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Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, eds., *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World* [*Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, New Series, Vol. 6]. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. viii + 256 pp. Illustrations, notes and index. £75.00 UK (hb), \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781781381595.

Review by Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, California State University--San Marcos.

As an American scholar of French slavery and memory, I have learned to be cautious in making small talk with white non-academics about my work, whether in the U.S. or in France. The gap between what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called “historicity 1” (what happened) and “historicity 2” (what is said to have happened) is simply too great on the topic of slavery, which can prompt awkwardness or far worse.[1]

And yet... when I visited Liverpool in 2013, I realized I was not in Kansas (or any other U.S. state) anymore. My cab driver drew me into conversation about what had brought me to his city. At first he assumed that I was a typical American visitor, on pilgrimage to the *lieux de mémoire* of John, Paul, George and Ringo. But he switched gears easily when I explained that I was in Liverpool for a conference at the International Museum of Slavery. Speaking in ways I did not expect from gray-haired, working-class white men at home, he lamented that the beautiful buildings adorning his city had been built with blood money from the slave trade. Later, while sightseeing, I asked another white-haired gentleman for the names of the elegant buildings in front of me. After identifying them, he described the Gorée Warehouses that stood there previously. He spoke of their place in the slave trade, which he denounced passionately. What was this place? How was it possible that even white men of a certain age were conscious of--and volunteered their shame regarding--the role of slavery in their city's prominence?

I have come to realize that the recovery of memory regarding slavery is more advanced in Great Britain than in the U.S. or in France, and that Liverpool is a particularly well-developed site in this memory explosion. In the last ten years, Liverpoolians have embraced the mission of acknowledging the dark parts of their city's history alongside its glories. In Great Britain more generally, the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007 prompted a flurry of exhibits and commemorations.[2] Certainly, France has acknowledged its history of slavery more since 2001, when the Taubira Law recognized slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity, than previously.[3] And in the United States, new scholarship, along with powerful depictions of slavery in recent films, has increased consciousness of slavery's horrors. Nevertheless, neither country has acknowledged the centrality of slavery to its national past in the same way as Great Britain. In metropolitan France and its overseas departments and territories, despite the new museums and committees devoted to slavery, the topic is little taught in schools. In the United States, though slavery is acknowledged in curricula, there is neither a national day of remembrance nor a single government museum on slavery.[4]

It is therefore not surprising that Liverpool University Press--and those involved in its Francophone Postcolonial Studies series--have been on the cutting-edge of slavery and memory studies. With

slavery's memory well established in Liverpool and other British cities, the scholars involved in the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies can move beyond identifying silences and amnesias. Nearly a decade after the British bicentennial and fifteen years after the Taubira Law's passage, they have also moved beyond cataloguing increases in the memorialization of slavery. Instead, they are able to consider limits and absences in how memories of slavery are being constructed. Rather than rehash existing arguments about silences in French colonial history, as the book's title might suggest, Frith, Hodgson and their contributors thus offer fresh and fascinating approaches to the study of memory and slavery in the Francophone world. Though most of the volume's contributors are British, the authors include two North Americans as well as two French pioneers in memory studies, Christine Chivallon and Françoise Vergès.

In their introduction, Frith and Hodgson lay out the volume's aims. First, they call for a shift beyond remembering only pre-1848 chattel slavery to recognizing "other forms of colonial labour exploitation that took place in the post-abolition period" (p. 2). They problematize 1848 (France's second abolition of slavery) as a turning point, given the "different forms of slavery and unfree labour" (p. 4) that continued afterwards. Second, they examine differences in how the descendants of slaves and official state institutions remember slavery. With regard to the latter, they are particularly interested in the "instrumentalization of memories of slavery by state discourses" (p. 3). By emphasizing French abolitionists instead of the brutality of French slaveowners, state museums and memorials have accommodated calls for remembering slavery without fundamentally altering the national narrative, which acclaims France as a source of *les droits de l'homme*. In addition, Frith and Hodgson explain that state invocations of slavery generally rip it from a contemporary context, without acknowledging the injustices left from slavery. Citizen-led initiatives, they note, present counter discourses against sanitizing forms of memorialization. Finally, Frith and Hodgson want to offer transnational reflections on commemorative practices, while highlighting French specificities.

Christine Chivallon, a pioneer in the study of slave memory in France, provides the volume's first chapter. She notes that current patrimonial practices in France are driven by political concerns; instead of creating a "just memory" (p. 28) of slavery, they "feed into age-old divides inherited from the slave past" (p. 26). For instance, even at sites where slavery is ostensibly made visible (such as plantations in the Antilles), museums "both efface/destroy slavery and emphatically valorize the world associated with the former plantocracy" (pp. 40-41). Chivallon argues that, in the Hexagon, "memory is deployed as a way of managing the crisis confronting the republican model" (p. 29). Instead of actually acknowledging slaves' suffering or the brutality of French colonists, "the memorial machinery only acts 'as if' this suffering were acknowledged" (p. 31). Catherine Reinhardt's contribution reflects further on how slavery has been remembered in the case of Guadeloupe. Based on interviews as well as a survey of memorial sites, Reinhardt notes that slavery is often portrayed in official sites as if it were a crime that happened "somewhere else." She highlights alternative commemorations by community associations, which help Guadeloupians connect with specific slave ancestors.

Nicola Frith and Renaud Hourcade present case studies focusing on Nantes, France's major slave trading port. Frith traces the history of the slave memorial built there in 2012. Instead of expressing genuine contrition about the history of slavery, she argues, the state used the memorial to reposition itself as a "champion of the victim's rights" (p. 69). The memorial focused on abolition, not slavery, and omitted stories of slave resistance. Hourcade examines how May 10 (Slavery and Abolition Remembrance Day) is observed in the city. He notes that since Nantes began to commemorate slavery in the 1990s (before the Taubira Law), it has come to see itself as pioneering. Rather than feel embarrassed over its past, it congratulates itself on its "modern values" and transforms "shame into civic pride" (p. 92). Hourcade observes that official commemorations have involved sterilizing slavery, with a focus on ensuring social cohesion. Politicians position slavery as a crime against universalism, rather than against blacks in particular. Community groups, he finds, have commemorated slavery in alternate

ways. For example, rather than try to “devitalize the past and damper passions” (p. 101), the group Passerelle noir reenacts a Marche des Esclaves.

Hodgson’s chapter turns to Haiti, the first French colony to have become independent. The author argues that, like France itself, Haiti suffers from gaps and limits in how slavery is remembered. She maintains that the success of Haiti’s revolution has “largely obscured” the traces of colonial slavery there. Drawing on Elizabeth McAlister’s work, Hodgson identifies “faint traces of the unconscious presence of the slave past . . . in popular Haitian festivities, such as carnival and Rara, in folk songs and stories, and in the practice of Vodou” (p. 110). Hodgson observes that MUPANAH, the national museum of Haitian history, focuses more on the Revolution than on colonial Saint-Domingue. As an historian of modern Haiti, I found Hodgson’s chapter particularly engaging. Certainly, she is correct that “what remains of the memory of colonial slavery in Haiti is inextricably bound up with the legacies of the Haitian revolution” (p. 124). I nonetheless wish that she had looked at other museums in addition to MUPANAH, which is conceived as a shrine to *grands hommes* (its full title is Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien). The Parc historique de la canne à sucre outside of Port-au-Prince, in partnership with the French organization Anneaux de la mémoire, features a museum designed to teach Haitians about “the history of the slave trade and slavery and its consequences until today.”^[5] In addition, in parts of the country where French colonial traces remain more present, such as Cap Haïtien and the Northern Plain, slavery’s memory is more tangible, though still hard to disentangle from the Revolution.^[6] Hodgson might also have discussed further how recurring struggles in Haitian history between the descendants of the *anciens libres* (the people of color who were free before the Revolution) and the *nouveaux libres* (slaves freed after the Revolution) have affected remembrances of slavery. Still, the chapter raises useful questions about how the memory of slavery in Haiti has been refracted through the Revolution’s shadow.

Remembrances of slavery in Francophone Africa form the basis for the contributions of Sotonye Omuku and Claire Griffiths. Omuku explains how commemorations of transatlantic slavery in Francophone West Africa have hidden the history of domestic slavery. She also examines West African historical novels that challenge this effacement. Griffiths explores how slavery is depicted in contemporary visual culture from Francophone Africa, including digital art and mixed media. Focusing on artists from Benin and West Central Africa, Griffiths notes that their works stress continuities between the treatment of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade and the place of “human [African] labour in the oil and mineral extraction industries of West Africa today” (p. 210).

Two contributions center on other forms of forced labor in the French empire and their relationships to slavery. Like Omuku’s, Inès Mrad Dali’s contribution reveals how remembering some forms of unfree labor can involve burying the memory of others. She explains that, in Tunisia, black Africans are universally regarded as descendants of slaves, even if they came to North Africa as free migrants. She examines “how such a process of forgetting [regarding voluntary migrations and other forced labor forms] could occur” (p. 192); she uncovers the suppressed histories of the *khamessat* (sharecropping) and *travaux de prestation obligatoire* (mandatory public service) systems that existed under the French. Srilata Ravi’s chapter turns to memories of slavery and colonization in Mauritius. She notes that the island is a special case, since it has no indigenous population and has been peopled by successive waves of free or forced migrations. In this context, Mauritians with different relationships to slavery, colonialism and indenture cannot construct a shared past; “different memorial registers” (p. 155) coexist instead. Ravi looks to Francophone Mauritian literature, from the 1960s to the present, to see how it “remembers and/or forgets Mauritian histories of slavery and indenture” (p. 156).

Charles Forsdick’s contribution, one of the volume’s most compelling, examines the place of Gorée Island in contemporary understandings of Atlantic slavery. Forsdick examines how Gorée (the Senegalese slave-trading port that has become the emblem of the slave trade) has been “progressively represented, instrumentalized, politicized and memorialized” (p. 149). The author finds that Gorée, now

part of Dakar, has become “unmoored from the West African coast, having been granted a symbolic existence in a wider Black Atlantic space” (p. 132). Forsdick describes the debate about Gorée begun by Philip Curtin in the mid-1990s. Curtin argued that Gorée had played a statistically minor role in the slave trade and that its iconic castle was more an “emotional shrine to the slave trade” than a serious museum (p. 133). But African scholars such as Achille Mbembe insisted that Gorée’s importance could not be reduced to statistics. Finally, Forsdick considers how an emphasis on Gorée as a site of pilgrimage has served to overemphasize the maritime component of slavery (that is, on Western powers ripping slaves away from the coast) while deemphasizing the journey of slaves from interior regions to the coast. Building on Ibrahima Seck, Forsdick also examines how Gorée was constructed to draw tourists (foreign and Senegalese schoolchildren) to Dakar rather than to alternative sites in Benin or Ghana.

The volume closes with an exceptionally suggestive contribution by Françoise Vergès, a towering figure in the study of French colonialism and of its enduring legacies. Vergès’s article is too rich to be summarized exhaustively here. But one main point is her call for remembrances of slavery not to be divorced from initiatives for reparative justice: “progress has been made in the fields of education, research and culture. So how do we explain the fact that, in the wake of decolonization, such a resurgence in the memories of slavery has led to official commemorations that are often emptied of social and cultural content . . . ?” Vergès continues: “the paths opened up by the struggle for recognition for France’s slaving past have been diverted away from their radical promise to lead us to social justice” (p. 230). Vergès reminds us that France only began commemorating slavery after pressure from the descendants of slaves, who felt their history was invisible. Crucially, she explains the context in which their activism began in the 1960s and 1970s. Vergès points to continuing inequities even after departmentalization was supposed to improve the status of former “colonies.” She highlights injustices like the higher wages paid in the postwar period to metropolitan (white) civil servants in overseas posts compared to their locally born colleagues. This inequity was justified by declarations that “If a European wants to maintain the authority that is vital for completing his work, then he must pay particular attention to his clothes; hence his greater expenses” (p. 235). Vergès notes that “It was within this context of struggle against postcolonial forms of repression that memories of colonial slavery emerged” (p. 237).

Overall, the volume is highly innovative, sophisticated and engaging. The authors’ insights about the memory boom in France and its limitations are certain to stimulate further analyses by other scholars. Since the volume aims to balance transnational comparison with French specificities, I would have liked to see some more explicit comparisons to the U.S. (and countries such as Brazil) alongside the frequent references to Britain. The U.S. context makes brief cameos only in two contributions, that of Forsdick (who analyzes George W. Bush’s and Barack Obama’s addresses at Gorée alongside other invocations of the island) and of Hourcade (who explains how black activists in Nantes drew inspiration from African-American activists). Certainly there are other recent volumes which are more explicitly comparative in focus (including one co-edited by Hodgson).^[7] But even a short summative discussion of the context outside of Europe would have better highlighted French specificities. Still, *At the Limits of Memory* is fascinating; I expect that, if multi-authored volumes were eligible for the French Colonial Historical Society’s Heggoy Prize, this volume would be a strong contender. The book will provide rewarding reading not only to specialists in memory and in French colonialism, but also to those interested in contemporary French culture more generally.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, “Slavery and its Legacies: Remembering Labour Exploitation in the Francophone World”

Christine Chivallon, "Representing the Slave Past: The Limits of Museographical and Patrimonial Discourses"

Catherine Reinhardt, "Telling Stories of Slavery: Cultural Re-appropriations of Slave Memory in the French Caribbean Today"

Nicola Frith, "The Art of Reconciliation: The Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes"

Renaud Hourcade, "Shaping Representations of the Past in a Former Slave-Trade Port: Slavery Remembrance Day (10 May) in Nantes"

Kate Hodgson, "Haiti and the Memorial Discourses of Slavery after 1804"

Charles Forsdick, "*Cette île n'est pas une île: Situating Gorée*"

Srilata Ravi, "Multiple Memories: Slavery and Indenture in Mauritian Literature in French"

Sotonye Omuku, "Speaking of Slavery: Representations of Domestic Slavery in the Oral Epics of Francophone West Africa"

Inès Mrad Dali, "From Forgetting to Remembrance: Slavery and Forced Labour in Tunisia"

Claire Griffiths, "Imaging the Present: An Iconography of Slavery in Contemporary African Art"

Françoise Vergès, "Cartographies of Memory, Politics of Emancipation"

NOTES

[1] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995), 2, 106.

[2] For details and an appraisal of the Bicentennial, see the articles by Marcus Wood, Douglas Hamilton and Catherine Hall in Cora Kaplan and John Oldfield, eds., *Imagining Transatlantic Slavery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[3] The law, passed in May 2001, was named for Christiane Taubira, then a National Assembly deputy from Guyana (text at <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000005630984&dateTexte=20080805>).

[4] While a National Museum of African American History and Culture finally opened in Washington, D.C. in 2016, there are only a handful of museums in the U.S. fully dedicated to the history of slavery, each created by private individuals. See John J. Cummings, III, "The U.S. Has 35,000 Museums. Why Is Only One About Slavery?", *Washington Post* (August 13, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/08/13/the-u-s-has-35000-museums-why-is-only-one-about-slavery/>, and Caroline Mimbs Nyce, "Notes: How Many Museums Are Devoted to American Slavery?" *Atlantic* (January 27, 2016), at <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/01/is-the-whitney-plantation-really-americas-first-slavery-museum/431448/>.

[5] Parc historique de la canne à sucre, "À propos du centre," at <http://parccanneasucre.org/recherche/about-2/>.

[6] *Lieux de mémoire* on slavery in Northern Haiti include the square in Cap Haïtien where the rebel leader Makandal was executed in 1758, as well as nearby plantations.

[7] Douglas Hamilton, Kate Hodgson, and Joel Quirk, eds., *Slavery, Memory and Identity: National Representations and Global Legacies* (London: Routledge, 2012); and also Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2012) and idem, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

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