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**Abstract:** This intervention argues that Morrison's *Beloved* highlights the workings of memory (*Erinnerungsarbeit*) rather than the concept of memory as a duty, as well as assesses the debate known as "memory wars" in France and gives a brief survey of what has been achieved at the level of the French state in the midst of a violent controversy about history, national memory and memorials. It closes on the ways in which slavery is fictionalized and analyzed, from Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and Chivalon's anthropological approach (2012) to the discovery of archives, such as the lawsuit brought by the slave Furcy against his master (2011).

**Keywords:** history, memory, memorials, archives, *Beloved*

**Author:** Claudine Raynaud is a Professor of English and American Studies at the University Paul Valéry in Montpellier. She has taught in the UK (Birmingham and Liverpool) and the US (Michigan, Northwestern and Oberlin). A Fellow at the Du Bois Institute (Harvard, Fall 2005), she headed the French African American Studies Research Group created in 2004 and works at the CNRS. She is the author of *Toni Morrison: L'Esthétique de la survie* (1995) and numerous articles on black autobiography. Her publications include "Coming of Age in the African American Novel" (2004), "*Beloved* or the Shifting Shapes of Memory" (2007) and an article on Hurston's fieldtrip to Haiti (2013). She has published a series of essays in translation from the Harlem Renaissance (2013) and coedited *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, 'Race'* (2014).

# Memory Work

“Writing Slavery after *Beloved*” –the title of the 2013 conference in Nantes –presupposes that Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is a landmark, a moment in writing about slavery that drastically and dramatically changes our views and our expectations, our thinking about slavery, its history and the way we remember it. It would preempt any going back to representations that in one way or another do not refer to it as a model or as a starting point for other ventures. Paul Ricoeur, as well as Simone Veil, politician and Holocaust survivor, refused the vision of memory as a duty (*devoir de mémoire*) to prefer, in the case of the philosopher, the psychoanalytic notion of memory work (*travail de mémoire*). If Morrison’s work stands out it is precisely because her novel is as much about the workings of memory as it is about slavery itself and its consequences.<sup>i</sup> Sethe tries to forget by fighting back the past, but that repressed memory haunts her to the point of overcoming her. The impossibility of telling and the difficulty of a narrative of slavery are epitomized in the threnody of the central pages of the novel where the voices of the three women, Sethe, Denver and Beloved, supposedly superimposed, cannot but be read one after the other. They should indeed be heard together: a mutual possession of the mother, the live daughter and the dead one: “What a roaring!” (Morrison, *Beloved* 181). Depicting infanticide as an act of mercy and using a historically grounded fact, Morrison links the history of slavery with the recreation of the psychic make-up of a slave mother. She performs the “act of willed creation” that is her definition for memory (Morrison, “Memory” 385). She exemplifies the writer’s role as “the truest of historians” (Morrison, “Behind” 88). She helps us relate to the past, its traumas and gives voice to the voiceless, the 60 000 000 and more of the epigraph. In more ways than one, *Beloved* is a *tombeau*, filling in the blanks of America’s amnesia.<sup>ii</sup>

While the reference, given the conference title, could only be to the Anglo-Saxon world, the Transatlantic trade and the plantation system in North America, the choice of Nantes as a venue called for a confrontation with France’s relation to its own history of slavery and drew attention to its difficulty with the memory of slavery. In short, what French historians and the media have labeled “the controversy over memory” or even “memory wars” (cf. Blanchard and Veyrat-Masson). As Michel Feith ex-

plains, the Nantes “Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery” was not open at the time when the conference took place. It opened a week later with an official conference in which members of the Committee for the Memory of Slavery (it has been renamed the Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery) took part, together with an array of international scholars (historians, sociologists, lawyers), artists and political activists.<sup>iii</sup> This committee, headed by the Guadeloupian writer Maryse Condé and then by Françoise Vergès, was founded after the passing of the Taubira Act on May 21st, 2001. The law states that the slave trade and slavery are a “crime against mankind” (“crime contre l’humanité”), recommends that history textbooks for secondary schools give ample space to the Atlantic slave trade, and selects May 10<sup>th</sup> as an official date for the celebration of the memory and the abolition of slavery (“Loi n° 2001-434”).<sup>iv</sup> The committee made several recommendations, notably it urged the funding of research on the history of the slave trade. This has led to the creation of a research program at the EHESS (*Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*), a prize for the best dissertation on the topic of slavery, an international program on slavery at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) named CIRESC, a project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) named AFRODESC,<sup>v</sup> an academic venture on the translation of slave narratives from English. The Memorial now hosts conferences and events on slavery and the history of the slave trade.

After the passing of a law in 2005 that recommended that the positive role of the French state in colonization should be stressed in history courses in French high schools, a group of historians contested in a petition the four acts labeled “memorial laws” which include the 2001 law on slavery.<sup>vi</sup> The heated debate revolved around the role of the state in passing laws about historical truth vs. the autonomy of history as a scientific discipline. The historian of slavery, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, found himself the butt of attacks on the part of the Antilles-Guyana-Réunion Collective (Collectif des Antillais-Guyanais-Réunionnais) for having minimized the scope and the tragedy of the slave trades that he refused to label as “genocides.” The Comité DOM used the Taubira Act to file their complaint.<sup>vii</sup> This brief summary of many years of controversy that reached its apex in the context of the 2005 riots in the Paris suburbs illustrates how legislators, as well as historians, find it hard to state the ‘truth’ of the past. Pétré-Grenouilleau prefers to talk about a “concern for truth” rather than a “memorial duty” (Interview) and the 19 historians who signed the petition on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, claim that history should be free:

Memories are plural, fragmented, and most often impassioned and biased. History, for its part, is critical and lay: it is our common good. It is precisely to protect freedom of expression and to guarantee to all a right of access to the knowledge of historical findings that are the outcome of scientific work, free from the weight of circumstances, that the co-signers oppose the

proclamation of official truths, unworthy of a democratic regime.  
("L'appel".)<sup>viii</sup>

The notion of public memory that a "memorial" represents turns memory into a consensual event monitored by the institutions and hence subjected to political lobbying. The notion of "collective memory" (Halbwachs), in this case of a whole nation, and hence the construction of a national memory leads to competing groups claiming visibility and, as Michel Feith explains in his introduction, to compromising with memory. It foregrounds memory's vulnerability and malleability.<sup>ix</sup> Christine Chivallon's study of Bordeaux and Bristol, two major European harbors of the slave trade, starts with the acknowledgement that the repressed memory of slavery in Europe and in the West Indies is the product of diverging impulses:

In the West Indies the—no doubt more official than popular—process of burying the past stems from social relations that constitute the very substratum of these societies' historicity, whereas for European nations, writing out 'the episode of slavery' is the counterpart of a selection of facts taken from a much more glorious history. ("L'émergence")

Deeply vested in subjective experience, memory is what helps the subject to construct itself as a subject. The leap from the subjective to the collective that literature easily negotiates through allegory, the creation of a character-type that represents the plight of the group, or the process of identification (the reader's empathy) changes modality when it comes to public memory, memorialization, and commemorations. As Sabine Broeck pointed out during the preparation of the conference, "after *Beloved*" a number of slavery novels were written that benefitted from Morrison's success, but fell short of making such a powerful intervention—the same tendency was bemoaned by McDowell and Rampersad in their *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Thus a thorough critique is needed to assess the unsettling aesthetics of "porno-trope" slavery (Spillers 67). At the same time, the work of graphic artist Kara Walker, for instance, is a testimony to the lingering effects of that historical trauma and to an exploration of sexuality as it was/is linked to slavery by a young contemporary African American artist (2003). In the mid-nineties, Gwendolyn Mae Henderson's study of Shirley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose* confronted in its title, "The Stories of (O)Dessa," the troubling yoking of bondage and eroticism. While I visited the International Slavery Museum of Liverpool in 2010—which one can enter free of charge—a group of teenagers were running wild through the darkened rooms where images of enslaved men and women were being projected to the noise of clanging chains and shackles and other sundry sound evocations of the Middle Passage. It was a disconcerting experi-

ence. How can we “teach” about slavery? Is a museum a pedagogical tool, a place of remembrance, a memorial, an experience?

That other countries besides the United States and France, as Sabine Broeck notes in her comment, are involved in projects that bring to the fore the past of slavery of the European nations is proof that *Beloved* and the array of neo-slave narratives of the 80s have not been written in vain, that Gilroy’s 1993 *Black Atlantic* has made its way into public life and policies. In a small yet significant way, through the dedication of benches in historically significant locations, The Toni Morrison Society contributes to making these *lieux de mémoire* real. One such bench was dedicated in France on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2010, rue Louis Delgrès, in the Paris 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement. Delgrès, a colonel in Napoleon’s army, deserted and fought Richepance who came to Guadeloupe to reestablish slavery after Napoleon had reinstated it. Here are excerpts from his proclamation on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1802 that he directed “to the whole universe”:

It is in the brightest days of a century forever made famous by the Enlightenment and by Philosophy, that a class of unfortunate men and women that one wishes to annihilate, is forced to raise its voice towards posterity to let it know, when it has disappeared, its innocence and its misfortunes. [...]

Our former tyrants allowed a master to emancipate his slave, and everything tells us that, in the century of philosophy, there are men, too powerful unfortunately because of their distance from the authority to which they owe their rank, who do not want to see black men, or men who draw their origin from that color, except in the irons of slavery. (Delgrès)

These words testify to an already present call into question of the Philosophy of the Enlightenment by black men who died while claiming to remain true to its principles.

Morrison herself gave an answer to “Writing Slavery after *Beloved*” in her 2008 novel *A Mercy* where Lina, the Native American, is a slave like the black heroine Florens, whereas the African blacksmith—with whom Florens is in love—is free. The novel also pictures two indentured servants, Willy and Scullard. Rebekka, Jacob’s wife, is sent overseas by her parents to marry a man she does not know. Jacob adopts another servant, Sorrow, left astray and roaming after her traumatic sea-journey. In a state of schizophrenia, she talks to an imaginary double, Twin, until she gives birth to a child and can become Complete. In a colonial context where slavery and servitude took on different shapes and shades, Morrison thus wanted to explore how race and slavery became intertwined. ‘Who owns his/herself in this world?’ is indeed the question at the heart of the text when the owner himself dies from smallpox. Moreover, the metaphor of slavery drifts into the realm of unconditional love and the erotic: Florens is a slave of her infatuation with the blacksmith. By so doing, Morrison fol-

lows the trend that makes the study of slavery a complex field where its very definition is at stake and where its valence as a metaphor for other types of bonding/bondage is questioned in return. In the academic field, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) project “Voyages: The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database” that attempts to provide precise figures about the number of slaves in the colonies is a testimony to the way in which scholars are now grappling with the issue of historical accuracy.<sup>x</sup> History has been taught from the point of view of the traders, the plantation owners, those who could write and tell. Slavery must be told from the point of view of the enslaved, but the material available also needs to be read from the point of view of its “shadow,” as Sabine Broeck points out, relying on Morrison’s injunction.

Let me quote two recent examples of the directions taken by the writing of slavery: one fictional, but based on facts, and another academic that relies on the notion of “cultural memory.” On March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005 an important archive about “The Case of the slave Furcy” was auctioned at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris. It contained a large number of documents relating the longest lawsuit (27 years) that a slave has ever brought against his master well before the abolition of slavery in 1848. It led to a novel about this tenacious slave from Bourbon Island (now La Réunion) who gained his freedom on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1843, in Paris. The author, Algerian journalist Mohammed Aïssaoui, found no historical trace of Furcy, apart from these documents, and invented his story from these remains. Anthropologist and geographer Christine Chivallon has just published a book on the memory of slavery in the Caribbean (“*L’Esclavage*”) that devotes a whole chapter to the way in which the current debate on memory in France can actually be a point of entry to the difficulty of thinking history and memory in relation to slavery. A thorough analysis of the historians’ positions—Pierre Nora’s staunch opposition to the Taubira act when he ironically is the scholar who coined the expression *lieux de mémoire*—and of the legislators’ leads her to assert that the memory of slavery is under suspicion in the political arena:

The petitionary stances of intellectuals and historians [...] did not limit themselves to raising the legitimate question of conducting research when facing the laws [...]. It has also circumscribed the site of power and historical competence that can designate good and bad memories; the legitimate victims that these laws could recognize, and the frauds. [...] (Chivallon, *L’Esclavage* 66)

She adds that, as one of the co-signers of the petition for the freedom of history, Nora’s interventions have been summoned “to show the existence of borders to moral space that help circumscribe, by exclusion and not by inclusion, the memory of slavery” (66). On the one hand, victimization, manipulation and one-upmanship define the regime of political suspicion.

The memory of slavery is, on the other hand, subject to anthropological doubt because of its frailty, its absence and the emptiness at its core.

In their 2006 contribution to the history of slavery entitled *New Studies in the History of American Slavery*, Edward Baptist and Stephanie Camp have tried to synthesize the elements that help set new trends in writing the history of the slave trade: intersectionality, cultural history, the emphasis on gender, and the historicization of race. I would add to these influences, the impact of trauma studies, the ethical turn, and an emphasis on the body. More work is needed in comparative studies about the Americas, the Caribbean and the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world. In the field of history, approaches have come to the fore that deal with the senses (*le sensible*), with the lowly, with the slightest traces of human presence (*faibles intensités*), such as the bracelet of parchment found on corpses and kept in archives that have helped 18th-century historian Arlette Farge reconstruct the lives of those who could not write, found a sudden death away from home and friends, and yet carried on them these signs to be deciphered. Her work is a matching complement to Morrison's own intervention.

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## *Endnotes*

- i Cf. Raynaud, "The Pursuit of Memory."
- ii Cf. Raynaud, "*Beloved*."
- iii The conference program is available at: <http://memorial.nantes.fr/evenements/rencontres-internationales-du-memorial/>.
- iv See also the official government website ("Esclavage").
- v See their website at <<http://www.esclavages.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article625>.> AFRODESC stands for Afrodescendants and slave trades: domination, identification and legacies in the Americas (15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries).
- vi The four memorial laws are: the law of July 13th, 1990, that aims at repressing any anti-Semitic and xenophobic act and deems the negation of the Holocaust a crime ("Gayssot Act"), the law of January 29th, 2001, "relative to the acknowledgment of the 1915 Armenian genocide," the law of May 21st, 2001 that "aims at acknowledging trade and slavery as crimes against mankind" ("Taubira Act"), the law of February 25th, 2005 that "acknowledges the Nation and the national contribution in favor of French colonists brought back to the home country (*rapatriés*)." ("N°1262"; translation mine). The second paragraph of article 4 that recommended stressing the "positive" role of colonization was abrogated on February 15th, 2006 ("N°1262").
- vii A summary of the controversy is available at: <<http://www.clionautes.org/spip.php?article925>.>
- viii See Chivallon for a discussion of the various historians' positions (*L'Esclavage*). African specialist Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch critically reviewed Pétre-Grenouilleau's work. See, for example, Coquery-Vidrovitch's *Enjeux politiques de l'histoire coloniale*.
- ix Ricoeur's notions of "abuses of memory" (1) can be helpful here. Ridvan Askin summarizes them as follows: "[There are] three different levels of abuse in the context of memory: on the pathological-therapeutic level there is the phenomenon of blocked memory, on the practical level that of manipulated memory and on the ethical-political level that of obligated memory" (n. pag.).
- x See "Voyages."