

Ethnologie française

Call for articles

“Slave Trades and Cultural Memory”

Coordination

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Brief

This issue of *Ethnologie française* will focus on the institutional commemoration of the story of slavery at a number of sites, ports and slave posts in Europe, Africa and the Americas. It will examine the edification of – or failure to edify – an official, normative “cultural memory” [Assman, 2010] of the slave trades and the movements that supported or opposed them. It will also look at the creative forgetfulness or silences that such memory generates or questions, sometimes with unstated implications. Our reflection will be centred on its various discursive registers and chronotopes and, more broadly, the motives that catalysed the narratives used. One of the objectives of the journal issue will be to question how the relationship to the past has been reconfigured through statements and rituals in social milieus and political contexts in which the slave trade has been thought and felt as a moment in which “origins” were simultaneously founded and erased or scattered. Starting from an overall reflection on these memorials as spaces that give rise to a past at once everlasting and threatened, we aim to produce a detailed analysis of the sites and contemporary narratives that convey a cultural memory of the slave trades.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin [1978: 391], chronotopes act as “centres to organise the main events contained in the subject of the novel” allowing writers to layer and embed different narrative and historical registers in literary fiction. In the various imaginaries that establish the origins of the slave trade – still “living”, yet already “museal” in the broad or ritualised sense –, we are often faced with the manufacture of memorial chronotopes such as the *ship, route, door, Ocean, return, crossing*, etc. Adopting the artifices and biases required to produce and disseminate these chronotopes, oral and written sources, visual media, and ceremonial practices help to transfigure the slave trading past through commemorative myths. In this way, the grieving memory of people who actually died (the slaves) can include and foretell, for example, the celebration of their *return* as “mythical heroes” or “ancestors” [Sutherland, 2002].

In former slave trading societies – whether African, American or European – the story of the slave trades can now be recounted *through symbols* by their current “rhapsodists”, e.g. local intellectuals, entrepreneurs of so-called traditional activities, religious dignitaries, government cultural policymakers, elected officials, tourist guides and artists. It can also be staged as an epic of diaspora or urban settlement (like the performances at former ports and slave-trading

centres) or as historical and biological kinship relationships to be reconstituted (like the presentations at sites where “slave cemeteries” are thought to have existed).

Today, on a worldwide scale, the presence of ceremonies and the transformation of slave trade sites reveal a process under way, nourished by, among other things, a dialectical relationship, sometimes claiming to be legal or juridical, with the notion of forgetting. Indeed this involves the forgetting of a tragic era, which must be redeemed, and hence a present that demands reparation. Through this shift from amnesia to commemoration, it would now seem possible to reverse what took place over time and its stigma. Experiencing time in reverse gives rise to various religious, civil and moral duties to remember. Each commemoration would therefore feature both the remembering and the forgetting required to be mutually performative, as well as a moral and cognitive palimpsest drawing on various ways of bringing the past into the present. Among them, a crucial role is played by the discourse supervised by memorialising elites and the way it is received – bodily, gesturally, verbally, silently or sometimes ironically –, as well as how that same discourse is avoided or denied. In this sense, the memory of slavery now available to us is carried by individual and group followers of religious cults, participants in civil ceremonies, visitors to commemorative sites, political personalities, representatives of associations, and pilgrims of the “diaspora”. Stratified over time, their political objectives are now in keeping with contemporary memorial places and scenographies.

In certain contexts that hide selective as well as projective memory, the temporalities of the slave trade era are filtered and grasped in simultaneity in order to achieve a soothing effect. Sometimes such an attempt involves the recognition of a patrimonial, anthropological and historical *quality*, which can be considered a rich source of moral heritage and cosmopolitanism today. In other cases, the conciliatory insistence on “good” memorial governance of slavery’s past may be subjected to acrimonious demands and attacks by individuals and groups asserting themselves as descendants, still caught in situations of conflict, populations that were once victims of deportation or who rebelled against the slavery system and are still suffering from discrimination or domination today.

In 2020, *Ethnologie française* plans to publish an issue devoted to these topics, commemorating the historical past of the slave trades in Africa, Europe and the Americas. Adopting a comparative, multidisciplinary perspective, the journal is calling for contributions in anthropology, sociology, history, history of art and political science.

As an extension of a study published in *Gradhiva* entitled *Mémoire de l’esclavage au Bénin* [Ciarcia, 2008], the issue will allow us to widen perceptibly the geopolitical scope of the West African context examined in the first collection of research on the topic. By broadening our focus, ten years after the publication of the 2007 issue of *Ethnologie française* edited by Michèle Baussant and entitled *Mémoires plurielles, mémoires en conflits*, this new publication by the journal is seeking to grasp from an anthropological, monumental and notional standpoint the specificities of the many conflicting discourses that have made the historical and moral impact of the slave trade a present concern. Such discourses form a landscape, together with other, extremely varied memorial “affairs”, expressing both the specific aspects of the ethnographic and historical situations under study and how those affairs affect the henceforth international debate over, for example, issues of citizenship and migration, the relationship to teaching and transmitting history, and relations among the diverse populations resulting from the colonial experience.

Contrary to the post-colonial discourse recommending the heuristic duty to “provincialize Europe” [Chakrabarty, 2007], our project aims, through a large number of case studies, to take a close look at what the memory of the transatlantic slave trade has become today at historic sites that once played a preeminent role in Europe (Bordeaux, Lisbon, Nantes,

Liverpool, Seville, etc.). Nowadays at these sites, the memory of “the return” of slaves from former colonies and places of deportation is replayed as a crucial political and societal issue, across a spectrum ranging from the absence or scarcity of public traces of the past to hyper commemorative and media exposure.

A past that is everlasting and living on borrowed time

By situating the memory of the slave trade geographically, the commemorative sites also express it ideographically in a language of signs that are supposed to signify or elicit a moral history of notions such as forgetfulness, repentance, grief, trauma and heritage. The relatively abstract dimension of these notions is made visible or echoed in the statues, staging, information panels, objects, and archives, and accompanied by local testimonials in keeping with various practices and rationales.

Under the impetus of elites, a cultural memory – likely to be reformulated by other actors among the populations or visitors to these sites – is thus instituted and celebrated through liturgies and ceremonies that may have a physical and mental effect on the actions and consciousness of those who carry the memory or of spectators.

The relatively recent emergence of such a memory emanating from the slave trades indicates the “contemporary value” [Riegl, 2016: 72] of the edified memory and the emotions it arouses. On this topic, at different times, authors such as Alois Riegl and Daniel Fabre [2013] have clearly brought out the social power of monuments to trigger feelings.

Continuing this reflection, with a view to the genealogical analysis of the memorial sites of slavery, it would be timely to point out comparable situations. For example, according to Reinhart Koselleck [1998: 41], war memorials are connected “to a temporal vanishing point oriented towards the future”. Paradoxically, they end up *forgetting* to represent and transmit the founding event – the death or disappearance – and instead highlight a figurative and metaphorical semantic register. As a result, the dead become masks, which are likely to affect the sensibility of spectators and contemporary witnesses of the transformation of a scene from the past that puts survivors – and we might add, by indirect filiation, their descendants – at the centre of the memorial narrative.

In his reflection on Holocaust memorials, James Edward Young [1993: 6] points out that the process of creating a public art of memory is constantly given new meanings, thereby developing a “texture” that allows some of its significance and ambiguities to be aesthetically, ritually and institutionally conveyed. Among these ambiguities, he emphasises the fact that “by creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of a common memory”.

Indeed, as Marita Sturken [1991] pointed out, the memorial-monument functions like a screen or surface on which images are projected, and at the same time, “hides” or “protects” the way they are viewed today from any interference that would upset the public visibility of the prose through which a message must be transmitted.

In this regard, it is interesting to borrow from the thinking of Paul Connerton [1989: 70] regarding the distinction between the “pulpit” and the “altar”, understood as concrete and symbolic places for verbal discourse and bodily action, respectively. He postulates that it is “Not the pulpit but the altar [which] is the privileged site” for the observation of commemorative liturgy, which seems to us reductive. Indeed, in our view, it is not so much a question of opposing “*inscribing* practice” (the pulpit) to “*incorporating* practice” (the altar) [*ibid.*: 73], but of grasping the phenomena of transfer or derivation between discursive, written, solemn and monumental practices of memory and so-called incorporated practices that can be gestural and non-verbal.

The past of the slave trades can therefore be grasped as a “scarce resource” [Appadurai, 1981], i.e. the object of constraints committed to establishing relatively consensual forms of

authority, continuity, depth and sharing certain values, as well as interdependence between several available, “credible” narratives. The political negotiation around these criteria often coincides with the emergence of the “debatability” [*ibid.*] of the past and therefore determines its memorability and uses in discursive and pragmatic areas.

Ethnographies of cultural memory

Based on the theoretical references mentioned above, the journal issue will be divided into areas enabling comparisons.

These areas may involve:

- analysing the symbolic effectiveness of commemorative narratives and ritual practices;
- examining the chronotopes at work in developing a memorial ideology or passions: the *route*, the *Ocean*, the *door*, the *ship*, the *return*, the *crossing*, etc.
- observing the effect of scale in the memorial governance of slavery’s past, which yields different versions according to the anthropological and historical context.

The development and comparison of these areas should enable us to bring out the shape and define the content in actions of a globalised memory of the slave trades, which could only have come into being in publicly instituted forms, while at the same time generating unofficial, local narratives. If the origins of a history confronted by discourse seeking to make reparation are made public, “true”, and symbolically effective through discursive and ceremonial gestures, cultural memory becomes a mirror of the moral or semantic metamorphoses of a past to be inherited or even founded anew.

The articles submitted must therefore link the analysis of significant ethnographic and political cases to the unthought elements that the process of commemorating slavery conveys and produces. In spite of (or because of) its contemporary public and media exposure, the memory resulting from the slave trade and its “shadow” [Lovejoy, 2000] remains a subject of study always open to further question. Such questioning entails observing the discourses in which different views of the doxa to be recovered are opposed and linked to each other. On these slippery slopes, the laborious search for a humanistic, politically correct, ecumenically oriented entente among the various individual and collective actors is merely the other side of asserting communitarian positions and specificities that may be “scandalously” idiosyncratic among themselves. For example, on a global scale, sites that have often been controversial and are now dialoguing with each other – such as the Slave Route in Ouidah, Benin, the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, the African Burial Ground in New York, the Valongo wharf in Rio de Janeiro, the ACTe Memorial in Guadeloupe, the International Slavery Museum de Liverpool, etc. – demonstrate the contrasting existence of the presumption of a diffuse duty of shared *commemorative memory* and also of a “missing link” [Schramm, 2007] between the diverse descendants and recipients (African, American, European) of a single history and divided, stratified stories. Similarly, when we find and question in the narratives and recommended uses of the repertory of extremely varied notions of *loss*, *rupture*, *reparations*, *forgiveness*, *victim*, *runaways*, *crime against humanity*, *Creole hybridisation*, and *diaspora*, we discover that they are all attempts to reformulate an origin that is of course identifying or political, depending on the case, but which also expresses the actors’ sometimes unacknowledged longing for a memorial social contract.

Schedule

The deadline for proposals for contributions (title and abstract of 4.000-6.000 characters, including references) is **31 May 2018**. Proposals should state the main lines of argument as well as the source materials (surveys and/or archives) used, and should be accompanied by an

author biography (including publications). Proposals should be sent to the issue coordinator, Gaetano Ciarcia: ciarcia.gaetano@wanadoo.fr Authors will be informed whether their proposals have been selected by **30 June 2018**. Final texts (between 35.000 and 70.000 characters, including spaces and references) should be sent by **1 January 2019**. Publication of this issue of *Ethnologie française* is planned for winter 2020.

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