*, ORSTOM, Paris, 1992.

case, the configurations belong to that common space of lower Marowijne, challenging the borders of Europe¹¹. It stretches out not only over urban boundaries toward other neighborhoods, but also over the national border. Both configurations of houses to which Lena belonged in 2013 had projections in a village on the other side of the river, called *Midina kampu*. As I visited them, both Lena and Lily evoked this *kampu* with delight, as a peaceful place, with a beautiful creek to wash in. Both of them had lived there. Lili had her own *kampu* very close to the current *Midina kampu*. It was destroyed by the Surinamese civil war in 1986. She said: “*the war dispersed the house*”, meaning that everyone went their way. She went to the French side, her sister Ine to Paramaribo. Other relatives finally moved to *Midina kampu*, like Lili’s maternal uncle, who married Lena’s *Tante* at some point. That is how Bobby, Ine’s son, was raised by this man, his great-uncle in the *kampu*, where he met Lena. Lili had not returned to that shore since the war, but she still has relatives there. Lena was partly raised in that *kampu* by her *Tante* (alternating with Paramaribo). There she met her two successive husbands. She first came to Saint-Laurent in 2003 to have her eldest daughter treated– the child died a few years before I met her.

Lena and Lili lived in close connection to that *kampu*, which was included in their configuration of houses. Lena was visiting the *kampu* very regularly: her *Tante* had a house there, as well as her house in Paramaribo. Many of the children of that *Tante* also had a house in the *kampu*, including Silvia and Mora, who also have a social housing in Saint-Laurent. The inhabitants of the *kampu* also regularly came to Saint-Laurent, only half an hour away by boat. The *kampu* was also linked to Albina by a muddy path. The 15 minute ride in taxi cost 20 euros, and from Albina, boats took you to Saint-Laurent in five minutes for 3 euros. Once, a man from the *kampu* came to *Baaka Wataa* in his boat, dropping his sisters off at the hospital to look after Amalia who had miscarried. Lili introduced him to me as her nephew, and Lena as her *baala* (brother or cousin). I later realized that he was a son of Lena’s *Tante*, which means that he was more closely related to Lena than to Lili. At that time, I had not yet distinguished those two configurations of houses to which Lena belonged.

¹¹ As Louis Marcelin mentioned it, “the configuration (...) does not take into account the official administrative divisions”, *op.cit.*, p.142 : « La configuration (...) ne tient pas compte des divisions administratives officielles. »

This distinction between the Lili's side, and her *Tante's* became apparent to me only after the death of Lena's disabled child at the end of my first fieldwork in July 2013. As a consequence of that crisis, when I came back for my second fieldwork in 2014, Lena had moved away from *Baaka Wataa* to her *Tante's* in *Midina kampu*. There, the configuration of houses including Mora, Silvia and Lena was reproduced in a different scale. One entire neighborhood of that *kampu* constituted what they called the *Ma bee*¹² of Lena's *Tante*: her house was situated at the center of an array of different houses of her children and relatives. If Mora and Silvia thus supported Lena in Saint-Laurent, it was because of that common belonging to the *Ma Bee* of the *Tante*, materialized by the disposition of the houses in *Midina kampu*. As for Lili and her relatives, they supported Lena because of her being with Bobby, Ine's son. This distinction did not first appear to me because of the existence of an earlier alliance between those two groups, since Lena's *Tante* married Lili's maternal uncle. Both those trans-border configurations were intertwined.

Retrospectively, I will try to draw the complex design of those two configurations. However, this tentative is neither exhaustive, nor definitive, as it reflects only a situation at the moment of my fieldwork. Neither is it objective, since it reflects above all Lena's point of view. Nevertheless, it allows us to grasp how people are appropriating this trans-border space. Some of them have multiple residences, as Lena's *Tante* in the *kampu* and in Paramaribo. Mora and Silvia had a house in the *kampu*, and another on the French side, where their children were schooled. They came to the *kampu* for holidays and weekends to relax, or to work in their fields. This integration of both sides is made easier by the presence of both Surinamese and French cellular networks in all that region of lower Marowijne. As a consequence, most people, including Lena who was not rich, had two phones, in order to be able to call to Guiana or Surinam, depending on where they were.

Conflicts in the configurations: family tensions and politics of bordering combined.

Let us now try to grasp the reasons why, between 2013 and 2014, Lena shifted from one bank to another, and from one configuration to the other. This will demonstrate how those configurations

¹² In Ndjuka, *Bee* means belly, or lineage or as here, indicates the neighborhood formed by the houses of one *Ma* (woman) and her descendants.

were shaped by conflict, combining different cumulative logics: the politics of bordering illegalizing migrants on the French side, that made it impossible for Lena to get her documents; and the internal pressure within the configuration which set many requirements on Lena, regarding her financial autonomy, her motherhood and more generally, her respectability. First, these tensions within the family group were unspoken where I was there. It is only during the crisis triggered by the death of Lena's child that they were expressed aloud. I argue these tensions are nevertheless constitutive of the configurations of houses. As in the *maisonnée*, mutual assistance and solidarity entail costs for individuals¹³, or even go hand in hand with forms of "tyranny"¹⁴. I will first analyze the reasons why I was ill at ease with Lena, which had to do with the tensions I mentioned. Then I will explain how Lena was actually doubly excluded from the Lili's configuration, and from the French bank of the Marowijne.

I met Lena through Diane Vernon, an anthropologist who was working in the hospital as a cultural mediator between patients and medical staff. Lena was a regular visitor because of her disabled child, Gabriella. Diane introduced me to Lena as a researcher on "housing", as Lena was leaving in a to-be-demolished sector. The first reason I felt ill at ease with Lena was that even if I told her many times that I was not working for the local administrations, but for a university in Paris, Lena expected me to help her in her search of social housing and her attempt to get documents. I felt guilty for not being able to help her.

Another reason for the mixed feelings I had toward her is the way she treated her children, which shocked me. I thought that I was being normative about it, but later I realized that Lena was also criticized by her family for not being a good mother. For example, I had to overcome a feeling of disgust when I saw how Gabriella was spending the whole day in the dust of their house in *Baaka Wataa*. Gabriella was suffering from a terrible illness that made her insensitive to pain. She was biting her fingers, inflicting diverse injuries on herself. As a nurse who visited them regularly had recommended, Lena had put socks on Gabriella's hands to prevent her from biting herself, and then

¹³ Gollac, op. cit.,

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, The Idea of Home : A Kind of Space, *Social Research*, vol.58; n°1 (Spring 1991), pp.287-307.

getting infected. I thought that those socks were quite dirty. Moreover, I was horrified by the way Lena treated her eldest daughter, Gabi, who was 5, and was not schooled yet. All day long, her mother would ask her in a rude tone to do domestic chores, like taking care of the younger children or going to shop at the neighbors. I thought she should have gone to school instead, because teachers had explained to me how crucial the nursery school was for Guianese children so they can learn French.

Month after month, I discovered that I was not the only one to be shocked by the behavior of Lena. One woman who had become a close friend on the field, Julia, was a relative of Lena. She was a *sisso* of Mora and Silvia, since they had the same father, and had many exchanges. Lena and Julia did not share the same point of view on their relatedness. Whereas Lena spoke of Julia as her *sisso*, Julia denied this qualification: “Lena is not my *sisso*, she is the *sisso* of my *sisso*”. As a consequence, Julia avoided direct contact with Lena: she never visited her, although she was visiting Mora and Silvia frequently. I saw them together only in crisis situations, like at the hospital at Amalia’s bedside, after her miscarriage, or at Silvia’s house after the death of Gabriella. Julia’s reluctance to consider Lena as her *sisso* shows that the configurations of houses in which Lena evolved were hierarchized spaces in which Lena occupied a marginal position. Many relatives criticized this woman seen as too dependent, and as a bad mother. Both her repeated demands for help even if I told her I could not, and the way she treated her daughters, made me feel bad. Her conduct in this respect was considered as deviant behavior by her relatives as well.

The criticisms toward Lena were expressed after the death of Gabriella. I went with Julia to Silvia’s house where everyone gathered for the event. Lena was sitting in the living room, wearing black and white mourning clothes. She was surrounded by many relatives; including Silvia and Mora. Lena told me her daughter had undergone surgery because her hand had got infected, and she never woke up. I immediately thought of a medical error (and Diane Vernon, the anthropologist, confirmed my interpretation). However, Lili and Franz’s wife had a different version. They were not at Silvia’s house, and when Julia and I went to visit them, they said it was Lena’s fault. She should have entrusted Gabriella to the government.

When I came back to the field a year after, I visited Lena at *Midina kampu*. She was very pleased to welcome me, with her newborn child. She gave a positive tonality to her move: she said she found it more beautiful there than in *Soolan*. Lena fought Lili's and Franz's charges: "They say I've killed her, but it was the doctor's fault". She told me how that night, Franz refused to drive her to the hospital, saying that she always bothered him. She had to find a *taximan*, who helped her. In her story, Lena highlighted the low support of the members of the configuration she was living in, which was Lili's and Franz's. Doing so, she justified her choice of coming back to the *kampu*, to "her" family. She also said she would not entrust Gabriella to the doctor, because the doctors had brought her first child to Martinique without her permission, where it died, so she did not want this to happen again.

So Lena came back in the configuration of houses of her *Tante*. However their support was also limited. Neither Mora nor Silvia offered to accommodate her in Saint-Laurent. Her *Tante* lent her provisionally half of a house to stay with her husband and their children. She had to prove that she was willing to become autonomous, financially speaking. Her husband found a job as security guard in one of the Chinese shops of Albina, and she started to plant a field near the *kampu*. Lena was also planning to build her house. Silvia will give her a lot she had officially bought nearby, between the *kampu* and Albina. This gift was only a second choice: Silvia wanted to give it to her own daughter, but the latter already had a house in Saint-Laurent. This reflects the marginal position of Lena within the configuration of houses of her *Tante*. Both banks do not have the same status in this trans-border configuration: living on the French side offers access to more social benefits. As a result of her marginality, Lena had to go back the Surinamese side.

Nevertheless, she does not consider her shift beyond the border permanent. After my visit to the *kampu*, she crossed over several times to the French side, to visit relatives or offices. The death of her disabled child reduced her chances to get documents, since it was the social workers from the hospital who were following her regularization demand. However, she was still hoping to come back to French Guiana, asking again for my help. As usual, I could not satisfy her. She also had Gabi, her eldest daughter schooled on the French side, even if she moved to the *kampu*. First, she entrusted Gabi to a *sisso* in Saint-Laurent. Julia told me that woman finally threw the little girl out in the street, where

she was found by the police. During my visit, Gabi was at someone else's house in Albina, so that she could cross the river every morning, to go to school in Guiana. The certificate of schooling can serve as proof in the regularization demands, to prove that one has stayed 5 years or more on French territory. So Lena had not totally given up the idea of living on the Guianese side.

This case highlights how one can “house” the border, and actually inhabit it. People do not just inhabit a single house, but entire configurations of houses whose dwellers are engaged in active kinship ties with each other, based on matrilinearity. In “house-ing” the border, the dwellers produce a trans-border space, the region of lower Marowijne, crossed by political hierarchies. These configurations are nevertheless fuzzy in several ways. They are changing according to life events and eventual conflicts within the group. Furthermore, they are not exactly the same according to the point of view of Ego: the very belonging to the configuration is at stake when Julia excludes Lena from the exchanges she has with Mora and Silvia. Lena, on the contrary, would include herself in that configuration.

Florence Weber proposes an analytic distinction between the concept of *maisonnée* and the one of *parentèle*, defined as a network of people related by kinship ties, in which exchanges take place under the rule of reciprocity between two units. She focuses on the criteria of subjectivity: whereas *parentèle* can only be listed according to the point of view of Ego, the *maisonnée* can be objectified through the observation of material exchanges. The configuration of houses would then be an intermediate concept between both: it is a network, whose definition can vary according to the point of view. However, reciprocity is not the basis of the exchanges made in those configurations, but solidarity. As in the *maisonnée*, one can objectify a spiral of exchanges in which people do not keep count either of their efforts to contribute to the common well-being, or of the benefits they derive. Belonging to that configuration entails costs: people are expected to follow certain rules, such as proving they do their best to get financial autonomy, or being a good parent. When one transgresses them, one can be excluded (as Lena has been from Lili's configuration) or marginalized (as she has been within her *Tante*'s configuration). That concept thus provides a tool for describing solidary exchanges observed between moving and subjective arrays of houses.