

Lawrence Aje, Nicolas Gachon (dir.), La mémoire de l'esclavage. Traces mémorielles de l'esclavage et des traites dans l'espace atlantique, Paris (L'Harmattan) 2018, 260 p. (Chemins de la Mémoire), ISBN 978-2-343-15137-3, EUR 26,50.

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This volume brings together nine essays dealing with the memorial traces that the slave trade left in the Atlantic world and calls for further research on this fascinating and important topic. It is the outcome of a conference held in Montpellier in 2016, »Traces et mémoires de l'esclavage dans l'espace atlantique«. Whereas this theme has been met with increasing success in the anglophone scholarship, research on this topic is – perhaps due to France's complicated relationship with its colonial past – rather scant in the French-speaking world. The current collection offers a welcome corrective to this deficiency. The book presents a very diverse perspective on the topic, both in terms of its geographical range (Cameroon, Guadeloupe, Equatorial Guinea, Haiti, Mexico, Benin, Panama, and the United States) and the approaches used (history, geography, anthropology, archaeology, Hispanic, Latin American, and American studies).

The first chapter addresses the relationship between modernity and slavery, and questions Bruno Latour and Philippe Descola's theories. In particular, it revisits the supposed separation between human and non-human that occurred with modernity in light of the colonial experience and of slavery. According to Christine Chivallon, given the relationship between slaves and owners, the boundaries between the human and non-human realms were in reality much more fluid than these theories claim. The study of any colonial setting does show that the line was indeed blurry, although Christianity limited for a long time the possibility of relegating one category of humans into the non-human realm. Although I felt that the author might have slightly overstated the rigidity of the boundary between human and non-human in Latour's work (after all, modernity seems to me to be more about the process than the end result), the chapter has the merit of pleading for the inclusion of the history of colonialism and slavery in theories that interrogate the construct »modernity«, which is a question that I believe is fundamental. This issue was brilliantly addressed in Stephan Palmié's »Wizards and Scientists«¹, which I warmly recommend to anyone interested in this question.

This introductory chapter is followed by contributions gathered under chapters that question the practices of memorialising and memory-making and their relationship to politics as well as their



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¹ Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*, Durham and London, 2002.

instrumentalisation for political or commercial purposes (chapters 2 and 4). Another chapter offers some insights or points to the need for more research on the history of slavery in certain areas of the Atlantic world where it is particularly lacking (chapter 3).

The first essay of the second part, by Joseph Jules Sinang, examines the neglect of the history of slavery, both in terms of scholarly interest, public memory, and the school curriculum in Cameroun. It sets out to trace the roots of this disinterest and questions the renewed interest that arose with the rediscovery of the slave port of Bimbia in 2011, as well as its instrumentalisation for touristic and economic purposes. The following contribution, by Jean Moomou, seems to me to offer very interesting insights on the relationship between public policy, collective memory, and history. In this thoughtful essay, Moomou addresses the ways in which socio-political stakes shaped the memory of slavery (or absence thereof) in Guadeloupe over time, in particular the appearance of material traces in the landscape. Moomou does it notably through an analysis of the creation of the Mémorial ACTe – Centre caribéen d'expressions et de mémoire de la traite et de l'esclavage.

In the third part, after a piece on religious and linguistic creolisation processes on the island of Annobon by Adeline Darrigol, an essay is dedicated to a convincing call by Joseph Sony Jean and Corinne L. Hofman for more research on the history of the natives in Haiti and their inclusion into its colonial history. It is true that Haiti has had a difficult relationship with its past in general, although some groundbreaking research has helped correct this issue over the last years (the work of Laurent Dubois, Janet McAlister, and Donald Cosentino among others come to mind). One essay that struck me as particularly useful was Paul Mvengou Cuzmerino's. His approach to the study of the memory of slavery in Mexico, using both archival and oral sources, is indeed of particular interest, and has the merit of taking oral tradition seriously. This is a methodological issue which is crucial for anyone interested in the study of the memory of slavery in the Atlantic world.

The fourth part offers a thoughtful self-reflective piece on the making of a documentary on commemorations on slavery in Benin by Gaetano Ciarcia. In the following essay, Régis Maulois presents a comparison between Congo in Panama and Gwoka in Guadeloupe which illustrates the fact that comparative research is particularly necessary for the study of not only the history of slavery but also its impact on cultural and religious landscapes. Finally, through a careful analysis of the African Burial Ground Memorial in New York and of its function and impact, Anne-Claire Fauquez offers a thought-provoking argument on the role of art not only in the shaping and reinvention of the memory of slavery, but also in the revitalisation of its history.

Diversity is both the book's strength and weakness: indeed it illustrates the extent to which this topic is a rich and fruitful one across so many regions and fields, while pointing to avenues for further research. Be that as it may, it also results in a feeling that the different chapters are slightly disconnected at times. Concluding remarks that would have tied up the chapters together and pointed to a potential dialogue across regions and fields might have been helpful. For example, most chapters justly question



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the practice of memorialising and memory making and their relationship to politics and other contexts, and discuss the nature and role of history in comparison. A concluding discussion on the potential political and biased nature of history itself – especially in relationship to slavery – would have been welcome.

Perhaps the stated goal of the book, namely to address the memory of slavery in individual, collective, and public terms, as well as its cultural, symbolic, and political effects was somewhat overly ambitious. Indeed, there is a strong emphasis on the public and political aspects. I would have enjoyed more balance between chapters dealing with official memory-making and heritage-making and those addressing more subtle traces in symbolic systems as well as in material culture (as illustrated, for example, in Rosalind Shaw's magisterial study on Sierra Leone, »Memories of the Slave Trade«, Susan Preston Blier's work on African Vodun, or J. Lorand Matory's study of black Atlantic religion)².

All in all, it is a very interesting collection that raises important issues about the multiple and varied ways in which slavery is officially remembered and reinvented. Most of all, the book points to the potential richness of the theme for future research across disciplines and regions, particularly in the French-speaking world.



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² Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, Chicago 2002; Susan Preston Blier, *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*, Chicago and London, 1995; J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé*, Princeton and Oxford, 2005.



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