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PROJECT TEAM



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“Black Atlantic Revisited” – African and South American UNESCO World Heritage Sites and “Shadowed Spaces” of Performative Memory

Summary

The project examines how memories of slavery are constructed in UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Gorée (Senegal), Ouidah (Benin), Cartagena (Colombia) and Salvador da Bahia (Brazil). It is based on the premise that these heritage sites respond to touristic telos and readings of history that do not go uncontested by alternative memory sites, media and discourses. In this regard, we establish a corpus of literary texts, film, audio/visual and performative arts that in/directly respond to the official sites and instigate alternative archives of lived and shared memories and trauma of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In the case of Francophone African literature, this has been a relatively neglected subject in contrast to the long tradition in Anglophone and Lusophone countries. Apart from textual and cinematographic analyses, our research critically engages with performative audio/visual practices (photography, painting, comics, songs, etc.) which enter into dialogue with official documents produced in and for the museums/heritage sites.

Key Questions

The overall project will focus on the following research questions:

- How do African/South American Heritage sites contribute to the construction and transmission of memory?
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- How do arts (literature, dance, performance, film, photography) construct and offer alternative and interactive spaces of memory and how are they en-acted/performed?

These interrogations are premised on the hypothesis that the official UNESCO World Heritage Sites are tourist attractions while having a relatively low impact on daily life, local dynamics, unofficial meaning-making and popular re-inventions of collective identity. This project will analyse the sites as pilgrimage spaces but will go further to examine unofficial enactments of memories constructed around larger communal and interactive endeavours as well as in intermedial art forms in photography, rituals, dance performances and music.

Methods/Concepts

Based on the analyses of the African and South American corpora, we compare themes, motifs, narrative procedures, tropes, etc. to offer insights into the construction of memory and contemporary transatlantic re-writings of slavery. We will engage with concepts such as transatlantic translations on the transformative/syncretic re-production of African cultural knowledges and aesthetics in the Americas under conditions of resilience and resistance.

Through this comparative framework, we intend to map out convergent and divergent poetics and ethics of memory and re-membering that have emerged from the historical experience and creative imagination of the Transatlantic slave trade. The practice of vernacular museum is crucial in perpetuating socio-cultural memories through individual and communal efforts in marginal communities as they depend on improvised performance, oral storytelling and intimate interactions aimed at maintaining and invigorating memorial communities.

Vision

This project envisions a scrutiny of the legacies of transatlantic slavery and fosters a reflection on the specificities as well as the shared components of memory, co-memorative practices, trauma, heritage, re-memberment in Africa as well as its South American diaspora based on case studies in Ouidah (Benin), Gorée (Senegal), Salvador da Bahia (Brazil) and Cartagena (Colombia). Its goals is to show the unravel of the ethical and aesthetical premises and possible limitations of official memorial sites and to come up with analyses of yet unarchived alternative



Vodun ceremony in memory of the deported Africans, Cotonou-Benin (Photo: Thierry Boudjekeu, 2020)



Statue of Benkos Bioho (San Basilio Cartagena. (Photo: Gilbert Shang 2018)

forms of memorialization that take into consideration communal perspectives and ethos. This can only be achieved through collaborative research with colleagues from Brazil, Senegal and Benin as well as transdisciplinary cooperation with philosophers, geographers and art historians within and beyond the Cluster.

Contribution to the Cluster's Concepts

The research dwells on the Cluster's fundamental principle that Africa and African identities are multiple and heterogeneous, with the conceptual map of Africa extending beyond its actual borders by virtue of Africa's complex migratory histories. Therefore, the project contributes to the concepts of relationality and multiplicity beyond the African continent.

Furthermore, as the project tackles questions of memory and ethics in the realm of historical sites in Africa and Latin America, the outcomes of the workshops will give some responses to the core questions of "reflexivity" in the field of African and Diaspora studies. The study is transdisciplinary by its very nature, straddling different heuristic angles of the Cluster such as medialities, modalities, spatialities and temporality and how they coalesce in composite works of it to represent the complexity of memories of the transatlantic slave trade.



Slave Route Step-6: La porte du non retour (Photo: Thierry Boudjekeu 2020)

Key References

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Photo : Thierry Boudjekeu 2020



Abolitionists in the Memorial of Zomachi, Ouidah-Benin