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Catherine A. Reinhardt, *Claims to Memory: Beyond Slavery and Emancipation in the French Caribbean*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. xiii + 202 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. ISBN 1-84545-079-5 (cl).

Review by Sibylle Fischer, New York University.

Claims to Memory is an engaging and in many ways unique book. By studying “the memory of slavery against the backdrop of embroiled eighteenth century voices” (p. 157), it sets out to dismantle the delusions of republican France as the birthplace of liberty and slave emancipation. Of course, among historians of slavery and slave resistance, Reinhardt’s views may well be the majority view nowadays. The work of Rebecca Scott, Julius Scott, Ada Ferrer, Aline Helg, Laurent Dubois, and many others would seem to support Reinhardt’s outlook. But among French historians, the study of the (slaveholding) Atlantic remains weak, and the reasons probably have a lot to do with the deformations of memory analyzed in this book, although Reinhardt does not touch on this issue.

There is also a difference between an emerging scholarly consensus and national memory. If there ever was any doubt whether there still is a need for studies like *Claims to Memory*, we should consider the unrelenting fury in France over the issue of historical memory and “le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer,” as the notorious article 4 of a 2005 law has it. In her Postscript, Reinhardt mentions the 2001 Taubira law (which declares slavery and the Atlantic slave trade a crime against humanity) and spin-off legislation as a sign that “[t]he nation at large has begun calling into question the inadequate memory of French colonization, thereby placing this marginalized past in the center of legal, political, and cultural battles” (p. 158). In light of the divisiveness of France’s recent history wars (including a spectacular dénouement in court) and the diplomatic *éclats* that accompanied these internal debates on the international stage, Reinhardt may have been a little too optimistic in her assessment. More than 150 years after the abolition of slavery, the topic seems to have lost none of its incendiary potential.

Reinhardt’s account of the formation and deformation of memory of France’s slavery past focuses on the late eighteenth century and the contemporary era. It is based on a wide range of materials mostly of a historical, philosophical, and archival sort. This includes well-known writings by Enlightenment philosophers, but also letters by colonial planters, letters sent by slaves, minor theater pieces from the eighteenth century, legal texts, and an original photographic record of monuments to slavery in Martinique and Guadeloupe. What emerges here is not the clearly drawn picture of positions, debates, and influences that intellectual historians might aspire to, nor the cause-effect account other historians might hope for, but a cacophony of contradictory voices and interlocking debates that take place both in the metropolis and the colonies. In Reinhardt’s reconstruction, a fragmented, plural memory emerges, which is played not against “the Enlightenment” as a whole, but against the idea of a homogeneous, internally coherent, and fully emancipatory and fully French, Enlightenment.

Books like *Claims to Memory* are rare not just for directly political and ideological reasons. Literary studies have to contend with the additional problem that the literatures of Martinique and Guadeloupe are typically done under the heading of *Francophonie*, a designation whose Eurocentric outlook is evident from the name itself (and often combines with a fairly conservative “litero-centric” methodology). A sustained inquiry into the claims to primacy by the metropolis is inopportune in a

subdiscipline that defines itself through its relation to the hexagon. As is often the case, disciplinary constraints reproduce ideological and political blind spots whether or not this is the intended effect of the practitioners.

The chapters, titled “Realms of Enlightenment,” “Realms of Freedom,” “Realms of Assimilation,” and “Realms of Memory,” are organized around key concepts rather than geographical or chronological criteria. Each chapter sets out to dismantle a particular historical narrative or myth, and to reclaim the voices that have been silenced by those myths. Reinhardt’s methodology is thus a mixture of a second-degree historiography of “memory,” and a straight-forward interest in (silenced) “events” and “voices.” This in itself is quite interesting and sheds some new light on the way history is experienced on the periphery: can we really distinguish between first and second degree history in a postcolonial setting? What happens to the second-degree (memory) when history as event is silenced? The implications of Reinhardt’s approach are quite remarkable and certainly could have been spelled out a little more.

Still, overall, her attempt to bring into focus moments where political struggles become emblematic or solidify into sites of memory, is quite successful. Consider for example her claim that metropolitan memory remembers slavery through metropolitan abolitionism, and the struggle against slavery as a struggle of metropolitan elites. “The image of victimized black bodies has become a site of memory representing abolitionist propaganda of the revolutionary period,” she argues. “[A]bsent from this site of memory are the slaves themselves as agents of their own destiny” (p. 97) One might say that similar arguments have been made before, but shifting the perspective to that of memory really gives this insight a remarkable new quality. One can only hope that Reinhardt will take up these insights and further develop them in the future.

After an introduction which is largely devoted to theoretical and methodological matters, chapter 1 argues that the struggle against slavery did not originate with the *philosophes*, and that Enlightenment thinkers were far less critical of racial slavery than is commonly assumed in national French historiography. Unlike some radical critics of the Enlightenment (Louis Sala-Molins, say, or Laurent Estève), however, Reinhardt insists on the heterogeneity of Enlightenment thought. She wisely eschews the for-or-against Enlightenment debate and opts for a nuanced position that seems entirely justified by the materials she compiles. In the end, her conclusion is that Enlightenment writings “leave the door open to diverse interpretations” and that within Enlightenment thought, there is a possibility to recognize slaves as historical agents.

Chapter two sets out to reconstruct the various mythical renditions of the maroon and traces them back to eighteenth century representations. While Reinhardt recognizes the symbolic importance of the heroic maroon in postcolonial Caribbean societies, particularly in various Caribbean nationalisms, she points out that French eighteenth century representations of the maroon are quite different from this popular memory and routinely deny self-determination and autonomy. Chapter three is particularly interesting. It analyzes competing notions of freedom, as they can be reconstructed from the writings of slaves, French abolitionists, and colonial planters. Reinhardt argues that there is little resemblance between the writings of the abolitionist *Amis des Noirs* and letters sent by slaves demanding liberty. That being the case, slave voices need to be given a centrality in the struggle over the meaning of liberty that conventional accounts of the Enlightenment have never granted. Chapter four analyzes the precariously situated group of the free people of color. Stressing their different relationship with France, Reinhardt points out that early on people of color developed a “filial relationship.” After the 1792 granting of French citizenship, free people of color abandoned their more radical positions and adopted assimilation to the mother country as their main strategy.

Chapter five, finally, turns to the present and particularly to events surrounding 1998, the year when the 150th anniversary of abolition in the French empire brought the topic of slavery and emancipation to the attention of a wider population. While the other chapters largely try to dismantle the reifications

and distortions of metropolitan memory, and reinsert the voices of the enslaved chapter five deals with the construction of some kind of counter-memory on the islands. Presenting the reader with fascinating and largely inaccessible materials, the chapter is based on a survey of museums, monuments, and sites in Guadeloupe and Martinique that might be expected to serve as "lieux de mémoire." The narrative descriptions are supported by an appendix of 34 black-and-white original photographs (by Reinhardt herself, it seems). What emerges is a collective memory that only slowly embraces the history of slavery. Buildings belonging to the slave past are falling apart and a museum devoted to the history of rum exists without any reference of those who worked in cane fields before 1848. Still, there are some powerful monuments now, some commissioned for the 1998 anniversary, which bring to light a counter-memory in opposition to imperial distortions.

Reinhardt roots her project firmly in Caribbean lived experience and Caribbean intellectual traditions. First and foremost, there is the Martinican writer and theorist Edouard Glissant whose notion of a "prophetic vision of the past" is quoted repeatedly and who provides perhaps the most important source of inspiration. According to Glissant, "the past must not only be recomposed objectively (or even subjectively) by the historian, it must also be dreamt prophetically for the people, the communities and the cultures whose past has been occulted" (p. 15) and Reinhardt evidently takes guidance from this well-known statement. But there seems to be a second strand to the argument which is already signaled in the "beyond" of the subtitle, but fully spelled out only in the Conclusion. On the basis of a brief reading of the novel *La Belle Créole* (2001) by the Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé, Reinhardt points out that the concern with the traumatic history of the French Caribbean islands is not without its own problems and that it can become a "dangerous obsession with the slave past" (p. 156). Reinhardt evidently wants to distinguish the "claims to memory," which she endorses, from the reductive determinism that would see contemporary men and women only as figurines laboring across the same old black-and-white checker board inherited from racial slavery.

Now, while both Glissant's and Condé's positions are in themselves quite understandable, is it not somewhat paradoxical to claim them both? To claim the memory of slavery, and then call for a "beyond slavery" in the same book—indeed, to do so in the very title of the book? After all, what memory has been suppressed or denied if not that of slavery and emancipation? What makes memory liberating? When does memory itself turn oppressive again? No doubt, the paradox can be resolved. Psychoanalysis has something to say about this, of course, as do the recent debates about trauma and history. There may also be a gender issue here that would deserve to be spelled out: the heroic counter-memory of the maroon, for instance, tends to be a rather masculinist myth. Counter-memory too, on suspects, has its fissures and contradictions.

Another way of thinking about the paradox of wanting to claim the memory of slavery and wanting to liberate oneself from it is through the concept of memory itself. Reinhardt does not engage in a critical discussion of Pierre Nora's work. Now, perhaps his key terms have gained such currency and have been appropriated in so many different ways and by so many fields that an in-depth discussion would be unnecessary and a distraction here. But Nora himself has been a key figure in the debates about memory in France since the late 1970s and continues to play an important role. Most recently, he took a stance against the Taubira law. It is probably no coincidence that Nora's multi-volume history of France is limited to the hexagon and has little to say about the colonies and slavery. So the issue is not just methodological and theoretical, although it is that, too. Nora places memory and history in an opposition to each other and claims that the modern discipline of history actually destroys memory. Reinhardt by contrast uses history to challenge a (distorted, imperial) memory. I suspect that the relationship between memory and history is rather different in France and its former colonies and that this difference has significant consequences for subject formation (collective and individual) in postcolonial and post-slavery societies.

There are some other issues one might raise. For instance, can we really discuss memory of slavery and

emancipation without talking into account the revolution and revolutionary writings? Can we really talk about memory in Guadeloupe and Martinique without reference to Haiti? For Glissant, Haiti certainly provided a crucial contrast case. Still, Reinhardt's book is great challenge to francophone literary studies and a brilliant response to Glissant's call for a "prophetic vision of the past."

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