
REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

Exhibition: L'Abîme. Nantes dans la traite atlantique et l'esclavage colonial 1707–1830 / The Abyss. Nantes's role in the slave trade and colonial slavery 1707–1830. Château des Ducs de Bretagne / Musée d'Histoire, Nantes, 16 October 2021–19 June 2022. Catalogue: Krystel Gualdé: L'Abîme. Nantes dans la traite atlantique et l'esclavage colonial 1707–1830, Nantes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2021, 321 pp.

Reviewed by
Ulrike Schmieder, Hannover[1]

Thirty years after the major exhibition *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* (1992–1994), which revealed the involvement of Nantes in the enslavement of Africans, twenty years after the promulgation of the Taubira law recognizing the slave trade and slavery as crimes against humanity (2001), and about ten years after the inauguration of the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery (2012), the exhibition *L'Abîme* or “The Abyss” returns to the topic with new approaches. It is worth looking at the displays not only because of their current

academic and societal relevance as proved by the year of toppled statues of 2020, but also because the exhibition, particularly the parts referring to Nantes, will be the basis for a general redesigning of the permanent rooms of the museum of history in Nantes devoted to this topic since 2007.[2] The title derives from a text by the Antillean writer Édouard Glissant who used the terms gouffre (*chasm*) and *abîme* (abyss) to describe the experience of deported African captives confronted with three abysses: the ship's belly, the sea into which the corpses were thrown, and the terrifying unknown that awaited them.[3] The itinerary begins on the first floor of the museum's exhibition building with an audio about the numbers and main characteristics of the trade in enslaved Africans and the traces of that criminal commerce in Nantes and the surrounding area, to be listened in front of an animated map showing the flows of displaced human beings over time, indicating the participating colonial powers. The section devoted to history explains 14 themes in French and English[4]: (1) “The Exploration of the African Coastline and the Carving Up of the World”, (2) “The First French Colonies on the American Continent”, (3) “The French Kingdom, Colonial Trade, and the System of Slavery”, (4) “The French Presence on the African Coast”, (5) “The Beginnings

of the Nantes Slave Trade”, (6) “Colonial Products Driving the Global Market”, (7) “Nantes, France’s Most Important Slave-Trading Port”, (8) “Aboard a Nantes Slave-Trading Vessel”, (9) “Nantes and Saint-Domingue, A Shared History”, (10) “Between Suffering and Resistance: the Daily Life of Slave”, (11) “The Spread of Abolitionist Ideas and the French Revolution”, (12) “From the Re-Establishment of the Slave Trade to Illegal Trading (1802–1814)”, (13) “From Illegal Trading to Abolition (1815–1848)”, (14) “Towards the Colonization of the African Continent”.

From a myriad of audio-visual tools which might capture the attention of young people more than the traditional object-text-presentation, three especially emotive ones shall be described here: first, the deportation ship *Marie Séraphique*. This ship owned by Jacques Barthélemy Gruel sailed from Nantes to Loango in Angola to Cap Français in Saint-Domingue in 1769. In 1770, René Lhermitte, the owner of a *chaloupe* and himself an enslaver, painted the ship just before it left the African coast (pp. 166–183 of the catalogue). In contrast to more schematic images (such as the famous engraving of the English ship “Brookes”), the human beings are painted in detail and the incredible overcrowding of the ship with 192 men, 60 women, 51 boys, and nine girls onboard becomes apparent. The museum offers an audio-visual experience by projecting onto the floor and walls an enlargement of Lhermitte’s engraving depicting the enslaved, lying fettered and cramped one against the other and with the sound effects of the clanking of chains, the roaring of the sea, the shouting of orders, a mother singing to her baby... This encourages visitors to en-

vision the atrocities of this mode of transportation of human beings, not numbers or “cargo”.

The second remarkable audio-visual element is “the wall of names”, on which the names of enslaved persons deported to Nantes are written and in parallel read aloud by members of Antillean associations in the town. In this section, the life-stories of eight women and men are reconstructed and presented. A painting portraying a couple of enslavers (the Deurbroucqs) with their enslaved domestics is deconstructed by an audio-visual throwing light on the individual elements, explaining the origin of the merchant’s and his wife’s fortune and luxurious lifestyle and telling as much as possible about the enslaved persons. The exhibition also includes detailed information about African kingdoms, kings, and towns, thereby giving an idea of the extent of their development and of the agency of African monarchs in the relations with European powers and their participation in the trafficking of their subjects.

The historical section of the exhibition represents two paradigm shifts in comparison to the exhibition of 1992 and the permanent gallery opened in 2007: the space devoted to the victims of enslavement is larger than before. This approach is reinforced by podcasts on the museum’s website where the voices of the enslaved as they figure in legal proceedings can be heard. This does not mean losing sight of the local and national perpetrators (Jean Baptiste Colbert, initiator of the Code Noir and founder of the Compagnie de Guinée or Napoléon Bonaparte, responsible for the reintroduction of slavery in 1802).[5] The second shift concerns the arousing of

an emotional involvement and empathy of visitors for the resistant victims, the distancing from a dryly academic, supposedly neutral language which ultimately reproduces the stone-cold calculations of enslavers that objectified the trafficked human beings. *L'Abîme* has come closer to the museum representations of enslavement in the Anglophone world like that of the International Museum of Slavery in Liverpool and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, which are close to the agency-resistance paradigm in historiography and activism about the enslavement past and do not hesitate to arouse emotions. That does not mean that there is any copying. The displays adhere strictly to the academic rigour of the French style and the enactment of the voyage of the *Marie Séraphique* in particular is innovative and striking. A third paradigm change is to be found in the section on the ground floor about present-day racism, the anti-racist struggle, enslavement, and forced labour. Amongst other displays one can see and listen to the documentary by Serge Bilé and Daniel Sainte-Rose-Franchine (2010) offering interviews with descendants of enslaved Africans in Martinique. As children they had still known great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents who had experienced enslavement and narrated their memories. These tales were listened to by a class from the *lycée de Bellevue* in Martinique whose reactions can be followed. The main hall devoted to today's legacies of enslavement in anti-Blackness and socio-economic inequalities, but also in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin-American cultural practices is something completely new in French museums. The curator,

Krystel Gualdé, told me that adults and schoolchildren are especially interested in an interactive tool relating to forced and child labour in the production of cocoa and cotton and the extraction of diamonds and gold. The exhibition is accompanied by a series of events developed together with local associations of citizens of Antillean and African descent, African roots celebrating Caribbean culture (*Le Mois Kréyol*), but also dealing with the legacy of enslavement in racism (*L'humain d'abord* as part of the *Semaines d'éducation contre le racisme et les discriminations*).

Finally, is there anything to be criticized? Yes, there is one gap in the discourse about enslavement and its long-term consequences. The exhibition refers to the indemnification of enslavers and profiteers from Nantes after the loss of Saint-Domingue/Haiti (1825). This is creditable, as French museums were silent on this topic before 2021. However, the indemnification of all other enslavers of 1849 is not discussed. This compensation benefited the owners of the enslaved labourers and their creditors in metropolitan France, including Nantes, as well as the *béké* caste in the French overseas departments, especially Martinique, the powerful local families of descendants of enslavers.[6] There is no information about the forced labour of workers of African and Asian descent or of colonial violence and racist discrimination in the "old colonies" after slavery. The remembrance of enslavement pains the Martinicans because they are confronted *now* with racist *béké* employers, poverty, ecological pollution through banana production on *béké-land*, the not at all de-colonized attitude of the French state towards Antilleans, and *colorisme*, a

socio-economic hierarchy based on skin colour inherited from enslavement.[7] Of course, this is an exhibition about slavery, not post-emancipation, but without at least some consideration of the developments between 1848 and today, the current situation presented in the second part of the displays will not be understood properly. Abolition will be misread as the true liberation of the once-enslaved, which it certainly was not.[8] Nevertheless, visiting the exhibition is highly recommended because it is innovative with respect to contents and multi-media-tools. It integrates France and enslavement in the Atlantic space in the global context, displays the individual life-stories of enslaved persons and arouses empathy by confronting the visitors with the African captives of the *Marie Séraphique*. The part dedicated to the legacies of enslavement in racism encourages visitors to reflect on their own position (privileged or unprivileged) in a society in which there is no legal slavery, but which is neither de-colonized nor free of forced labour and slavery-like forms of dependency.

The catalogue written by the exhibition's curator, Krystel Gualdé, is an excellent introduction to the topic "France and Atlantic slavery" in the period 1707–1830. The catalogue does not deal with the long-term consequences of enslavement as the exhibition does, but it mentions the traces of profits transferred to Nantes and Europe (p. 304). In the preface, Jean-Marc Ayrault, a former mayor of Nantes and now president of the Foundation for the Memory of Slavery, refers to the big anti-racist manifestations in 2020, which took place in Nantes at the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery (p. 19). The book is

recommended for reading and looking at a great variety of visual sources and objects, independently from the exhibition. The involvement of Nantes is also embedded in the broader national and international context, including a differentiated look at pre-colonial African societies. Sometimes it would have been useful to quote more international historiography. For the question of what defines the "sugar revolution", one could have quoted a specialist in Caribbean history, e.g. Barry Higman, who has developed a sophisticated and detailed explanation of the historical process baptized the "sugar revolution",[9] instead of quoting Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau (p. 60),[10] who has never worked on the Caribbean.

From the perspective of the history of Nantes it is very important that Krystel Gualdé describes human trafficking by the Nantais merchants and shipowners at the height of the French Revolution who sent ships with revolutionary names such as *Égalité*, owned by Antoine Baudouin, to the coasts of Africa for deporting enslaved humans (p. 255), their intensive anti-abolition activities and their fight against the impending loss of Saint-Domingue, as well as their efforts to be indemnified for their losses in Haiti. The author explains their important role in the illegal trade in African captives until 1830, also with new destinations like Cuba (pp. 252–289). Thus, the long-dominant focus solely on the eighteenth century in the historiography and remembrance of enslavement[11] is overcome and the link with the nineteenth-century prosperity of Nantes established. A similar tendency can be found in the account of Nantes' participation in the traffic of African *engagés* to

the Antilles and the new colonialism leading to the exploitation of African workers in their home countries, particularly Senegal (pp. 289–292, 299–300). Nantes' involvement in colonialism merely entered a new phase of expansion; it did not end in 1830 with the prosecution of the illegal traffic by the French state. Although the indemnification of 1849 and *engagisme* are mentioned (p. 297), more information about what happened in the “old colonies” in the Caribbean would have been useful to contradict the idea of the “liberation” of the enslaved by the French Republic. The chapter about memories of enslavement is the weakest; it repeats the official discourse. According to this narrative, Nantes had faced up to its slavery past as a pioneering town since Jean-Marc Ayrault became mayor in 1989 and the exhibition *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* was mounted in 1992. The work of local associations and committed historians had prepared this shift in the politics of memory (p. 306). This narrative downplays the pressure Antillean and African associations had to exercise constantly because of the strong resistance to a critical remembrance of Nantes' involvement in human trafficking, coming from inside the town's administration, local politicians with different party background, and municipal officials. This pushback retarded the inauguration of the memorial for several years and in the end it was built without a more visible above-ground beacon.[12]

This single criticism does not alter my recommendation to read this book by Krystel Gualdé. She manages to explain a complex history in an understandable, but not simplified language and makes clear to readers how strongly European progress and pros-

perity were intertwined with the enslavement and exploitation of African humans. It is commendable that the author openly admits the limitations of an exhibition based on local archival sources and inherited objects: one cannot fully narrate the lives of the enslaved because they cannot be found among the remnants of the perpetrators of enslavement (p. 308).

Notes

- 1 This review presents results from a project funded by the German Research Foundation, project no. 393718958.
- 2 Interview with the curator Krystel Gualdé, 18 November 2021. Viewing of the displays by the author 17 and 18 November 2021.
- 3 É. Glissant, *La barque ouverte*, in: *Poétique de la Relation* (Poétique III), Paris, 1990, pp. 17–18.
- 4 Quoted from the English version with an error in 10 (“slave” instead of “slaves”).
- 5 Regrettably, Napoléon Bonaparte's responsibility for the genocidal warfare against Black people in Saint-Domingue (hotly debated in 2021 at the occasion of the bicentenary of his death) is not discussed in the museum. Recommended reading: J.-P. Le Glaunec (transl. J. Kaplansky), *The Cry of Vertières. Liberation, Memory, and the Beginning of Haiti*, Montreal 2020.
- 6 *Esclavage & indemnités. Empire colonial français du XIXe siècle, Base 1849*, <https://esclavage-indemnites.fr/public/Base/2> (accessed 13 February 2022).
- 7 U. Schmieder, *Controversial Monuments for Enslavers, Enslaved Rebels and Abolitionists in Martinique and Cuba*, in: U. Schmieder/M. Zeuske (eds.), *Falling Statues Around the Atlantic* (= *Comparativ, Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung*, 31 [2021] 3–4), pp. 374–393.
- 8 O. D. Lara, *La liberté assassinée: Guadeloupe, Guyane, Martinique et la Réunion en 1848–1856*, Paris 2005; N. Schmidt, *La France a-t-elle aboli l'esclavage? Guadeloupe – Martinique – Guyane (1830–1935)*, Paris 2009.
- 9 B. Higman, *The Sugar Revolution*, in: *The Economic History Review, New Series* 53 (2000) 2, pp. 213–236.
- 10 O. Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les négoce maritimes français XVIIe–XXe siècle*, Paris 1997.
- 11 *Cahiers des Anneaux de la Mémoire, Les ports et la traite négrière*, Nantes, 10 (2007). The ex-

hibition of 1992 focused on eighteenth-century enslavement. The permanent rooms in the Museum of History from 2007 mention the illegal trade, but not in a prominent position or in much detail.

- 12 E. Chérel/G. Brindis Álvarez, *Le Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage de Nantes. Enjeux et controverses (1998–2012): Un projet de Krysztof Wodiczko & Julian Bonder*, Nantes 2012 ; U. Schmieder, *Lieux de mémoire et lieux d'oubli de la traite et l'esclavage: une comparaison entre les villes portuaires espagnoles et françaises*, in: M. Augeron (ed.), *Des patrimoines transatlantiques en miroir. Mémoires du premier empire colonial français* (Geste éditions), La Crèche 2021 (forthcoming).

Christine D. Beaulé / John G. Douglass (eds.): The Global Spanish Empire. Five Hundred Years of Place Making and Pluralism, Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2020, 305 pp.

Reviewed by
Fidel J. Tavárez, New York

One could explain the rise and longevity of the Spanish Empire in a rather simple way. In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic hoping to arrive in the East Indies. To his chagrin, he was unable to reach the desired destination, a fact he was unwilling to admit until the end of his days. Instead, his voyages remained limited to the bounds of what we now call the Caribbean, where he encountered various Indigenous groups. Although Columbus never intended to arrive in the Americas, the fact that Native societies quickly succumbed to Spanish conquering schemes is clear evidence that the Spanish triumph,

though accidental, was inevitable, for Europe's superior military technology nearly guaranteed that Indigenous peoples, including the Mexica and the Incas, never had a chance. Furthermore, that the Spanish were quickly able to institute Iberian political, legal, and religious institutions across the Americas and the Philippines is proof of their unequivocal ability to dominate conquered peoples, whose only chance of survival was cultural assimilation and political subordination.

The book reviewed here attempts to dismantle this perspective in its entirety, emphasizing the pluralism that characterized Spain's seemingly effortless conquering enterprise. For starters, if it is true that Spanish conquistadors were able to invade and control territories in a relatively short time span, it is also true that numerous groups of Indigenous peoples participated in the conquering process as allies of the Spanish. What is more, the notion that Spanish conquests across the world were clearly defined events – the editors tacitly suggest – is a misnomer. Rather, the Spanish conquering enterprise was a long-term process that ran through the entire colonial period, which demonstrates its utterly incomplete nature. The Spanish colonial world was, hence, always a contested space that led to variegated arrangements across the globe. With this basic premise at its core, this book aims to highlight the Spanish Empire's vast pluralism, which resulted from the interactions of diverse Indigenous peoples who not only adapted to imperial exigencies – often by creating new cultural practices – but also resiliently maintained their ways of life.

The book consists of 11 chapters, each of which corresponds to a case study of a