

Bristol and the eruption of memory: making the slave-trading past visible

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This article describes the work undertaken by the public authorities of Bristol to construct, for this old slaving port, a collective memory of the trade in Africans. It shows how the use of urban space is necessary to resurrect that past and implies a visual model to inform a new gaze on the city. Through intensive action on the memory of slavery, the author suggests, from the work of Paul Ricoeur, the passage from silence to 'too much memory'. This excess can be viewed as the result of a political instrumentalization linked to the requirements of the British multicultural model. Further, these actions on memory reveal distinctly divergent intentions for the different communities of the city.

Key words: collective memory, Atlantic slave trade, urban landscape, political instrumentalization.

Introduction

In launching its international project 'The Slave Road', in 1994, UNESCO confirmed the observation that silence has surrounded the major event in human history that the Atlantic slave trade represents. With the deportation of millions from Africa to the New World, that event is nonetheless one of the largest dramas of the modern era. The purpose of UNESCO's intercultural programme is to recall that hidden history, so that 'the universal conscience may in full clarity acknowledge a shared memory' (Dienne 1994).¹ Silence and various forms of forgetting have been the distinctive selective

mnemonic modes of confronting the Atlantic slave trade. Both express the great paradox of the relationship that came into existence between the black and white worlds over the four centuries of modern history: on the one hand, the fundamental importance of slavery as an institution and its corollaries in the creation of Western modernity; on the other hand, the ignorance and silence surrounding this contribution to human history.

Work undertaken by the public authorities of Bristol (UK) sets out to construct for this old slaving port a collective memory of the trade in Africans and its consequences. In the end, that work brought out the necessity of using urban

space to resurrect that past. It is as though the very posture of avowal in the place of silence called for a mark *in situ* attesting a true coming to light, and into sight, of a buried history.

The study of how Bristol authorities went about creating a collective memory, and, to a lesser extent, of how the results were received by different groups of users leads, however, to distinctly divergent intentions. For the purpose of teasing them out, two notions are employed in this paper. Both are inspired by an approach to landscape that has been developed in studies of space. The first, proceeding from a visual model, emphasizes the 'gaze'. From this standpoint, approaches in terms of landscape best bring out the involvement of visual perception in the capacity of the built environment to transmit a worldview. The geographer Denis Cosgrove (1984) conveys this idea perfectly when he speaks of landscape as 'a way of seeing'. That way of seeing rests, first of all, on a visual model, an internalized codification that enables the eye to transform what is 'perceived' into what is conceived as 'landscape' (Lenclud 1995; Mondada, Panese and Soderstrom 1992). This perspective on 'the gaze' merits extension, however, to any arrangement of space. Whether landscape or not, the meaning that any spatial arrangement makes legible is transmitted via looking and thus via the visual theory that informs the gaze.² We will see, then, that the policy implemented in Bristol in regard to its slaving past became an effort to change the way the city is looked at, and the way its textures are decoded. According to Augoyard (1991), we can speak of a 'socially competent gaze', a term that denotes not only the cultural schemas that organize the 'seen' but also the practices that appropriate those schemas. A second notion seems pertinent to understanding the latter, that of 'urban landscape'. Berque tells us (1995: 34) that the city-dweller's view of the urban landscape derives

from an 'urban schema'. That schema derives in turn from a conception of the city as a whole, 'an integrated form, compact and clearly delimited' which presupposes a symbolic identification of homogeneous form with the social order of the city as a community. As much for Berque (1995) as for Roger (1991), the notion of landscape has, besides, an aesthetic dimension. Thus, one can say that to see the city as a landscape is already to have 'artified' it (Roger 1991: 14), and to have embellished the form it presents to the eye. In Bristol, the reaction of certain users bears witness to this desire for an aestheticized urban landscape. That desire stands in opposition to political work on the 'gaze' aimed at rendering the traces of slavery legible in the urban fabric. To enter via the gaze and via the landscape is not, however, to exhaust the full range of reactions by Bristol residents. Indeed, it proves unproductive in understanding the 'Caribbean gaze' on the city, or Caribbean expectations in the uncovering of the city's past.

This article is based on research undertaken in Bristol in April 1999 as part of a larger comparative project on two old slave-trading ports, one in France (Bordeaux) and the other in Great Britain (Bristol). The results come from two main sources: first, a descriptive study of activities by the City Council that translated into urban lay-outs or into museum exhibitions; second, a perusal of the local press,³ which among other things provided access to the reactions of Bristol residents when confronted with activities intended to construct a memory of slavery in the city. Informal interviews with direct participants in the decisions of the City Council complement those sources. The research is still under way, which means that this interpretation must not be regarded as a fixed or final result. It is also important to note that the present study draws substantially from earlier work on Caribbean cultures in

Great Britain (Chivallon 1997a, 2001) and in the Caribbean (Chivallon 1998). That work has helped in the construction of the interpretations proposed here, in particular those regarding 'Caribbean collectivity'.

Obstacles to remembering slavery

The failure to construct a memory of slavery means different things depending on the cultural milieu under consideration— in the case of this research on old slaving ports, this means European (British and French) and Caribbean milieux. If set in a sociological perspective, dimness of memory in regard to slavery can be seen as one mode that a collectivity can adopt in constructing its relationship with the past. I turn, therefore, to works on the constitution of collective memory. My suggestion, following certain authors (Groshens 1979; Halbwachs 1950; Jodelet 1993; Lenclud 1987), is this: social identities generally produce a register in which the past is made intelligible to serve the present by permitting the integration of individuals through a narrative of common origin while laying the basis for an order of permanence beyond transitory individual lives. The constitution of representations concerning a shared past can activate what Namer (1991) has called the 'vertical bond', a term denoting the relation between today's living and yesterday's dead, as well as that between the membership group and the reference group. The social bond of today stands justified through its rootedness in time. As far as slavery and the slave trade are concerned, the reappropriation of the past would seem incapable of either fostering such elaborations or constructing a register that could serve, whatever the meaning conveyed, to mark out the terms of social relationship.

For the Caribbean world, slavery and the slave trade are founding events. But unlike

other dispersed peoples, who have managed to nourish stable elements of their identity after devastating violence— for example, through the re-telling of the traumatic event, as the Jewish people have done— the people of the Caribbean have been prevented from carrying out that work of reconstruction. Following Paul Ricoeur (1998), one may speak of 'wounded memory'. Ricoeur's phrase denotes the destabilization of collective memory when it fails to achieve a 're-remembering', that is, the putting-into-words of memory about the traumatic event, a verbalization that warrants completed work of mourning. Simultaneously a founding event and original trauma, the violent tearing-away from Africa resembles all persecution, in that it prohibits maintenance of the subject as a producer of the subject's own history. Furthermore, as a founding event, the original dispossession is perpetuated as the impossibility of constructing self after the event. Sealing off the entire previous heritage while forbidding mastery of one's own self or of the future was characteristic of the slavery that followed the trade. Thus, the history of the Caribbean people has been a series of discontinuities and negations; it is 'scratched out' history or, again, 'non-history' (Glissant 1981: 130–131). The 'obscured history' that results (Glissant 1981: 131) displays a certain opaqueness of memory in which the collective consciousness cannot successfully extract continuity from the chaos undergone. For the Caribbean world, therefore, the failure of collective memory originates not in the desire, not even the unconscious desire, to reject the memory. The failure originates instead in the difficulty of fully understanding what that permanent dispossession means.⁴

Since, fundamentally, the constitution of collective memory is a construction of identity, one can easily imagine that its resurgence in this instance would be not only incomplete but also quite particular. In an intellectual period

now past, the difficulties of memory were interpreted—for French Caribbeans, at least—as symptomatic of a ‘Caribbean alienation’, in consequence of which it was impossible to construct ‘anything collective’ (Affergan 1983; Glissant 1981). We have now entered a period in which Caribbean identity and that of the black American world in general no longer rely on models of a centred community or nation. While a collective memory with unifying virtues has proved difficult to construct, and has not acted as an element of cohesion for Caribbeans, the identities flowing from that collective memory are unobsessed with unity, and are engaged not in the linear logic of filiation, but in the transverse logic of ‘relationship’ (Glissant 1990, 1996). Henceforth, Caribbean identities are identities of mixture, creolization and the baroque (Glissant 1990, 1996), of ‘hybridity’ (Hall 1994), or of ‘changing same’ (Gilroy 1993). Whatever reservations one might have in regard to this recent conception of Caribbean identity—in particular, the risk of veering off into a new essentialism, that of hybridity (Chivallon 1997a)—it is nonetheless relevant to understanding the fluidity that is so characteristic of the Caribbean cultural universe, a fluid configuration that seems to leave no room for the formation of any hard kernel of identity.

To understand amnesia about the slave trade and slavery in the European cultural universe, a quite different perspective is required. To the extent that ‘wounded memory’ expresses the absence of verbalization—hence, a state of being unthought yet present—that notion might still prove useful, provided one notices what Marc Ferro (1993) calls a ‘subversion of memory.’ By it, he means the conscious or unconscious refusal to integrate into the reformulation of a community’s past those events that might disturb the necessarily reassuring image that the collectivity constructs for itself.

Europe has not managed to integrate its slaving past into its own history. The recent celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery (1998) show that particularly well, at least for France.⁵ Those celebrations seemed nothing less than a self-celebration of Republican France, vaunting its revolutionary ideal and out to renew its rejection of the Old Regime by laying sole responsibility for the ignominy upon those shoulders.⁶ The celebrated hero for that Republican France was first and foremost Victor Schoelcher, author of the decree of abolition of 1848 and obligatorily invoked throughout the commemoration. Along the same lines, one could mention the symbolic place that the Prime Minister Lionel Jospin chose for the festivities: Champagny, the first French village to have placed a demand that slavery be abolished on its list of grievances of 1789, on the eve of the Revolution. Likewise, one could refer to the official speech of President Jacques Chirac when he spoke of abolition as a ‘founding act’ of republican history that helped to ‘reinforce the unity of the Nation’.⁷

What was omitted about slavery and the slave trade as such on that occasion, the better to give the symbolic appropriation of abolition free rein, is best understood as the result of a selection. Its purpose: to mark the glorious national journey and to give that journey roots in the humanist tradition that summoned into being the ‘fatherland of the Rights of Man’. In the process of ‘imagining itself’ and of constructing its register of memory, the national community cannot integrate its own slave-trading and slavery into the past with which it provides itself. To do so would require a story that reconciled irreconcilable things, for the practice of slavery directly contradicts the trilogy ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ on which the nation nourishes its cohesion. In the Caribbean universe, weak memory in regard to slavery

does not reflect a community strategy but is, instead, the substrate of a historicity. But for European nations, that same weak memory results from a collective investment made elsewhere in the search for symbols and great deeds, and drawn from outside the episode of slavery.

In the British situation, of course, the silence surrounding slavery does not proceed from the same sources that lead France to postulate an identity between the republican Nation and abolition, making the one begin with the other. But the forgetting and omission that until quite recently characterized the relationship of the British Nation to its slaving past, also underline the difficulty of making the national ideal compatible with the recognition of activities linked to the slave trade. We can grasp this difficulty as the outcome of two contradictory tendencies, ancient pride in the creation of the British colonial Empire, versus investment in those democratic values that sustain nation-building. If we add to that tension the peculiarly British insistence on an island model of identity, based on the notion that a continuity of traditions developed inside a perfectly delimited territory, we understand why slave-trading and slavery have not been summoned into the reconstitution of that 'intra-mural' history. Hence, there is a three-fold obstacle to resurgent memory in regard to slavery: the need to preserve an uplifted image of the Empire and, at the same time, to draw not only on democratic values but also on the resources of a history conceived as local. Nevertheless, that framework has shifted considerably. Since the 1950s, when migration from Commonwealth countries began, the UK has become engaged in the development of a multicultural society. It is the political management of inter-ethnic relations that brought about the new attitude recently shown by British society in regard to its slaving past, as remarkably illustrated in the City of Bristol.

The context of Bristol: or, the city charged with recounting its past as a slave-trading port

In Bristol, the two 'cultural universes' just referred to are side by side, along with their corresponding registers of memory. With a population of 370,000, 5 per cent of whom are ethnic minorities, Bristol is a port city whose activity was very directly implicated in colonial trade and slaving. There were 2,000 slaving expeditions between 1698 and 1807 (Richardson 1997), giving Bristol the same rank as that of Nantes in the French context. Once slaving was abolished, in 1807, the city continued to prosper through colonial trade based on the plantation systems of the West Indies, which in turn were based on the institution of slavery.

Today's Caribbean community in Bristol is directly descended from former slaves in Britain's Caribbean colonies. Formed from migrations in the 1950s, mainly from Jamaica, that community today numbers about 6,000 people. Of those, more than 60 per cent are in the central districts of the city, the well-known 'inner city', lending St Paul's its renown as the 'ethnic' area of Bristol. That urban enclave has all the traits that reveal a powerful process of segregation at work. The residential concentration of ethnic minorities in St Paul's is coupled with distinct social inequalities. The rates of unemployment and of manual labour in 1991 were, respectively, 21 per cent and 54 per cent in the Caribbean population, as contrasted with 10 per cent and 40 per cent in the white population.⁸ Even more pronounced in the 1980s, such inequalities lay at the root of the social explosion that St Paul's experienced in April of 1980, when street violence which pitted young black men against police prefigured the riots of the next year that set aflame the streets of Liverpool and Manchester and of Brixton in London. But while economic

inequality certainly underpinned a chronic malaise, it became a factor in acute social conflicts only because it combined with the racialization of social inequalities and of social relations in general. On this point, as Susan Smith said so well (1989: 17), 'residential differentiation ... [is] ... an expression of well-entrenched racial inequalities that are politically and socially, as well as economically inspired'.

The vigilance shown by local authorities in dealing with any incident that might disturb the city's social climate was doubtless connected with memories of the St Paul's riots. This would explain the energetic mobilization in the mid-1990s to open up Bristol's slave-trading past. The city's chosen posture until then could be described as one of silence (Dresser 1998). Two large programmes linked to the activity of the port led to a diffuse protest, promptly stifled by intense official activity. In 1996, controversy was triggered by the International Festival of the Sea, which proposed 'a celebration of all things maritime' as part of the nation's heritage. Voices arose, in particular from St Paul's, where a cultural association, Beehive Recording Studios and Workshops (a short-lived one, however), was heard to say that the programme commemorating maritime history:

cannot be complete without portraying images of the Sea's effects on the lives of African Caribbeans through the Slave Trade which was such a decisive factor in the growth of Bristol City, enabling it to become one of the most affluent international business ports. (*Bristol Racial Equality Newsletter*, May 1996, p. 12)

The City Council did not wait for the second programme, a 500th anniversary celebration of the voyage of John Cabot (an explorer of Italian origin who left Bristol in 1497 to explore the Canadian coast) that was planned for the following year. Instead, through Leisure Services

at City Hall, it brought representatives of the black community into the preparations for the festivities. During the joint meetings, dissatisfaction was expressed that the programming of the two commemorative events made no reference to the city's slave-trading past. In consequence, the Council, dominated by the Labour Party, created the Bristol Slave Trade Action Group (BSTAG). BSTAG's role was to guide City Hall and the museum in considering 'how and in what form should the City Council acknowledge the Atlantic slave trade and its legacy in Bristol' (*Bristol Racial Equality Newsletter*, December 1996/January 1997, p. 5). This group included museum officials as well as university faculty with particular interest in this activity. Unless one counts the multicultural association Kuumba and the official representative of the Commission for Racial Equality (obligatory backing for any action directed toward ethnic minorities), the members of the 'black community' who were present did not belong to readily identifiable organizations—for example a 'freelance' historian of Jamaican origin; a municipal library employee of Trinidadian origin; and the single minority Council member of the city, Nigerian in origin. From the moment BSTAG was created and for three years thereafter, activity designed to expose the past relative to the Atlantic slave trade grew ever more intense. That activity was bound up with a series of more or less official events that echoed and amplified this 'discovery' of the past.

When memory booms

Making the slave-trading past visible: action by the City Council

Three programmes undertaken under the lead-

ership of the City Council, in partnership with BSTAG and the Bristol City Museum, were as remarkable for the speed with which they were launched as for the force of the message they were meant to deliver. The first was to create a section on the slave trade in the Georgian House, located in the city's historic centre not far from its imposing cathedral. Transformed into a museum, the house until then had embodied and glorified the period of King George III, while investing its owner, John Pinney, with the prestige of an elegant and refined notable. A re-evaluation of that history was proposed with the opening in September 1997 of a room dedicated to the activities of Pinney. One learned that the owner's fortune came from a West Indian sugar plantation worked by slaves in Nevis, and that the house had also sheltered Pero, a slave brought from the plantation. Details were given as to Pinney's treatment of his slaves, leaving no room for ambiguities that might support a view of history in terms of the values of the period—though it was reported that the planter considered himself more 'humane' than a good many others. This exhibit also provided the wherewithal to take a more comprehensive view of Bristol and its ties to the slave trade.

The second project, more encompassing in scope, was the creation of an itinerary which took the form of a guide available through the tourist office ('The Slave Trade Trail around Central Bristol', Bristol City Council and Bristol Museums and Art Gallery). The guide, which offered a walking tour through the city, pointed out most of the sites linked with the slave trade and its extensions. Through descriptions and commentaries, this 'Slave Trade Trail' unambiguously associates buildings familiar to local history with a buried unglorious past. The itinerary leads to some fifty places—from working-class pubs not far from the port where the slavers recruited their crews, to the

beautiful neighbourhoods where notables lived in wealth derived from the colonial trade. It points out the houses of ship-builders and captains of expeditions, as well as the headquarters of various businesses derived from the colonial trade. The itinerary pays especial attention to the well-known Society of Merchants Venturers, a powerful commercial lobby from 1552 on. The itinerary points out as well the present-day banks that owe their original organization to this same trade. It reveals the traces of the abolitionist movement, marks the visits to Bristol of the famous activist Thomas Clarkson at the end of the eighteenth century and provides tangible landmarks on the influence of the Quakers (and is not silent about the earlier involvement of Quakers in slave-trading and in the plantation economy). It conjures up the myths that the city cobbled together in the absence of an official history, such as the supposed existence of cellars where slaves were interned, or the famous street called White-ladies Road that starts at Blackboy Hill—names that suit a vagabond imagination, but that historical investigation links with less romantic realities. The guide stops at the cathedral to reconceive the meaning of the plaques dedicated to the memory of certain notables, and one learns of their involvement in slave trafficking or in the abolitionist struggle. Along the way, it breaks with one of the most powerful historic symbols of the city as incarnated in the personage of Edward Colston. Erected on one of the city's grandest avenues, Colston's statue is a reminder of the charitable works of this generous seventeenth-century merchant in the building of the hospitals and schools that still bear his name. Until then, it was not known that the fortune which built them came from the slave trade and from Colston's active participation in the London concern that held the monopoly in that trade.

The third project was more conventional. It

was the holding of an exhibition at the Bristol Museum, from March to September 1999. That exhibition took the name of the televised series 'A Respectable Trade?' which was nationally broadcast on BBC1 in April/May 1998 and whose plot, centred on the slave trade, was set in Bristol. The re-use of that title sealed the popular success of the series in Bristol and in the country at large.⁹ Through a typically museographic activity, the exhibition proceeded energetically in re-situating the reality of the slave trade locally. Organized according to the circuit that links Africa to the West Indies and to Bristol, it attempted to bring out all aspects of the trade, and to put all of the actors on the stage. The tone of the exhibit is *engagé*, in that it seems totally uncompromising. The cruelty and inhumanity of the slave system are shown alongside its immense economic ramifications. Here again, the city of Bristol was reshaping its history, displaying the wealth and the glorious figures of the past in relationship to the terrible traffic.

Those three projects converge in a way that permits us to define the activities conducted under the aegis of the Bristol City Council as a politics of the gaze. At issue in that series of actions, of which the Slave Trade Trail is surely the most spectacular, is a change in the gaze on the city. Obviously, the forms of the city were no different before and after the publication in Bristol of the guide. What did change was the framework provided for reading what is seen. The expectation was that the signs the city had offered until then would thereafter be invested with different meaning. It seems that the work of restoring a difficult, shameful past that must be extracted from a dense silence could not be done unless physical traces in the urban fabric were made visible. It was as though the past could not break through if restricted to the realm of talk alone; the very form of the city had to have its say.

This was so not simply because urban form has the power of the 'visibility effect', but because form also brings about a necessary distancing between a present where harmony is wanted, and an extremely turbulent past. Paradoxically, urban form—the symbols it displays and the relics it deploys—was charged with returning an unwanted history to collective memory, while at the same time keeping that very history at a distance, by making it exist in stone and in monuments before making it exist in the community of 'flesh'.

This paradox, the rapprochement/distancing of the past, is, however, less troubling than the sources of finance for these activities. It turns out that the Society of Merchant Venturers, direct heir of that long history of Bristol commerce, signed on as an official sponsor of the Slave Trade Trail. That participation, which remained in the status of the unthought and the unsaid, brings out the essential trait of this work of memory. In it, a political intention unites, on the one hand, a sincere wish to create a moral bond with the past, as expressed by some of the planners, and, on the other, the political wish to maintain social cohesion, leaving untouched the relative positions of the two communities.

Accelerated memory

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all the events of the past three years that have marked off that bringing-to-light of the city's past in the slave trade. Accordingly, the rapid overview of those events to be attempted here will leave open certain questions that will not be fully resolved in the concluding analytical remarks.

To begin with, the formal events must be raised in relief, since they find supporting echoes in official venues, where there is a certain

rush to sponsor any initiative dealing with the slave-trading past. Beginning in March 1997 those developments include (among other things) the taking of positions by the local press after the Labourite Bernie Grant demanded official apologies for the crime of slavery from the British Parliament. In addition, the year 1997 (also the 'European Year Against Racism') witnessed, on several occasions, the participation of Ian White, Bristol's European deputy, in activities designed to remember slavery. He made an official visit to the Georgian House with members of BSTAG. Most importantly, he took part in the placing of a commemorative plaque on the building that houses the Bristol Industrial Museum, by the docks—a plaque dedicated to the men and women victims of the slave trade.¹⁰ This official ceremony included members of the team that made the televised series 'A Respectable Trade?', among them Philippa Gregory, author of the novel from which the series took its title. Before, during and after the broadcast, this 1998 series gave rise to regular press commentaries, variously reacting to this 'discovery' of the past. What is more, the filming team took part in city programmes, such as an advance showing of the series during the film festival organized in late 1997 by an association from St Paul's.¹¹ To all evidence, the series accelerated both the demand for memory and the response to that demand.

In August 1998, The Fourth Annual African Remembrance Day was held in Bristol. Organized on the initiative of a national committee, that commemoration joined the UNESCO project ('The Slave Road') in declaring an annual day of memory; it also marked the anniversary of emancipation in the West Indies. Held, symbolically, in Queen Square, where wealthy merchants once lived, it associated City officials with the people gathered there. Finally, in 1999, came another striking official action: a bridge

baptized as the Pero Bridge was inaugurated; it is named after a slave who once lived in the Georgian House. Here, too, the ceremony was highly official, the commemorative plaque unveiled by the Home Office Minister. Add to those events university conferences, public information meetings, BSTAG's consultations in St Paul's, constant press attention to the subject, and, clearly, one can speak of a veritable boom in memory.

That memory boom also translates into more spontaneous events, in a kind of chain reaction. Through the press, the rock group Massive Attack (multiracial and from Bristol) made a succession of demands: first, that a statue to the memory of the 'Unknown Slave' be erected on the site of the docks,¹² and then, in 1998, they refused to give a concert in Colston Hall, in view of the name attached to the building. That demand for a statue was also heard from a traditional religious venue; the Bishop of Bristol made known his hope of seeing such a work built in St Paul's (*Bristol Evening Post*, 8 June 1998). The bishop's reaction was linked to the defacement, several months previously, of the statue of Colston, an emblematic figure in the local lineage of the British civic tradition—the statue having been discovered in late January with graffiti, the words 'Slave Trader', inscribed on its pedestal. This mini-event, which reverberates nationally (*The Guardian*, 7 February 1998; *The Times*, 29 January 1998), brings out especially well the tensions and the expediencies that flowed from that resurgence of the city's slave-trading past. A council member from the black community, representing St Paul's and a member of BSTAG, supported the deed, saying,

If we in the city want to glorify the slave trade then it [the statue] should stay. If not the statue should be marked with a plaque that he was a slave trader or taken down. We don't have a statue to Hitler and

we shouldn't to Colston. (*Western Daily Press*, 28 January 1998, p. 9)

The director of the Colston Girls' School, whose pupils annually lay a floral wreath at the feet of the statue, interpreted that reaction as 'taking the political correctness to the extreme' (*Western Daily Press*, 28 January 1998, p. 9). At least some of the letters of Bristolians published in the local press also expressed revulsion against inserting Bristol's past into a context that sullies and desecrates it. 'Leave the past where it is' became a local slogan. More fundamentally racist and xenophobic was the reaction of extremists associated with the National Front. In April 1998, they seized the occasion to distribute in the city some 2,500 leaflets calling for preservation of the statue and urging the 'malcontented ethnics [to] return to there [*sic*] ancestral homelands' (*Bristol Evening Post*, 9 April 1998, p. 2).

Telescoping intentions in the memory of slavery: politics, ethics and the urban landscape

Most of those reactions can be said to occupy a space of struggle over the mobilization of the symbols that represent the community, be they political, religious, or, for that matter, artistic and intellectual, insofar as those symbols operate by the constitution of an 'audience'. Though at differing levels of responsibility and legitimacy, those who reacted were competing to defend or to conquer the positions from which such symbols can be controlled. But these reactions do not exhaust Bristol's experience of its exercise in memory. They all have a core of what might be called 'political intentions', pressing alongside and telescoping other motives prompted by the resurgence of the past. In the context of this ongoing research,

three sets of intentions seem to me distinguishable.

A political intention regarding the gaze

When Paul Ricoeur speaks of 'wounded memory', meaning failure to achieve successful verbalization, he indicates two main symptoms: 'not enough' memory and 'too much'. The abuse of memory prompts Ricoeur (1998: 26–27) to 'speak less of wounded memory than of instrumentalized memory'. When the constitution of memory has a strategic aim, it inevitably becomes excessive. It is then far from what the work of memory would be, were it focused on reconciling the past with the present and not subjected to political pressures. Some abuses of memory 'are also abuses of forgetting' (Ricoeur 1998: 26–27). The Bristol situation nicely exemplifies what can be considered a passage from 'not enough' memory to 'too much'. Memory of the city's slave-trading past began to accelerate through caricatures of memory— days of commemoration, dedications of plaques and monuments— thereby producing the 'repetition compulsions' of which Ricoeur speaks. We must therefore ask, 'what sort of political aim it is that, to gain its objective, requires such an exercise of memory?'

Promotion of the 'multiculturalist' model certainly belongs to the Labour Party, especially in its having put into place a rather remarkable legislative machinery. Part of that machinery is the famous Race Relations Act of 1976 to combat racial discrimination. One finds therein that paradox of British society, which is to produce the category of race by giving it profound social efficacy, and, simultaneously, to produce a method of closing the fissure that it opens. The multicultural model has been associated with the definition given in the Swann Report of 1985 on education (Goul-

bourne 1998: 21). The Report encourages the participation of every ethnic group in a 'whole' structured by values and shared practices while at the same time encouraging the maintenance of each group's identity. The point is to pull off an alchemy: social cohesion plus cultural diversity. Prime Minister Tony Blair was referring to this not long ago, when he spoke about the 'diversity' that 'unites Great Britain'.¹³

The activities in Bristol must be understood in terms of that objective: associating plurality with unity. They spring directly from that broad approach, so startling to an outsider, that consists of going to the point of caricature in order to show the well-intentioned taking-into-account of difference. The boom in memory was only translating the excess that marks the instrumentalization of all signs that serve to accredit a social vision in which the acceptance of difference must be viewed as already achieved. In that respect, the action at Bristol was driven by a profound imperative to inform the gaze, enabling the gaze to decode those signs. Visible in this 'too much' is a zeal to show convincingly that the history and identity of the Caribbean minority have indeed been effectively recognized. Visible as well, following Goulbourne (1993: 117), is a distortion of a multiculturalism about to conflate two things that are linked but not the same: access to social equality and recognition of various communities' cultural heritages. From this standpoint, intense polarization over the reconstruction of the past may correspond to an inability to set right social issues of racial inequality, as though it were a method of neutralizing the effects of conflict.

In its political trajectory, then, this 'too much' memory in the British multicultural model corresponds to the 'not enough memory' in the French republican model. The two processes turn out to be similar in their attempt to reinforce national cohesion, albeit by opposite

routes. Ethically laden though it be, the activity at Bristol also involves the political domain as a domain, let us say, of 'governance', that pivot-point in 'strategic relations among groups and individuals where the behavior of another or of others is the prize to be won' (Foucault 1981 [1994]: 214). In this way, the paradoxical involvement of the Society of Merchant Venturers in the action at Bristol becomes more readily understandable. By encouraging the revelation of a less than glorious past, that powerful institution managed in the end to build arguments for its legitimacy in the present. These processes resemble the ones Catherine Neveu (1993) documented so well in her study of the Bangladeshis in London. Access to civil rights for all British residents, black or white, served in the end to strengthen Britain's insular identity by setting it beyond those rights and beyond judicial instrumentality, like a sacred object. The reinforcement of Bristol's identity as a city through representatives of its most venerable institutions may also operate through passing over values relegated to the past, the better to sacralize the collectivity. That collectivity then seems untouched and untouchable by the meaning of the reconstituted history.

A scenic intention regarding the urban landscape

This domain of intentions concerns Bristol residents whose familiar image of the city has no such references to its slave-trading past. It concerns the 'social competence of the gaze' when citizens reappropriate the visual model offered for decoding the city. The letters of Bristolians to the local press¹⁴ convey rather well the malaise generated by the call to grasp the city using the signs of a morally unacceptable past. Resistance and refusal were clearly expressed. Feelings began to veer off into nationalism and

xenophobia. In the wake of the polemics around the Colston statue, the historian Madge Dresser (1998) detected a tendency to develop a 'protective and proud' attitude toward the symbolism incarnated in the local personage.

The sentiment expressed in those letters doubtless represents those who read the local working-class, populist tabloids better than it represents Bristolians generally. Still, the letters give access to what can be called a scenic intention: a desire to place the city into perspective in accordance with a scheme that renders it homogeneous and harmonious, without fractures, incoherences, chaos or disorder, and able through smooth form to embody a reassuring unity. In a letter addressed to the *Bristol Evening Post*, an 87-year-old Bristol resident opposed giving the name of a slave to the new bridge at the port, because, he said, 'The Bristol Docks mean a lot to me' (14 July 1998). In the activities conducted throughout the city, the planners of the Slave Trade Trail noted how hard it was for the Bristolian-in-the-street to make the familiar landmarks coincide with the references to its slaving past. They recounted, among other things, one inhabitant's resistance to admitting that the original owner of his house could have been implicated in the traffic (Dresser 1998).

Those reactions of refusal to accept reminders of the slave-trading past reveal the large obstacle that confronts the work of remembering shameful events. The slave-trading past disfigures the city. It obliges the city to integrate into its fabric the stigmata of a crime against humanity and to replace a serene and glorious vision with a shameful and painful one. Into those very places that earlier projected an order of continuity, rooted in an aesthetic that could bring out beauty and pride, the city must now insert a whole series of shocks born of trauma and suffering. In its way, the Bristol situation echoes the recent

difficulty in Berlin over the Holocaust memorial, as it emerged in particular through the Walser-Bubis dispute. From the camp of those 'against', the writer Walser called the memorial a 'nightmare in concrete' (quoted by Robin 1999: 54). According to the analysis of Régine Robin (1999: 63–64), the reaction of refusal shows how hard it is to construct a 'normal' relationship with the past against the background of shame. Others apparently feared the setting-up of a 'Holocaust Park' (Kertesz quoted by Robin 1999: 68). As Robin also pointed out (1999: 69), today's critical gaze upon actions of memory, like the actions themselves, marks the setting-up of a 'post-memory'—that is, a memory activated by generations at a distance from the event, who demand that representations be anchored in their own experience.

This brings us to the heart of what the Western conception of urban monumentalism means. For the British context, Françoise Choay (1992) has traced that conception to the thought of John Ruskin in the nineteenth century, when he laid out the terms of the relationship between urbanity, memory and preservation of the national heritage. The buildings of the past are considered necessary to the present in order to maintain a living link with the past through memory. The task of that memory, more affective than historical, is to keep in view the noble values of those who over time have contributed to building the city of today, even in its most modest expressions (Choay 1992: 109). The urban fabric itself must restore a two-fold continuity/proximity—between glorious building and humble home as well as between everyday immediacy and rootedness in time. Thus, the British city as a whole comes to play 'the memorial role of the monument' (Choay 1992: 140). That conception well defines a scenic intention, a duty to reconstitute a vision of the city—'framed', as it were, its

past aestheticized, a 'narcissistic mirror' (Choay 1992: 188) celebrating faith to an ancient dignity, kept. And if we accept that self-glorifying scenic conception as constitutive of cultural schemes for the urban gaze, we grasp all the better how difficult it is to make that gaze register the signs of the slaving past that are visible in the urban fabric. That 'scenic intention' quite clearly indicates procedures through which the community 'imagines itself' national and insular, but it indicates as well the inevitable need to ground the present in a comfortable relationship to the past.

An ethical intention regarding the constitution of memory

What became of the Caribbean community in this whirlwind? The intense deployment of activities seems to have gone on apart from it. Fragmented from the start, the community's participation in BSTAG became less and less visible (moreover, the group met less and less frequently). Certainly the planners saw that lack of participation as an endemic absence of 'community leaders'. But would this community tend to produce representatives? At the end of the day, those publicly designated as representatives seem to have owed that designation only to the power of the socio-racial category 'Black' in Britain, which indistinctly mixes groups according to phenotypical colour. In that sense, nothing warrants a presumption of community representativeness from the specifically Caribbean sphere. This is the case of the Councillor of African origin who attained great visibility during the events conducted by the city. Though elected from St Paul's, to be sure, he seems not to have been a leader within that Caribbean sphere. In any event, his defeat in the last elections indicates a weak response to his repeated statements about

recalling the city's past and the absence of an *a posteriori* identification with him. Figures more 'internal' to the Caribbean sphere demonstrate the presence of interlocutors in the public realm,¹⁵ but their presence is dispersed and cannot be equated with the existence of a clearly identifiable collectivity. Like the fragmentedness of Caribbean participation in BSTAG, the diffuseness of the controversy that originated the action of memory stems from that absence of community centrality. Voices rise but are not given to fix the position of the group.

In the very fact that the collectivity as a unified entity is fleeting, we can perhaps recognize the quite specific dynamic that permits the Caribbean social universe to construct itself without centralizing itself. An observation made by one of those I interviewed illustrates this point with especial clarity. A Caribbean of Jamaican origin, temporarily at work in the Museum exposition 'A Respectable Trade', he introduced himself as 'a political activist'. He told me he had participated in the protest that lay at the origin of the city's action. Hoping at last to pinpoint that origin, I asked him to what political group he belonged. 'To none', he answered, since 'one voice must speak only for itself, not for anyone else', doubtless reflecting Rastafarian politico-religious ideology, whose resistance to any organized form is well known (Chevannes 1998; Barret 1988). That remark may be seen as one emblematic figure (but not the only one) through which Caribbean collectivity as a whole may be understood: precisely through its refusal to constitute itself as a 'community'. It is this 'decentred' social dynamic that the Jamaican sociologist Ken Pryce (1979: 30) had already so well identified when, in regard to the Caribbean community in Bristol, he spoke of an absence of 'constraining community standards' or of 'overriding considerations that people are forced to adhere to'.

This is not the place to delve further into that fluidity of Caribbean identities (see Chivallon 1997b, 2001). Suffice it simply to note that those identities are possibly unsuited to embracing the work of remembering slavery with a political intention, as a strategy for mastery of community relations. Such mastery is not the motor of Caribbean social experience, which tends to inhabit an open interpersonal fabric. This might explain a certain withdrawal and even disappointment with what was actually undertaken. ‘There’s no emotion in it’, another Caribbean told me. He saw the action on the memory of slavery as having the coldness of a mechanical enterprise expressed in the museographic and patrimonial language of British society. He was unconvinced that that language in constituting the needed memory corresponded to the language of the ‘Caribbean group’. If released from a political intention capable of subordinating the memory of slavery to a model for the management of inter-community relations, the constitution of that memory from within the Caribbean sphere leaves the way open for an *ethical intention*. First and foremost, that intention would consist of a vibrant call for a social justice that might, as the Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau says, ‘untie the psychic knot created through that dark period of history’ and encourage ‘a necessary collective catharsis’.¹⁶ To fulfil this ethical intention, the work of memory surely must not be done through the production of physical signs and symbols alone. A relational component, a putting of self and other into contact, would be needed as well. That ‘emotion’ is what is hoped for, so that memory can simply be alive and no longer frozen or reified.

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Notes

- 1 On ‘The Slave Road’, see also UNESCO Sources no. 99 (1998) and <<http://www.unesco.org>>.
- 2 In distinction, perhaps, from approaches like that of Duncan and Duncan (1988), I do not use the notion of landscape to refer to all spatial arrangements that might be understood as ‘texts which are transformations of ideologies into a concrete form’. Instead, following Berque (1995), I understand landscape, as a mediation, to be one of various ideologies linked to the Western experience of modernity. The distantiating of entities conceived as separate (‘nature’ but also the ‘city’) operates through the creation of landscape. This creation of landscape fosters the naturalization of the environment and, at the same time, its secularization and rationalization— or alternatively, in the felicitous French term of Roger (1991), its *laïcisation*.
- 3 Principally the *Bristol Evening Post* and *Western Daily Press*, as well as the magazine *Venue* and the *Bristol Racial Equality Council Newsletter*.
- 4 The idea of permanent dispossession also applies to post-abolition history. See Myriam Cottias (1997), who shows that successful assimilation under the process characteristic of French policy toward the French Caribbean required a ‘forgetting’ of self, with access to French citizenship working meanwhile in tandem with the obliteration of France’s slave-holding past.
- 5 While it might be objected that the National Assembly in France recently adopted a law defining slavery as a crime against humanity (Assemblée nationale 1999), in my mind, that acknowledgement does not modify the ‘narrative scheme’ into which France’s political ideology integrates slavery.

- 6 On this point, see the article of Louis Sala-Molins 'The 150th Anniversary of What?' in *Le Monde*, 16 April 1998. See also the series of articles published by *Le Monde* during May, June and July 1998.
- 7 In a speech made 23 April 1998, the main points of which were excerpted in *Le Monde*, 24 April 1998.
- 8 These statistics are from the 1991 census. In the central districts, the gap narrows between the white and ethnic populations inasmuch as the former are underprivileged. Yet, gaps between St Paul's (all origins taken together) as versus the rest of the city still shows marked disparities: for example, 13 per cent of the unemployed population is in the central neighbourhoods as against 7 per cent for the rest of the city (Marolleau 1996). For a more thorough approach to discrimination in British cities, see Byron (1991), Chivallon (2001), Keith (1993), James (1993), Peach (1983) and Western (1993).
- 9 This televised series was a dramatic fiction retracing the painful itinerary of a group of slaves brought from Africa to Bristol, where a young woman married to a go-getting Bristol merchant was to train and refine them, thereby increasing their market value. The popular success of that series was due as much to the charisma of the novel's author (Philippa Gregory, a bestselling writer) as to the very romantic plot, which ends by uniting the young white woman with the black slave.
- 10 'In memory of the countless African men, women and children whose enslavement and exploitation brought so much prosperity to Bristol through the African Slave Trade', *Bristol Evening Post*, 15 December 1997.
- 11 The Black Pyramid Film Festival, which presented the made-for-television series in 1997, its fourth season.
- 12 On the same occasion, the group expressed the idea of apologies coming too late ('It's not so much a guilt thing, it is really in respect and remembrance about the type of things that happened', *Western Daily Press*, 4 March 1997); in that respect, and no doubt unintentionally, embracing the position of the Society of Merchant Venturers, which was taking a similar view just then (*Bristol Evening Post*, 5 March 1997).
- 13 Remarks made in the wake of the bombings in London against places frequented by minorities, April 1999 (*Le Monde*, 4 May 1999).
- 14 In particular, the letters published in the *Bristol Evening News* of 6 February 1998.
- 15 In particular, a member of the Commission for Racial Equality and an officer in a Caribbean cultural association, whose renown in Bristol stems from the import-

- ant role he played in the 1960s during an intense struggle against racial discrimination. He was involved in many of the recent events on the memory of slavery, at least via his regular press commentaries about them.
- 16 An interview in the special issue of *France-Antilles*, 'Cent cinquanteaire de l'abolition de l'esclavage, 1848-1998,' May 1998.

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Abstract translations

Bristol et l'explosion de la mémoire. Rendre visible le passé de la traite transatlantique

Cet article décrit et analyse le travail entrepris dans la ville de Bristol, ancien port négrier, pour con-

stituer une mémoire collective relative à la traite négrière et à ses conséquences. Il montre comment l'usage de l'espace urbain se révèle nécessaire à la résurgence de ce passé et implique un changement de modèle visuel pour informer un regard nouveau sur le paysage urbain. À travers le déploiement intense de l'activité de mémoire, l'auteur suggère, à partir du travail de Paul Ricoeur, le passage à un 'trop de mémoire'. Cet excès pourrait correspondre à une instrumentalisation politique liée aux exigences du modèle politique multiculturel britannique. En dernière analyse, ces actions de mémoire révèlent des intentions divergentes pour les différentes communautés de la ville.

Mots clés: mémoire collective, traite transatlantique, paysage urbain, instrumentalisation politique. *Bristol y la erupción de memoria haciendo visible el comercio de esclavos del pasado*

Este artículo describe el trabajo llevado a cabo por

las autoridades públicas de Bristol con el fin de construir, para este puerto de la esclavitud, una memoria colectiva del comercio de africanos. Indica como el uso de espacio urbano es necesario para hacer resurgir el pasado e implica un modelo visual para informar una nueva manera de ver la ciudad. A través de acción intensiva sobre la memoria de la esclavitud, el autor sugiere, haciendo referencia al trabajo de Paul Ricoeur, el pasaje del silencio a 'demasiada memoria'. Se puede interpretar este exceso como resultado de una instrumentalización política junto con los requerimientos de un modelo británico multiculturel. Además, estas acciones sobre la memoria revelan intenciones claramente divergentes para las distintas comunidades de la ciudad.

Palabras claves: memoria colectiva, comercio de esclavos atlántico, paisaje urbano, instrumentalización política.