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Editorial

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Editorial

Myriam Cottias and Céline Flory

- 1 We wish to open this third number of *Esclavages & post-esclavages/Slaveries & Post-Slaveries* with a tribute to Samuel Paty, teacher of history and geography, who was murdered in front of his school at Conflans-Sainte-Honorine on 16 October 2020, and we dedicate this tribute to freedom of speech and the open discussion of free thinking. We extend our respects to all teachers in schools and higher education who guide their pupils and their students along the path to critical thinking and to knowledge without boundaries.
- 2 Many questions which are at the heart of the scientific project of this journal have taken shape in a concrete, violent and lethal way since our last editorial. In the United States, the *Black Lives Matter* movement has taken on a new energy, rallying around the struggle against the racism and discrimination suffered by the Afro-American population; this suffering has assumed tragic dimensions in a series of homicides by the American police. There have been echoes of these demonstrations in a number of countries, including France, triggered by similar events. A future number of this journal will analyse these particular situations.
- 3 There have been calls for a readjustment of the reminders of slavery and colonialism in the public arena, regardless of national frontiers, together with denunciations of the discrimination marked by symbolic historical monuments, which have been taken down, destroyed or daubed with critical inscriptions. Some of these actions are a response, by populations identified as Black, to globalised anti-racist demands, but also to particular local situations. Others are more specific and national in nature, and belong to a more extended historical movement which serves to remind us how deeply rooted are those demands.
- 4 The statue of the Empress Josephine de Beauharnais, wife of Napoleon I, is a good example. There was a huge symbolic apparatus—a military procession, a Mass, banquets for the social and political elites, and cash handouts to the former slaves of the Empress—to accompany its inauguration on La Savane, the main park of Fort-de-France in Martinique; it was surrounded by railings and guards to keep away a crowd which the authorities suspected of being potentially dangerous. It should be noted that

at the time there were rumours circulating in the colony that Napoleon III intended to reinstate slavery, and that fields of sugar-cane were constantly being set on fire.¹ It cannot be said that in the 'Old Colonies' denunciation of colonialism, and in this case of slavery, was not swift to come. From the very moment of its installation, Josephine's statue has been the bearer of this history. In 1885, Alfred Parépou records in *Créole*, in his *Atipa, roman guyanais*, that 'jou yé meute statoue, pou so femme [Joséphine de Beauharnais], la Martinique, oune nègue frotté caca là-sous'.² In March 1974, in a period of social unrest and renewed demands for independence, the statue lost its centrality: Aimé Césaire who was then mayor of the city, moved it to the very edge of La Savane park.

- 5 Statues are in constant dialogue with history. In September 1991 this one was decapitated and covered in red paint; then in 1998, on the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the whole monument was wrapped in a black shroud while discussions were going on about the possibility of a law declaring slavery to be a crime against humanity, and providing for reparation.³ In November 2012, the artist Sarah Trouche, naked and covered in anatto, did a performance—much criticized locally—entitled 'Resilience'. Whipping the statue thirty-three times, she called on the monument, which she described as an emblem of slavery and colonialism, to tell the whole truth. The pain she inflicted on it was intended as the mirror-image of past and present social oppression.
- 6 So the statue continued to stand on La Savane, headless and dripping with blood. As a symbol of domination, it was to some degree corrected by those who bore the memory of the enslaved, so that it could alert tourists to the tensions in post-slavery Martinique society.
- 7 Yet, to borrow the title of Emmanuel Fureix's study of iconoclasm,⁴ our eyes can continue to be offended. Outrage is an effective means of shaping political demands in our imagination. Even if, in 2010, a woman standing in front of the newly restored statue could declare how proud she was of Josephine, 'a beautiful mulatto from Martinique who married Napoleon, a Black man who became Emperor of the French',⁵ objections to the contrary were raised as recently as 22 May 2020, based on the question of gaining reparation by repossessing public spaces and removing symbols of slavery and colonialism:⁶ the statue was then abruptly destroyed.
- 8 This act was clearly a way of bringing into play a different mode of making history, in which conflicts in the political sphere are habitually enacted in the destruction of symbols. But at the same time it can be said that it shows that anticolonial demands have not yet settled, and that the recent advances of the humanities and social sciences, research into and analysis of slavery, post-slavery and colonialism, are scarcely being heard. The field of transmission of knowledge is thus still wide open to investigation.
- 9 One line of enquiry which this number pursues is that of the digital humanities, making available primary sources in archives or embedded in databases. But our eyes must never fail to be critical.

NOTES

1. Laurence Brown, “Créole Bonapartism and Post-Emancipation Society: Martinique’s Monument to the Empress Joséphine”, *Outre-mers. Revue d’histoire*, t. 94, No. 350-351, 1st semester 2006, pp. 39-49 ; Anny Dominique Curtius, “De cuerpos desnudos pintados y de estatuas decapitadas: la historia interpretativa de Fort-de-France”, *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, No. 78, 2013, pp. 175-194.
 2. He continues : ‘A ça, oune so, li té poussé fait. Yé condamnein nègue la, tois mois.’ (Alfred Parépou, 1885, p. 180). Translation: ‘That’s why, on the day of the inauguration of his wife’s statue on La Savane in Martinique, a negro smeared his shit on it. It was the only thing he could do. He was sent to prison for three months’. The Créole original and a French translation by Michel Lohier (1972) were published together in 1980 by Éditions caribéennes.
 3. The law recognizing the slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity was finally voted through on 10 May 2001.
 4. Emmanuel Fureix, *L’œil blessé : politiques de l’iconoclasme après la Révolution française*, Seyssel, éditions Champ Vallon, 2019.
 5. Interview recorded by Myriam Cottias on 7 July 2010 in Fort-de-France, Martinique
 6. <https://www.people-bokay.com/destruction-statues-v-schoelcher-non-victor-schoelcher-nest-pas-notre-sauveur-insistent-les-militants-martiniquais/> [last accessed in November 2020].
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