FRANÇOISE VERGÈS

Wandering Souls and Returning Ghosts: Writing the History of the Dispossessed

. . . It is hard to imagine all is lost
Since the energy of ashes is still here
And blows from time to time
through the debris.
—Aimé Césaire[1]

MONTAGES

When I first reflected on the question of *noeuds de mémoire*, a series of thoughts came to mind. I propose to approach this question from the so-called "South," which for me is not a geographical space but rather the historical site of the dispossessed: workers, peasants, the colonized, slaves, displaced people, refugees. Viewed from this "South," the history of enslavement, mass massacres, genocides, does not belong to the ethical and legal framework that has emerged from a consideration of the Shoah as a unique tragedy, with the metaphors and tropes that construct it as a crime against humanity *which is unparalleled*. When viewed from such a perspective, any event loses its inscription in history. It belongs to a world outside of humanity, to the register of metaphysics. The discourse of uniqueness situates the catastrophe of the Shoah on the plane of belief, rather than encouraging a plurality of readings of the disaster itself and of its critical examinations. This metaphysical approach inevitably leads to a hierarchy of historical violence. Rather, from the perspective of the South, a state of crisis such as the Shoah is not the exception but the rule and

1. Aimé Césaire, "Slowness" in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82*, trans. Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 15.

YFS 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire*, ed. Rothberg, Sanyal, and Silverman,

human-made catastrophes belong to the disorder of things, which is the history of human affairs.

Though I am aware of the limits of biography, it may be necessary to say that I am writing from multiple positions: as a cultural activist, a researcher, a project director, and a writer circulating between France and its overseas territories, and Africa and Asia. For years now, I have been working with social educators, associations, and teachers. I have experienced the difficulty of building a project from the bottom up, and have confronted hesitations, administrative obstacles, political conservatism, division among "natural" allies. All this has transformed my theoretical approach and made me wary of grand claims, suspicious of grand narratives, particularly of the narrative of emancipation as a total rupture, as an erasure of the past, as the dawn of a "new" world. Instead, emancipation is a long process in which any victory opens up a terrain for new struggles (see for instance, the abolition of slavery followed by struggles against new forms of economic exploitations and post-slavery colonialism). My experience of such conflicts, tensions, and solidarity and my research on diverse instances of struggle and their fields of contradiction make me wonder if the notion of *noeuds de mémoire* might not be misleading. The potential immobilization of history into a "knot" of fixed relations is real. The way in which memories perform a role in our lives is connected to the questions we raise at a certain moment, and the connection can be explained through a constellation of causes. Hence, the emergence of the memories of slavery and colonization in the French public space and the role these events have played in the public debate can be explained by a number of factors: the growing importance of the problematic of the Shoah (politics and morals, evil and politics), the role of the tribunal and the witness in politics; the role of grass-roots groups, the discontent of French youths whose parents came from the former colonies or the French overseas territories and who experienced racial and ethnic discrimination; and finally, the role that memory plays in the articulation of a discourse about injustice ("it is because of this past that I am discriminated against today").

In other words, the ways in which we use memories and histories are dynamic. Thus, although I know that the editors would not advocate the reification of memories into a fixed construct, I worry that the image of "knots" might lead us to consider a nexus of contradictory or overlapping discourses and representations as a fixed structure that needs unknotting. I suggest using the notion of "contacts of memo-

ries," a space where diverse memories enter into contact either by chance (those of refugees escaping wars and repression, or of migrants); or through the deliberate actions of groups or individuals (the memories of the Shoah and slavery, for instance). The contact between diverse currents of memory obeys a different logic, and answers to different interests. It marks a space of encounter, conflict, and exchange between speeches, representations, objects, and sounds that trigger and reactualize past events in ways that cannot be predicted. Such a notion opens up a site for the unexpected, that is, for dynamic history. Even if we observe a "knot of memories," that is, a series of reified, fixed speeches, representations, objects, and sounds that perform the same role of triggering and reactualizing past events, we can look at this knot as the expression of a political goal anchored in present interests, i.e., integrated in a dynamic political process. A "knot" can thus exist as a form of contact, a temporary moment where fixation is constructed to serve diverse interests. "Contacts of memories" describe the changing sites of encounters among memories. It allows us to observe not only how actors instrumentalize or create memories, but also how memory has become an active source of references for articulating present contradictions and emergences. Memory has entered the historical and political vocabulary and rather than bemoaning this fact, we can analyze how it is changing the ways in which struggles are deployed against injustices. The questions raised by the editors led me to operate a self-reflexive work on memory and to be more precise about the notions I use.

I consider a "contact de mémoire" to be the source of active contradictions, a challenge to monolinear national narratives, a zone of encounter and conflict between different layers of memory, all making claims for recognition and meaning. The current debate in France around a "war of memories" ("guerre des mémoires") implies that memories (of slavery, colonialism, wars, and so on) are peaceful constructions, that they are an expression of the human desire to be unique among others. But the fact that they are in conflict should not surprise us because they reflect conflicting interests. Psychoanalysis has made us aware of the importance of the small differences as well as the aspiration to be noticed, the importance of narcissism. Why would memory not be, like any other human activity, the terrain of conflicting interests? A "noeud de mémoire" evokes what could bring human beings together and what might forbid movement, therefore immobilizing them.

I also looked at the question of memory from different positions

that, from my point of view, do coexist. It is partly the result of growing up on a small island, Reunion Island, barely situated on the maps but which, since the first years of permanent settlement, has been caught in world events: slavery, abolitionism, colonialism, French colonial empire, south-south migrations, end of colonial status, Cold War, communism, French politics, Indian Ocean politics, European economic regulations, and more recently the challenges of climate change, the emergence of regional world powers (India and China) in the Indian Ocean, and new cultural expressions. The diversity of processes of creolization in such a place make it impossible to ignore multiple layers of signification in, and alternate approaches to, history, as well as to what constitutes the self and the Other. I do not argue for an endless indeterminacy in the reading of history, but instead, I attempt to find the points of contact and conflict between memories and histories. As I try to remain open to emerging or unfamiliar expressions, my assumptions are continually challenged. If there is a theory by which I approach situations, it is the theory of human frailty, of human longing for the infinite, and for the (too often denied) need for others. Although the critique of Western Reason, of the Western belief in free will and in the individual's capacity to realize "himself," has been widely developed, that belief remains strong and hegemonic. One acknowledges the critique but continues to believe in Reason and free will. Thus, "history" is the history of progress or regression, of good or evil, rather than of human actions. However, I seek out the unexpected, the accident of history. I seek out the history of the "anonymous," of those without graves. To think about "noeuds de mémoire" in this context is to think about the history of the dispossessed, about those "without whom the earth would never be the earth," as Aimé Césaire wrote. The history of the dispossessed is the history of economic and psychic domination and of resistance against that domination. A hierarchy of events is therefore impossible. Rather, we may consider the modalities, finalities, time, location, routes, networks, zones of contact and conflict, and draw a cartography of crisscrossing events, one that cannot lead to a linear and coherent narrative but rather to hybrid memories that are dynamically reconfigured. Just as people formulate questions about their past from concerns about their present, memories follow the same dynamics. The "noeuds de mémoire" of the dispossessed are articulations of explanations about their present with explanations about their past.

I would like to argue for the notion of "contact de mémoires" as a source of active and dynamic contradictions through the memories of slavery, how they have played out in France, in Reunion Island, and in Togo. Writing about "contact de mémoires" requires one to remain open to the "small" events, to the singularities of experiences enmeshed in larger events of global importance. Writing the history of the dispossessed requires evoking a simultaneity of events to which the method of *montage* seems better suited. Montage suggests an encounter between what is intimate and what is foreign, it implies a shift in our gaze, it challenges preconceptions. It is a pedagogy of complexity, a warning against the temptation of easy and self-righteous judging. It rests on the understanding that our current multifarious position can no longer be apprehended through one discipline. It also rests on my own experience of traveling between asymmetrical languages and places, of always trying to understand the fabrication of the subaltern in a situated locale. It also means making the effort to understand the position of the oppressor, its fears and angers, the causes for its narcissistic wounds, and acknowledging its capacity for self-reflection. In this contribution, I construct such a montage by looking at slavery as a "contact de mémoires" in three different settings: hexagonal France, Reunion Island, and Togo.

WHOSE MEMORIES MATTER?

In the last two decades, race, slavery, and the colony have become hotly contested terrains in France. Intellectuals, historians, sociologists, elected officials, the ministers of Education, of Immigration, of overseas departments, and the president of France, have all contributed to the debate on memories of slavery and colonialism, their role and place among other central events (deportation of the French Jews, Vichy), and the writing of their history.[2] The petitions of eminent historians against "memorial laws"[3] and for vigilance about the

2. Witness the current debate on "national identity," which has allowed xenophobic voices to freely and anonymously express themselves on an official website. Colonial memory and immigration play an important role in the enterprise of "what it is to be French": see www.debatsuridentitenationale.fr.

3. Liberté pour l'histoire (www.lph-asso.fr), an association begun by historians such as Pierre Nora, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Françoise Chandernagor in December 2005, stated as its objective the "defense of historians' freedom of expression against all kinds of political interventions and ideological pressures" and wrote a petition on this theme. In 2008, their petition received the support of numerous European and US historians of international reputation. Though their objective

"public use of history,"[4] the declarations of Nicolas Sarkozy (as a candidate for the French presidency) who coined the term "repentance" to counter demands for a rewriting of French national history that would explain why and how slavery and colonialism are central to French culture and politics, his policies once elected (the creation of a Ministry of Immigration, Integration and National Identity), the debate about ethnic discriminations in housing and work, the governmental project of a *Maison de l'Histoire de France*,[5] the debate around national identity launched in November 2009 by Eric Besson, Minister of Immigration, Integration and National Identity—all these elements show the points of contact and conflict among memories and histories that are currently at the heart of French public debate in the hexagon. The memories of slavery and colonialism constitute sources of reference for both sides of the debate, whether they acknowledge or diminish the importance of the colony as a formative cultural and political site. Declarations and speeches are examined through this lens,[6] but these declarations and speeches must concern the hexagon. What happens in "overseas" France is barely acknowledged.

Since history is said to "be constitutive of French national identity,"[7] questions such as who has the right to speak, to be included, which memories are legitimate, what are their routes and roots, which events are said to be central, are political questions. The relation between history and national identity has been closely associated with the debate on the "integration" of children of migrant workers in France. The objective could be summarized as "no more shame," no more retrospective blame, but a strong pride and a "new relation between the French and their history."[8] On March 31, 2009, upon taking up his position, Eric Besson was told by Nicolas Sarkozy and his prime

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appears to be the support of research, it has been perceived as directed against the Law of May 21, 2001 that recognized the slave trade and slavery as "crimes against humanity" and whose application has been met with resistance.

4. Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l'histoire (http://cvuh.free.fr) is more involved than Liberté pour l'histoire in the debate about educational programs, textbooks, and the history of slavery and colonization.

5. www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/09400029/index.shtml.

6. Witness the recent row around the declaration by Eric Raould, a conservative, who told the Prix Goncourt winner Marie N'Diaye not to make negative remarks about Nicolas Sarkozy, now that she was representing France with this award.

7. Christine Albanel, Minister of Culture, cited in "La Maison de l'histoire de France franchit un pas," www.nouvelobs.com, September 23, 2009.

8. Hervé Lemoine, author of the preliminary report on the project, cited in "Un musée de l'histoire de France: pour quoi faire?" www.lepoint.fr, January 13, 2009.

minister that "the promotion of our national identity must be at the heart of your action" and that his ministry would take part in the construction of the museum, "Maison de l'Histoire de France," which is destined to play a central role in the elaboration of "national memory."

The 2001 Law of May 21 that qualified the slave trade and slavery as "crimes against humanity"[9] was received with indifference by French public opinion and historians. The events of 2005 (riots, controversies, and so on) deeply transformed the discursive terrain as claims for rewriting colonial and postcolonial history became social claims seized by young rioters and associations. The response of the academic and political elites indicated fear that an unspoken but existing hierarchy between different events could be challenged. The memories and histories of the Shoah and colonial slavery were rapidly opposed: which one was a "crime against humanity" and which one did unjust and terrible damage but nonetheless did not entirely deserve to be called a "crime"? Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, whose book *Les traites négrières* (2005) became for the historians of *Liberté pour l'Histoire* the emblem of their resistance, put forward remarks that have supported commonly-held ideas. In an interview (June 12, 2005), he declared that the "Muslim empire started the slave trade," that slavery was abolished thanks to the work of the "essentially white and protestant abolitionists," and that the Law of May 21 induced a comparison with the Shoah that was impossible to maintain since the slave trade was not a "genocide."[10] The reduction of the judicial notion of "crime against humanity" to "genocide"[11] has

9. www.legifrance.gouv.fr, text of Law n°2001-434, May 21, 2001.

10. I do not discuss here the complaint of Antillean associations against Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau's declarations in the name of the 2002 Law which was finally withdrawn, even though a close reading of the affair should be done one day to show the diversity of interests at stake.

11. The London Charter of the International Military Tribunal, which issued the decree that set down the laws and procedures by which the post-World War II Nuremberg trials would be conducted, defined "crimes against humanity" as: "Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated." The "Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Explanatory Memorandum" defined them as "particularly odious offences in that they constitute a serious attack on human dignity or grave humiliation or a degradation of one or more human beings." The Declaration of the Powers, on the Abolition of the Slave Trade, of February 8, 1815 (which also formed Act XV of the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna of the same year) included in its first sentence the concept of the "principles of humanity and universal morality" as justification for ending a trade that was "odious in its continuance."

served as a device to draw the boundary between slavery and the Shoah. The other argument that has found credence is time. Historian Henry Rousso's declaration is symptomatic of this position. For him, slavery is a "past which was foreign to 'us'" because it was "four centuries old" whereas the Shoah remained the sole and legitimate "memory erected as a universal symbol of the struggle against all forms of racism."[12]

"French history" is *European* history; the hexagon's borders were traced by the European wars of the sixteenth century. The imagined community that is "France" remains strangely narrow, expelling from the national body its "overseas parts," as well as "jungles" and "*quartiers*"[13] perceived as transplanted elements rejected by the national body because they contain(ed) "alien" matter. The geography of memories and histories is still firmly contained within these borders. This partly explains why even shameful events like Vichy and the French active complicity in the deportation of French Jews could eventually be discussed: they concern "France" whereas slavery concerns the "descendants of slaves" who do not live on French "historical territory." Slavery is kept within the racial borders of blackness (being "Black" marks one as being directly interested in slavery). The advocates of the republican myth continue to conceive of slavery as something that happened "over there." The containment of this event in the field of "memory" (subjective, fickle) masks its importance in the making of French modernity (an importance that did not escape the Haitian revolutionaries). French national history persists in its refusal to consider the centrality of the colony in the making of its identity; it is a chapter, important perhaps, but a chapter only. There is currently no real public debate on cultural memory in a transnational age, on the points of contact and conflict between the memories and legacies of genocide, slavery and colonialism.

The reduction of the French national narrative to European territory was concomitant with the end of its colonial empire and the transformation of French society.[14] The reinvention of France as innocent of colonial crimes was the price society was ready to pay in

12. Cited by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, "À propos de l'histoire des traites négrières et, plus généralement, des positions contrastées des historiens," www.cvuh.free.fr/spip.php, Article 64, January 5, 2006.

13. "Jungle" is the name given to squats built by refugees around Calais as they try to cross the Channel, "quartiers," to the places where poorer social classes live.

14. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

order to embrace the benefits of modernization. France could recreate itself without a colonial past. The *longue durée* of the colony could be forgotten. Stories about French generosity (abolition of slavery, schools and hospitals in the colonies) were kept.[15] The power exerted by the romantic narrative of revolutionary rupture on generations of French intellectuals has made it difficult for memories of the slave trade and slavery to become "interesting" facts. For generations of French intellectuals, the Algerian war of independence (in Algeria) has constituted *the* model of anticolonial struggle (though resistance to slavery was anticolonial struggle). In a dramaturgy that put together Algerian peasants, veiled women, young and heroic women, heroic French men, French torturers and their victims, displaced populations, conflicting memories, a coup d'état, nationalist fighters, internal and violent tensions within the nationalist movement, the violation of rights, transcontinental solidarity, and the fall of a Republic, France could play and replay a twisted, idealized version of decolonization. With slavery, the iconography is impoverished: there are too few moments of bloody revolt with the flag on the barricades, bodies falling, battle cries, in which the French can see themselves as primary protagonists. Slaves risked their lives and died for freedom but very few French subjects died for the abolition of slavery. The hegemony of a model of radical historical rupture inevitably marginalizes the memories and histories of the slave trade and colonial slavery. These lasted for centuries, putting into contact and conflict continents, systems of laws, cultural expressions, philosophies, theologies, and notions of sovereignty. A long, patient, and transcontinental struggle led to their abolition, practically four centuries after the first slave ship left England. And yet, what event other than slavery better resonates with our era of massive migrations, massive fabrication of disposable people, massive and growing inequalities, and the return of an economy of predation that rests again on the belief in infinite resources and the desire of the powerful to impose their rule?

A Eurocentric reading of history seeks to marginalize the memories of transcontinental solidarities. With regards to decolonization, it also reorganizes events through the narrative of liberal democracy. Thus, the role and impact of the Soviet Union and the international communist movement on movements of decolonization are slowly erased

15. See Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.)

(in postcolonial countries as well: witness the erasure of Nelson Mandela's past as a communist). The geopolitics of the Cold War and their legacies have produced subaltern memories. I am thinking of the Chagos Island,[16] where a population was expelled from its native land to give way to one of the most important US military bases in the world, Diego Garcia. The territorialization of memories and histories undermines the routes of exchange and concrete solidarity.

The geography of French "noeuds de mémoire" speaks of its still unchallenged borders. If "France" is contained within the hexagon, it is understandable that a hierarchy of memories dominates. European wounds and human-made catastrophes are then undoubtedly major events. However, hybrid memories exist. The routes of solidarity among the dispossessed trace another map of contact and conflict. Indeed, conflict occurs among the dispossessed, as we can see, for instance, in the color line that runs through history and sets feminists against slaves, trade unions against immigrants.

STORIES THAT CUT THROUGH OFFICIAL NARRATIVE

On October 31, 2009, at the Père Lafosse cemetery in Saint-Louis, Reunion Island, a thousand people gathered under a canopy and in the shade of trees. It is a small cemetery with graves bearing no names or dates, close to one of the last two sugar factories that remain active on the island. Père Lafosse was a French priest who came to Reunion Island in the eighteenth century and embraced the cause of the slaves. During the French Revolution, he denounced slavery and called for the application of the "Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen" to the colony, but was opposed by the local colonial power. Oral tradition says that slaves are buried in the cemetery and that Père Lafosse himself was buried there upon his death in 1820. For a time, the cemetery was abandoned, even though people came to perform rites to ancestors and to honor Père Lafosse. In the late 1980s, grass-roots groups and progressive priests worked with the city of Saint-Louis and the Regional Council to renovate the site. Local artists contributed to the renovation. Anonymous graves and the grave of Père Lafosse have be-

16. See David Vine, *Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) and Rosabelle Boswell, *Le malaise créole. Ethnic Identity in Mauritius* (London: Berghahn Books, 2006).

come places of pilgrimage, prayer, homage, and rites to ancestors; they are surrounded with flowers, candles, and objects of creolized rites (red ribbon, cigarettes, glasses of rum). The anthropologist Christiane Rakotolahy has remarked on the Malagasy spatial organization of the site. The history of the cemetery, its place in the oral tradition and in popular history, its role in vernacular practices and rituals explain why, on October 31, 2009, the scientific and cultural team of the *Maison des civilizations et de l'unité réunionnaise* (MCUR) chose it as the place to inaugurate a monument to all the ancestors buried without a marked grave, that is, to the hundreds of thousands of women, men, and children deported as slaves to Reunion Island.

The ceremony was organized around three moments: prayers and songs to the dead, a speech, and the unveiling of the monument. The moment of prayers was opened by Madame Baba, a 91-year-old woman who has been performing creolized Malagasy rites to enslaved ancestors for decades, first with her husband who died in 2005, then with her children. She gave a short speech before singing of her unknown ancestors. Following Madame Baba, Afro-Malagasy, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim songs and prayers were heard. They called upon the mercy of God, of gods and goddesses, of spirits to appease the wandering souls that haunt the island. For two hours, the public listened to words of sorrow, mourning, grief, and hope. The singer Christine Salem arrived with a *kayamb*, an instrument that accompanies *maloya*, the music created by slaves and enriched by indentured workers on the sugar plantations. She spoke first. She had just learned that her father was denied last rites according to Catholic tradition because he was a communist. She made a connection between this refusal and the ways in which her enslaved ancestors had been denied last rites. She improvised a song in Creole and Malagasy. The monument was unveiled, a sober piece of gray and red granite, the local stone. People could read the text on the monument: "Hundreds of thousands of children, women and men were wrenched from their native land and enslaved on this island, from the end of the seventeenth century to the abolition of slavery in 1848. The Code Noir reduced them to the status of 'furniture.' Colonial slavery deprived them of a marked grave and erased all trace of their presence. Every human being has a right to memory. With this monument, we repair this oblivion. We celebrate their lives, their courage and what they left us." One by one, people put a flower on the monument. Some people came to me to tell me that they would come back later, once the

crowd had thinned, to perform vernacular rites, to give the ancestors rum and cigarettes.

The following day, one of the daily newspapers wondered why so much trouble had gone into this ceremony: why a canopy, why so many speeches, why flowers?[17] On the Internet, the blog "Français de souche"[18] contested the idea that slaves were buried without a marked grave. It claimed that the Code Noir required that their owners bury them, that they were not to be left to the dogs, that it was a duty to bury them to avoid epidemics. Other voices concurred: it was time for slavery to be put behind us, time to move forward. The lack of empathy, the refusal to consider—just for once—the sorrow of those who were present at the ceremony, spoke of the contempt for a long history of slavery that had deeply changed the world and shaped the island.

During the October 31 ceremony at the Père Lafosse cemetery, a renowned Sufi visiting from Senegal spoke of the relations among human-made historical catastrophes—slavery, genocide against Native Americans, genocide against European Jews, genocide in Rwanda —and called for a common reflection on the connections among these events. They were all actions of destruction and crimes against humanity, he said; they all sought to transform human beings into refuse, into excess to annihilate, "things" to maim, torture, and kill. This was their point of connection. In other words, human-made historical catastrophes appear to share a line of thought: the dehumanization of another group. Denying the humanity of others justifies enslavement, deportation, destruction. Yet, despite the connection that dehumanization provides, is it possible to compare genocide and slavery? Or, to compare genocides that were the consequences of clearly defined plans and genocides that were the unexpected consequences of invasion, conquest, wars? How and where do these events connect? The history of the slave trade and slavery is still too often read through the theory of liberal and Marxist economy, whereas genocides or mass massacres are explained by a failure of morality and ethics. It is more difficult to confront, outside any moralistic approach, the logic of economic exploitation and progress that justifies forced labor and the fabrication of disposable people.

Slavery is in itself a space of "contact of memories" that assem-

17. JIR, November 1, 2009.

18. *Français de souche* is quite untranslatable in English. The expression was coined by the National Front and meant a "true" French person, with "authentic" roots.

bles different sites and layers of memory, different languages and expressions of shame, denial, mourning, and commemoration. It still resonates because it speaks of the transformation of a human being into pure animal force, into a disposable thing whose life and death cease to matter. What matters is the profit the trafficker and the owner can make and the pleasure of consumption. Slavery evokes human dependency on things that are immorally extracted or produced. Are we that foreign to this situation? People wanted to forget the cost of a pound of sugar. We are ready to forget the human cost of a gallon of oil. What I mean here is that a "contact of memory" is not just about history, it is about the way we live, what we accept and what we fight against. The memory of slavery in Reunion Island must remain a source for examining one's own complicity with exploitation and injustice. It is not a lesson in morals, but a lesson in politics.

In France and Reunion Island, it is not that the cultural expressions of memory and the history of slavery are fully ignored, but rather that there is a refusal to acknowledge slavery as a *common* and *worthy* legacy. Slavery is not part of "universal memory." The *longue durée* of European colonialism inscribes Reunion Island within different globalizations: first, the one produced by slavery, then by imperialism, and today by the different multipolarities created by current globalization. It is important to place the island within different temporalities and spaces, within different modernities: the time and space of the Indian Ocean world, of the slave trade and slavery, of imperialism, of anti-imperialism, of south-south exchanges and encounters. The cartography that is suggested is one of multiple roads and routes of memory, of Gujarati migrants, Malagasy slaves, French settlers, Tamil and Chinese indentured workers, among others. Current issues—economic, cultural, geopolitical—have brought up new questions: what does it mean to live on a small island in a maritime space deeply redrawn by emerging regional powers—South Africa, China, India—which use old routes and connections or invent new ones, in an ocean bordered by countries where the majority of Muslims in the world live today, that remains the main road for oil, and where wars are waged for the control of these routes? This complex situation suggests the existence of new sites of memories, of new *contacts* of memories.

Reunion Island is an intense zone of contact. It was uninhabited when the French decided they needed ports of call on their way to the riches of India. They took possession of two islands to the east of Madagascar which they named Bourbon (La Reunion) and Ile de France (Mau-

ritius). Reunion Island had no native population. The society was created by slaves, colonial settlers, and migrants, brought or coming from Madagascar, Mozambique, Comoros Islands, France, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Malaysia, Vietnam, South China. Waves of migration have contributed to the making of Reunion culture. They trace itineraries of contact through the Indiaoceanic world, of south-south migrations and routes of exchange and conflicts. Today, two out of three monotheisms—Christianity and Islam; one of the major religions—Hinduism; Buddhism; and Afro-Malagasy rites or ancestral worship ceremonies all coexist on an island of 2500 square kilometers. In each of these religions there is also a diversity of churches and practices, with Evangelism, Shiism, Sunnism, and Comorian rites. Interculturality is not some hearsay notion. *Métissage*, which elsewhere often implies binaries ("white/black") is considerably multiple and layered. There are an infinite number of combinations of interethnic mixing. In the same family sisters and brothers bear testimony to the game of the genetic luck of the draw, throwing out all forms of presupposition and all forms of determinism. On Reunion, the unexpected consequences of history constantly contradict the idea of linearity and determinism. Who would have foreseen the creation of Creole cultures out of colonial slavery? Who would have known that the first abolition of slavery in 1794 would be rejected by the slaves' owners and therefore not applied? Who would have foretold the importance of the conflict between the Reunionese Communist Party and a local conservative xenophobic movement in the transformation of the society in the post-1946 years (The colonial status ended on March 19, 1946)?

Creolization processes and practices show a cartography of crisscrossing trajectories that do not necessarily produce a nomadic identity, but an identity that recognizes the diversity of worlds, and moves through different territories. There is *no creolization without conflict* among differences and the movement toward cultural unity is itself affected by new differences. Creolization is about the experience of *being a foreigner*, hence about radically questioning the relations among roots, territory, and identity. It is the *territory of language*, rather than blood. Creolization allows a theory of the subject that is not contained within the limits of imperial and national sovereignty. It challenges the "truth" of identity. It suggests that loss is not necessarily a lack. It is about having to learn to share a territory with others, a territory one has not necessarily chosen as one's own.

Processes of creolization are also about contingencies, accidents of

history. Gender, class, ethnicity affect the processes. Let me show this through three imagined examples based on fact:

- In 1798, a young man is captured in a village of what is today northern Mozambique. He is taken to a slave ship. He has been brutally separated from a familiar world and must make sense of many new things: chains, whip, hunger, solitude. Along the way, he meets other captives. One night, he is thrown into the belly of a ship. Fear and terror are his new companions. After a month, he disembarks on an island whose name he has never heard, whose language he does not understand. He is sold to a man who takes him to his house. He was a son, a brother, a husband, he is now a slave, an "object" according to the laws of his new land. Slowly, he learns a new language, new ways of living. He undergoes creolization, he becomes a Reunionese.
- In 1857, a young woman leaves south India for an island whose name she barely understands. She leaves a world of misery, she wants to believe the promises that the strangers who came to her village made: that she will find wealth, that she will be able to return when she wishes. On the ship, she has to protect herself from the sailors and the men who are her companions in the program of migration organized by the British and French colonial powers between their respective colonies. She arrives on an island and is right away quarantined in an isolated and overcrowded place, "Le Lazaret." She plants the seeds of sacred spices she has hidden in her hem, she recreates her rituals. She hides her caste, reconstructs herself. Finally, she is taken to her new "home," a plantation on the island. She reconstructs a life, she goes to the *koilou*, the Hindu temple, makes her offerings, cultivates her spices and cooks her curries. She learns a new language, she shares with her new neighbors their own food, participates in their festivals, invites them to her own. She undergoes creolization. She becomes a Reunionese.
- In 1910, a young couple leaves France to find fortune in the colony of Reunion. They soon find that work is hard despite the privilege the color of their skin affords them in a colony. They squat some land in the mountains—the rich land of the coast is the reserve of the wealthy—and cultivate vegetables, geraniums, vanilla. They lend their hands to a wealthy landlord when times are hard. They slowly learn Creole, they share with their poor neighbors, some of them of Malagasy, African, or of Indian descent, a harsh life but one that is also filled with festivities. They become Reunionese.

Anthropologists have shown that people in Reunion often circulate between practices and beliefs. They call this *intraculturality* to ex-

press the existence of multiple modalities at work in a singular expression. For instance, *narlgon* is a form of vernacular theater that came with Indian indentured workers but was transformed in Reunion. Contrary to *terrukkutu*, a well-known form of vernacular theater in Tamil Nadu, the actors of narlgon are not professional and women, not men, play the female roles. Two stories are favored that reflect local concerns and experiences. One is *Vanavarson*, which tells the story of exile of the *Pandava*, called *Barldon* in Reunion Island, and echoes the experience of exile of indentured workers. Another favorite story is the love story of Vali and Soubramaniel (or Muruga), which is a story of mixing, of love stronger than class or ethnic origin.

To trace the itineraries of ideas, women, men, gods, spices, goddesses, songs is to trace a pluralized history and memory of the dispossessed. Totalizing terms, such as "African slave," "Indian indentured worker," or "European settler," are deconstructed and a diversity of stories weaves a common history of multiplying presences. What emerges are the memories and histories of peoples who were and are still denied humanity in the inhuman field of brutal exploitation. In 1989, Alain Gauthier and Henri-Pierre Jeudy imagined a museum of holes of memory (*trous de mémoire*)[19] where a surface communicates with another surface without any temporality. "Contacts de mémoire" are not "trous de mémoire" but rather memories that are inscribed in time, context, and space. What method of writing will best preserve the intricacies, hesitations, failed opportunities, the memories of fear, complicity, betrayal, and hope that accompany any moment? To write about "contacts of memories" is to write without retouching photographs and rewriting biographies and histories, to allow for inconsistencies and human frailty, in other words, to be open to history.

A crossed history of the gestures, actions, and words of the dispossessed questions the ways in which global history is still written as the history of nations and countries. In a world where there is a growing fabrication of disposable people, where states and multinationals mock the common good and glorify egotistic satisfaction, interconnected histories of resistance demonstrate that there are grounds for fighting and that hope (not an empty word) is a political category. It took practically four centuries to abolish colonial slavery. It was a long

19. Alain Gauthier and Henri-Pierre Jeudy, "Trou de mémoire, image virale," *Communications* 49, "La mémoire et l'oubli" (1989): 143.

and difficult struggle. Slaves denounced the plots of insurrection; African kings sold their neighbors; Europeans looked elsewhere. Despite protests, Europe and its colonies and the United States continued to traffic in human beings. The addiction to spices and sugar, the addiction to brutality and power, the easy gains, the belief in "Whites'" superiority, the territorialization of suffering, the distinction between who matters and who does not, the complicities of the Law and of the Catholic Church contributed to keeping millions of Africans in bondage. The fabrication of disposability went along with the fabrication of assent. Is this really foreign to us?

BLACK DIVINITIES OF BRAZIL AND TOGO

For the last four years, the association ACOFIN (from the name of a Togolese musical instrument) has organized the Festival of Black Divinities. For the 2009 event, which took place from December 16 to 20, the theme was "Africa and Its Diaspora: An Eternal Alliance." Têtе Wilson Bahun, ACOFIN's president, explained why he wanted to organize a ceremony of purification and reconciliation between people from Bahia, Brazil and the people of Togo: "The quest for African roots goes through Salvador de Bahia, which is called the 'Black Rome,' because it is the city that has best preserved African culture from the time of slavery." He traced a route of complex memories that ran between Togo and Brazil. More than two million Africans left the continent from Ouidah (Benin) and Aneho and Agbodrafo (Togo) and among those, slaves who had bought their freedom came back to the region and settled. They established a new social and cultural identity. Their descendants live in villages and cities in Ghana, Benin, and Togo.

The Festival brought together Africans whose ancestors had never been slaves, Africans whose ancestors had sold African captives, Africans whose ancestors had been slaves in Brazil but had come back as free men, and Brazilians who were descendants of slaves. The guests from Brazil were reincorporated within the African social community through cultural and social ceremonies where African priests perform rituals, and where dances and songs celebrated a shared past and present. In his speech, Mensah-Assiakoley V, the traditional king of Agbodrafo (where the purification ceremony was held) acknowledged the responsibility of Africans in the slave trade and asked for a common reflection on the complex legacies of slavery. His speech was a meditation on a "noeud de memoire" that concerned south-south routes

of commerce, traffic, and exchanges. He did not situate his reflections within the framework of apology, reparation, and compensation that has dominated public debate in Europe following the thirty-year campaign by Jewish organizations against European states, banks, museums, and individuals. The debates about compensation for damages always raise the question of who will pay and who will make sure that compensation goes to the right people. The King suggested that we all had to accept the past by building new bridges and new forms of cooperation. Reparation was about reconstructing a connection while acknowledging difference (the goal was not to transform Brazilians into Togolese). Apology was about acknowledging African complicity in the slave trade and receiving Brazilians in a poor region of Togo as honored guests and members of a transcontinental family. Compensation was unfair: who would pay and what would it accomplish? Aimé Césaire shared this approach when he explained why he rejected the concept of reparation. He did not even like the term because it implied that "reparation is possible." Césaire declared, two years before his death: "I know Western people. They will say: 'So, my dear, how much? I give you half to pay for slave trade. OK? Done!' And then it will be done; they would have accomplished the reparation. In my view, it is irreparable."[20] During an exchange at the University of Lomé, the Brazilian anthropologist Milton Guran was very clear: why would the Brazilians, descendants of slaves, have to compensate Africans, even though their ancestors had been captured and sold by Africans to Europeans? The idea was absurd. The king, like Césaire and Guran, defended transcontinental solidarity between the dispossessed and policies of cooperation that would serve the dispossessed.

The Togolese who received the Brazilians and carried out rituals to reincorporate them into a social and cultural lineage, even if it was imaginary, rejected the metaphysical approach. They acknowledged that there is no scale of human suffering. They also acknowledged that the history of those who had been "lost," whose names had been forgotten but whose lives had been preserved through song, music, poetry, and ritual, belonged to the history of humanity. They "performed" memories that inhabit people, the intangible history not found in monuments, palaces, and castles. We must learn to live with this complex legacy, with a "contact de mémoires" that constantly

20. Françoise Vergès, *Nègre je suis, Nègre je resterai. Entretiens avec Aimé Césaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006), 39; my translation.

questions our desire for a clean and linear narrative. In Togo, the word "slavery" evokes both routes of deportation and routes of solidarity and exchange that were built then and there. The encounter, even if fluid and momentary, contributed to the writing of a history of the dispossessed, leaving a diversity of memories among those who were present. This diversity had meaning, the meaning of a "contact de mémoires," a source for future references that would feed new cultural expressions and emergences.

Events that coalesce into memories of displacement, loss of language, brutality, and harsh working conditions build sites of memorial contact, memories of suffering, complicity, and resistance. They all belong to the long history of the colony, as the site of exception, and a regime of forced labor. The interconnected stories of human cargo, of the memories of fear, solitude, despair, vigor, human ingenuity, and resistance challenge linear history. Ruptures, accidents, unintended consequences, the crossed histories of gender, imperialism, and race formation question a linearity in the history of the dispossessed. Ordinary lives and ordinary labors construct a vocabulary that speaks of intricacies and affiliations. In this contribution I have explored slavery as a fluctuating and dynamic site of memorial contact, as a constant source of reference to describe the transformation of human beings into things that do not matter. Slavery runs through human history. It raises a philosophical and anthropological question: why do human beings enslave other human beings? As a system of exploitation, slavery speaks of brutality and cruelty, it violates social and cultural ties. It constructs a culture of fear and submission, of shame and contempt. Yet, its history is also full of daily gestures of solidarity, of transcontinental struggle in a diversity of fields: judicial, religious, philosophical, economic, cultural. As a "contact of memories," slavery goes beyond a defined historical moment and offers a space for the exploration of disposability, of the ways in which memories become transcontinental, dynamic, and contemporary.[21]

21. One might ask if slavery can be a "global" contact of memories? I will suggest that it can, if we consider slavery as the fabrication of disposable people. True, slavery comes in different forms and the experience of colonial slavery stands apart. Yet, the notion continues to serve as a powerful trope for protest and resistance against what one perceives as the ultimate insult to one's humanity: being trafficked and denied access to basic needs.