

## **Archives, memory and 'traces'**

*The use of the archives as telling 'something of the past'*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to question the status of archives as well as their epistemological and ontological possibilities in testifying on 'something of the past'. It develops a reflection that combines the results of an anthropological research that was done in Martinique on the memory of slavery, with the theoretical contributions of the Martiniquan writer, Édouard Glissant and the philosopher, Paul Ricoeur. Each one of them, using different means, offers to consider memory as the matrix of a historical condition. The 'traces' of living memory supplant the documents of archives by their capacity to give access to the marks that past and present events make on memorial expressions today. The descendants of insurgents, the protagonists of an anticolonial uprising that took place in Martinique in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and who were the major characters of the research on the memory of slavery, make it possible to question these concepts in the situated field of memorial practices. Their experience is an indication of a memory attached to the "*souvenirs*" (memories) of the founding setting of violence, just as much as it shows how the access to archives gives the latter a new lease of life filled with subjectivity and emotions that it ought to isolate.

### ● Introduction

In the very stimulating presentation of the series of seminars on "Utopian Archives: Pasts and Futures", I have selected the aim which questions the extent to which past events can leave traces and how these events can be traced through documents<sup>2</sup>. This

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<sup>2</sup> - In the proposal of the seminar, this aim was formulated in the following terms : "One of the interesting questions in archival research is to what extent events leave "traces". How can events be "traced" through documents? How do such documents thereby constitute the archive as a monument to the sovereign state ? (...) How can postcolonial futures be imagined through alternative archives? Can popular culture and forms of embodied knowledge constitute such alternative archives?" (F. De Jong, P. Basu et D. Murphy, collaborative project on the postcolonial archive : "Utopian Archives: Excavating Pasts for Postcolonial Futures". Proposal of the workshop 'Utopian Archives: Pasts and Futures', University of East Anglia, 15-17 May 2013).

fits very well the recent research that I have conducted in the French Caribbean on memory of slavery. This research mainly done in Martinique has dealt both, with the idea of alternative readings of archives and with the idea of the possibility of the constitution of alternative documents considered as traces of the historical condition.

In this paper, I would want to explore the status of the archives for which the classical definition and localization is powerfully destabilized by Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau or Derek Walcott. I would want to consider that this Caribbean deconstruction of the concepts of archives and history suits very well the path followed by those - like the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the historian Michel de Certeau - who do not consider the archives anymore as a place to read the past, but as a trace among many others, neither true, nor false, always resulting from a form of materialization of representations located in space and time and calling for a careful hermeneutic approach. Furthermore, all these authors share a conception in terms of “traces” of memory through which phenomenological experience remains the basis “to know something of the past”.

### **• Presentation of the research on memory of slavery conducted in Martinique**

Before developing this idea, I would like to present the research from which I propose to enter the debate on archives. This anthropological research aimed at looking for various forms of memory of slavery which could be different from those associated with the recent apparition of the public and political claim for constructing a memory of slavery through commemorative and heritage practices (Chivallon 2010, 2012). The starting point has somewhat been given by the public debate around this unexpected claim, particularly in the French context. Caribbean cultures and societies belong to those postcolonial experiences where “silencing the

past” has been the official modality of writing History, showing “the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others” (Trouillot 1995 : 25). During the two last decades, the heritage machine – the “making past visible” – has given way to a situation which – to take the words of Paul Ricoeur (1998) - has dramatically moved from a “not enough memory” to a “too much memory”. This memory boom has led to what I have called in my work a “moral economy of suspicion” where this “new” memory is morally, scientifically and politically discredited (Chivallon 2012 : 62). Coming both from politicians and academics - mainly historians as for example Pierre Nora (2008) - this suspicion identifies this new category and practice of “memory of slavery” as having been spontaneously created and specifically invented and instrumentalized only to serve the present, with no living links with the past, as if it was only an artificial and utilitarian memory. The fundamental question left aside in this debate is : what is the meaning of representations of the past for those who are neither experts in the construction of memory, nor “memory-makers”, nor activists or politicians but rather individuals and members of the different Caribbean groups evolving in the intimate family frame of the experience linked to the past of slavery ? Is there an inter-generational circulation of knowledge on slavery and on its legacy ?

Taking these debates and these questions as a starting point, my aim has been to interrogate memories and traces of slavery as a cognitive knowledge under the notion of *souvenir* which as a specific meaning in French close to “remembrance”. I shall come back to this notion. My objective was not to find a “true” memory to replace the one being accused of being invented, but to approach expressions of memory without any concern for verification and suspicion, only through the testimonies of those belonging to what the Jamaican anthropologist David Scott calls a structure of recognition, identification and subjectivation aimed at producing the colonial or postcolonial subject as a “black [subject] in and through raced relations, ideological apparatuses and political regimes” (Scott 1997 : 36).

I do not want to enter details of this research in terms of fieldwork and final interpretation. I limit myself to say that I have mainly worked on an historical event that revives the framework of the original master/slave conflict, namely an insurrection against the colonial order which took place in Martinique in 1870. My intention was to follow the traces of this event by doing a kind of circular movement from the present to the past and return to the present to describe the memory processes this violent and tragic event generated.

I have worked on several materials, including archives, to reconstitute the rebellion and its aftermath. The accounts from the descendants of the rebels have been the masterpiece of this “trying to follow the path of a souvenir” of a traumatic event. They have helped to put forward a large spectrum of historical facts which I do not separate from memory, on the contrary. These narratives give the testimony of family knowledge which has been transmitted until this day. The forms taken by these intimate stories are those of hidden and clandestine narratives which are only shared in family circles. These forms are directly related to the consequences of the repression of the rebellion. Until very recently, the descendants of the insurgents have been stigmatized as criminals, traitors to the French Republican Nation. The trial of the insurgents has been the place of a staging to transfigure the act of a collective revolt into a criminal case in order to reinforce the vision of the Republic as being generous towards colonial subjects seen as children who have still to learn the virtues of civilization. The narratives are explicitly based on this shared “primal scene”. Without having lived this event, today’s generations continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it. This situation allows them to take the place of witnesses, a place which, of course, has never been seen as such, insofar as it has been discredited, and silenced.

- **The non-history : the absence of ruins/history and the refusal of archives.**

I now come to develop the idea on the deconstruction of the archives as a tool for knowing something of the past. If my research started with “the moral economy of suspicion”, it came also from the way in which the anthropology of the Caribbean has confronted the memory of slavery. Until the late nineties, it was generally admitted that no memories were capable of emerging from the experience of slavery. Furthermore anthropologists were more preoccupied with attesting of what remained truly African in Americas, than with questioning the memory of the slaving past. In 2005, the historian Joseph Adjaye (2005) could still speak of a field which has put aside the questions of what does it mean to remember or to forget about slavery and what does it mean to construct memories of suffering and caring on the basis of such an oppressive experience which remains the very foundation of Caribbean societies.

The idea of a traumatic and permanent dispossession which has blocked the process of being conscious of the past has been very influential. The metaphor of the poet Derek Walcott on the “absence of ruins” has provided one the most powerful conception to think of consciousness, memory and history<sup>3</sup>. For Walcott, History cannot exist for the slaves and theirs descendants. No ruins could be identified, no heroic palace, no monument, not a single material element through which it is possible to access history. And even, if he does not explicitly refer to them, these materials include the famous archives. Walcott says that “the sigh of History rises over ruins, not over landscapes”, and in the Caribbean, “there are few ruins to sigh

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<sup>3</sup> - According to the famous title of Derek Walcott’s poem : “The Royal Palms. . . an absence of ruins”, first published in *The London Magazine*, 1(11), 1962 : 12-13.

over, apart from the ruins of sugar estates" (Walcott, 1992). This is the reason why he states that "the slave surrendered to amnesia [and] that amnesia is the true history of the New World" (Walcott quoted by R. & S. Price 1997 : 5). This metaphor has been used by many social scientists. The sociologist Orlando Patterson makes it clear when he says : "The most critical feature of the West Indian consciousness is what Derek Walcott calls "an absence of ruins." The most important legacy of slavery is the total break, not with the past so much as with a consciousness of the past. To be a West Indian is to live in a state of utter pastlessness" (Patterson quoted by R&S Price 1997 : 6).

This conception is very close to the one developed by the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant who speaks of the loss of collective memory, of an obscurity of the past, and finally of an impossible memory. The past has not been lived but suffered, destroying the social life and the possibility of the sedimentation of a collective knowledge. As Walcott, Glissant in *Le Discours Antillais* (1981) - *Caribbean Discourse* (1992) - mixes together history and memory. His point of departure is the idea that Caribbean subjects live in a state of "non-history", made of "ruptures", "contraction", "shock", "painful negation", "explosive forces" and "dispossession" (Glissant 1992 [1981]: 62). The historical consciousness is unable to arise. The negative factor of this non-history is therefore the erasure of the collective memory : "the dislocation of the continuum and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it" (ibid.).

To sum it up, if there is no history, there is no memory. But Glissant becomes more and more aware of the confusion between two ways of positioning oneself in time through the notions of history and memory. Here, he could have used the concept of *régime d'historicité* ("regime of historicity") as stated by Marcel Détiénne to define « the modalities of self-consciousness that each and every society adopts in its construction of time and its perception of the past » (Détiénne 2008 [2000] : 41). If, as

Ricoeur says, all individuals are necessarily living in an historical condition – “the ontology of historical being” (Ricoeur 2004 [2000] : 280) - it does not mean that History is the only way to represent the past. It is simply one regime of historicity among others, the very operative concept of the West. In denouncing the vacuum of history and in regretting the absence of history, Glissant nourishes the interpretation in terms of alienation which was widely used until the end of the 1980s, particularly in the French Caribbean. But this interpretation only makes sense by comparing it to European culture. In these conditions, the lack of memory could only be a lack of History. The novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, who shares the same conceptual approach as Edouard Glissant, will finally assert that their thoughts had been blinded to their own conditions because until that time they have been reading their historical past only through the lens of the French colonist. They were looking for a Nation, history, territory, roots for themselves as a simple reversal of Western modernity (Chamoiseau 1997). In *Le discours antillais* (1981), Édouard Glissant already begins to deconstruct the concept of History to see it as a pure invention of the West and to claim to recover the complexity of a vision of the past which is not the concern of those who use the analytic categories of “History” (“with a capital H” as he put it). “History is a highly functional fantasy of the West originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the World” (Glissant 1992 [1981] : 64).

- **Traces rather than archives to recover memories of the past**

It is at this time that Glissant brings into play one of the fundamental notions of his conception, the notion of “traces”, sadly translated by “signs” in Glissant (1992 : 64). The “traces” are all those expressions of being in the world under the conditions of oppression, without being able to stabilize oneself, except through tricks, transgression, and what De Certeau (1990 [1980] : 62) would call “tactics”. The traces of memory are obscure, nearly invisible because they have been forced to silence and

secrecy. The writer, the poet, or the novelist is in charge of finding these traces : “Because historical memory was too often erased, the Caribbean writer has to delve deeper into memory from the traces – sometimes latent – that he has identified in the reality” (Glissant 1981 : 133, with my own translation).

Needless to say, it is not in the colonial archives that those traces could be found. Glissant’s conception makes a divide between the archive and traces. He uses this term only once in the *Caribbean Discourse* (1992 [1981]) to suggest that archive is a tool to produce the univocity, and to make disappear the diversity of the world. The archive deals with “the universalizing influence of Sameness” since “the oral would be the organized manifestation of Diversity” (Glissant 1992 [1981] : 100). For the historian Adjaye (2005), the traces of the Caribbean memory of slavery - for which, as we have seen, he thinks that they have been neglected by anthropology – are also located not in the archives seen as recording obsession of the administrative colonial regime, but in interstitial spaces which have to be uncovered.

Through this refusal to see the archives as a tool to reveal the past of the colonial subjects and approach their memories, it is the formal conception of the archives which is rejected. It is true that it will be hard to deny that archives belong to the western utopia of ruling space and time, and, as Glissant would say, of producing the history of the whole world from one location. The statements about the archives as a powerful component of the western hegemony are now widely accepted. The positivist use of the archives as a proof of the transparency of the past has declined, at least in the many circles in which to practice history goes hand in hand with a deep epistemological concern. During the two last decades, there has been a dramatic growth in literature with the so-called “archival turn” where the tone has been set by the influential contribution of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The evocative title of his book - “Archival fever” (Derrida 1995) – could be considered as nearly performative or visionary since it has been followed by a real

academic “fever”. On this point, I shall only retain the always stimulating interpretations of Achille Mbembe (2002) when he defines archives not as a piece of data but as a status (Mbembe 2002 : 20). A status which makes possible to classify, to select, to order the world and above all to act as proof attesting that a truly life existed. Archives are only powerful because of their materiality and their visible embodiment into documents, records, and physical spaces where all these written traces are kept. And, as Mbembe says, if this materiality allows to think of something of the past as being true and real, “the final destination of the archive is always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible” (ibid : 21). It is the reason why archives function as an “instituting imaginary”, colonial imaginary of domination and racialization in the case of the Caribbean.

Alongside Paul Ricoeur (2004 [2000]), who is not at all a specialist of colonial history, insists also on the material dimension of the building where archives are located. To put aside documents is a way of cutting the testimony from the living memory, to prevent the irruption of the testimony as something which could be transmitted by the voice intended to be heard by someone. The archive does not admit traces as being cerebral, emotional or affective, or intended to be in a dialogue with anybody. In other words, the archive is a “promise [which] has not and cannot be kept” (Ricoeur 2004 [2000] : 275) since “The moment of the archive is the moment of the entry into writing of the historiographical operation. Testimony is by origin oral. It is listened to, heard. The archive is written. It is read, consulted. In archive, the professional historian is a reader” (ibid. : 166). In this “institution of knowledge” the document remains “silent” and even “orphan” deprived of “the hearsay of oral testimony”. It is the reason why the archive “constitutes the first historical mutation in living memory” (ibid. 167)

To come back to Caribbean thinkers and to Glissant in particular, we have seen that it is to the writer that the role of finding the traces of memory is attributed. In that

case, the question is : what could be the difference between the writer and the historian once historians and philosophers themselves have deconstructed the practice of writing history and its belief in the proof brought by the archives. Michel de Certeau (1975) has suggested that history can no longer be seen as detached from the written discourses of the historians as practices which necessarily transform what is called “the reality”. It is by confronting the illusion and the fiction of a unifying historiographical meta-language that historians can have access to the limits of their own discourses. For De Certeau (1975), as for Paul Ricoeur (2004 [2000]), history remains founded on the terrible aporia of the absence of the past, what Ricoeur calls “the enigma of a present representation of the absent past’ (ibid. : 511). Knowledge of the past necessarily involves representations, no events. In Paul Ricoeur’s conception, what are called “historical facts” as those found in archives are themselves representations of events. And if a “past event” has to be the reality, the reality of this event also corresponds to the assertion of some representations (ibid. : 279). Such approaches of history bring us far from the utopian status of archives as being able to recover the transparency and the objectivity of the past by virtue of reading them.

Here again, what can be found in archives is the limit of historical knowledge, and history itself as a concept to be deconstructed. Of course, this conception has a lot of in common with the claim of Édouard Glissant. This is why I would say that there is no difference between writing about traces and writing about, not History, but about the historical condition once the work on archives is animated by a continuing questioning of its status, which, in the case of Martinique means both, epistemic deconstruction of archives and epistemic decolonization of knowledge from archives.

The proximity between the conceptions of Édouard Glissant and Paul Ricoeur is even stronger and more amazing, when Ricoeur considers the action of recovering

something of the past as a multi-situated practice involving what he calls alternatively documents or “traces” (Ricoeur 2004 [2000] : 278), including material space, testimonies, archives. And surprisingly enough, living memory and testimonies are for Ricoeur the matrix of what could be still called history. That is to say that there is nothing more valuable than memory to speak about what does not exist anymore. He brings this argument to the point where he presents his book “as a plea on behalf of memory as the womb of history, inasmuch as memory remains the guardian of the entire problem of the representative relation of the present to the past’ (Ricoeur 2004 [2000]: 87). The notion of “souvenir” (remembrance) is at the heart of his conception. Remembering is the masterpiece of the memory of the historical condition because it brings a cognitive trace of something which has happened. It is the result of the cognitive experience – “the cerebral and affective trace” (ibid. : 167) - something which has been lived in the past, which has left an imprint, and which is recalled today through imagination. No archive could replace the living “souvenir” and the voices by which it continues to circulate. “To put it bluntly, we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened before we declare that we remember it” (ibid. : 21). And again, Glissant and Ricoeur meet since Glissant considers that writing on traces of the past - if it has not to become an archive - has to remain irrigated by oral transmission, the word and voices.

Therefore, the project promoted by Glissant and Ricoeur follow the same path to discover on one hand what has been oppressed and silenced for Glissant (the “non-history”, the “obscured history” or “the erasing of the collective memory”), and on the other hand what has been discredited as non-historical for Ricoeur (the memory). But both of them remain writers and both of them know how writing contains the risk of a rupture with memory, of fixing what is proclaimed to have values insofar as it remains alive. Both confront in fact the old and still relevant distinction made by Maurice Halbwachs between historical memory and collective memory, the first

being a voluntary practice to restore what has been lost, the second continuing to make possible the circulation of knowledge on the collective trajectory. No doubt that the approach of Ricoeur and Glissant fits a project of historical memory. If archives and memories find new locations where testimonies displace the authority of history, the intention to recover the past – through writing - still remains separated from the livingness of the historical condition. Does Glissant address the challenge that he clearly states : “For the only way, to my mind, of maintaining a place for writing (if this can be done) – that is, to remove it from being an esoteric practice or a banal reserve of information – would be to nourish it with the oral” (Glissant 1992 [1981] : 101). And does Ricoeur resolve the aporia of “the scriptural phase” which is the beginning of the loss of the living memory or, as for the archive, “a mutation in living memory” (Ricoeur 2004 [2000] : 168) ?

### ● **Conclusion : memories making archives alive**

To return to the research which has inspired these arguments, and it will be my conclusive comment, another perspective emerges. It comes from the experience of the archives by the interlocutors of this research, namely the descendants of the insurgents. Some of them have had an access to the documents that I have brought from the National French Library to the local village in Martinique. These documents were principally recordings of the Court concerning the trial of their ancestors. The use of the archives by the descendants concerns one aspect that Achille Mbembe has briefly described when he speaks of the subjective experience of the archive by individuals. I completely agree with him when he says that “however we define archives, they have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them. It is this subjective experience that places the limits on the supposed power of the archives revealing their uselessness and their residual and superfluous nature” (Mbembe 2002 : 23).

In using the archives the descendants of the insurgents do not search for new knowledge of the past. Sharing an awareness of having been the keepers of stories against the dominant colonial narrative, they are not ready to believe the content of the archives. Reading them, they find a mean to reinforce the counter-memory that circulates through the family ties. A person's name, a name of a place, a brief description of a situation can be enough to continue restoring the figure of the ancestors, to allow them to recover the dignity of the oppressed fighting against the colonial order. It is the irony of archives to be read today in an unexpected way, to make sense of what records were intended to prove irrational.

Through the archives, the descendants follow the opposite path of Ricoeur and Glissant. For the writing here is a way to keep the past alive and to nourish narratives which are not ready to be abandoned to the authority of any historical written account. Remembrance is stronger, which in a way, proves that Ricoeur is right when he argues for a knowledge of the past based on the cognitive experience of the events of the past. But this has not to be naively and romantically stated as a victorious counter-narrative against postcolonial narrative of the sovereign state. If as we are invited to think of it, the status of archives has to be enlarged and to be used as a metaphor of all what embodies something of the past, this should not be done with abandoning the place where the (post)colonial archives stood and continue to authoritatively stand. Or, to say it in the words of the description of the project of this seminar, alternative traces can be found in popular culture, and alternative past can be extracted from conventional archive to support postcolonial utopias of ordinary memories, but without deteriorating the very basis of the old "institution of knowledge" able to reproduce itself through more and more sophisticated digital apparatuses.

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