

Keynote address

The Age of Love*

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History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake

– James Joyce

*... It is hard to imagine all is lost
Since the energy of ashes is still here
And blows from time to time
through the debris*

– Aimé Césaire¹

The title, *The Age of Love*, is borrowed from a quote in Gustave Flaubert's *The Sentimental Education*. In the novel Flaubert follows two young men taken by the wave of the 1848 revolution but who will betray lovers, friends, ideals and end up being two good bourgeois, reminiscing on the foolish and romantic ideals of their youth. There are many things to be said about Flaubert's novel but what I borrow is its criticism of romantic idealisation in politics. Flaubert mocks the victory of the 'beautiful revolution', the revolution of words crushing the 'ugly revolution' of June 1848, ugly because 'realities have taken the place of words', Marx said. Realities challenged the power of words but words unveiled the unconscious desire. In *The Sentimental Education*, a patriot of the *Club de l'Intelligence* cries: 'After the abolition of slavery would come the abolition of the proletariat. The age of hatred was past; the age of love was about to begin'.² Abolition of class, caste and race would lead to fraternal love.

* This presentation was delivered prior to both the United Nations-sponsored conference on racism in Durban at the beginning of September 2001 and the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. These events do not challenge the roots of the argument presented here but they affect the ways in which the conversation will continue between 'the drowned and the saved'.

Flaubert's remarks echo Marx's: 'The phrase which corresponded to this imaginary abolition of class relations was *fraternité*, general fraternisation and brotherhood. This pleasant abstraction from class antagonisms, this sentimental reconciliation of contradictory class interests, this fantastic transcendence of the class struggle'. The classes had been divided by a mere misunderstanding. The revolutions of the second half of the 19th century inaugurated the age of love in politics, an age of love that would be intimately connected with the imperial conquest. The rhetoric of love, the sentimental education of race were introduced as political idioms along with the idiom and weapons of imperialism.

I wish to discuss two inter-related aspects of the discourse of race and on race. First, I evoke briefly the elaboration of humanitarian discourse with Africa as its target and trace its roots back to European abolitionism in the age of imperialism. The doctrine of abolitionism inaugurated a sentimentalised view of violence and a rational approach to its resolution. It affirmed the unity of humankind and the supra-national law of humanitarianism. 'Violence against any member of the human species affects the entire humanity', the French abolitionist Victor Shœlcher (1842) declared. 'Each of us must care for the victim'. Rony Brauman (1996), who left the direction of *Doctors without Borders* to protest against its role in Africa, has shown how and why we must suspect the rhetoric of emergency, care and love that humanitarian discourse presents. The condemnation of racism by abolitionists prefigured current condemnation of racism: a rational education of the ignorant under the guidance of Europe (or of any enlightened group) would eradicate violence, intolerance and promote brotherhood and love.

I want to explore the ways in which race, in recent years, has come to be inextricably connected to a politics of reparation and recovery, and with a narrative that insists on wounds and damages. I will neither look at the European philosophies that have promoted racism nor at colonial racism. I will not look either at recent practices, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. A lot has been written on that subject and I do not think that I will add anything substantial to that debate. Rather, I propose to take you through a series of remarks, through the discourse – elaborated by descendants of slaves and colonised – of the politics of recovery and reparation. I will focus more specifically on the debate around slavery and reparation, and thus will have to look at the rhetoric of abolitionism.

To be sure, the West's responsibility in the current state of African countries must still be underlined, analysed and explored.³ Its philosophies of race must still be exposed for what they were and are. We must pursue that project. However, it is important that those who are 'on the other side' of Europe, those whose ancestors have suffered from European-organised slavery and colonialism, examine carefully the motives, desires and intentions that support demands for apology and compensation. What is the *mise-en-scène* of the theatre of apology and compensation? Why would Europe's apology perform if we do not look at local and regional complicity with slave trade and slavery? Let us ponder Wole Soyinka's (2000) remark: 'the ignominious role of ancient rulers, continuing into the present, serves to remind us of their complicity in the cause for which reparations are sought.'⁴

Would Europe's apology replace the necessary work on the linguistic, cultural and social legacy of slavery in the African world? Should we not confront as well the desire to incarnate the good that the demand for apology implies? How can we make sure that the apology which African ministers demand will serve as a catalyst for change, opening a space for public debate on responsibilities, change, retribution, restitution, democracy? Finally, how can we make sure that an apology will renew the debate on the 'topography of cruelty',⁵ on the 'scenes of subjection' that the slave trade and slavery produced?

The Theatre of Redemption

I see an affiliation between 19th-century abolitionist rhetoric and the current rhetoric of humanitarianism. In the current theatre of redemption, Africa still offers a site of action to those who give themselves the duty to save the wretched of the earth, the excluded, the victims. As the site of one of the greatest catastrophes in history, the slave trade, of repeated scenes of subjection and abjection – rapes, forced labour, massacres, humans taken to be shown in zoos, of colonial conquest, of deportation of civil populations, of civil wars, of apartheid, of genocide – Africa captures the imagination of the West. Africa needs to be saved from herself, from the predators who, throughout history, have depleted her resources.

By the mid-19th century, Great Britain was leading the campaign against the slave trade. Historians have shown why and how European powers were led to accept the abolition of the slave trade, then of slavery. I will not evoke here the economic and political reasons of these decisions.

Rather, I wish to evoke the discursive strategies of European abolitionism and to show how abolitionism, as a discourse, as a political doctrine, brought into being two related features of contemporary humanitarianism: the European saviour and the African victim. Nineteenth-century abolitionism displaced the responsibility of European powers in the slave trade: the perpetrators were the whites in the colonies, the African, Malagasy, Comorian and Muslim slave traders. Europeans would now intervene in Africa to save African victims from local tyrants and mean Muslim traders. They would bring the ideals of reason, tolerance and education to neglected peoples. They would enlighten populations kept in backwardness and, thus, would atone for European passivity during the slave trade. The abolitionists opposed a moral model, which rested on reason, to the economic model, which rested on interests. To the abolitionists, European states and associations had a right to intervene in territories in which they suspected a traffic in human beings.

The law against slavery was supra-national; it transcended the notion of national sovereignty. I am not saying that slavery was not a crime. I want to show the genealogy of a relationship between Europe and the African world, in which notions of damage, wrong, redemption and reparation can be traced back to the idiom of a 19th-century rhetoric. Let us see that genealogy: once slavery is said to be a 'crime against humanity' – and the abolitionists spoke of humanity as one and of slavery as a crime – there is an obligation to oppose it, to eliminate it. A moral law was elaborated whose foundation was the existence of common values that defined civilisation against barbarism. Barbarism should be eradicated: it was a sacred mission. Africa became a terrain of experimentation: of new weapons, of new techniques of discipline, of 'scientific racism', of extermination for the good of humanity, of whole groups judged to be mentally and physically inferior and, finally, for many Europeans, a terrain for their redemption. The paradox of abolitionism then, and of its offspring humanitarianism, is contained in that space: the historical, political and economic conditions that produced slavery, forced labour and colonialism, also produced the abolitionist ideal. However, we know, since Foucault, the duality of discourse: it promises emancipation and reconstructs power, but in that dialectical movement there is space for dreams, creativity, resistance. In their emptiness, the empty signifiers of abolitionism – tolerance, fraternity, reason – functioned to encourage possibility through discursive denial of historically layered and institutionally secured bonds, by denying with

words the effects of relatively wordless, politically invisible, yet potent material constraints. Yet, still more paradoxically, when these material constraints were articulated and specified as part of the content of rights, they more likely became sites of production and regulation of what Wendy Brown (1995) has called 'states of injury', of identity as injury. The rhetoric of slavery and abolitionism answered each other, for each sought to challenge the foundation of the other. Abolitionism held as a universal law that no human being could enslave another while the advocates of slavery argued that there were universal justifications for enslavement.

Reparation, Apology, Repentance

We are witnessing currently what seems to be an inevitable movement towards demanding apology, reparations and compensation for the past. In a few weeks, the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance will be held in Durban. Reading the historical perspective prepared for the event we learn that since 1963 the United Nations has tried through conventions, meetings, declarations to 'eliminate' (a term chosen by the General Assembly) all forms of racial discrimination. In 1968 during the *International Year for Action to combat Racism and Racial Discrimination*, the institution 'appealed urgently to states to intensify their efforts to eradicate racial discrimination'. Education was the means because only education would unveil the 'inherent falsity of racism'.

In furtherance of its efforts, the UN organised three decades for Action to Combat Racism: 1973-82, 1983-92, 1993-2002. Despite its efforts it had to recognise, at the beginning of the third decade, that there had been an increase of intolerance, xenophobia and racism throughout the world. Again, a campaign of education appeared essential. The primary cause of racism, the document concluded, was ignorance and the mission of the UN was, the Secretary-General declared, 'to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity'. Remember the terms: eradication, elimination, education and tolerance. The ideal of the Enlightenment – knowledge as the weapon against violence, as a means to correct man (and woman), as the source of love – is very much alive. Receive an enlightened education and you will love and you will understand and you will tolerate. Ideas will defeat passion, reason will defeat violence. The discourse against racism borrows from the European Enlightenment its philosophy, its rhetoric and

its politics. In recent years, however, a new dimension has been added: reparation, moral and material, for past deeds, for damage done to the psyche, to the bodies, and to the spirit of victimised groups, as well as apology, pardon, repentance. The Declaration and Recommendations for a Programme of Action, adopted for the Durban meeting by the African Preparatory Conference at Dakar in January 2001, appealed to similar notions.

African ministers reminded the conference that the slave trade and colonialism had deeply affected the African continent. Slave trade was a 'unique tragedy', a 'crime against humanity which is unparalleled'. It has resulted in substantial and lasting damage hence the demand for an 'explicit apology by the former colonial powers or their successors for those human rights violations' and 'adequate reparation regardless of when or by whom they were committed'. Apology, compensation, reparation of the self and the community, *devoir de mémoire* (duty to remember) and the search for an external culprit frames the current discourse on past violence, and represents the responsibility and grounds for a better future.

I wish to argue for the integration of a 'grey zone'. I borrow this notion from Primo Levi,⁶ who used it to describe the daily practices of survival (betrayal, passivity, indifference) in concentration camps. Levi remarked that our 'desire for simplification (in history) is justified, but the same does not always apply to simplification itself'.

One cannot easily say here the righteous, over there the reprobates. As Levi argues:

the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness, with all its infinite nuances and motivations, to collaborate: terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even ridiculously circumscribed in space and time, cowardice and, finally, lucid calculation aimed at eluding the imposed orders and order. (1988:43)

This evocation of the grey zone in concentration camps harks back to the evocation of the ordered disorder of the plantation. An ordered disorder reigned, a state of terror, a regime of fear in which humans either sought to survive or let themselves die. Entering the slave ship and the world of the plantation, each person was innocent because their enslavement could not be justified by any fault of their own. The criminal and the child were both innocent but only within that space. They were not innocents because they were human beings, they were innocents as they were condemned to a

world of violence and racial humiliation. However, the state of innocence, Hannah Arendt (1995) has remarked, does not belong to the world of the human conceived as the member of a political community. If the slave trade is said to be a 'unique tragedy', a 'crime against humanity which is unparalleled', the event loses its inscription in history. It belongs to a world outside of humanity. Such an affirmation operates a transference: the historical event belongs now to the register of metaphysics. This approach situates the slave trade and its consequences on the plane of belief, rather than encouraging a plurality of readings of the disaster and its critical examination.

The model for those who wish to receive apology and compensation for slavery and colonialism is the campaign that has been led for the past 20 years by Jewish organisations against European states, banks, museums and individuals that took advantage of Nazi laws against the Jews to increase their wealth. An ethical and legal framework has emerged, with its metaphors and tropes. Time has become a central issue: it is urgent that compensation occurs now because there are fewer and fewer survivors, because it will constitute a warning against those who could be tempted to re-establish policies of racial discrimination and because it will have an educational as well as an ethical dimension. Recent publications by Brauman (1996), Novick (1999) and Finkelstein (2000) have pointed to the political problems raised by this approach. I do not wish to enter the controversy around their conclusions. However, I agree with many of their remarks, particularly those around victimhood and righteousness, commemoration and an apolitical position. The processes of identification with victims produces a righteous, pure and innocent identity. Virtue is on the side of the victims, evil on the side of victimisers.

Historical and political analysis of the social forces at work, of the passions that are sometimes unleashed, of the power of hatred and envy as social practices, disappear behind a moralistic condemnation that hopes to constitute a strong enough barrier against present and future racial discrimination. The moralistic condemnation powerfully resonates with a doctrine that connects, according to Elie Wiesel, 'suffering and truth, suffering and redemption, suffering and spiritual purity, suffering as a getaway to the sacred'.⁷ However, the moralistic condemnation appears to constitute a very weak barrier against new explosions of ethnic violence. It is not that a moral condemnation is not needed but that it must be done in connection with a series of reflections on the constitution of the Other

as a mortal threat to my being, and on the processes (psychological, social, cultural and political) that give way to the destruction of the Other.

To enjoy the prestige of our heroic parents or to commiserate with the suffering of our victimised parents is normal, but when these sentiments support a political demand we must ask if we are not acting in our own interests and not in the name of morals. As Todorov (2001) has argued, 'The public reminder of the past has an educative dimension only if it also questions our own actions and shows that we (or those with whom we identify ourselves) have not always been the good incarnate'. Past suffering comes down as a narrative that exercises a powerful attraction because it conjures up images of loss, misfortune and tragedy. In the current discourse of recovery and reparation, these images echo the Christian pathos, albeit secularised. One might ask what if the Christian-inspired discourse of guilt, atonement and pardon does not resonate for a group? And what would justify the universalisation of a Christian discourse and iconography? A secularised Christian eschatology shapes the discourse of reparation. The amount of suffering in the past determines the amount of rights in the present. The victimised group receives an open line of credit. No debt, no responsibility, or rather, as the philosopher François Flahault (1998) has said, the problematic of the debt is that 'everything is owed to me, you are forever indebted to me.' The debt is, of course, not only material but also symbolic. However, does not an ethic of responsibility demand that we abandon thinking that we are owed everything and that we ourselves are in a position of debt? A critical examination of non-European participation in the slave trade, slavery and colonisation is linked to the ethic of responsibility. It is tied also to the project of 'provincialising Europe' in which the notion of periphery is reworked and peripheries of peripheries appear.

In the discourse of wounding, recovery and reparation, the African world and its margins are ruled by the signifier 'slave', and by the history of the Atlantic slave trade. But why should the Atlantic experience represent the experience of the entire continent? What about North Africa, East Africa and the Indian Ocean world, in which different forms of the slave trade and slavery gave birth to different memories, cultures and languages than the Black Atlantic? Why should damage and harm define the African, or Afro-Creole, self? In the discourse of recovery and reparation, the self has been damaged to the extent that only a politics of recovery could heal the self. Only a politics of reparation by the West could heal the continent.

Recovery is seen here as the recovery of an enchanted past, as the re-inscription of the multifarious forms of subjectivity into an objective totality. Reparation means to restore a 'world of before' whose seamless life was interrupted by external forces. It is not totally incomprehensible that the desire to restore harmony and concord would be so attractive, would not capture the imagination. The African world is confronted with a rapid erosion of social and economic infrastructures, with the violence of capitalist global deregulation, and with the collapse of borders, regimes, institutions. The dream of the recovery of a world in which markers and meanings do not shift constantly, in which the outcomes of actions are not always dictated by accident and hazard is entirely understandable. People do invent ways to deal with the disorder of everyday life. Yet, when the dream becomes a fantasy that shapes politics, one must pause. Both recovery and reparation as a 're-enchantment of tradition', to use the very apt formulation of Achille Mbembe, imply that there is a core to retrieve.⁸ Collective identity and collective memory are entangled in a circular relationship. Certain memories are chosen to express what is central to collective identity, and those memories reinforce that form of identity which, in turn, chooses the memories that support its claims, and so on. Thus, the common denominator of 'African identity' is the trauma of the slave trade and slavery, which have wounded the self, the self who turns to memories of slavery and colonialism to explain present neuroses, nightmares, weaknesses and difficulty of being, of existing. Race (its discourse, practice, laws, and representations) has directly wounded the Self. Therapeutic practices are required. As Mbembe has remarked, in this discourse of recovery the African selfhood is entirely contained within the field of victimhood.

Reparation and Debt

In the post-slavery French territories in recent years, a politics of recovery and reparation has also framed the debate about identity, albeit within the specific framework of French politics of commemoration and memory. During the 1998 commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies, the official discourse constructed a clear historical rupture. Monarchy had established slavery, the republic had abolished it. It was a narrative of teleological progress, a struggle between good and evil, between *les forces du futur* and *les forces du passé*. 1848 had accomplished the promise of the French Republic when Robespierre had declared '*Périssent les colonies plutôt que nos principes*'. The beautiful

revolution had finally integrated the slaves in the family of French citizens. Abolition was a gift of Republican France, and the emancipated became forever indebted to France. In 1998, the debt had been honoured and it was now time to celebrate the creativity of Creole societies and their contribution to the culture of humanity. Within that framework, the construction of identity is dependent upon the capacity to find harm in the past and upon the belief that the past entirely defines the present.⁹ In a paradoxical move, the burden of debt is shifted again. If France regrets its complicity with the slave trade, it is absolved. France shows its capacity to atone, to be above petty resentment; the post-slavery colony is again in debt. The dimension of debt in the rhetoric of apology, I argue, points to the difficulties of elaborating a politics of reparation that provides an emancipatory horizon, that does not erase the existence of social and racial conflict and of the struggle against exploitation.

To counter the French discourse of gift as reparation, Creoles turned to the discourse of debt and reparation of the kind I have described above. It is important to clarify the relationship between past and present at work in the reparation/recovery discourse. Despite current work on the ways in which traditions are invented and the past recreated to support political claims, memory in the reparation/recovery discourse is a sacred repository of collective identity. The connection 'collective memory/collective identity' is, as I said above, circular, and each is elaborated to reinforce the other. It might be interesting to go back to the definition of 'collective memory'. To the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who was the first to coin the expression 'collective memory', the present determines what of the past we remember and how we remember it. Collective memory, Halbwachs argued, is thus profoundly anti-historical: it does not accept multiple perspectives, it rejects the ambiguous, the uncertain, the indeterminate. The temporality of collective memory is a timeless present, ie a time in which the past and present are in a continuous sign-chain.

The past of slavery becomes the present of post-slavery societies. The figure of the slave is re-enacted as a traumatic presence. The experience of slavery is both past and present. Such vision paradoxically rejects the system of slavery to a pre-history, a pre-modern period, whose pre-modernity still determines the post-colonial world. There is no slave rebellion, no abolitionist politics, no creation of a new culture, a new people and, in the case of the southwest islands of the Indian Ocean, a Creole culture and people. Such a position leads to an impossibility: to

analyse slavery as one system of exploitation of human beings by other human beings. Hence, the moralistic tone still largely used to denounce current forms of enslavement. The surprised: 'How can such things exist in our world?' reveals the strength of the narrative of a *universal abolition* (extinction, eradication) of slavery operated in the mid-19th century within the 'civilised world and beyond' by European powers. Historians have nonetheless qualified that narrative. They have shown how abolitionism produced new forms of discipline and punishment that were often as violent as their precedents, how it displaced (willingly or unwillingly) the blame for slavery onto others (feudal aristocrats in Europe, Muslims or local tyrants abroad), and how abolition (willingly or unwillingly) supported the 'civilising mission' of European imperialism: 'We are saving these peoples from barbarian practices'.¹⁰ This, in any case, does not deny the emancipatory dimension of abolitionism but points to the dangers entailed by the coupling of 'memory of evil, temptation of goodness'.

Further, enslavement does not belong to a pre-modern history. It recurs in our so-called post-modern global world under new aspects (see the traffic in human beings whose profits are becoming as important as those of the drug trade), though the foundation remains the same: transforming a human being into a thing that can be bought, sold, disposed of. The fabrication of disposable people throughout history points to the permanence of a specific construction of otherness, in which the excess of enjoyment is expressed through the transformation of a human being into matter. Looking at slavery only as a traumatic experience reduces different histories and geographies (East, West, Islands, linguistic territories, etc) to one history and geography, which constitute the very foundations of identity. One Signifier, slavery, dominates the world of the Symbolic.

To be sure, and to return to my case, to affirm the hegemony of the sign, 'slavery' has also constituted a counter-hegemonic strategy in French Creole post-slavery societies. The discourse of recovery/reparation seems to be the only one that the French Republic will listen to. We know that French republicanism strongly rejects any reference to 'race' in the making of the republican nation and of French identity. Fraternity and equality are the pillars of French republicanism and only equal brothers are said to inhabit republican France.¹¹ In this narrative, the slave trade and slavery become two 'irrational' events connected with the feudalism and backwardness of the *Ancien Régime*.¹² When slavery was abolished in 1848 a paradoxical form of citizenship emerged: a colonised citizenship,

in which equality was qualified. The brother in the colony was equal but not quite.

I have analysed elsewhere how the French abolition of slavery transformed their emancipation into a debt owed by the freed slaves to the French republic (2001). I wish to add now that a citizenship with colonialism imposed not only a debt but also a space that put the new citizens in the position of beggars. Creoles had to beg to be included within the political community of French citizens. The political demand: 'On what basis aren't we your equals?' was translated into a demand for love and recognition: 'What do we lack that explains your exclusionary practices?' As equality was both offered and postponed, the Creole-colonised citizen (male) became alienated to the desire of the French coloniser, which could not, of course, be satisfied.

The public space produced by colonised citizenship was not democratic. It encouraged a binary structure: acceptance through unconditional love for France, or rejection. Those who questioned the persecutory character of colonised citizenship – 'show me over and over your love' – and the paranoid structure imposed by the hegemony of the vocabulary of love in the political space of colonial relations – first, a defence mechanism: the ego cannot assimilate the discourse of love and colonial politics; second, an impossibility: to reject the persecutory other (France) as such – was demonised. In fact, to be accepted into the body of the republican nation, the Creole citizen had to operate a denial – enslavement as the matrix of its world – and absolve France of its responsibility towards the slave trade and slavery. Thus, inequalities produced by colonialism were denounced, but the connection between slave society, colonial society and French republican ideology was not made. However, the political discourse became detached from the cultural and social world in which race and ethnicity framed the processes of identification.

After the abolition of slavery in 1848, thousands of indentured workers were brought to the island of Réunion from India, Malaysia, China and Africa to work the sugar fields. A new racial typology emerged, influenced by European racial 'science': *Kaf* (descendants of slaves of African origin) were described as 'lazy, violent, childish'; *Malbar* (people of Indian origin) were 'cunning and hypocrites'; *Zarab* (Muslim Indians) could not be trusted; *Sinwa* (of Chinese origins) were 'dirty, liars, thieves'; *Yab* (poor whites, victims of the land restructuring after 1848) were poor but white and thus 'good Catholics'. Réunion's white elite borrowed the lexicon of

'scientific' racism to describe the island's creolised multi-ethnic society. Its racial discourse was an answer to the fear of post-slavery social chaos and its desire to contain the emergence of a Creole identity, rooted in the history of the slaves' resistance, in the syncretism of African, Malagasy and Asian beliefs and rituals, the Creole language invented by slaves, and the processes of creolisation which each ethnic group experienced. The population ought to be French, Catholic and colonised.

When a new elite emerged in the 1930s, it was republican and secular, educated in French universities, not tied to land ownership and influenced by the ideals of European socialism (equality, non-racial societies, fight against capitalism). It rejected any reference to ethnicity and race, and its discourse was adopted by the trade unions. In 1946, the status of the old colonies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, Guyana) was abolished by the French parliament and they became French Overseas Departments (Départements d'Outre-Mer, or *DOM*).

However, it would be unfair to claim that anti-colonialists did not acknowledge the role of slavery in the making of the Creole world. Aimé Césaire in *Return to My Native Land* and *Discourse on Colonialism* described slavery as the matrix of the Creole society. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, written after the Second World War, Césaire compared the practices and racism of European slavery and colonialism to Nazi practices and racism. Slavery and colonial racism challenged the European ideal of its civilising mission, pointing to the extent to which violence, inhuman practices and philosophies of terror inhabited its heart.

Yet, it would be the emergence of the politics of identity in the 1970s that would bring back to the Creole societies the problematic of the past as a lasting wound that damaged the present. It was partly an answer, as I have argued, to the difficulty of transforming a cultural difference into a political difference. Slavery and colonialism had created a Creole society, political assimilation had been fought for and won. A difficulty remained: what form of political association could be invented between a people constituted by slavery and colonialism and its former master? Some Creoles turned to the idiom of recovery and reparation. They were victims because their ancestors had been victims and victimisation was handed down from generation to generation.

The politics of apology and recovery in Creole societies is not quite about restoring harmony. Harmony is not something that belongs to the repertoire of Creole societies built on destruction (of family, social,

cultural ties) and erasure (of native languages). There were either no natives on the land (Réunion island) or they were practically destroyed (Martinique, Guadeloupe). Slaves from diverse cultures, languages and traditions (Asia, Madagascar, Africa) were thrown together. They invented a language, rituals and culture that were the product of processes of creolisation (imitation, translation, substitution, creation). Predatory, violent and inhuman practices constituted the grounds upon which Creole societies developed their creativity.

Demands for recovery and reparation are addressed to a power that has marginalised (or ignored) the contribution of Creoles to politics and culture. In that scenario, recognition and reparation would both be performed through apology and reparation. France would apologise for having participated in the slave trade and slavery, and thus would recognise the Creole world. This is what happened in 1998 when the French government admitted the wrong of the slave trade and slavery but rejected demands for financial or material reparation: recognition was reparation. What has concretely changed since then? The role of France in slave trade and slavery is still extremely marginally mentioned in the schools' curriculum; relations between France and its post-slave territories are still formulated through an idiom of debt; deep inequalities persist in Creole societies; dependency is still the frame that shapes social and economic relations.

Frantz Fanon famously refused to bear the burden of slavery. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), he affirmed that he did not wish to fight for compensation of his ancestors' victimisation. A free man could not exist through the past, tradition, ethnic characteristics and the categories of the coloniser. Fanon ridiculed the alienation of the Antillean, his and her desire to become 'white', to speak 'white', to think 'white'. The Antillean was a prisoner of the white's gaze, forever seeking an approval that the white either did not want, or did not bother, to give. To be free meant liberating oneself from that neurotic embrace. However, a new identity could not be built on a return to the past or on carrying the burden of that past. Emancipation meant first getting rid of the aspirations to become white, and, second, to rise above the binary nature of racism – white vs black – in order to build a 'new humanism'. Fanon's conclusions echoed the conclusions of the colonised who were then engaged in the movement of decolonisation. Albert Memmi (1965) concurred when he declared: 'The former colonised will have become a man like any other'. The tradition of the dead should not weigh upon the living, ghosts of the slaves should be

laid to rest. The present should not be sealed, to borrow Fanon's term, in the 'materialized Tower of the Past' (1967:226). Recovery and reparation were about rupture, de-alienation and reconstruction, and tearing the shroud of the past.

The past should not be a burden, Fanon claimed. Let us go free from the ruins, the spectres, the phantoms. They barred the road to the future, and hindered the present, he asserted. For my part, I challenge Fanon's belief that it is possible to erase the past, to start anew, to operate a *tabula rasa* (1999a). I argued that this aspect of Fanonian psychology seems not only based on the illusion of self-creation (largely shared, I must admit), but also on the belief that there exists a core self. Tearing the mask would uncover a truer self. However, I wish now to qualify my critique. There is in Fanon's affirmation an insight about the politics of recovery as apolitical politics, as a narcissistic use of the past to compensate for a troubling present, whose responsibility cannot be mine. Fanon foresaw in the politics of recovery, a politics of 'projection': projecting outside of the (national, cultural) body the deep ambiguities, the passions, the sentiments of hatred and animosity that nonetheless animate the (post)-colonial unconscious and consciousness. As such, it is an ideology that seeks to protect individuals from loss and mourning and to transform politics in a field in which conflicts are regulated by moralistic condemnation rather than through a confrontation with the plurality of positions.

I wish to propose another politics of recovery and reparation, in which my demand for recognition of the past is not entirely tied to the recognition of guilt by the One, whom I have put (rightly or wrongly) in the position of having damaged my past and thus my Self. There is an inevitable loss that I must mourn, a time and space that are irretrievable. Yet the past constructs a web of debts and filiations in which I am caught. Memories and expectations constitute the threads of the web; the context of these memories and expectations colour the fabric of the web, draw a pattern on the fabric. I am attached to the world of others and to those who constitute my world (family, relatives, characters of my family romance) by this fabric. The process of reconstructing and recovery means disentangling the threads of the fabric to weave a new fabric. Thus, for the fabric not to constitute a straightjacket, I might need to undo the knots of the web that hinder my movements and construct new knots that tie me in with the others.

An ethics of responsibility might do more towards emancipating us from the idiom of debt that binds us to an unhealthy relationship with 'Europe'.

A politics of reparation could mean first opening our horizon – rather than a fixation on Europe, provincialising Europe and studying the formation of new centres and peripheries, of new borders and territories. Second, a politics of reparation could mean challenging the relation of dependency on Europe with its related sentiments, resentment and rage. In other words, a politics of reparation might entail renouncing what the current politics of recovery and reparation have transformed into a requirement – having the perpetrator demanding forgiveness, performing atonement, enacting guilt. There are moments when recovery and reparation are also about forsaking the demand addressed to the perpetrator. Shame him by ignoring him, by banishing him from our mental world.

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Notes

1. Césaire, A (1990:15) 'Slowness' in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946-82*, translated Clayton Esleman and Annette Smith. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
2. Flaubert, G (1969:303) *The Sentimental Education*. London: Penguin Classics.
3. It is always problematic to use the term 'West' for it denotes a totalising gesture that marginalises the critical traditions of Europe.
4. Soyinka, W (1998:89) *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
5. Balibar, E (forthcoming) *Extreme Violence and the Problem of Civility*.
6. Levi, P (1989:36-69) *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Vintage International.
7. Wiesel, E (1995) *All Rivers Run to the Sea: memoirs*. New York: Knopf. Cited in Novick (1999). Novick remarks on the relation of Wiesel's words with the Christian doctrine.
8. Mbembe, A (2001) 'Cosmopolitanism from the margins'. Public lecture at the Patna conference on 'Cosmopolitanism and the Nation-State', February 22-26.
9. Vergès, F (1999) 'Colonizing citizenship', *Radical Philosophy* 95.
10. Idem.
11. Idem.

12. Feminists, historians and critics have long questioned the masculinity of the French Republic.

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