Slavery Memorials

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In Silencing the Past, Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes:

Theories of history have a rather limited view of the field of historical production. They grossly underestimate the size, the relevance and the complexity of the overlapping sites where history is produced, notably outside of academia. [...] We are all amateur historians with various degrees of awareness about our production. We also learn history from similar amateurs. Universities and university presses are not the only loci of production of the historical narrative. (1995: 19–20)

Memorials and museums in Martinique have long been related to the history of colonization, but for the past twenty years new dynamics have been reconfiguring the memorializing landscape of Martinique. From the renaming of streets and squares in the southern towns of Le Diamant\(^1\) and Rivière-Pilote,\(^2\) for example, to memorializing performances or the creation of associations such as *Mi Mès Manmay Matinik* (AM\(^4\))\(^3\) [Here are the Traditions of Martinican People], new memorializing initiatives remap collective memory within communities and in urban landscapes. In dialogue with Trouillot’s argument, this essay examines how three memorials encapsulate and commemorate the entangled and traumatic memory of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery while interrogating and challenging the very definition of a memorial, crafting

\(^1\) Avenue Aimé-Césaire, Rue Edouard-Glissant, Avenue Nelson-Mandela, Rue Barack-Obama, Rue Derek-Walcott.

\(^2\) Rue des Arawaks, Avenue des Anti-Esclavagistes, Rue du marronnage, Rue Che Guevara, Avenue Frantz-Fanon, Rue décembre 1959.

\(^3\) http://am4.fr/.
the production of a postcolonial historical narrative and remodelling the cultural heritage and agency of postcontact societies.

The three memorials I have chosen to explore are the beheaded statue of Empress Joséphine de Beauharnais Tascher de la Pagerie, the Cap Mémoire et Fraternité Memorial in Anse Caffard (both located in Martinique), and the Memorial of the Names of the Abolition initiated by CM 98 (Comité Marche du 23 mai 1998) in Paris. This association was founded on 30 November 1999 and bears the name of a silent march that gathered about 40,000 people in Paris on 23 May 1998, from Nation to République, to pay homage to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery, and demand that slavery be recognized as a crime.

4 http://cm98.fr/.
5 Mostly from Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Reunion, and mainland France.
against humanity. The memorial does not have yet a fixed location, and can be considered a ‘travelling memorial’ (Gordien, 2016).

In September 1991 the statue of Empress Joséphine in *La Savane*, the main city park in Fort-de-France, was beheaded. Inscriptions written in red across the explanatory glass panels next to the statue stated in Martinican Creole: ‘Esklavaj Krim Kon limanité’ [slavery crime against humanity] and demanded respect for 22 May 1848 (the day of the abolition of slavery in Martinique). No one has openly claimed responsibility for the beheading and, even though a new head was commissioned by the City of Fort-de-France, the statue has never been fully restored. The inscriptions in Martinican Creole demanding respect for the memory of the slaves and the red paint covering the statue, symbolizing the blood of the violence of slavery and the slave trade, have not been removed either. Numerous speculations constantly feed the obvious question ‘Who cut off Joséphine’s head?’ but ultimately the
silence surrounding the identity of the perpetrators triggers what really seems to matter most, namely: how does the beheaded statue dialogue with Martinicans, the French government, the city of Fort-de-France, bemused tourists, scholars and artists who now consider the beheaded statue as contemporary art (Curtius, 2015: 10)? Since 1991, the beheading can no longer be approached through the lens of a local news item, as it was originally regarded, but as the locus for the production of a performativ

Joséphine de Beauharnais Tascher de la Pagerie was born in the town of Trois-Ilets in the south of Martinique on 23 June 1763 and died in Rueil-Malmaison near Paris on 29 May 1814. In 1796 she became the first wife of Napoleon Bonaparte and the First Empress of the French, but was repudiated in 1809 by Napoleon. Joséphine’s statue was the first to be installed in Fort-de-France, in August 1859, in the middle of La Savane, a public park that faces the ocean. A grandiose inauguration lasted several days and was attended by noteworthy political figures from France and the Caribbean. In 1974 the statue was relocated from the centre of the park to a corner near Rue de la liberté, across from Bibliothèque Schœlcher and half a block from the Préfecture. Among the various features adorning the statue, it is notable that Joséphine holds a medallion that shows Napoleon’s profile, and on the front side of the pedestal a carved section represents Joséphine’s coronation at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1804. To the rear of the pedestal an inscription states that ‘in the year 1858 of Napoléon III’s reign, the Martinican people raised this monument to honour Empress Joséphine, born in this colony’. While some see Joséphine as the pride of the island as Empress of the French, or praise her passion for botany, many remain vehemently critical, and associate her solely with her role in the reinstatement of slavery in 1802. However, no historical text proves that Napoleon re-established slavery in the colonies under pressure from Joséphine, although it seems likely that she would have wished to maintain the slave system and thus preserve the economic power of generations of white colonists to which she herself belonged, as her parents were slave-owners. Nevertheless, Joséphine is caught in the quarrel between official History and the trauma caused by a wounded memory, and she was therefore beheaded by locally produced history.

In 1992, one year after the beheading, the French government officially acknowledged the statue as a National Heritage site. This recognition is markedly uncanny because as a site protected by a state procedure on account of its importance to France’s historical and cultural heritage the
head should have been replaced and the statue shielded from future acts of defacement. In 2010 the statue was renovated, but the decapitated head and the blood-red paint nevertheless remain untouched, as if to permanently actualize the ideological and political message conveyed by the symbolic gesture of defacement and to subvert the full restoration of the memorial.

Similarly, through another premeditated ‘act of memory’ (Curtius, 2008) shortly after the renovation, the name Joséphine was erased from the inscription that appears on the pedestal of the freshly renovated monument. The text that now reads: ‘To the empress born in this colony’ originally stated: ‘To the empress Joséphine born in this colony’. With the name Joséphine erased from History by a performative narrative, and with the red paint still covering the chest and the robe of the statue, it becomes essential to question the new status of the allegedly freshly restored statue that still does not have its head.
On 30 March 2012, when the City of Fort-de-France renamed the square surrounding the statue Allée Vœu de Champagney [Champagney Wish Alley], it symbolically reconfigured this historically entangled space, engraved another ideologically charged layer on the palimpsest that constitutes this statue, insightfully dialogued with the beheading and prefaced Sarah Trouche’s performance analysed below.

Because the renovated but still beheaded statue, with the name Joséphine erased on the pedestal, is evidently embedded within the traumatic memory of slavery, it becomes a fertile ground for performing artists and anonymous performers who value the palimpsestic subtexts that are etched on and around the statue. Hence, the statue triggers daring speeches and memory performances through which anonymous and visible bodies lay claim to the statue and the nearby park, reconfiguring them as disruptive platforms for acts of memory. The

6 On 19 March 1789, the inhabitants of the town of Champagney in France condemned slavery and called for its abolition in an article that they included in their notebook of grievances to Louis XVI.
primary function of the statue, as written on the pedestal, is ‘to honour Empress Joséphine’. Nevertheless, this function has been eroded since 1991, because the official message the statue is supposed to convey is partially erased, threatened with disappearance or forced to compete with an urgent oppositional narrative that appropriates colonial history with the intention of unremittingly deploying entangled meanings.

During the Martinique Pool Art Fair (16–18 November 2012), held at the hotel L’Impératrice in Fort-de-France, located opposite La Savane and facing the beheaded statue, French visual and performance artist Sarah Trouche, her naked body covered with red roucou oil, walked from L’Impératrice to the beheaded statue of Empress Joséphine and flogged\(^7\) the statue thirty-three times with a whip. Evidently, embedded

\(^7\) Trouche’s performance can be watched at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvfnoWGFKmM.
in the intertwining of arts and politics, various layers of subjectivities overlap as Trouche and the viewers of the performance interact. Through her artistic reappropriation of the politically motivated beheading, Trouche dislocates French and Martinican societal debates about Joséphine and proposes tactics that can be devised in order to reject, problematize or nurture a forward-looking co-existence with the statue. Likewise, the viewers’ subjectivities must also process the immediacy of Trouche’s performance and critically dialogue with her desire to shake a customary vision of Joséphine in Fort-de-France and transform the apparent stability and quietness surrounding the beheaded statue on La Savane. Thus, when Trouche declares that her performance ‘must trigger a reconstruction’, as a French female artist who had never visited Martinique prior to her performance and who became aware of the controversy surrounding Joséphine as she arrived in Martinique, she seeks to share a sense of common history with a Martinican community.

Trouche reappropriates the roucou oil (extracted from the red seeds of the annatto or achiote tree), originally used by Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean for body painting, hair and skin care, to creatively juxtapose African and Indigenous Caribbean experiences of engineered extermination, bloodshed, suffering, survival and resistance during the post-Columbian conquest and the Middle Passage and on the plantation. Hence, using her body as a live sculpture and a palimpsestic canvas on which several complex layers of agency are etched, her naked, roucou-painted body is a poetics of entangled and polysemic bodies that enters into a dialogue with Joséphine’s body and several other historical modalities. To that extent, Trouche’s reparative performance reminds us of Cuban sculptor, photographer, painter and performance and video artist Ana Mendieta, whose artwork deeply coalesces her own naked body, nature and the land. Trouche flogs the ambiguities, social tensions and political contradictions that Joséphine and her beheaded statue exhibit, and, with the red roucou oil covering her body, she translates the trauma of slavery with all its temporal thickness. Beyond Trouche’s nudity, one might also visualize Joséphine’s body being unclothed and deposed from its highness in order to be symbolically flogged like her own slaves. Likewise, by desacralizing the institutionalized male aesthetics of marble memorials, she advocates for the immediacy and vitality of performing arts and its strong capacity to disrupt historical hegemony, dislocate tensions and interrogate tormented histories in communities of the global South. For Trouche, her body
is a political and sociological transmitter, and her nudity allows her to offer everything, to be totally in conversation and in close contact with the problems she tackles, and the communities that are deeply involved in socio political tensions. Nudity is the total sincerity and authenticity of the gesture and the action.\(^8\)

Trouche’s performance also destroys the neatness of historical monuments and replaces it with a political, spontaneous, ephemeral action. Through these various intertwined layers of actions, Trouche enacts the trauma of slavery. In addition, by carving out an evocative ideological theatre to compensate for the blanks of an erased memory, her ‘repertoire keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning’ (Taylor, 2003: 20).

The first 1991 act of memory gives Trouche access to a public space full of tension. By occupying this space, she rekindles several layers of traumatic silences in history, then acts out to repeat this unbearable, dehumanizing punishment of flogging during the times of slavery in front of an audience with a clear historical consciousness of the trauma caused by flogging, and of slavery. As a vicarious, secondary witness to the trauma of slavery, she triggers her own subjectivity, and that of the audience, and seeks to work through a possible dialogue between two communities, one in mainland France and one in Martinique, around an entangled and what seems to be an impossible reflection on the trauma of slavery. This reflection is still at the unresolved stage of noeuds de mémoire, or what may be called a disorder of postcontact memory. As Rothberg observes, ‘sites of memory as noeuds de mémoire are not static conglomerations of heterogeneous elements.’ Quoting James Young, he adds that ‘they require the active agency of individuals and publics that entails recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription, coding and recoding’ (2010: 8). As an artistic intervention that rewrites a social text from a disputed socio-historical context, Trouche’s political, oppositional and eccentric corporeality follows the 1991 perpetrators as well as the subsequent invisible performers that defaced the statue and reminds us that while the presence of the beheaded statue of Joséphine in Fort-de-France looks uncanny, it produces a ground-breaking discourse about dislocating institutional monuments and archives and infusing them with palimpsestic ‘anarchives’ (Derrida, 1995).

\(^8\) Trouche’s electronic communication with the author: 17 September–14 October 2014.
Dissecting Sarah Trouche’s oppositional and reparative corporeality, Serge Chalons, former president of the Comité Devoir de mémoire in Martinique, sent to the media covering the event the following unpublished, spontaneous and incisive reaction to the performance:

Que porte cette jeune femme, blanche, mais qu’importe, faisant subir à ‘Joséphine cou coupé’, impératrice des Français, deux siècles après, le châtiment du fouet, sur la place de la Savane qui longe la rue de la Liberté à Fort-de-France … Debout, l’impératrice, figée dans le marbre, du haut de sa grandeur, mais soumise au fouet d’une femme ‘toucouleur’, à ses pieds, dans une extrême nudité … Bouleversant ainsi l’ordre des choses et du temps …. (Chalons, 2012)9

[What is this young woman wearing, a white woman, incidentally, submitting ‘Joséphine with her neck severed’, the Empress of the French, two centuries later, to punishment by flogging, on the Square of La Savane, alongside Liberté Street in Fort-de-France … The Empress, standing, frozen marble-like, in her greatness, but being flogged by a ‘Toucouleur’ painted woman, at her feet, in extreme nudity … Thus upsetting the order of things and time … .]

On 3 October 2014 Sarah Trouche performed ‘Action for Resilience’ at Plateforme, a Parisian visual and performing arts gallery.10 This action is a meaningful sequel to the 2012 performance in Fort-de-France insofar as she chooses to flog Joséphine along with her own artwork representing two portraits of the Empress. Hence, using her braided hair as a whip, she flogs and destroys her own artwork, and subsequently embodies, with the red paint dripping over her body, the translation of the trauma of slavery. Likewise, she evidently desacralizes neoclassical portrait painting of royal families. Trouche explained to me that her electronic correspondence with me prompted her to create this second performance, in which she flogs two portraits that convey a dichotomy, but above all the opacities and multiple political and social frictions, through which Joséphine must be perceived.

Prior to this 2014 performance, Trouche had imagined that the head of the statue had been found on two distinct beaches in Martinique, a white-sand beach and a volcanic sand beach, which explains the black and brownish colours she chose for each of these sculptures. Ultimately, as an ‘amateur historian’, Trouche complexifies the palimpsestic dynamics

9 Text obtained through email exchange between Serge Chalons, Suzy Landau and the author.
10 This second performance can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/107992001.
of the beheaded statue and imaginatively positions herself as a surrogate victim while acknowledging that she cannot fully take the victims’ place. In addition, because her nudity allows her to enact an embodied memory in total sincerity and authenticity, she entangles her positionality as both a vicarious and a virtual witness, and muddles Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between these two notions (2004: 125).

The wounds of history necessarily trigger a crisis of the representation of a traumatic memory in an overseas French department where, before 1991, the majority of the monuments supported an official colonial narrative. From that perspective, the 1991 beheading and Trouche’s 2012 and 2014 performances profoundly interact with Derek Walcott’s now well-known poetic reconfiguration of the Middle Passage, where the ocean ‘keeps turning blank pages looking for History’ (1979, 25–26).
Relocating the decapitated head of the statue. 
Courtesy of Sarah Trouche.
The Memorial Cap 110 at Anse Caffard in the town of Le Diamant, on the south-western coast of Martinique, displays a different active agency to help turn the ‘blank pages’ of History. Inaugurated in 1998 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, the town of Le Diamant commissioned Martinican artist and sculptor Laurent Valère to conceive this poignant memorial as a tribute to African captives who drowned on the night of 8 April 1830 during the shipwreck of an illegal and unidentified slave ship on the rocky shore of Anse Caffard. Although the slave trade had been abolished in 1817, the ship was illicitly carrying captives to Martinique. Before the ship wrecked itself at Anse Caffard, most of the crew had died during the passage that lasted four months, and many captives who had died of illness had been thrown overboard. As the remaining Africans were shackled together in the ship’s hold, most of them perished near Anse Caffard; however, eighty-six male and female captives were rescued and sheltered on Latournelle Plantation, then entrusted to the Administration of the French Navy. Forty-six bodies were recovered,
including those of four white seamen who were offered decent burial in the cemetery of Le Diamant, while the remaining forty-two African captives were buried in a mass grave. This is allegedly the last shipwreck of a slave ship on the coast of Martinique. Faced with the entangled legal status of the survivors, who were shipped illegally and who were neither slaves nor free human beings who could be granted special status, the Conseil Privé of Martinique ruled in May 1830 that they be deported to the colony of Cayenne where the eighty-six African survivors landed in July 1830.

The memorial, paying tribute to this harrowing event, is built on the alleged burial ground of the forty-two drowned African captives. It comprises fifteen massive androgynous statues arranged as a triangle (a reference to the Triangular slave trade) and aligned at a 110° angle to the Gulf of Guinea, from where the ship had probably departed. The statues are made out of white concrete reinforced with sand and gravel. Each statue, representing a meditative captive leaning forward, is sealed on a solid base and is approximately eight feet tall, four feet wide, two feet deep and weighs four and a half tons. Located on a gently sloping
grassy bluff, the statues overlook the Caribbean Sea, facing Diamond Rock, with their back to the shadowy flanks of Morne Larcher and the nearby Morne Pavillon locally known as Morne L’Afrique.

The distinctiveness of the memorial lies in the tragic event that inspired its conception, the significant sense of mourning it evokes and its absolute inclusion in its natural environment. The original white colour of the memorial, symbolizing mourning, has weathered and turned grey. Thus, landscape, weatherscape and seascape stand as intangible witnesses of the historical tragedy, play a significant role in the ageing process of the statues and ultimately remodel the statues, which become an integral part of the natural environment. The symbiosis between nature (sea winds, salty sea sprays, soil, sunlight, rains and hurricanes), the statues and the burial ground tells a historical narrative that visitors need to process as they become immersed in the uniqueness of the memorial. Because the memorial is in the open, visitors can touch the statues, walk around them, be impregnated with the sound of the wind and the pounding surf below and are evidently imbued with a historical denseness. Likewise, the deep connection
between statues and people evoked in the name of the memorial, ‘Mémoire et fraternité’, is intensified by this sense of close intimacy with the statues. The hunched shoulders and bowed heads of the statues, huddled together, staring out stoically to sea and meditating on the burden of historical wounds, force us to apply a conscious gaze to the seascape and the surrounding scenery. Similarly, the heartrending expression on the face of each statue and the original white colour, framed in the geography of the pounding surf below and the protecting flanks of the mornes, force visitors to feel the deep historical distinctiveness of Cap 110. As Suzanne Césaire (1945) urged us to grasp the profound historical significance of nature, visitors to the Memorial need to develop a ‘total insight’ to carve out a conscious memorial cartography. Visitors also need to excavate from under the beauty of the natural environment surrounding Cap 110 the humanity and history of a landscape and seascape that witnessed the shipwreck and constitute today a sacred burial ground for drowned African captives who were neither slaves nor free human beings.

Unlike the beheaded statue of Joséphine, while the memorial ultimately prompts a distinct ‘global memoryscape’ for international visitors (Phillips and Reyes, 2011), Martinicans have taken to illuminating the memorial during All Saints and All Souls Days in memory of the captives allegedly buried on the site, and have elected Cap 110 as the most appropriate location for the 22 May commemorations of the abolition of slavery in Martinique. Similarly, one should note that Edouard Glissant’s funeral ceremony was organized at Cap 110, with his coffin installed next to the statues, thus leading mourners to pay homage simultaneously to the poet of the Tout Monde and to the African captives. In a video posted on Laurent Valère’s website Glissant, a part-time resident of the town of Le Diamant who regularly visited the memorial, observes that the location bears the dimension of the ‘unknown’, the ‘unfathomable’. Cap 110, he adds, ‘is the memory of the abyss, the source of the absolutely undecipherable African origin of the Caribbean. Cap 110 has stirred something in the unconscious of the population of Le Diamant and of Martinique.’ Aimé Césaire, another faithful visitor to the memorial, especially toward the end of his life, explains in another video, also posted on Laurent Valère’s website, that Cap 110 ‘reflects a distinctive
Martinican anguish, melancholy, complexity, and resistance’. Césaire adds that:

as an uprooted and displaced people, Martinicans need to take root on their land. It is important for Martinicans to have a memorial that reminds them of a past of pain, disaster but also resistance. These phantoms [the statues] have their descendants on the nearby Morne L’Afrique, and they are the living example of resistance. When I descend into myself, when I go deeper than a probe, I find the fundamental Negro and my phantoms, here they are, next to me, and I do not reject them.

In shaping a memorial poetry where the sea is a historical abyss, Césaire and Glissant echo Walcott, who found the ‘monuments’, ‘battles’, ‘martyrs’ of the African diaspora, its ‘tribal memory’, and its ‘Renaissance’ in ‘that grey vault, the Sea [that] has locked them up’ ‘in them sea-sands’ (1979: 25–26).

By way of a conclusion and of opening up a reflection on how communities from the French overseas departments dislocate a cartography of remembrance that silences the victims of slavery, one should pay close attention to the Memorial of the Names of the Abolition. In 2008 the association CM 98 created this memorial, which
is composed of 256 glass panels. It lists the first names, the numbers assigned to slaves and the last names they were arbitrarily given in Guadeloupe and Martinique at the time of the abolition of slavery in 1848. These panels are set up for each town in Guadeloupe and Martinique, with about 70,000 names arranged in alphabetical order. The memorial was inaugurated on 23 May 2008 in the Senate in Paris, then on the square of the Basilique de Saint-Denis. It is considered a travelling memorial because it is installed only in a specific location, and for a limited time, during commemorative events in mainland France. For instance, the Memorial was installed in the gardens of the Ministry of the French overseas territories where the event Limyè Ba yo [A Light for Them] took place on 23 May 2016. According to Emmanuel Gordien,12 president of CM 98, as the main objective of the memorial is to carve out, on a national scale, significant itineraries of recognition and reconciliation, CM 98 seeks to increase the number of panels with names from all the overseas departments and is actively looking for a prestigious and visible location in Paris for the permanent exhibition of the memorial. Therefore, I argue that this memorial can be considered as a post-museum exhibiting slavery anarchives that fill the silences of History and desacralize a conventional archival logic.

Other memorials that strive to restore the suppressed memory of slavery were given space in Parisian suburbs with large communities from the French overseas departments.13 La Gardienne de vie [The Protector of Life], which portrays a slave woman shielding her child, was the first memorial to be erected in Sarcelles on 23 May 2006. Subsequently, the towns of Sarcelles and Saint-Denis in 2013, Creil in 2015 and Grigny14 in 2016 have installed steles that bear the names of 213 slaves (the number of years that slavery lasted between 1635 and 1848, according to CM 98). Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in 2006, CM 98 also created a genealogy workshop the objective of which is to ‘look for the slave’ and understand the post-abolition arbitrary creation of families and societies. An archival database with 120,000 names of emancipated Guadeloupean and Martinican slaves is now accessible on the site anchoukaj.15

12 Gordien’s email communication with the author (December 2016).
14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2B9uwRYmbQ.
By disentangling the thick temporality of slavery, these memorials all strive not to make slavery an event that happened too long ago to remember, but to excavate the trauma of slavery and ultimately foster instead a constructive solidarity and awareness of a painful history.

Works Cited


