Title

Introduction

Author

Warner, Tobias

Peer reviewed

Tobias Warner

Introduction

One could sketch a portrait of contemporary debates around decolonizing public memory in France and the francophone world in two objects: the first, a sword on a red velvet pillow exchanged between heads of state; the second, a funeral post, grasped from a museum display in a live-streamed attempt at unauthorized repatriation.

In November 2019, France returned the sword of El Hajj Umar Tal to Senegal. Tal was a nineteenth-century political leader and Islamic scholar who battled the French and built a short-lived West African empire across much of what is now Guinea, Senegal, and Mali. The return of Tal's sword was the first tangible outcome of the much-discussed 2018 report of Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy on looted African cultural artifacts in European museums (Sarr and Savoy). If some saw progress in this step, others saw further complication: it was unclear why this object had been chosen among so many others, whether it had even belonged to Tal in the first place, nor why it was being returned to Senegal alone given the fluidity of nineteenth-century borders. But the optics spoke for themselves: in a widely disseminated image, the sword sits between prime minister Edouard Philippe of France and president Macky Sall of Senegal (Macé). This is restitution, the photo op suggests: a material symbol of past conflicts being soberly returned by the accredited representatives of two sovereign nations. A sword evokes conflict, resistance, or confrontation, but to twenty-first-century eyes it also carries the unmistakable whiff of something *dépassé*. Just as modern wars are no longer fought primarily with sabers, the photo suggested, so too might the colonial past be definitively buried with state-driven gestures such as these.

Just over six months later, a very different scene unfolded in June 2020 when the Congolese-born pan-African activist Mwazulu Diyabanza tried to remove a nineteenth-century Chadian funeral post from the Musée du Quai Branly – the first of a series of actions at other European museums over the following year. "C'est notre patrimoine [...] on va partir avec à la maison," Diyabanza proclaimed before being confronted by museum staff (*Mwazulu Diyabanza Siwa Lemba Récupère*). Accounting for his choice of object was simple: "It was the only piece that was within our reach," Diyabanza later told the *Guardian* (Diyabanza). One can see what he means in a video of a later action at the Louvre: such exhibition spaces are often

crowded with artifacts but most are held tightly in translucent plexiglass boxes (*La Récupération*). In videos of Diyabanza's attempts at repatriation, other artifacts hover in space around him, silent witnesses to the unfolding drama. While Diyabanza and his collaborators have been arrested and fined and the artifacts themselves have not left the museums, these interventions have upended the carefully choreographed statist vision of restitution unveiled the previous year with the return of Tal's sword.

Questions hover around these objects: what would constitute a successful effort at restitution (or removal)? Who can engage in such practices, where, on whose behalf, and to what ends? In short, what is to be done about the coloniality of public memory in francophone spaces and what would a decolonial practice of collective memory look like? This special issue of *Contemporary French Civilization* takes stock of the urgency of recent interventions in the French and francophone world around these and other related questions. Struggles over the public memory of colonization are not in themselves new, but few would deny that they have acquired a renewed visibility.

The articles in this issue are largely drawn from panels organized over the last several years at the annual conventions of the Modern Language Association by the Executive Committee of the Francophone Forum.[1] These panels came about for two reasons. First, to give scholars of French and francophone cultures a forum to respond to rapidly unfolding debates about the coloniality of public space. Second, to link these debates to the rise of francophone memory studies. While the blind spots of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* project have been discussed for well over a decade now (Nora; Rothberg), there has been a surge of recent publications investigating the specifically colonial dimensions of sites of memory and practices of everyday life. Recent work in this vein includes Etienne Achille and Lydie Moudileno's *Mythologies postcoloniales: pour une décolonisation du quotidien* (2018), their edited volume (with Charles Forsdick) *Postcolonial Realms of Memory* (2020), and the recent issue of *Francosphères* edited by Jonathan Lewis and Antonia Wimbush (Achille and Moudileno; Achille et al.; Lewis and Wimbush). This body of scholarship has responded to what Achille, Forsdick, and Moudileno describe as the "urgency of asserting the central place of the colonial in the making of modern France, and of anchoring it in a collective memory that has often evacuated traces of empire" (Achille et al. 2).

In tandem with this welcome revisionist aim, another recent current in francophone memory scholarship has been to sketch out alternative

practices of memory. Debarati Sanyal has cautioned against making the recovery of suppressed histories the sole critical response to legacies of violence and suggested instead the notion of entanglement as a generative way of thinking about time and memory (Sanyal 347). Jill Jarvis highlights the ways in which aesthetic practices afford not only ways of rewriting the colonial past but also envisioning decolonized futures (Jarvis 2). The essays in this volume respond to these threads. Although some were conceived partly as a kind of scholarly rapid response to still-unfolding events, they also seek to intervene in broader critical conversations in francophone memory scholarship.

Problematic statues and stolen artifacts have been some of the common sites around which debates around restitution and removal have unfolded, but in "*Restituer*: sharing colonial films" Rachel Gabara asks what can and ought to be done with colonial films. Focusing on films shot in colonial Africa, Gabara argues that a model of restitution based on physical objects does not transfer easily to moving images. European archives maintain control over colonial films through a variety of obstacles that are medium-specific, from the difficulty of physical access to exorbitant licensing fees. Giving colonial films "back" need not mean giving them up, Gabara suggests, since it is possible to produce high-quality copies. Moreover, just as Africa did not experience these films' loss, Europe will not lose them by returning them, losing instead authority over access to and income from licensing. As cases in point, Gabara explores the work of filmmakers including Jean-Marie Téno and Mweze Ngangura who incorporate fragments of colonial films into their own creative work. Without a drive for formal restitution, though, such re-mixings will remain the exception and European archives will continue to retain control over an important dimension of understandings of colonialism and its aftermath.

In "'Ni repentance ni excuses': France's symbolic acts of monumentalizing the memory of the Algerian War of Independence," Maria Vendetti unpacks a January 2021 report, written by the historian Benjamin Stora and commissioned by French president Emmanuel Macron, which studied questions of memory relating to the Algerian War. For Vendetti, Stora's report is an act of memory-making that is primarily intended for the French Republic rather than the people of France, far less the people of Algeria. Although the report denounces the systemic brutality and injustice of the colonial system it fails to envision convincing projects of reparation or resolution. By imagining current and potential future *lieux de mémoire* as a sufficient response to calls for reparation, the report recycles decades-long commonplaces about the

Algerian War and its place in French collective memory. For Vendetti, this is part of an official drive to monumentalize both the history of the Algerian War and a certain idea of Frenchness which together stand in the way of the possibility of decolonizing collective memory.

How to imagine a truly postcolonial France, asks Mame-Fatou Niang in "'Mémoires-Céramiques': La fresque du Palais Bourbon ou le grand dérangement mémoriel." This contribution departs from a Spring 2019 polemic, which Niang helped spark, about a fresco at the Palais Bourbon by the French artist Hervé di Rosa. The painting is supposed to commemorate the first French abolition of slavery and yet features what are clearly blackface caricatures. Niang's petition, written with Julien Sauadeau, asked whether this fresco, with its racist imagery that she suggests would not have been out of place in *Tintin in the Congo*, was really the best way to commemorate abolition? Strikingly but not surprisingly, the petition itself unleashed a frenzy of condemnation. Niang draws on this experience to ground an extended critique of the coloniality of national memory in France and gesture toward alternative practices of memory that would seek not to silence the past but to accept, incorporate, and transform it. Niang conceptualizes this re-composition as "mémoires-céramiques." The central analogy here is the practice of *kintsugi*, a process of repairing ceramic objects with a lacquer mixed with gold, such that the traces of damage are accepted and incorporated into the history of the object. "Il n'est plus question de réparations," Niang writes, "tant ce qui a été brisé est trop grand." Instead, Niang envisions a "kintsugi national," which would attempt to "inscrire le bris et l'effacement dans les procédés de refondation" (57).

Sura Qadiri echoes a similar note in "Fixing time: repair in the work of Kader Attia." Focusing on the concept of repair in the installation art of French-Algerian artist Attia, Qadiri's reading harmonizes with Niang's vision of collective memory as conspicuously repaired ceramics. For Attia, repair means moments where friction is figured as re-piecing, suturing together, substituting, and supplementing. Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour and Édouard Glissant, Qadiri elaborates repair as a practical measure that ensures the survival of a person or an object following trauma or breakage. In Attia's work and writings, repair is a continual process of restoration, hopeful but imbued with ambivalence as a hedge against any impulse toward erasure. Such "practical optimism" is captured in Attia's installation *Continuum of Repair* in which a circular array of bookshelves is mirrored ever upwards into infinity – a stunning visual in which Qadiri finds a compelling figure of atelic repair.

Collectively, the essays in this issue position themselves against the monumentalization of public memories of colonization and offer instead various visions of decolonial repair. In so doing, the authors expand the focus from recovering or removing objects to attending to the frames around such contested *lieux* or *noueds de mémoire*. Think once more of Tal's sword on that red velvet pillow or Diyabanza surrounded by a room full of artifacts in translucent display cases. Recent and ongoing struggles over collective memory in the francophone world have often been fought over the frames through which objects, sites, and experiences become meaningful and collective memories take shape. By disputing the monumentalization of memory, raising questions of access and standing, and theorizing critical and creative practices of repair, redistribution, or re-composition, these essays seek to pry the entangled colonial past loose from its settled framings in order to envision new futures.

University of California, Davis

Note

1 Many thanks to the members of the Francophone Executive Committee for their help crafting the panels that generated the rich conversations from which most of these papers emerged: Siham Bouamer, Lia Brozgal, Karl Britto, Annette Joseph-Gabriel, Mame-Fatou Niang, and Denis Provencher.

Works cited

Achille, Etienne, and Lydie Moudileno. *Mythologies postcoloniales. Pour une décolonisation du quotidien*. Champion, 2018.

Achille, Etienne, Charles Forsdick, and Lydie Moudileno. *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*. Liverpool UP, 2020.

Diyabanza, Mwazulu. "Experience: I Steal from Museums." *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2020. *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/nov/20/experience-i-steal-from-museums.

Jarvis, Jill. *Decolonizing Memory: Algeria and the Politics of Testimony*. Duke UP, 2021.

Lewis, Jonathan, and Antonia Wimbush. "Introduction: Postcolonial Realms of Memory in the Francophone World." *Francosphères*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–7.

Macé, Célian. "A Dakar, Edouard Philippe dépose les armes d'El Hadj Oumar Tall." *Libération*, 18 Nov. 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2019/11/18/a-dakar-edouard-philippe-depose-les-armes-d-el-hadj-oumar-tall_1764118/.

Mwazulu Diyabanza Siwa Lemba Récupère Une Statue Au Musée Du Quai Branly à Paris. Directed by ZIANA TV, 2020. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyjH-ZIvBDo.

Niang, Mame-Fatou. "'Mémoires-Céramiques': La fresque du Palais Bourbon ou le grand dérangement mémoriel." *Contemporary French Civilization*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2023, pp. 45–61.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, vol. 26, Apr. 1989, pp. 7–24.

La Récupération de Notre Patrimoine Continue Au Musée de Louvre. Directed by AFRICA SENEGAL TV, 2020. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=826BeInG7_s.

Rothberg, Michael. "Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From Lieux de Mémoire to Noeuds de Mémoire." *Yale French Studies*, no. 118/119, 2010, pp. 3–12.

Sanyal, Debarati. "Introduction." *Critical Times*, vol. 2, no. 3, Dec. 2019, pp. 347–352.

Sarr, Felwine, and Bénédicte Savoy. *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain*. 2018, p. 240.