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Silences that Speak to the Slave Trade

Silences qui parlent à la traite d'esclaves

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ARGENTI, Nicolas. — *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence and Belated Histories in the Camaroon Grassfields*. Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2007, 362 p. + XVIII, map, photographs., HOLSEY, Bayo. — *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*. Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2008, 280 p. + XIII, map, photographs., SHAW, Rosalind. — *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 2002, 312 p. + XV, map, photographs

- 1 Slavery and the slave trade have become subjects of intense public debate over the last decades. The formal recognition that the slave trade was a crime against humanity (e.g. *la loi Taubira* in France) and the UN Durban Conference against Racism returned slavery from its repression in the silences of history. In the United States the debate on slavery reveals a search for “social justice” on the issue of race (Berlin 2006: 1). Under the aegis of national commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade in France and the United Kingdom and the recognition of the tragedy of the trade by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, the academic study of the history and memory of the slave trade has acquired a new urgency. Alongside the numerous commemorative events, conferences are organised on

the history of the slave trade and the traumas that this history has resulted in. Slavery and the slave trade are understood to have produced lasting effects that continue to replicate themselves in the present in phenomena as varied as inner city gun crime and the underdevelopment of Sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, there is a sense that slavery and the slave trade should not be seen as a finished history. Consequently, the recognition of the tragedy of the slave trade implicates a blurring of history and memory—of the past as *past* and the past as *present*. Increasingly, the tragedy of slavery is treated on a par with the Holocaust. But while the belated effects of the Holocaust—the transmission of trauma and the replication of violence in the present—are fully recognised, the belated effects of the slave trade are yet to be diagnosed. The books under review here have taken up that challenge.

- 2 While a public discussion on the injustice of the slave trade is taking place in the West—for what this is worth, of course, in terms of restitution—slavery and the slave trade seem to be remembered quite differently in Africa. Apart from occasional claims for reparations, there is of course a booming heritage tourism industry that caters to the search for roots by African Americans and the ironies of a Pan-African politics of selective remembering and forgetting (Bellagamba 2009; Bruner 1996; Ebron 1999; Hasty 2002; Schramm 2007). However, public debates on the history of the slave trade and the continuity of domestic slavery remain largely absent (Austen 2001). Many observe a “silence” on slavery on the African continent. Some time ago, this issue was already addressed by a prominent scholar in the study of the slave trade in West Africa. Reflecting on his research on oral traditions, Martin Klein (1989) noticed that oral traditions remain silent on slavery. Indeed, former slaves and descendants of slaves do not seem to want to speak about their past. Instead of remembering their shameful past, they rather forget. This forgetting seems to be replicated in a more general politics of oblivion. In his review, the historian Ibrahim Thioub (2005) notices that African historians have privileged the study of the slave trade to the extent that it was conducted by Europeans—at the expense of African domestic slavery. African historians have tended to shy away from this painful subject, fearful of disclosing the continuities of domestic slavery and revealing the slave status of fellow citizens. Moreover, Walter Rodney’s thesis that the slave trade constitutes an important historical explanation for Africa’s under-development, has remained an article of faith for African historians (*ibid.*). Thus, slavery and the slave trade are hardly discussed in Africa. But what does this silence imply? Does it mean that nothing is remembered of the slave trade (Mbembe 2001)? Has this past completely been forgotten? The three books under review address these questions.
- 3 In *Routes of Remembrance*, Holsey examines how the slave trade is remembered at those Ghanaian sites where it is commemorated by African Americans. While she registers how the slave trade is silenced by the Ghanaians, Shaw and Argenti suggest that the slave trade is remembered in other modes than discourse. Shaw’s *Memories of the Slave Trade* deals with divination in Sierra Leone and Argenti’s *Intestines of the State* examines masked performances in the Cameroon Grassfields. All authors are anthropologists and their studies are respectively situated in debates on the Black Atlantic, divination and performance, but for the purpose of this review I focus on the contribution they make to the study of the memory of the slave trade.
- 4 For *Routes of Remembrance*, Bayo Holsey conducted her research in the Ghanaian towns of Cape Coast and Elmina. The slave castles in these coastal towns have played a pivotal

role in the transatlantic slave trade and have recently become destinations for returning African Americans. Rather than studying these pilgrims, Holsey focuses on those who live in the shadow of these castles. Some of these residents claim that nobody remembers anything about the slave trade and many told Holsey that “the castles are just for tourists” (Holsey 2008: 2). Confronted with this denial of history, Holsey sets herself the formidable task of trying to understand why nobody remembers the slave trade and finds that the coastal residents have in fact sequestered the slave trade in discourses which “minimize the effects of the history of the slave trade on coastal residents’ constructions of their contemporary identities” (*ibid.*: 23).

- 5 The first part of the book, “Sequestering the Slave Trade”, examines how the slave trade is sequestered in discourses on family, geography, region and nation. Chapter 2 discusses how the 1874 Emancipation Ordinance resulted in the transformation of notions of kinship and how the *de facto* slave status of family members became silenced in public. While status distinctions continue to be made within families—and revealed when required for purposes of inheritance—such distinctions are never made in the public realm. Legal standards prohibit the open discussion of the slave status of family members. While the coastal residents thus sequester slavery in a discourse on family solidarity, they also displace the history of the trade by suggesting that the slaves came from the North and merely passed through their coastal communities. Moreover, rather than presenting themselves as heirs to the slave traders, coastal residents instead present themselves as heirs to a glorious past of commercial association with Europeans. If the coastal Ghanaians are thus very evasive of their slave trading past, the national government too marginalizes the place of the slave trade in history textbooks. The Ghanaian government feels that no edifying lessons can be told on the history of the slave trade and has banned the slave trade from the textbooks, preferring to focus on the histories of colonialism and postcolonialism that convey a clear, positive message of liberation. “Rather than exploiting the possibilities of tragedy”, Holsey writes, “schools have continued to present histories that are a product of the optimism of the independence moment” (*ibid.*: 138).
- 6 The second part of the book, “Centering the Slave Trade”, focuses on the ways in which the history of the slave trade is presented to tourists and African American pilgrims. There, we learn how the restoration project of the Elmina Castle and the Cape Coast Castle led to a conflict between African Americans and Ghanaians about how the fortresses should be restored. Diaspora tourists and Ghanaians interpret the restored castles very differently and there are indeed different routes of remembrance. While African American visitors are strengthened by their visits, conceiving of themselves as strong and proud survivors, to most Ghanaians the slave trade remains a difficult story to embrace. They clearly do not identify with the victims of the trade, “viewing it as the history of others” (*ibid.*: 184). Furthermore, they find it difficult to comprehend that these privileged foreigners perceive Ghana to be their home and they reject the African American construction of Ghana as their “homeland”. Holsey thus reveals the ironies in the remembrance of the slave trade, ironies that are undoubtedly hard to digest for African Americans. But towards the end of the book she resolves some of these ambiguities, focussing on some students that have started to frame the history of the slave trade as a narrative of protest. This protest narrative is embraced and presented as the redemption that the slave trade can offer. The protest narrative provides a hopeful conclusion to the silencing of the slave trade in most public history of Ghana.

- 7 Holsey is very outspoken about which routes of remembrance she considers productive, and which not. The official commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade launched by the Ghanaian government, PANAFEST, is denounced as a “Pana-flop”¹. How the majority of Ghanaians and African-Americans commemorate the slave trade does not meet her approval either, in contrast to the rather incidental expressions of the protest narrative voiced by some Ghanaian youth. The author is nevertheless committed not to denounce those who sequester the slave trade. To Holsey Africans were only pawns in the slave trade and they still suffer from white oppression today. This frames her claim that “silence can be a strategy that groups employ to negotiate oppressive conditions”. She suggests that coastal Ghanaians have inhabited a discursive space in which the representations of the slave trade are to a large extent responses to European narratives. The ways in which they talk about the slave trade should therefore be seen as a postcolonial “wink”, a discursive gesture resulting from the “double consciousness” that derives from the experience of the slave trade.
- 8 To Holsey, Ghanaians sequester the slave trade because they try to evade the stigma attached to it. Of course, as she convincingly argues, the coastal residents of Ghana have an unequal share of history to carry and she justifiably refers to that share as the “burden of blackness”. This is a burden that the coastal residents prefer to shoulder, *by forgetting to remember* their implication in the slave trade. Holsey is sympathetic towards this denial, blaming European discourses for stigmatizing Africans for their involvement in the slave trade. She rightly claims that these stigmatizing discourses were part of a more general scheme to denounce Africans as primitive and goes on to analyse the strategy of coastal residents to deny their involvement in the slave trade as a creative response to these European accusations. She attributes “agency” to this strategy of the coastal residents: “*Routes of Remembrance* examines the imbrications of coastal Ghanaian subjects within these discourses, not as their helpless victims, but rather as agentive and *well-versed* subjects” (*ibid.*: 12. Italics in original). This is an original claim, but one wonders whether in the struggle for the recognition of racism in the present this is the most appropriate claim to make? To present the denial of history as an *effect* of the slave trade reminds me of another context—that of post-Holocaust Germany—in which similar arguments would be considered as inappropriate.
- 9 Holsey argues that the silence on slavery should be seen as a way in which contemporary Ghanaians present themselves to the world at large, in particular to the ghostly presence of a European audience. It is one of the achievements of Holsey’s book to situate the memory of the slave trade in an Atlantic discursive space. But to situate the memory of the slave trade in ongoing trans-Atlantic conversations also raises the question whether the memory of the slave trade is indeed sequestered from the public sphere due to nineteenth-century European narratives on the alleged savagery of African slave traders. In an international context contemporary moral discourses on the slave trade may be more relevant. Why should the denial of history be an effect of nineteenth century European discourses, rather than a consequence of contemporary moral condemnation? One also wonders whether the need to sequester the slave trade is not most of all a national need? National citizens need to forget a great deal in order to imagine a shared nation (Anderson 1991). In today’s Ghana slavery is silenced precisely to prevent this sensitive subject from entering the national public sphere.
- 10 This brings us to a discussion of Rosalind Shaw’s *Memories of the Slave Trade*, a book that set new standards for the study of memory, which is the reason for this belated review.

As in Ghana, people in Sierra Leone prefer not to speak of slavery. This observation provides Shaw with the motif for her book, taking it into a different direction than Holsey's *Routes of Remembrance*. Shaw notes that "there are other ways of remembering the past than by speaking of it" (Shaw 2002: 2). Following Bourdieu and Connerton, she situates memory in the bodily substrate or *habitus*. Positioning herself very well in the debate on memory and embodiment, Shaw argues that rather than being opposed to the ruptures caused by colonialism, *habitus* should be seen as incorporating such ruptures. Memory is therefore not antithetical to modernity (Nora 1989). Accumulated precolonial memories of the Atlantic slave trade may be layered with memories of the colonial legitimate trade, as well as those of postcolonial civil war. Different historical experiences are thus sedimented in what she calls "palimpsest memories". Since what happened later is inevitably shaped by what happened before and understandings of what happened earlier in history are shaped by what happened afterwards, Shaw argues that memory moves both forward and backwards in time (*ibid.*: 15).

- 11 In addition to this important claim Shaw makes the point that social and cultural practices that appear as "indigenous" and "authentic" were actually forged in the long encounter with Europe. Taking her cue from earlier work on witchcraft (Geschiere 1997), she argues that from the very beginning capitalist modernity took plural forms in different parts of the Atlantic world. In this capitalist system characterised by the exchange of human life for wealth and power—"a modernity whose very nature was, and is, witch-like" (*ibid.*: 17)—divination is a form of practical memory that remembers these exchanges. To illustrate this point, the author tells a typical vignette: As a white British woman in a former British colony, she expected to be associated with colonialism. But there was another association that she had not anticipated. When talking to a diviner who was to teach her cowrie shell divination, the diviner told her that she already had a close link to these objects and their powers: "You people are the owners of cowries", she said. "There is no need to teach you" (*ibid.*: 43). Of course, the diviner was right about the historical connection between Europeans and cowries, which were brought from the Indian Ocean to West Africa to serve as currency in the slave trade. Shaw's initiation into divination thus entailed a revisiting of the slave trade.
- 12 The slave trade was important in this region. When English merchants replaced the Portuguese in the eighteenth century, between 4,000 and 6,000 slaves were dispatched from Sierra Leone annually. Although Temne-speaking communities probably participated as middlemen in the Mande dominated slave trade, they too lived its consequences: the knowledge that bodies could become commodities through raiding rendered terror a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life. Chapter two demonstrates how this terror has been inscribed unto the landscape. Spirits who once inhabited the landscape as friendly neighbours, have transformed themselves in raiders. As raiders arrived by road, roads are today perceived as dangerous. Shaw argues that the landscape has thus internalized terror and forgotten as history. History is sedimented in a memoryscape.
- 13 Subsequent chapters demonstrate that these memoryscapes are invoked in divination. By invoking sites of power and danger in their divinatory work, the diviners rework the landscape and thus convert the powers of palimpsest spirits that dwell in these places into ritual power. Through their divination techniques, diviners map landscapes that are simultaneously times: the Atlantic trade, the legitimate trade, the dissemination of Islam and Christianity, and the imposition of colonial rule have all left disparate forms of

knowledge that co-exist and comment upon each other. Diviners draw differently upon these sedimented forms of knowledge. But these forms of knowledge are not external to the diviners, as memories of the slave trade constitute contemporary subjectivities. For instance, Shaw argues that marriage has historically constituted a protective practice against the dangers of the slave trade, yet it simultaneously rendered married women into potential channels of dangerous incursions. Thus she suggests that the representation of the wife as a slippery “Thing under the Water” remembers the slave trade. Men, to this day, defend themselves and their households against the secrecy and occult powers of women by “Closing” themselves, afraid of the “Darkness” that renders women unknowable. If gender can thus be understood as memory—of the slave trade—memory itself is also gendered.

- 14 If this is all wonderfully imaginative, Chapter seven is this book’s *pièce de résistance* that provides the central argument. Situating itself in the debate on the modernity of witchcraft, Shaw agrees that witchcraft in Africa may indeed provide a discourse on the immorality of capitalist accumulation. But she also suggests that so far it has not been examined to what extent witchcraft’s “traditional workings” is a *product* of the slave trade. Analysing historical documents that describe public divination, this chapter demonstrates how persons were transformed into slaves through their conviction as witches. But those who imposed their rule on local peoples and profited from the sale of the latter to European slave traders were themselves the subjects of rumors of cannibalism. While profiting from “the ritual conviction of witches, [they] were implicitly recognized as the biggest witches of all” (Shaw 2002: 223). Thus these forms of divination were ways of knowing the world and contributed to its constitution. Reminiscent of Baum’s *Shrines of the Slave Trade* (1999), Shaw demonstrates how practices that have always been considered “traditional” actually produced a contemporary knowledge of modernity.
- 15 Occult imaginary was thus constituted during the era of the slave trade. Thus this book tells in harrowing tales the story of modernity in a place that provided its slaves. The last two chapters of this book demonstrate how the memories of the slave trade structure the agency of colonial and postcolonial subjects as they experience the opacity of the modern state. Palimpsest memories fuse in the present and form a prism through which the present can be understood in the light of the past. The slave trade—and the complicity of African intermediaries—is here remembered as a trade of which the moral ambiguities are encrypted in an occult imaginary of witches and leopard men. These cannibals and witches may sometimes be admired, Shaw tells us, but that does not make them simple celebrations of modern wealth; it renders them morally ambivalent. In contrast to Holsey’s coastal residents who exorcise guilt by sequestering the trade, Shaw’s Temne informants situate that immorality in their occult imagination and carry the “burden of blackness” as fear for today’s leopard men/politicians.
- 16 Fear, as lived in the territories of terror in Sierra Leone, also prevails in the hearts of the inhabitants of the Cameroon Grassfields. Nicolas Argenti’s book is clearly very much inspired by Shaw’s *Memories of the Slave Trade*. Analysing the slave trade as a global capitalist economy that stimulated state formation in the Grassfields, the book situates the memory of the slave trade in the heart, or rather, in “the intestines of the state”. This title refers to the palace of Oku, one of the many small chiefdoms in the Cameroon Grassfields that are known for their masquerades as well as for their elaborate hierarchies headed by kings (*fon*) aided by a judiciary body known as *kwifon*. These

courtly societies are marked by a stark concentration of wealth among the *fons*, in the form of wives of which these *fons* can possess up to hundreds. Argenti's book is concerned with the opposition between the *fons* and their dependants, the bachelors who are excluded from access to women and whose main purpose within the polity is the provision of labour to the elite. Since labour can be extracted from these bachelors until they get married, the *fons* are usually not very forthcoming in providing their dependants with a wife. Reminiscent of the Marxist anthropology of the 1970s, Argenti analyses how in the slave trading past the labour of these "cadets" was either put to use in the chiefdom or exchanged against European prestige goods in the slave trade. The exclusion of these "cadets" from full adult status (childless bachelors are considered "children" and not given a proper burial) has been endemic throughout the history of chiefdoms. Argenti analyses the slave trade as part of an ongoing succession of forms of submission, including colonial forced labour and postcolonial exclusion from the benefits of the state.

The introductory chapter to this book situates its subject—violence against youth—in the literature on youth and their current marginalization in much of Africa today. Argenti starts by noticing that "not a word was ever spoken to me about slavery or forced labor for the duration of my stays in the region" (Argenti 2007: 3). Following Shaw, he wonders whether there might be "other, untold ways in which the past perdures and informs the present?" (*ibid.*). A large part of the introductory chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the literature on performance and in particular of those performances—of which there are many in Africa—that seem to incorporate violence in an exercise of mimesis or what Bakhtin terms "grotesque realism". Having thus suggested that performances remember violence, Argenti goes on to argue that such performances are not memorializing histories. Unlike chronological, memorializing histories, these performances are living practices of remembering that are polyvalent and ambiguous in their references. These masked dances are not organised according to the Time of the King (chronology), but according to the time of the people that is non-sequential and "ghostly" in its recurrent returns in the present. These masked dances are therefore mimetic of violence but rather than merely repeating the violence, the dances transform it in the present. Here, the past is not a foreign country (Lowenthal 1985): it "is still palpable—ever present in the bodies of the people" (*ibid.*: 6).

The second chapter situates the subject of the book in the history of the Cameroon Grassfields. The moral ambiguity of the *fon*'s historical status as invading founders of kingdoms and protectors of their clients—a moral ambiguity which Shaw also noticed in the witchcraft discourses and practices of divination—conveys their historical status as both perpetrators of violence and victims of subsequent invaders. Moreover, echoing Shaw's work once more, the participation of *fons* in the slave trade by selling their clients in exchange for prestige goods, is represented in the social imaginary as a form of cannibalism: "the fon was the forest's dominant predator, with slaves as his prey" (*ibid.*: 56).

Chapter three shows how this historical cosmology is reflected in today's performances of the palace masks. One of these masks, Mabu, instills terror in his audience which comprises mostly of cadets. Although one of the most feared masquerades in Oku, it is also one of the most appreciated of the palace masks. Argenti demonstrates that the ambiguous representation of Mabu corresponds to the palace discourse of power invoked above. Argenti suggests that in their mimetic re-enactment of the unspeakable horrors of the slave trade, these performances enable the palace authorities to appropriate the

unforgotten events of the past and to redeploy them in the defense of the palatine discourse of state formation (*ibid.*: 79). Very convincingly, he demonstrates how this masquerade does indeed represent ambiguity to the extent of being indeterminate. While the first three chapters present the gist of the argument, Argenti goes on to demonstrate the applicability of his thesis with gusto. In chapter four it is argued that under German colonial rule—which was justified as an intervention to stop the slave trade—the slave trade was actually exacerbated. Moreover, the recruitment of forced labor for the legitimate trade often turned into raiding and the chiefdoms that had formerly supplied slaves now became sources of forced labor. Hence, the establishment of a cash economy in *Kamerun* perpetuated the *razzia* as form of violent labor recruitment while the sale of children into slavery by their parents resulted in a discourse on cannibalism. “Eating” became the dominant trope for the predatory consumption of people and their labour. In the Grassfields the cannibal witchcraft discourse was used by slave providers and their victims alike, speaking to the fear and victimization of commoners and children. To this day, the cannibal witchcraft discourse remembers slavery and forced labour.

In subsequent chapters, Argenti further elaborates the continuities in the exploitative relationship between palace elites and cadets, suggesting that the violence perpetrated by the masquerades is—for the cadets—not primarily a commemorative event: “It does not represent anything but rather engages the cadets in a confrontation that is itself the originary event—not the memory but the source of the memory, not the representation of the event but the event itself confusing past and present in its perpetual recurrence” (*ibid.*: 187). Each performance embodies the experience of contemporary violence that resurrects the unforgotten violence of the past. Yet although these spectacles are meant to enact the power of the palace, these symbolic forms of violence do not remain unquestioned. In the last two chapters, Argenti demonstrates how the masquerades performed in the outlying villages of the kingdom subtly differ from the palace masquerades. In the mortuary dances, death returns as violence and as *difference*. Through their masking the women and the cadets create subjectivities that confront the objectifications inherent in political domination: “Where the palace perpetuates by concealing the terror of the past, the village masks dispel it by revealing it” (*ibid.*: 236). While the dance can be used by the palace elite to reinstate its hegemony over the cadets, the cadets may read the dance against the palace and remember their oppression.

The object of this study is as much about performance as it is about time and how time is performed. Argenti’s beautiful book shares this concern with the other books discussed here. The study of the memory of slavery is the study of the past in the present and possibly—as Argenti suggests—the future in the present. Moving backwards and forwards in time, memory is presented as opposed to linear history. Memory is conceived as the “unfinished” past. Whatever divination tells us about the haunting spectres of modernity it does not tell us in a linear fashion. And even its contents are different from anything a positivist history could ever tell. These studies oppose memory to history and demonstrate the gains to be had from studying memory. This presents us with questions regarding the evidence to be used in the study of memory, which is a controversial subject. Many have lamented the absence of regular, historical evidence for some of Shaw’s or Argenti’s assertions. It is indeed true that their most imaginative arguments are hardly substantiated—I should say: cannot be substantiated—since they pertain to the transmission of violence that has never been relegated to the past. Historical evidence for what these studies suggest is not available and cannot be

available. Memory is a social and moral practice and its documentation is based not on historical documents but on what Palmié calls, “spectral evidence”. Only this kind of evidence renders what would otherwise remain unspeakable.

These three books address the violence in the past, present and future of a nightmarish modernity and situate the immorality of unspeakable acts of violence in different sites of agency. Regretting the way in which the slave trade is silenced in discourse, Holsey finds redemption in the way the slave trade is embraced by youth to contest their marginalisation in a neo-liberal world, thus turning the “burden of blackness” into a protest narrative. However much one might want to join Holsey in her embrace of counter-memory, most Ghanaians seem to prefer to forget the slave trade. In that respect Shaw and Argenti open new avenues that do not just situate memory elsewhere, but its burden too (Lambek 2002). For Shaw, the immorality of the slave trade is remembered by the haunting presence of evil spirits and the divination techniques used to stall their power. The legacy of the slave trade is inescapable. For Argenti, the memory of the slave trade is not just inescapable, it haunts the present in the form of masked performances that embody both the *razzia*, the marches of death, and the violent incursions by postcolonial police forces. Their indeterminacy makes these masquerades memories of a past that is unforgotten. The immorality of the slave trade is not exorcised but is situated in an uncanny presence that still needs to be “unmasked”. Whether sequestered in discourse or embodied in ambiguous performance, the slave trade thus maintains a ghostly presence.

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NOTES

1. See HASTY (2002) for a more nuanced assessment.

ABSTRACTS

Abstract

This article reviews three books that address the memory and commemoration of the slave trade in West Africa. The author contextualises these books in the political context of slave trade commemoration and its academic analysis. In contrast to several European countries that have publicly admitted that this trade constituted a crime against humanity, in many African countries slavery and the slave trade remain silenced. The books discussed here address this "silence". Halsey examines the politics of commemoration amongst the coastal population of contemporary Ghana. Historically complicit in the slave trade, these populations have "forgotten" the complicity of their forebears. The books by Shaw and Argenti suggest that the historical memory of the slave trade is no longer available in discourse, but embodied in ritual and performance. The unspeakable violence perpetrated against historical forebears is still remembered in today's divination rituals and masked performances. Thus, these books provide sophisticated analysis of the ways in which a nightmarish modernity is remembered today and

why the history of the slave trade is unfinished. Whether sequestered in discourse or embodied in ambiguous performance, the slave trade maintains a ghostly presence.

Résumé

Cet article recense trois ouvrages sur la mémoire et la commémoration de la traite d'esclaves en Afrique de l'Ouest. L'auteur replace ces ouvrages dans le contexte politique de la commémoration de la traite et de son analyse académique. À la différence de plusieurs pays européens qui ont publiquement reconnu la traite comme étant un crime contre l'humanité, dans beaucoup de pays africains l'esclavage et la traite restent silencieux. Les ouvrages dont il est question ici questionnent ce « silence ». Holsey examine les politiques de commémoration au sein de la population côtière du Ghana contemporain. Historiquement complices de la traite d'esclaves, ces populations ont « oublié » la complicité de leurs ancêtres. Dans leurs ouvrages, Shaw et Argenti suggèrent que la mémoire historique de la traite ne se retrouve plus dans les discours, mais qu'elle est incorporée dans le rituel et la performance. La remémoration de l'indescriptible violence perpétrée à l'encontre des ancêtres a lieu dans les rituels contemporains de divination et dans les représentations de masques. Ainsi, ces ouvrages proposent une analyse subtile de la manière dont une modernité cauchemardesque est remémorée aujourd'hui et des raisons pour lesquelles l'histoire de la traite reste inachevée. Qu'elle soit enfermée dans des discours ou incorporée dans des performances ambiguës, la traite d'esclaves reste présente sous une forme spectrale.

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Mots-clés: Afrique de l'Ouest, discours, incorporation, mémoire, modernité, performance, rituel, traite d'esclaves, esclavage

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