



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Lewis, J;Wimbush, A

Title:

Introduction: Postcolonial realms of memory in the francophone world

Date:

2016-01-06

Citation:

Lewis, J. & Wimbush, A. (2016). Introduction: Postcolonial realms of memory in the francophone world. *Francosphères*, (second), 10 (1), pp.1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2021.1>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/336612>

License:

[CC BY](#)

Introduction

Postcolonial realms of memory in the francophone world

Jonathan Lewis and Antonia Wimbush
Bangor University and University of Liverpool

In September 2020, the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, announced plans to unveil a statue of Solitude, a former slave who fought against the French reinstatement of slavery in Guadeloupe in 1802. Solitude was arrested during the revolt, sentenced to death, and hanged. The inauguration of a statue in her memory would constitute the first statue of a black woman to be put up in the French capital.¹

Hidalgo's announcement, which took place in the Jardin Solitude located in Paris's seventeenth *arrondissement*, came in the wake of the defacement of statues, earlier in the year, depicting prominent French political and military figures with ties to the slave trade and colonialism.² In June, the statue of Jean-Baptiste Colbert that sits conspicuously outside the Assemblée Nationale was sprayed with red paint, the phrase 'Nérophobie d'État' graffitied at its base. Colbert was one of Louis XIV's most trusted ministers in the seventeenth century and helped draw up the Code Noir, the document that effectively legalized slavery in the French Empire. In the same month, a statue of Joseph Gallieni, a military leader who served the French Empire in Africa and Indochina, had the words 'dans un musée' spray-painted onto it. Gallieni was governor of Madagascar at the time of the uprising against French colonial rule from 1904–05, which was brutally suppressed by Gallieni's forces. Other monuments dedicated to prominent French historical figures that have been the subjects of vandalism, both in Paris and elsewhere in France, include those of Hubert Lyautey, the general who served in North Africa, Indochina, and Madagascar, and Louis Faidherbe, another general who served in France's African colonies. The

- 1 Statues representing black women are rare elsewhere in France too, though a notable exception can be found in Bordeaux, where a statue of the former slave Modeste Testas was inaugurated in 2019 as a reminder of the port city's prominent role in the slave trade. 'Bordeaux la statue de Modeste, esclave de Bordelais finalement affranchie', *Ouest France*, 10 May 2019 <<https://www.ouest-france.fr/nouvelle-aquitaine/bordeaux-33000/bordeaux-inaugure-la-statue-de-modeste-esclave-ensuite-affranchie-de-bordelais-6344463>> [accessed 5 February 2021].
- 2 For a more detailed study of the ways in which Parisian monuments tend to uphold colonialist narratives, see Elizabeth Benjamin, 'Places and Spaces of Contested Identity in the Memorials and Monuments of Paris', *Modern and Contemporary France* 29.1 (2021), 1–17.

defacement of statues was not confined to the Hexagon. In Martinique, a statue of the Empress Josephine was torn down by protestors, not for the first time,³ and two monuments to the abolitionist Victor Schœlcher were destroyed. Despite leading the movement towards the abolition of slavery amongst French politicians, Schœlcher has more recently come to represent the over-commemoration of white men in relation to abolition, contributing to a ‘white saviour narrative’ that diminishes the active role played by slaves themselves in achieving freedom.⁴ Another statue of Schœlcher, in French Guiana, was toppled on 18 July and, in Réunion, there have been calls for the removal of a statue depicting the island’s former governor, Bertrand-François Mahé de La Bourdonnais.

The defacement of statues in the francophone world in 2020 has, as in the anglophone world, thrown questions of memory and national history into sharp focus. In particular, the events referenced above have brought sites and symbols of memory to the fore: this special issue is concerned precisely with such sites of memory in the francophone world. For a concerted period of time in 2020, debates and discussions around state-sponsored commemoration, and about which figures from the past should or should not be recognized and honoured as representatives of the historical narrative of the nation, were played out regularly and prominently, some would also say belatedly, in the public domain. However, in response to calls to take down statues of Frenchmen with ties to slavery and colonialism, the French president Emmanuel Macron remained adamant, in this case reacting to the suggestion to remove the statue of Colbert, that ‘la République ne déboulonnera pas de statue’: instead, he advocated a more lucid engagement with French history and memory.⁵

Such ambivalence on the part of Macron is indicative of the polemical and polarizing nature of the debates triggered by the defacement of Colbert’s statue and others. On the one hand, some have seen in this type of activism an opportunity to question and reconsider dominant narratives of French history. For example, the president of the Fondation pour la

3 As Anny-Dominique Curtius observes, the statue of the Empress has had a rather long and fractious history in Martinique, having been beheaded for the first time in 1991. See Anny-Dominique Curtius, ‘Slavery Memorials’, in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, ed. by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 167–85.

4 For a compelling study of the ways in which freedom has been represented as a gift offered by white people to black people, see Marcus Wood, *The Horrible Gift of Freedom: Atlantic Slavery and the Representation of Emancipation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

5 ‘La Statue de Colbert vandalisée devant l’Assemblée Nationale’, *Le Monde*, 24 June 2020 <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/06/24/la-statue-de-colbert-vandalisee-devant-l-assemblee-nationale_6043986_3224.html> [accessed 20 November 2020].

mémoire de l'esclavage Jean-Marc Ayrault called for the renaming of areas or halls bearing Colbert's name within government buildings, such as the Assemblée Nationale.⁶ On the other hand, politicians on the Right have accused Colbert's assailants of 'censoring history' or of 'culpabilization'. Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far-right Rassemblement National party, denounced what she interpreted as a tendency to judge history through the prevalent values of today's society.⁷ Still other right-wing responses have suggested that the movement to reassess French history constitutes a threat not only to long-standing monuments that have adorned the French urban landscape, but also to French literature, cinema, and music.⁸ At risk are the dominant French historical narrative and long-established, monolithic, but enduringly powerful conceptions of French culture and identity. The articles compiled in this special issue seek to explore and analyse postcolonial sites of memory and how such sites – including not only physical monuments, but also museum exhibitions, literary texts, films, *bandes dessinées*, and other forms of cultural expression – challenge the persistence of a certain idea of France from which references to the French imperial past continue to be marginalized.

As if to foreshadow the events outlined above, January 2020 saw the publication of a major new volume in Francophone Postcolonial Studies: *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, edited by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno. This publication responds to the apparent absence of the colonies from Pierre Nora's project *Les Lieux de mémoire*, published in three volumes between 1984 and 1992. As the editors to this new collection state in their introduction, the flaws in Nora's project – for example, its reproduction of a static image of the French nation-state and lack of attention to France's imperial past – have been pointed out fairly regularly by scholars working in francophone postcolonial studies, but the time has come for the field to make a more 'sustained and collective intervention'.⁹ In anticipation of the

6 Jean-Marc Ayrault, "Comment comprendre que dans les locaux de l'Assemblée nationale, une salle porte encore le nom de Colbert?", *Le Monde*, 13 June 2020 <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/06/13/racisme-et-esclavage-il-y-a-des-symboles-que-la-republique-ne-saurait-plus-tolerer_6042711_3232.html> [accessed 20 November 2020].

7 'La Statue de Colbert vandalisée devant l'Assemblée Nationale'.

8 Jean-Christophe Buisson, 'Entre vandalisme et réécriture de l'Histoire, l'antiracisme en folie', *Le Figaro*, 19 June 2020 <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/entre-vandalisme-et-reecriture-de-l-histoire-l-antiracisme-en-folie-20200619>> [accessed 20 November 2020].

9 Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, ed. by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 1–19 (p. 1).

publication of Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno's edited volume, the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies (SFPS) held its annual conference in November 2019 around the topic of postcolonial realms of memory in the francophone world. The articles collected in this special issue comprise a selection of papers developed from the conference, and respond to the invitation put forward by Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno to 'reflect on extending and diversifying the range proposed in [their] volume'.¹⁰ As stated in the introduction to *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*, this book constituted 'the first step of a potentially unlimited project'.¹¹ The present special issue takes further this project of 'extend[ing] the concept of realms of memory to colonial and postcolonial situations',¹² recognizing, and indeed encouraging, the need for further work in this area of study. The task of 'postcolonializing' sites of memory is a considerable and exciting undertaking, as underlined by the diversity and richness of the papers presented at the SFPS Annual Conference. The articles selected for inclusion in this special issue build on *Postcolonial Realms of Memory* by 'consider[ing] the territory of the Republic in its broadest geopolitical sense' and not 'limiting postcolonial France solely to its hexagonal contours'.¹³ At the same time, the present collection takes up Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno's call to 'extend the geographical reach' of the sites and symbols analysed in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*.¹⁴ The articles collated here move the focus beyond the Hexagon to the wider Francosphere to explore postcolonial memory in Mauritius, Haiti, Algeria, and the French Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe, thus exploring how colonial and postcolonial memory is conceptualized across the far-reaching geographical space that has been shaped by France's colonial project.

The articles in this special issue examine how memory operates in museum exhibitions, literature, film, art, photography, and *bande dessinée*, thus revealing how the memorialization of France's history occurs across a range of media and genres. The first article, 'Playing devil's advocate: Digging up the colonial past in Pierre Nora's *Les Lieux de mémoire*', is written by Achille, who also gave the Kate Marsh Memorial Lecture at the SFPS conference in 2019. Achille's contribution seeks to debunk the oft-repeated criticism of Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* project – that the colonial is almost entirely absent from the seven volumes – by demonstrating that it

¹⁰ Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 14.

¹¹ Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 14.

¹² Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 4.

¹³ Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 9.

¹⁴ Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, 'Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 14.

is in fact present in at least thirty-eight of the entries. He argues that traces of empire appear in three different ways in the essays: some essays simply allude to colonial facts, others posit colonial sites as key loci of memory transmission, and others still implicitly reveal connections to empire through the images reproduced in the volume. Achille interrogates why these traces of empire in Nora's work have been overlooked by scholars and asks what this shows us about France's contemporary attitude towards its own postcoloniality.

Jennifer Boum Make also interrogates how France's colonial past plays out in the present in her article 'Décryptage de l'exposition "Le Modèle Noir" au Musée d'Orsay, ou interroger l'évitement du passé colonial français par le biais de l'anonymat des corps noirs'. Boum Make studies the Parisian iteration of the exhibition 'Le Modèle Noir, de Géricault à Matisse', which was curated by Cécile Debray, Stéphane Guégan, and Isolde Pludermacher and presented at the Musée d'Orsay between 26 March and 21 July 2019. She argues that the exhibition, which seeks to recuperate the identities of black female figures in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European art, in fact reproduces the same modalities at work during the French colonial period which stigmatized the experiences of the 'Other'. Boum Make concludes that the museography of the exhibition reflects French reluctance to tackle its problematic memories of French colonial histories, thus revealing a disconnect between the intended aims of the exhibition and the exhibits themselves, which perpetuate rather than disrupt colonial discourses.

Julia Waters shifts the focus to the Indian Ocean with her article 'Lieu de mémoire, lieu d'oubli, lieu de réparation? The colonial house in contemporary Mauritian art and literature', an exploration of colonial remembering but also of forgetting. Examining the representation of the Mauritian colonial house and its destruction in contemporary literature, art, and photography, Waters argues that this imaginary demolition is a crucial symbolic reparation for the historical injustices of colonization and slavery. Waters reminds us of the need for this debate to transcend from the imaginary realm to the real, a theme which has clear resonances with the activism of the Black Lives Matter movement and the toppling of colonial statues in France, the UK, and the US in summer 2020.

The theme of commemoration is further pursued by Michelle Bumatay, who examines the representation of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in *bande dessinées*. Her article 'Comics as commemoration? The *tirailleurs sénégalais* and World War I' analyses a range of contemporary French-language *bande dessinées*, arguing that this is a particularly productive medium for the transmission of historical memory because it counters official historical

narratives and draws attention to the important role played by the *tirailleurs* in the two World Wars. Bumatay considers the differences in the ways in which the *bande dessinées* deal with the violence of colonial memory. While texts produced by French and African cartoonists differ widely in the extent of their indictment of the French colonial project, Bumatay demonstrates how the medium acts as a worthy alternative to physical monuments in the remembrance of France's colonial past.

Andrew McGregor focuses on how memory operates in film in his article entitled 'Liminal *lieux de mémoire*: Representations of postcolonial memory in Tony Gatlif's *Exils* (2004)'. He argues that Algeria is portrayed as a French postcolonial *lieu de mémoire* in the film, which depicts the return to Algeria of both protagonist and director. This return journey is crucial for both in the awakening of their postcolonial identity. McGregor analyses the cinematic features of movement, sound, space, and dialogue in the transmission of historical memory.

The final contribution to this special issue is written by Rachel Douglas. 'Entangled Caribbean rewriting, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, and their books as postcolonial *lieux de mémoire*' explores specifically Caribbean sites of memory from both an anglophone and francophone perspective. Douglas traces the physical and literary interactions between these two key Caribbean writers, focusing particularly on James's own creative translation of Césaire's seminal poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), which takes on a new meaning in the appendix to his 1963 updated version of *The Black Jacobins*, a history of the Haitian Revolution. Douglas explores the 'afterlives' of these two foundational texts, demonstrating how they have been rewritten and reinterpreted by both the authors themselves and by other influential writers and thinkers. She argues that these texts have been vectors of different 'post/colonial' memories at different historical moments.¹⁵

Each article in this special issue of *Francosphères* insists on the need to challenge official, nation-centred discourses of memory. The contributions reveal how French-language cultural production in all its forms reconfigures methodologies and frameworks of memory to draw attention to intersecting colonial and postcolonial histories of France and the wider francophone

15 The term 'post/colonial' was first coined by Chris Bongie in *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/Colonial Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Bongie prefers the term 'post/colonial' to the other iterations 'postcolonial' or 'post-colonial', because it refers to a relationality 'in which two words and worlds appear uneasily as one, joined together and yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity'. Bongie, *Islands and Exiles*, pp. 12–13.

world. Indeed, the events of summer 2020 have shone a spotlight on colonial histories globally and the corresponding political, economic, and social inequalities perpetuated by one-sided narratives about the past. The articles, therefore, complement the crucial work of *Postcolonial Realms of Memory*, seeking to challenge ‘current nationally focused understandings of sites of memory and [...] integrate colonialism and its afterlives more actively into the practices and studies of collective memory’.¹⁶

16 Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno, ‘Introduction: Postcolonializing *Lieux de Mémoire*’, p. 15.