

‘Working Through’ Slavery: The Limits of Shared Memories in Contemporary France

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The desire to construct a ‘shared’ memory of France’s involvement in slavery and the slave trade means creating a narrative that is both sensitive to the history of a formerly enslaved population and critical of the economic system which made that crime possible. Such a narrative would not draw directly from the memories of those whom Emmanuel Terray terms ‘victime[s] directe[s]’, but rather from those who see themselves as ‘victime[s] indirecte[s]’, and who are linked to the ‘victime directe par une relation quelconque — parenté, amitié, voisinage, appartenance au même groupe ou à la même communauté’.¹ At a political level, the creation of a memory that is able to engage the nation collectively, while remaining rooted in the demands of these representative groups, presents a significant number of challenges. For example, the memories of those who were enslaved cannot be fully excavated from the archives, but must be assembled from the traces of a past that remain embedded in the physical landscape of France’s overseas departments and maintained in the post-generational memories of its descendants.² The state’s communication of this ‘shared’ memory must both transcend a history that formerly divided large sections of its populace between master and slave, and transmit its willingness to confront its criminal past after a long period of amnesia.

On 21 May 2001, a major step towards addressing this memorial lacuna was taken with the ratification of a new French law that retrospectively labelled slavery and the slave trade crimes against humanity.³ The creation of the (first) ‘Taubira law’, named after its

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1. Emmanuel Terray, *Face aux abus de mémoire* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2006), p. 21.
 2. As Françoise Vergès puts it, ‘Les paysages “disent” cette histoire’. *L’Homme prédateur: Ce que nous enseigne l’esclavage sur notre temps* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011), p. 9.
 3. ‘Loi n° 2001-434 du 21 mai 2001 tendant à la reconnaissance de la traite et de l’esclavage en tant que crime contre l’humanité’, <www.legifrance.gouv.fr> [accessed 1 May 2011].

author, Christiane Taubira, worked to bring the forgotten history of France's system of slavery into the consciousness of the nation as a whole. Following several other 'lois historico-mémorielles', to borrow Johann Michel's phrase,⁴ this law was lauded as a moment of genuine political consensus, but provoked little media attention. Yet in 2005, this accord gave way to intense media debate after it was connected to two key political events: first, the now infamous 'Loi du 23 février 2005', which triggered a much wider battle over the use of memory laws; and second, a grievance procedure brought on 12 June 2005 against the historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, who was accused of denying slavery the status of a crime against humanity.⁵ This attack on a member of the academic community resulted in a group of well-known historians, among them Pierre Nora, petitioning for the abrogation of these 'memory laws'. They argued that history was neither 'un objet juridique' nor (provocatively) 'l'esclave de l'actualité'.⁶ 'Liberté pour l'histoire', as they became known, questioned the legitimacy of the state's role, and the use of its legal apparatus, to intervene in historical

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4. Johann Michel, *Gouverner les mémoires: Les Politiques mémorielles en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010). These include the 'Loi Gayssot' (1990) against acts of anti-Semitism and xenophobia; the 'Loi du 18 octobre' (1999) that renamed the 'opérations effectuées en Afrique du Nord' as 'la guerre d'Algérie'; and the 'Loi du 29 janvier' (2001) that recognized the Armenian genocide of 1915. For further information on the consensual wording of the Taubira law, see Nicola Frith, 'Crime and Penitence in Slavery Commemoration: From Political Controversy to the Politics of Performance', in *France's Colonial Legacies: Memory, Identity and Narrative*, ed. by Fiona Barclay (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), pp. 227–45 (pp. 232–33).
5. Article 4 of the 'Loi du 23 février 2005' called for the school curriculum to recognize 'en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord'. 'Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés', <<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr>> [accessed 27 June 2013]. Useful interventions in the memory wars include: *Les Guerres de mémoire. La France et son histoire: Enjeux politiques, controverses historiques, stratégies médiatiques*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard and Isabelle Veyrat-Masson (Paris: La Découverte, 2010); Benjamin Stora, *La Guerre des mémoires: La France face à son passé colonial* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2011).
6. 'Liberté pour l'histoire', *Liberation*, 13 December 2005, <http://www.liberation.fr/societe/2005/12/13/liberte-pour-l-histoire_541669> [accessed 30 May 2011]. See also the association's website: 'Liberté pour l'histoire', <<http://www.lph-asso.fr>> [accessed 27 June 2013].

matters (and by implication matters relating to memory)⁷, concluding that 'memory laws' equated to an infringement of freedom of speech.

This rejection overlooks a number of key issues that lie at the heart of the following article. The spirit of the Taubira law was not to direct or dictate how historians should conduct their work, but rather to recognize the existence of a long-neglected history of trauma that connects metropolitan France to its overseas departments. Far from attacking the historian's objectivity, it promotes a wider conceptualization of French history, which attempts to overcome the tendency to view the past from the limited and amnesiac perspectives of the *métropole*. Indeed, this tendency is exemplified by Pierre Nora's seven-volume collection, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984–93), which failed to include within its realms of memory any serious consideration of France's long colonial history.⁸ Where slavery and the slave trade are concerned, not only do they represent histories in which the French state has been directly implicated; they are also historical facts which have been defined legally and internationally as 'crimes against humanity'.⁹ The Taubira law thus connects France to a pre-existing international doctrine on human rights that has its roots in the Charter of the Nuremberg Tribunal, while also recognizing its responsibility towards those formerly colonized regions over which it still has jurisdiction. The history of such places carries with it a particular duty in that it requires, as a starting point, an ethical response. The question does not then concern the legitimacy of the Taubira law, as Nora and 'Liberté pour l'histoire' claimed, but rather the possibilities of creating a 'shared', that is a national, memory of slavery, and the theoretical limitations that such a memory might encounter.

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7. For more on the relationship between history and memory, see notably Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).
 8. *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. by Pierre Nora, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). As Charles Forsdick notes, 'It has become almost predictable in francophone postcolonial criticism to signal the exclusion of colonial memory from this monumental collection'. 'Siting Postcolonial Memory: Remembering New Caledonia in the Work of Didier Daeninckx', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 18 (2010), 175–92 (p. 176).
 9. 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights', <<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>> [accessed 7 October 2013].

It is here that the first major difficulty for the state lies, since it legislates for the construction of a memory that has been deliberately marginalized in public life. In 2004, a government committee was assigned the difficult task of achieving Article 4 of the Taubira law, which called for ‘un comité de personnalités qualifiées’ to guarantee ‘la pérennité de la mémoire de ce crime à travers les générations’.¹⁰ As noted in the Comité pour la mémoire de l’esclavage’s (CPME) first report, the history of slavery divides French society between those ‘issues de l’esclavage’ and ‘la France métropolitaine’.¹¹ Yet it was the very threat of social division that served to justify the state’s institutionalized forgetfulness in the first place. This can be traced back, as Myriam Cottias notes, to the 1848 abolition decree, ‘qui avait pour objectif de permettre “aux frères esclaves d’entrer dans la grande famille nationale”’, and, in doing so, enshrined ‘l’oubli de l’esclavage dans le métarécit national’.¹²

According to the CPME, overcoming this fracture means achieving a work of reconciliation by locating ‘un terrain de rencontre’, and creating both ‘une mémoire partagée’ and ‘une histoire commune’, or ‘ce que le philosophe Paul Ricœur a appelé un “récit partagé”’.¹³ On the advice of the CPME, the government’s first initiative was to implement a national day for remembering slavery, the slave trade and their abolitions, inaugurated under Jacques Chirac on 10 May 2006.¹⁴ But if forgetting has been, to quote Doris L. Garraway, ‘the very condition for the [overseas departments] political assimilation’,¹⁵ what

10. ‘Loi no 2001-434 du 21 mai 2001 tendant à la reconnaissance de la traite et de l’esclavage en tant que crime contre l’humanité’, <www.legifrance.gouv.fr> [accessed 1 May 2011].

11. Comité pour la mémoire de l’esclavage, ‘Mémoires de la traite négrière, de l’esclavage et de leurs abolitions’, Rapport à Monsieur le Premier Ministre, 12 April 2005, p. 13.

12. Myriam Cottias, ‘Et si l’esclavage colonial faisait histoire nationale?’, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 52 (2005), 59–63 (p. 59).

13. Comité pour la mémoire de l’esclavage, ‘Mémoires de la traite négrière’, pp. 13–14.

14. The pre-existing commemorative dates in the overseas departments were protected by law; ‘Loi n° 83-550 du 30 juin 1983 relative à la commémoration de l’abolition de l’esclavage’, <<http://legifrance.gouv.fr>> [accessed 7 October 2013].

15. Doris L. Garraway, ‘Memory as Reparation? The Politics of Remembering Slavery in France from Abolition to the Taubira law (2001)’, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 11 (2008), 365–86 (p. 366).

does it mean to create a national memory that promotes integration while transcending division?

At a socio-political (as opposed to individual) level, the state's role in the creation of this memory might imply a Freudian process of 'working through'.¹⁶ Such a process should aim, according to Dominick LaCapra, to help one achieve a better understanding of each aspect of what he terms the 'tragic grid'; that is the complex web of relations that 'locks together perpetrator, collaborator, victim, bystander and resister'.¹⁷ Ideally, a proper engagement with this grid will generate 'a more desirable network of relations' between each of the subject positions listed above (*HMA* 41). He argues, therefore, that this activity is 'most effective when it is situated in social and political contexts', since these contexts continue to offer the widest possible setting for communicating a new collective consciousness and a revised ethics based on a critical understanding of the past (*HMA* 185). This may be true in terms of dissemination; but when the public face of politics is driven by a desire to create a common, that is a national, history, constructed upon a fictitiously shared memory, does it not also run the risk of producing new forms of amnesia in the very process of locating a zone of consensus?

The purpose of this article is to question the narrative upon which France is constructing these memories: a narrative which might be seen, on the one hand, as part of the difficult process of 'working through' historical trauma but, on the other, as the production of consensus politics that eschews any genuine engagement with France's colonial past. As such, the article considers on what grounds a narrative of working through, or a 'récit partagé', has been, or is being, created for memories of slavery, a question that is linked to the more difficult

16. Working through normally relates to a psychoanalytical procedure involving victims who have suffered trauma and/or tragic loss and assists them in the process of reconstructing the shattered self; Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), xii, 147-56.

17. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 40-41, hereafter *HMA* in the text.

matter of whether or not France is really involved in such a process. As will be shown, the central issue remains the difficulty of confronting, especially after Auschwitz, a traumatic history in which there are no living survivors but only ‘victimes indirectes’,¹⁸ ‘secondary witnesses and historians’ (*HMA* 41), and politicians who wish to adopt particular roles within the memorialization process.

To explore these questions, this article will first consider how the French state positions itself in relation to the history of slavery and the slave trade, before examining the cases of Nantes and Bordeaux (France’s foremost slave ports) and the extent to which they have ‘succeeded’ in creating a shared local memory that adheres to the Taubira law. The article is thus concerned with the capacity of the state at both national and local levels to communicate a collective memory that might be seen as a complex cultural acquisition, as opposed to what Perry Anderson has called (in reference to Nora’s project) an ‘*union sucrée* dans laquelle les divisions et les discordes de la société française se fondraient dans les rituels attendris de la remémoration postmoderne’.¹⁹

France, the republican abolitionist

Like all traumatic histories, slavery is composed of various subject positions, including those of the ‘perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, [and] those born later’ (*HMA* 8). Citizens of contemporary France fall collectively into the category of ‘those born later’; yet the state bears a responsibility to the past, irrespective of the political regime in question, and particularly when that past continues to affect present-day French society.²⁰ In media and political circles, responsibility has frequently been conflated with repentance, resulting in its routine

18. Terray, *Face aux abus de mémoire*, p. 21.

19. Perry Anderson, *La Pensée tiède: Un regard critique sur la culture française*, trans. by William Olivier Desmond (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), p. 54, emphasis in original. See also Forsdick, ‘Siting Postcolonial Memory’, p. 176. Ricœur uses the term ‘une mémoire instrumentalisée’: *La Mémoire, l’histoire et l’oubli*, p. 71 and p. 97.

20. One example would be racial discrimination; see Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), p. 37.

rejection from nearly all political speeches concerning France and slavery since 1998. But even if guilt should not be transferred across generations, there might still be a need, as LaCapra asserts, to work through any misplaced 'feelings of guilt or vague disorientation' in order that 'critical distance [...] with respect to the ideology and motivation that led to the acts of perpetrators' can be achieved (*HMA* 197–98). In light of this insight, it is worth considering the responsibility taken and the position adopted by the state in confronting France's history of slavery, and whether the state has achieved a critical distance from the horrors of the past.

As a stakeholder in memory and a representative of all national legacies, the state faces a number of difficulties in selecting an appropriate role to play with relation to the slave past. Inevitably, the Fifth Republic constructs itself not as the descendent of the perpetrator (who is associated predominantly with the *Ancien Régime*), but as the direct descendent of the Second Republic that abolished slavery in 1848. The republic's adoptive position is therefore that of the righteous abolitionist who, in ending slavery, endorsed the values of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*. Not unlike the popular imagining of the Vichy Regime as a suspension of 'true' republican values, the abolitionist's perspective perpetuates a culture of forgetting that, as noted earlier, is rooted in the Second Republic's 1848 decree. It thereby works to obscure the important connections between systems of slavery and post-abolitionist labour exploitation that were in operation throughout the late imperial period.²¹ The 1998 celebrations of the abolition of slavery, for example, took place under the slogan 'Tous nés en 1848'. The use of collective pronoun 'tous' imposes an artificial narrative that can be superficially 'shared' and was designed, as Renaud Hourcade suggests, 'to make Republican universalism prevail on concurrent race-orientated narratives of the past'.²² As in

21. Éric Conan and Henri Rousso, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris: Fayard, 1994). As Doris L. Garraway notes, former slaves were required to become 'citizen-labourers' under a new colonial system in which the land continued to belong to the white colonizer. 'Memory as Reparation?', p. 372.

22. Renaud Hourcade, 'Commemorating a Guilty Past: The Politics of Memory in the French

1848, this collective ‘rebirth’ jettisons slavery from the construction of a republican nation by identifying the republic as the saviour of the colonized ‘other’. In doing so, it flattens a far more complex memorial landscape that is constructed from multiple perspectives and colonial histories, as evidenced by the 1983 decree that recognized the diverse commemorative dates selected by the overseas departments to celebrate the role of slaves in their own emancipation.²³

The insistence on investing in the abolitionist view as the state’s prevailing subject position can be seen as a form of what Saul Friedlander calls ‘narrative fetishism’. This is a tactic commonly used to avoid the process of working through trauma by constructing and deploying a narrative that is ‘consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called the narrative into being in the first place’. Narrative fetishism functions as ‘a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere’ (cited in *HMA* 13). For the French state, that means distancing itself from any historical connection to the perpetrator, who is relocated to the remote, pre-republican past, while adopting a celebratory abolitionist role that simultaneously silences the connections between the republic and its colonial practices after 1848. By compartmentalizing French colonial history into a before and an after, the complex continuation of an ‘économie de prédation’, to borrow Vergès’s term,²⁴ is thus erased, along with any discussion over the reparations paid to plantation owners, while the subject of colonialism under the Third Republic is tacitly framed by an abolitionist discourse.²⁵

Former Slave Trade Cities’, in *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*, ed. by Ana Lucia Araujo (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 124–40 (p. 131).

23. ‘Loi n° 83-550 du 30 juin 1983 relative à la commémoration de l’abolition de l’esclavage’, <<http://legifrance.gouv.fr>> [accessed 7 October 2013].

24. For the connections between slavery and labour exploitation as predatory economics see Vergès, *L’Homme prédateur*, pp. 31–78.

25. The financial compensation paid to the perpetrators undermines the assumed innocence of the Republic — indemnity was paid because the state was held responsible — and transforms the former slaves back into commodities. See Garraway, ‘Memory as Reparation?’, p. 371.

It is debatable whether the adoption of the Taubira law (10 May 2001) and the inauguration of a national day (10 May 2006) have resulted in either a significant shift in this abolitionist discourse, or the adoption of a more complex subject position by the state. While the presidential addresses that have marked 10 May have tentatively moved towards a fuller recognition of France's role in slavery, and while this has been complemented by acknowledging the agency of those who were enslaved, the emphasis remains broadly on abolitionism.²⁶ Of course, the work of the abolitionists remains an essential part of the history of slavery and should be celebrated, as Vergès notes, particularly in an age where slavery is rife.²⁷ But abolitionism has also become what LaCapra terms a 'harmonizing mode of narration [that] tends to repeat the processes of avoidance, denial, and willed ignorance through which bystanders [can] remain indifferent to — or somehow able to live with — persecution and genocide' (*HMA* 50).²⁸ For example, 10 May ceremonies have included the opening of two national sites of memory in the Jardin du Luxembourg: Fabrice Hyber's statue 'Le Cri, l'Écrit', inaugurated by Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007; and a stele entitled 'Hommage aux esclaves des colonies françaises', unveiled by Sarkozy in 2011, which reads:

Par leurs luttes et leur profond désir de dignité et de liberté, les esclaves des colonies françaises ont contribué à l'universalité des droits humains et à l'idéal de liberté, d'égalité et de fraternité qui fonde notre République. La France leur rend ici hommage.

While this acknowledgement, along with Sarkozy's speech of 2011, might represent something of a discursive break, in that they finally and officially include a memory of slave-led resistance within the national narrative, this is only possible if slave revolts are viewed as part and

26. Frith, 'Crime and Penitence', p. 239.

27. Vergès, *L'Homme prédateur*, p. 198.

28. LaCapra's use of the term 'genocide' refers to the Holocaust, but his theorization concerning a 'harmonizing mode of narration' can equally be applied to memories of slavery.

parcel of the ‘fight for the same universal human rights that would eventually be articulated and codified by the French revolution’ and the ‘ideal of universal emancipation’, as Garraway argued in relation to the 1998 commemorations.²⁹

The recent inauguration in 2013 of two further steles in Sarcelles and Saint-Denis, but this time at the initiative of the Paris-based association CM98, offers a counterpoint to these official memorial spaces. These sites display the names given to the former slaves by the French administration in 1848 and provide direct links to residents living in the locale. History is thus connected to a living present and renders visible the presence of a particular group within French society.

In contrast, meaningful memory work at state level continues to be blocked by the risk of undoing the ‘unifying’ myth of ‘la grande famille nationale’.³⁰ This myth is rooted in a colour-blind/culture-blind politics that refuses to recognize particularist identities and histories, and which must anxiously be repeated in order to guard against the ‘threat’ of communitarianism and multiculturalism.³¹ Trapped in this aporia, the memory of the enslaved cannot be positioned at the heart of the nation on two counts. It is seen as divisive in terms of privileging an alternative, non-unifying subject position, that of the victim; it is also considered to be destabilizing, since it opens up the possibility that the republic’s heritage might be located in a different subject position — that of the perpetrator who did not abolish the plantation system and who used republican universalism as the rationale for colonial exploitation.³² Above all what must be avoided are the interconnections between the systems of slavery, abolitionism and colonialism, as well as decolonization and departmentalization, that might inform a complex

29. Garraway, ‘Memory as Reparation?’, p. 381.

30. See, for example, Cottias, ‘Et si l’esclavage colonial faisait histoire nationale ?’, p. 59.

31. For more on French universalism and the threat of multiculturalism, see Naomi Schor, ‘The Crisis of French Universalism’, *Yale French Studies*, 100 (2001), 43–64; and Cécile Laborde, ‘The Culture(s) of the Republic: Nationalism and Multiculturalism in French Political Thought’, *Political Theory*, 29 (2001), 716–35.

32. For a detailed examination of the paradox of republican colonialism, see Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Françoise Vergès, *La République coloniale* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003).

reading of current racial prejudices and socio-economic inequalities. Alternatively, compartmentalization keeps intact the unifying myth that, as Chirac stated in his 1998 speech, 'Les anciens esclaves deviennent, dès qu'ils sont affranchis, des citoyens à part entière. Ils jouissent de tous les droits civils et politiques [...]. Ce que notre pays refuse, alors, c'est l'apparition d'une catégorie de citoyens de seconde zone'.³³

The state's largely celebratory stance has not, therefore, provided the necessary context against which a genuinely worked through memory of slavery might be achieved. A more reflective approach would endeavour to avoid 'the kind of uncritical, customary identity that seeks an affirmative conception of the past and self-conforming normalization or national identity even at the price of denial and distortion', and would interrogate what Habermas terms the 'collective life-context' that allowed such a system to prevail in the first place (*HMA* 63). This kind of engagement would require the republic to relinquish its 'harmonizing mode of narration' and its adherence to 'a "republican" vision of collective memory' by confronting its own mythologies.³⁴ Notably, this would mean questioning the republic's role in post-abolitionist forms of colonial exploitation, and would require an understanding of the legacies left by these histories in a society in which, as Pap Ndiaye states, 'le bannissement de la catégorie de "race" n'avait pas supprimé le racisme'.³⁵ In other words, it would require the republic to abandon the project of creating a 'mémoire partagée' and to begin negotiating 'more complex systems of inter-relating memories' that 'provide challenging new models in which to consider the persistence of the colonial past in a chronologically postcolonial present'.³⁶

If this has yet to be achieved at a national level, then perhaps a better model might be found at a regional level. Certainly, there has

33. Jacques Chirac, 'Discours de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, sur l'histoire de l'abolition de l'esclavage, le rôle de Victor Schœlcher et contre les formes modernes de l'asservissement', 23 April 1998, Paris, <<http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/987000146.html>> [accessed 31 July 2011]. See also Garraway, 'Memory as Reparation?', p. 377.

34. Hourcade, 'Commemorating', p. 137.

35. Ndiaye, *La Condition noire*, p. 37.

36. Forsdick, 'Siting', p. 183 and p. 187.

been a greater attempt to construct a 'shared' memory in regions such as Loire Atlantique and Aquitaine in metropolitan France, and in the overseas departments of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. These areas offer concrete case studies through which to explore more fully the ways in which government, but at a local level, has negotiated the past in a socio-political context that has seen the gradual '*dénationalisation des mémoires locales*'.³⁷ They thus offer the opportunity of drawing connections, while identifying the schisms, between regional and national narratives of working through, which will be examined by considering the post-2006 commemorative work of first Bordeaux and then Nantes.

*Bordeaux, 'un grand port antillais'*³⁸

The first national day for remembering slavery, the slave trade and their abolitions occurred in 2006, during a period of political debate over the legacy of France's colonial history instigated by the controversial proposition of 23 February 2005. These debates filtered into the regional press with *Sud-Ouest* (for the Aquitaine region) publishing an article provocatively entitled 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux'.³⁹ The city was presented as a 'laboratoire politique' where national tensions over the legacy of the colonial past were being played out in microcosm over the memories of slavery. In other words, as Christine Chivallon suggests, Bordeaux has acted as a 'caisse de résonance aux options de la Nation républicaine'.⁴⁰ The newspaper's use of the verb 'tirailer' personifies

37. Michel, *Gouverner les mémoires*, p. 62, emphasis in original.

38. Denis Tillinac, 'Comité de réflexion et de propositions sur la traite des noirs à Bordeaux: Rapport officiel remis à M. Hughes Martin, Député-Maire de Bordeaux', 10 May 2006, <http://www.bordeaux.fr/ebx/ShowBinary/BEA%20Repository/flip/fr/groupePiecesJointes/4870/2/pieceJointeSpec/11313/file/rapport_tillinac.pdf> [accessed 14 November 2011].

39. Héroïse Lhérété, 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux', *Sud-Ouest*, 12 January 2006, p. 12, <<http://www.sudouest.fr/>> [accessed 30 May 2011]. Note that all subsequent articles from *Sud-Ouest* were accessed from this web archive.

40. Christine Chivallon, 'L'Émergence récente de la mémoire de l'esclavage dans l'espace public: Enjeux et significations', *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique*, 89 (2002), 2–15 (p. 8).

the city of Bordeaux as both a victim of aggression and as a community torn by competing memories, while recalling obliquely debates over the Senegalese *tirailleurs*. In this way, memory is presented as an antagonistic force that has pushed Bordeaux into a defensive position, rather than as a way of working through the past that should begin with recognition.

Bordeaux's primary defender would be found in the figure of Denis Tillinac, a close personal friend of Chirac, who had been commissioned by the Bordelaise council to examine the possibility of creating a local memorial site to acknowledge Bordeaux's historical connections to slavery and the slave trade. Lhéréte's article ('La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux') had expressed the anxiety, echoed by the Tillinac report, that public recognition for the past would have a negative effect on the city's image, or, to borrow the words of the Nantes historian Éric Saugéra, would 'écorner un mythe'.⁴¹ That myth refers to the nostalgic image of Bordeaux as 'la ville des Lumières', a place that had produced key enlightenment, and indeed abolitionist, figures such as Montesquieu. In the same way that the French state wishes to protect the myth of republican universalism, it is this enlightenment image that Tillinac is at pains to preserve in the city's performance of recognition.⁴² But unlike the nation, whose historical implication in slavery and the slave trade can be flattened under a 'harmonizing mode of narration' (*HMA* 50) — abolitionism — Bordeaux, as France's second largest slave port, is automatically placed in a different relation or subject position with regards to history: from the outset it is defined as the perpetrator's descendant.

Facing up to this past was viewed as a difficult issue by the local press. Drawing on the preliminary results of the Tillinac report, *Sud-Ouest* highlighted the 'profondes lignes de fracture' that were dividing the community between 'une minorité blessée, dont nous devons entendre les souffrances', and 'une partie de la population largement indifférente, qui pourrait mal prendre une surenchère mémorielle'.⁴³

41. Saugéra was quoted in Lhéréte, 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux', p. 12.

42. Chivallon, 'L'Émergence récente', p. 8.

43. Lhéréte, 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux', p. 12.

The Tillinac report, released a few months later, emphasized the same schism: *‘Le Bordelais “ordinaire” (terme générique) ne peut pas se sentir impliqué au même titre que ses compatriotes africains, antillais, haïtiens, guyanais ou réunionnais [et] le “droit à l’indifférence” ne saurait être dénié à personne’*.⁴⁴ Although the report is at pains to nuance its use of the term ‘ordinaire’, the word acts euphemistically to split the memory of slavery and the slave trade between the average (white) Bordelaise citizen who has no connection with, and therefore no interest in, slavery; and the (black) ‘other’ who is assumed to be descended from slavery and presumably interested in the perpetuation of its memory. This ethnicized, even racialized, conceptualization of memory unhitches the history of slavery from the (white) majority and defends its right to remain ignorant.

This racial division is further compounded by splitting Bordeaux’s port history between its primary activity as ‘un grand port antillais’, or its ‘commerce en droiture’ with the Antilles, and its secondary function as a ‘port négrier’: ‘la traite ne compte qu’à hauteur d’environ 5% pour Bordeaux, contre près de la moitié pour Nantes’.⁴⁵ As Chivallon notes, ‘c’est précisément cette perception d’une participation secondaire au trafic négrier qui a contribué à justifier l’oubli bordelais’. But more than that, as she goes on to argue, Bordeaux’s denial resides in the failure to make a connection between its primary commercial activities and the integral role of these very activities in sustaining plantation slavery.⁴⁶ This dual narrative, which at once ethnicizes and marginalizes the history of slavery, enables the city of Bordeaux, and its powerful elite, to avoid adopting the subject position of the perpetrator as part of their heritage.⁴⁷ To quote Chivallon again, this narrative provides a ‘refuge pour une mémoire qui n’oserait se dire’.⁴⁸ Instead, as Tillinac declared in the interview with *Sud-Ouest*, Bordeaux’s engagement would be minimal: ‘Je ne veux pas culpabiliser les Bordelais avec des projets

44. Tillinac, ‘Comité de réflexion’, p. 20, emphasis added.

45. Tillinac, ‘Comité de réflexion’, p. 7.

46. Chivallon, ‘L’Émergence récente’, p. 4.

47. Hourcade, ‘Commemorating’, p. 134.

48. Chivallon, ‘L’Émergence récente’, p. 4.

trop spectaculaires. Ce qui m'importe c'est de réinscrire son passé dans une histoire globale'.⁴⁹ To avoid any association with the perpetrator, which would risk burdening the local with the 'guilt' of the national, Bordeaux's plan was to reach towards the global. This, then, is a far cry from Taubira's vision of 'l'histoire de la France assumée par toute la communauté national', and of the CPME's desire to communicate a 'récit partagé' of slavery.⁵⁰

What emerged from the Tillinac report were two commemorative initiatives. The first was a plaque embedded in the Quai des Chartrons and unveiled on 10 May 2006 by the UMP mayor, Hugues Martin. The plaque was intended to achieve the goals set out in the Tillinac report: a discrete object to answer the calls of commemorative associations for some permanent mark in the cityscape, but one that was not so 'spectaculaire' that it would risk upsetting the majority populace. The second was the creation of a permanent exhibition at the regional Musée d'Aquitaine, inaugurated during the 2009 ceremony when it was Bordeaux (not Paris) that was nominated as the alternative location for the president's annual address (with Sarkozy's responsibility deferred to his interior minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie). This new museal space was intended to lay to rest the long-held idea that Bordeaux was suffering from amnesia. As Christophe Lucet wrote for *Sud-Ouest*, 'Une page va se tourner: celle qui disait que Bordeaux "occultait" son passé négrier'.⁵¹

The year 2009, which represented the apogee of Bordeaux's commemorative efforts, was considered by Tillinac to have successfully avoided 'les deux écueils de l'amnésie et de la repentance'.⁵² Bordeaux's links to the slave trade were acknowledged, but the thorny subject of a formal apology was never broached. For Hourcade, any such expression of regret would be impossible since it would require the republic to identify 'a community of perpetrators and an opposite

49. Lhéréte, 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux', p. 12, emphasis added.

50. Hélène Rouquette-Valeins, 'L'Esclavage, hier et aujourd'hui', *Sud-Ouest*, 9 May 2006, p. 2.

51. Christophe Lucet, 'L'Histoire de la traite négrière a son musée', *Sud-Ouest*, 8 May 2009, p. 10.

52. Christophe Lucet, 'L'Entretien du dimanche: Esclaves, la juste mémoire', *Sud-Ouest*, 10 May 2009, p. 11.

community to which the perpetrators express sorrow', and there 'is no institutionalized community, in the French context, to whom an apology could be addressed *a priori*'.⁵³ But how does this traditional attachment to 'une figure abstraite de la citoyenneté théoriquement indifférente aux particularités de sexe, de couleur de peau ou autres' intersect with a local government whose approach to memory was, from the outset, structured upon an incommensurable *différand* between an 'ordinary' majority and a 'black' minority?⁵⁴

The unveiling of the new rooms at the Musée d'Aquitaine permitted Bordeaux's mayor, the UMP minister Alain Juppé, to summarize his vision of a 'shared' narrative that likewise rejected repentance: 'S'agit-il, pour nous, de faire repentance?' he asked, before responding negatively, 'Nous, citoyens français du 21ème siècle [...] ne sommes évidemment pas responsables ni coupables de ce qui a été commis au 17ème, 18ème et 19ème siècles dans un contexte historique profondément différent'.⁵⁵ Coming in the immediate wake of the general strike in Guadeloupe (January–April 2009), Juppé's speech could be interpreted as a riposte to the Guadeloupian syndicalist, Élie Domata, who had criticized the French state's neo-colonialist attitude towards the Antilles. But it is also telling that Juppé explicitly connected Bordeaux to its abolitionist mythology by citing the city's regional hero, Montesquieu: "Comme les hommes naissent égaux, il faut dire que l'esclavage est contre nature." C'est ce message et cette vérité que nous avons le devoir de perpétuer.⁵⁶ Juppé is not wrong to communicate the importance of this message, but the subject position adopted by the regional state, acting in this case as representative of the nation, presents no further political elaboration on the process of working through than that adopted by the national state (although, of course, the museum does represent an important moment of recognition). Official discourse thus repeats, or acts out, that of the state, so that the national and the regional coincide in a 'metalanguage

53. Hourcade, 'Commemorating', p. 135.

54. Ndiaye, *La Condition noire*, p. 40.

55. Alain Juppé, 'Opération vérité', 10 May 2009, <<http://www.al1jup.com/operation-verite>> [accessed 17 April 2013].

56. Juppé, 'Opération vérité'.

or higher-order normative structure' that is the republic (*HMA* 193–94). Bordeaux's negotiation with the slaving past is, therefore, one that must keep alive the nostalgia for those enlightenment ideologies that lie at the heart of French republicanism, while putting an end to a war of memories 'qui tiraille Bordeaux',⁵⁷ but possibly at the cost of eschewing a critical dialogue among all possible subject positions. As Tillinac replied when questioned in *Sud-Ouest* about whether the museum was a sufficient response, 'c'est pour solde de tout compte [...]. Le mot d'ordre désormais, c'est "pas d'amnésie, plus de repentance, pas d'agressivité et surtout, fraternité"'.⁵⁸

*Nantes, 'un port négrier'*⁵⁹

The city of Nantes has undergone an even longer process of engaging with its slave past, notably under the socialist deputy mayor (1989–2012) and current prime minister (2012–), Jean-Marc Ayrault. As in Bordeaux, the construction of a collective memory of slavery has followed years of silence brought about by a jostling between an unspoken shame on the one hand, and on the other nostalgia for the prosperous eighteenth century. Echoing the state's desire to forget after 1848, Nantes rebranded its civic image as that of a colonial port. It became, as Marie-Hélène Jouzeau (Directrice du Patrimoine for Nantes) stated in an interview with the author, 'Nantes, grand port industriel et colonial', which enabled its elite to 'se dédouaner de sa responsabilité'. However, the sharp decline in its economic activities also meant that this amnesiac present was forced to sit uncomfortably alongside 'une sincère nostalgie pour le dix-huitième siècle parce que cette prospérité [...] a été définitivement perdue'.⁶⁰ Nantes and Bordeaux have therefore

57. Lhéréty, 'La Mémoire qui tiraille Bordeaux', p. 12.

58. Lucet, 'L'Entretien du dimanche', p. 11.

59. Philippe Gambert, 'Abolition de l'esclavage, Nantes commémore', *Ouest-France*, 3 May 2007, <<http://www.ouest-france.fr/>> [accessed 30 May 2011]. Note that all subsequent newspapers articles from *Ouest-France* were accessed from this web archive.

60. Author's interview with Marie-Hélène Jouzeau, Direction du patrimoine et de l'archéologie, Nantes, 26 March 2012.

experienced a similar process of deep forgetting, which has hidden the history of slavery beneath the narrative of colonial maritime trading, and has generated nostalgia for the enlightenment period in which slavery developed.

In 1992, Nantes's silence was broken with a landmark temporary exhibition entitled 'Les Anneaux de la mémoire', which took place at the Château des ducs de Bretagne and lasted until 1994.⁶¹ Since that time, the city has engaged in numerous commemorative activities that, with the encouragement of its local government, have seen the emergence of a comparatively large network of memory activists and the inauguration of a permanent exhibition to slavery at the Château in 2007. The plans for this new exhibition, as well as for a large-scale memorial project on the quayside, meant that the first 10 May commemoration was cause for civic pride. The local press boasted that not only was Nantes able to look 'son passé esclavagiste droit dans les yeux', but it had also 'brisé le tabou avant les autres', and notably in advance of its former rival Bordeaux.⁶² To some extent, the two cities function contrapuntally. Just as Nantes's statistically more significant role in the slave trade has acted as a rationale for inaction and forgetting in Bordeaux, so Bordeaux has long formed a reference point against which Nantes can construct an alternative memorial narrative.⁶³ A year later, for example, Philippe Gambert wrote for *Ouest-France* that 'À Bordeaux, le 10 mai, il y aura un dépôt de gerbes', whereas 'À Nantes [...] une foultitude de manifestations est annoncée. [...] Nantes port négrier assume toute son histoire'.⁶⁴ Unafraid to add the suffix 'port négrier' to its name, Nantes is thus celebrated as a city built upon diversity and capable of incorporating the histories of all its citizens, in contrast with Bordeaux which is viewed as being trapped by amnesia and where 'c'est surtout

61. A virtual exhibition can be found on the association's website; 'Anneaux de la mémoire: Alliance internationale', <<http://anneauxdelamemoire.org/fr>> [accessed 28 June 2013].

62. Joël Bigorgne and Philippe Gambert, 'Le Passé esclavagiste provoque toujours des remous', *Ouest-France*, 10 May 2006; Stéphanie Bodin, 'Une marche en mémoire des esclaves', *Ouest-France*, 10 May 2006.

63. Chivallon, 'L'Émergence récente', p. 4.

64. Gambert, 'Abolition de l'esclavage'.

l'abolition qu'on célèbre'.⁶⁵

Nantes presents itself as being further along the process of working through the past because, unlike Bordeaux, it has been able to assume an alternative subject position that moves beyond the abolitionist. It offers a more direct encounter with its past by accepting its historical role as perpetrator, and counterbalances this acceptance by promoting its actions as courageous, moral and at the heart of its new and more open civic image.⁶⁶ 'Nantes va donner l'exemple', stated José Jean-Pierre, spokesperson for the Nantes-based association 'Collectif du 10 mai'; 'Les Français ont besoin de réconciliation avec eux-mêmes et leur histoire', and it is Nantes that provides the model.⁶⁷ So does this process of assuming an alternative subject position mean that Nantes has genuinely worked through the trauma of slavery and achieved critical distance, or is it simply a narrative construction based on a rebranding exercise rooted, for example, in the tourist trade?

To answer this question, we need to consider the recent construction of a large-scale memorial and architectural project, designed by Krzysztof Wodiczko and Julian Bonder, and inaugurated in Nantes in March 2012. Although the Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage has undoubtedly generated local opposition — for example over its escalating costs, its conceptualization and its 'invisibility'⁶⁸ — it has also offered Nantes the foundations upon which to structure another rebranding of the city's image. The challenge of commissioning, in Emmanuelle Chérel's words, 'un "travail de mémoire", qui semble "culpabilisant" pour les uns', while functioning as 'un moyen de faire le deuil pour les autres', would be met by Jean-Marc Ayrault, who found a solution to the problem by positioning the memory of slavery within a

65. Joël Bigorgne, 'Raconter la traite des noirs sans passions', *Ouest-France*, 19 May 2007.

66. As Hourcade writes, 'By appearing as brave communities [Nantes and Bordeaux] have engaged in a re-creation of their identities'. 'Commemorating', p. 138.

67. Gambert, 'Abolition de l'esclavage'.

68. For a full exploration of the history of the memorial, see Emmanuelle Chérel (avec la contribution de Gabriela Brindis Alvarez), *Le Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage de Nantes: Enjeux et controverses, 1998–2012* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012).

discourse of civic pride.⁶⁹ As Chérel pertinently notes, Ayrault used the memory of slavery as a ‘ressort culturel’, reviving the city following many years of economic hardship.⁷⁰ Using a series of what she describes as ‘déplacements métaphoriques’, Nantes is decontextualized by connecting it with alternative histories that reach out from the local and towards the international. This was a deliberate aspect of Jean-Marc Ayrault’s vision: to create a new identity rooted in cosmopolitanism, heterogeneity and tolerance.⁷¹ During the commemorative ceremony held in 2009, the deputy mayor spoke of the memorial in *Ouest-France* as conveying precisely this message — ‘le projet actuel du mémorial n’est pas “nanto-nantais mais un appel à la réflexion universelle”’.⁷² As a universal object, it is used politically to communicate to the world a positive image of Nantes based on openness and self-reflexivity. This act transforms the negative (shame, amnesia) into a positive through a duty to remember that diverts the threat of repentance hovering over the perpetrator’s descendent.

The memorial represents a complex, dialogic space that literally inscribes slavery as a crime against humanity into its glass-panelled walls. These panels reference the regional, national and international nature of slavery, and attest to all the possible subject positions that might be assumed within this history, including the voices of the slave trader, the abolitionist, the maroon, the legislator, the artist and the politician. Despite its name, the message communicated by the Mémorial de l’abolition de l’esclavage, and indeed its very structure, are not limited to an abolitionist discourse. Rather the message is composite, and the memorial actively encourages a process of construction and debate. For example, the glass panels and the texts inscribed within them do not narrate a teleological tale that moves from slavery to abolition, but are deliberately lacking in chronology so that multiple subject positions are

69. Chérel, *Mémorial*, p. 94.

70. Chérel, *Mémorial*, p. 86.

71. Chérel, *Mémorial*, p. 88; Hourcade, ‘Commemorating’, p. 138.

72. V. E., ‘Et si le mémorial de Nantes était celui du “tout-monde”’, *Ouest-France*, 11 May 2009.

juxtaposed.⁷³ The visitor is thus obliged to construct a dialogue between the different panels and to create complex connections and divergences across and between polyphonic voices. The result is that the message is far from being either hegemonic or homogenous. This heterogeneity does not mean, however, that the memorial has become disconnected from its own regional history. Although it has been criticized as being 'invisible' because it lies beneath the quayside and away from the city centre, it dialogues with the city on different levels. For example, it reaches out across the centre to the permanent exhibition at the Château des ducs de Bretagne via a series of eleven 'panneaux signalétiques historiques'.⁷⁴ Moreover, its strategically chosen position on the quayside enables it to communicate with the waters of the Loire, meaning that it is able to link back to its local history while simultaneously projecting the city out towards the international through its 'metaphoric displacements'.⁷⁵

The question then remains: how does the memorial identify and dialogue with the nation state? Arguably, one of its key limitations lies in its inability to connect itself into a national historical context. As Yannick Guin, the cultural attaché in Nantes, stated hopefully in an interview with *Ouest-France*, the memorial is 'celui de la République. La ville de Nantes lui offre l'occasion d'avoir un grand repère'.⁷⁶ But the nation state has yet to offer any reciprocal marker to assist in the construction and communication of this history and memory at a national level. Locally, no central funds were offered to support the project in Nantes, despite the minister for culture, Frédéric Mitterrand's vague promise find some 'petit tiroir budgétaire'; and nationally the plans to create a 'Centre national pour la mémoire des esclavages et de leurs abolitions', conceptualized by Édouard Glissant, were shelved under Sarkozy.⁷⁷

73. This is the opposite of the Cité de l'histoire de l'immigration which, as Forsdick notes, leads teleologically from immigration to integration. Forsdick, 'Siting', p. 178.

74. Author's interview with Marie-Hélène Jouzeau, Direction du patrimoine et de l'archéologie, Nantes, 26 March 2012.

75. Chérel, *Mémorial*, p. 87.

76. V. E., 'Et si le mémorial de Nantes était celui du "tout-monde"'.
77. 'Le ministre soutient le Mémorial de Nantes', *Ouest-France*, 6 February 2011.

As such, France's slaving history remains locked into a regional context that must bear the weight of constructing this memory on behalf of the nation. This situation has led France's foremost postcolonial theorists (Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel and Françoise Vergès) to demand the creation of a central commemorative and archival space:

Nous sommes nombreux à penser que cette approche par 'communauté' et par territoire risque de favoriser la fragmentation et la segmentation des récits. Il est temps de rompre avec ce modèle. [...] C'est pourquoi nous revendiquons la création d'un grand *lieu unique*, fédérant ces récits et mémoires [...] pour bâtir une histoire commune.⁷⁸

While the emphasis here is still upon the construction of 'une histoire commune', the desire to federalize memory suggests a more complex space in which the tensions between different 'récits' are allowed to remain.⁷⁹ As Glissant envisaged, this would mean turning away from 'les *mémoires de la tribu*' that are bounded by borders and divisions between peoples, and towards 'la *mémoire de la collectivité Terre*'; one that creates new relations and connections by envisaging memory, not as homogenous and ubiquitously 'shared', but rather as archipelagic and transversal.⁸⁰

As the examples of Bordeaux and Nantes suggest, the lack of a significant national project to act as the connective tissue for a network of local projects means that the history and memory of slavery are destined to remain either marginalized in public consciousness or trapped in a kind of obsessive-compulsive repetition of universalism that masks a

Édouard Glissant, *Mémoires des esclavages: La Fondation d'un centre national pour la mémoire des esclavages et de leurs abolitions* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

78. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Françoise Vergès and others, 'Manifeste pour un musée des histoires coloniales', *Libération*, 8 May 2012, <http://www.liberation.fr/culture/2012/05/08/manifeste-pour-un-musee-des-histoires-coloniales_817262> [accessed 17 June 2013], emphasis in original.

79. Forsdick, 'Siting', p. 188.

80. Glissant, *Mémoires*, p. 166, emphasis in original.

far deeper anxiety concerning the legacies of French colonial history. Arguably, what lies behind the inability (and unwillingness) to construct a multi-perspectival and relational memory of slavery is an entrenched nostalgia for a fading republican identity that views memories of the colonial past as too politically dangerous. Nonetheless, the dots need to be joined not simply between local, national and international memorial projects, but also between the histories of slavery and colonialism that traverse all of France's political regimes and that might require the republic to adopt a whole series of inherited subject positions. At the moment, it is major projects such as the Mémorial à l'abolition de l'esclavage that offer the possibility of constructing such a narrative, or rather narratives. The memorial at Nantes is an important symbol in that it both names and marks the crime within a civic space, and thus represents not an endpoint, but a narrative in construction. As such, it also symbolizes a deeper absence and process of non-recognition at a national level that, if continued, will, like memory, lead back to forgetfulness. As Ricœur states, 'les souvenirs qui n'ont pas encore accédé par le rappel à la lumière de la conscience [risquent] la même sorte d'existence que celle que nous attribuons aux choses qui nous entourent lorsque nous ne les percevons pas'.⁸¹ But then perhaps, for the state, that is precisely the point.

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81. Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, p. 562.