

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kóz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

ASHGATE

Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East, Union Road,
Farnham, Surrey,
GU9 7PT, England

www.ashgate.com

ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7



9 781472 415677

The Postcolonial Museum

Chambers, De Angelis, Ianniciello,
Orabona and Quadraro

ASHGATE

ASHGATE

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro



MeLa – *European Museums in an age of migrations* is a four year long Research Project (March 2011–February 2015) funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme within the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities Sector (SSH-2010-5.2.2, Grant Agreement n° 266757). MeLa is an interdisciplinary programme aimed at analysing the role of museums in the contemporary multi-cultural context, characterized by an augmented migration of people and ideas, and at identifying innovative practices and strategies in order to foster their evolution.

The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

RF01: Museums and Identity in History and Contemporaneity

examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

RF02: Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernity and Museum Practices

transforms the question of memory into an unfolding cultural and historical problematic, in order to promote new critical and practical perspectives.

RF03: Network of Museums, Libraries and Public Cultural Institutions

investigates coordination strategies between museums, libraries and public cultural institutions in relation to European cultural and scientific heritage, migration and integration.

RF04: Curatorial and Artistic Research

explores the work of artists and curators on and with issues of migration, as well as the role of museums and galleries exhibiting this work and disseminating knowledge.

RF05: Exhibition Design, Technology of Representation and Experimental Actions

investigates and experiments innovative communication tools, ICT potentialities, user centred approaches, and the role of architecture and design for the contemporary museum.

RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums

fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

Partners and principal investigators:

Luca Basso Peressut (Project Coordinator), Gennaro Postiglione, Politecnico di Milano, Italy
Marco Sacco, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy
Bartomeu Mari, MACBA – Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain
Fabienne Galangau, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, France
Ruth Noack, The Royal College of Art, United Kingdom
Perla Innocenti, University of Glasgow, United Kingdom
Jamie Allen, Jacob Back, Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design, Denmark
Christopher Whitehead, Rhiannon Mason, Newcastle University, United Kingdom
Iain Chambers, 'L'Orientale', University of Naples, Italy
www.mela-project.eu



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
European Research Area



Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

Legal notice

The views expressed here are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Commission.

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by

IAIN CHAMBERS, ALESSANDRA DE ANGELIS,
CELESTE IANNICIELLO, MARIANGELA ORABONA
AND MICHAELA QUADRARO
Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

ASHGATE

© Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the editors of this work.

Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
110 Cherry Street
Suite 3-1
Burlington, VT 05401-3818
USA

www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:

The postcolonial museum : the arts of memory and the pressures of history / by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona, Michaela Quadraro.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4724-1567-7 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-4724-1568-4 (ebook) –

ISBN 978-1-4724-1569-1 (epub) 1. Museums – Social aspects. 2. Postcolonialism – Social aspects. 3. Collective memory – Social aspects. 4. Museums and community.

I. Chambers, Iain, editor of compilation.

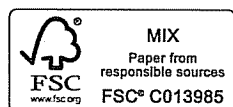
AM7.P59 2014
069–dc23

2013033639

ISBN 9781472415677 (hbk)

ISBN 9781472415684 (ebk – PDF)

ISBN 9781472415691 (ebk – ePUB)



Printed in the United Kingdom by Henry Ling Limited,
at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality <i>Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro</i>	1
--	---

PART I: GLOBAL MIGRATIONS, TRANSCULTURAL HERITAGE

1 A Museum Without Objects <i>Françoise Vergès</i>	25
2 Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage (2000–2012) <i>Felicity Bodenstein and Camilla Pagani</i>	39
3 Colonial Spaces, Postcolonial Narratives: The Exhibitionary Landscape of Fort Cochin in India <i>Neelima Jeychandran</i>	51
4 Ethnographic Museums: From Colonial Exposition to Intercultural Dialogue <i>Fabienne Boursiquot</i>	63

PART II: ARTISTIC INCURSIONS IN SPACE AND TIME

5 'There is Not Yet a World' <i>Ebadur Rahman</i>	75
6 The Artist as Interlocutor and the Labour of Memory <i>Mihaela Brebenel, Christopher Collier and Joanna Figiel</i>	89

- 7 Performance in the Museum Space (for a Wandering Society) 99
Margherita Parati

PART III: DISORIENTING THE MUSEUM

- 8 *Museo Diffuso*: Performing Memory in Public Spaces 111
Viviana Gravano
- 9 Mining the Museum in an Age of Migration 125
Anne Ring Petersen
- 10 Blurring History: The Central European Museum and the Schizophrenia of Capital 137
Ivan Jurica
- 11 The Limits to Institutional Change: Organisational Roles and Roots 147
Peggy Levitt

PART IV: REPRESENTATION AND BEYOND

- 12 The Incurable Image: Curation and Repetition on a Tri-continental Scene 161
Tarek Elhaik
- 13 The Postcolonial 'Exhibitionary Complex': The Role of the International Expo in Migrating and Multicultural Societies 175
Stefania Zuliani
- 14 Orientalism and the Politics of Contemporary Art Exhibitions 185
Alessandra Marino
- 15 What Museum for Africa? 195
Itala Vivan

PART V: FUTURE MEMORIES, ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES

- 16 *Egyptian Chemistry*: From Postcolonial to Post-humanist Matters 209
Ursula Biemann
- 17 'The Lived Moment': New Aesthetics for Migrant Recollection 219
Peter Leese
- 18 Coding/Decoding the Archive 229
David Gauthier and Erin La Cour
- Afterword: After the Museum 241
Iain Chambers
- Index* 247

Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 1

A Museum Without Objects

Françoise Vergès

This is the history of a project and of its defeat. The project: the *Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise* (MCUR), a museum in a French postcolony of the Indian Ocean, Réunion Island, launched in 2000 by Réunion Regional Council.¹ The defeat: the end of a utopia, a Museum Without Objects. In April 2010, the local Conservatives came to power in Réunion Regional Council. One of their first acts was to put an end to the MCUR project and to disband its team. The decision meant that the project was killed, since two thirds of its funding came from the Regional Council (the French state and the European Community sharing the rest of the 60 million euro budget, covering studies, building and museography).

In this chapter, I will explain how and why the notion of a *museum without objects* was chosen and why I think today that the notion of creolisation that was central to the project needs to be revisited. In my conclusion, I will suggest new ways of developing the notion of a museum without objects and why the notion can still be useful. In the text, I use large excerpts from the scientific and cultural programme I wrote with Carpanin Marimoutou in 2004 and which became the basis for planning the architecture, the exhibitions and the different spaces of the museum. It was for this programme that I developed the notion of the museum without objects – neither a virtual museum nor a museum of images and sounds, but a museum that would not be founded on a collection of objects, where the objects would be one element among others, where the absence of material objects through which to visualise the lives of the oppressed, the migrants, the marginal, would be confronted. We would not seek to fill up a void, to compensate for the absence, we would work from the absence, embracing it fully, for we understood that this absence was paradoxically affirming a presence. To us, the accumulation of objects destined to celebrate the wealth of a nation belonged to an economy of predation, looting defeated peoples or exploiting the riches of others. It belonged to an economy of consumption that invested the object with narcissistic meaning, making visible one's identity and social status. We turned to small objects, *objets de rien*, devoid of economic value in the market economy – objects that had a biography and had travelled.

¹ I worked on the project during 2000–2010, by participating in seminars and meetings of artists, museum professionals, curators, heritage specialists and scholars organised by the Regional Council, and by directing the MCUR team, 2003–2010.

In recent decades, a vast and diverse literature has been produced on the museum. We benefited greatly from this debate, though most contributions were critical appraisals of projects and few were written by people who had built a museum and who openly discussed the problems raised by building a postcolonial museum. The dominant position was how to create a museum with the Western museum as a counter-example. The Western model remained the reference. We wanted to question the logic both of inversion and of catching up. Both could reinforce the hegemonic position of the West. Could we take the Western model as one among others, neither imitating it nor fully rejecting it? Could we take it as a proposition that could be mixed with others, playing freely with its modes of presentation? We also benefited from our encounters with museum professionals we met in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. We learned a lot from the conversation we had following the presentation of the project at colloquiums in Japan, the USA, Italy, France, Germany, India and South Africa, as well as from our visits to museums. But our first reference was the people of Réunion to whom we presented the project as it moved along. We discussed it with local artists and with cultural associations. We tested our choices during the cultural manifestations we organised: the annual ceremony honouring Zarboutan Nout Kiltir, women and men who had safeguarded and developed vernacular knowledge and practices, the series of conferences with international scholars on the history and culture of the Indian Ocean and on contemporary issues – climate, economy, geopolitics, the work we did with schools, the seminars we put together, the meetings with our Scientific Council – Marc Augé, Achille Mbembe, Simon Njami and Germain Viatte, the work we did with the architects Anouk Legendre and Nicolas Démazières, whose project had been chosen following an international competition, and with the team which was developing the permanent exhibition.²

What Kind of Museum?

In France, museums are top-down affairs. Whether private or public, they are a *fait du prince*. The polemics and controversies surrounding the building of I.M. Pei's pyramids for the Louvre, the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration and the Musée du quai Branly did not stop their completion. They were projects carried out by a President of the French Republic, who remained in power long enough to see their opening, ensuring they received the financial, administrative and political support they required. The MCUR project was a regional affair, and as such it sought to work with the local terrain. Seminars were organised with artists, associations and researchers in 2000–2001. What emerged from these meetings was a conception of the island's history divided into ethno-cultural chapters. The participants, who had all been educated through the French system, imagined a

² A description of the project is available at <http://www.x-tu.com/> (accessed 10 March 2013).

succession of 'houses': 'House of Africa', 'House of India', 'House of China' and 'Creole House'. What was remarkable was the absence of France, whose role could not be ignored, and of Madagascar, often forgotten. The narrative was one of linear progress, from slavery to integration within the French Republic. There was much talk about 'identity' and safeguarding 'tradition'. The ways in which the restaurant was imagined embodied the idea of creolisation as offering a series of coexisting forms: a buffet with 'Indian', 'Chinese' and 'Creole' food. The team in charge of turning the conclusions of the seminars into a programme proposed to follow the timeline of French colonisation through a series of chapters that would visualise the transformations of Réunion society with regard to events in France.

During these seminars, we measured the weight of the French policies of assimilation. A few of us defended an approach designed to emancipate the island's history from the temporality and spatiality imposed by French colonialism. We suggested that Réunion's history was the history of the unexpected (Creole language and culture), of the intangible, of sorrows and struggles. Few objects had survived that would testify for the lives of women and men brought to the island since 1663. Official history did not record their lives. To recover this past, we had first to acknowledge an *absence*, an unknown past. To Walter Benjamin, the recovery of the unknown past – 'the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been' (Benjamin 1999, 458) – is the battlefield where the future is decided. What would produce a shifting of the gaze, what small displacement would open up new vistas? The map drawn by the Arab geographer Abu Abdullah Ibn Idrisi in the eleventh century was an inspiration. In accordance with Arab convention, the north was at the bottom of the map and the south at the top. This convention transformed the ways in which French schooling has imposed the cartography of the world; as a device, it helped us suggest that, living in an island on an African–Asian axis, we could question the notions of North, South, West and East.

Where did we start? With the island, with the physical territory: an active volcano, a small island on an African–Asian axis. It was known to Arab navigators, identified by the Portuguese in the seventeenth century as a place to replenish ships with fresh water. It became a colony by accident in 1663. The French were looking for a port of call on their journeys to India. They were unable to conquer Madagascar, but there were two islands without a native population, offering fresh water, great forests, and one of them natural harbours, so the French took possession of these. They were called Bourbon (present-day Réunion) and Île de France (Mauritius). The latter had been abandoned six years earlier by the Dutch, who had colonised the island following a decision taken by the directors of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie – VOC) in 1637. But in 1657 the company decided to dismantle Mauritius's garrison and abandon the island. The country was no longer viable. No precious metals had been found in its soil, and the ebony forests were almost completely depleted. The French took over, and soon populated both islands with settlers and enslaved labour from Madagascar and Africa. France 'lost' the colony of Mauritius in 1815.

In Réunion, slavery was abolished in 1848: out of a population of 100,000, some 60,000 were enslaved. They became citizens, but remained under colonial status, which was abolished in 1946 when it became a French department.

After 1946, local struggles for social equality led to the emergence of a middle class. Four generations have had access to education. The development of public services offered jobs to the children of people who had often been poor. Since in the overseas departments all civil servants benefit from privileges inherited from colonial times – higher salaries and lower taxes than in France for the same jobs, as well as other important benefits inherited from colonialism – private property and other forms of consumption became accessible. Consumption and assimilation to whatever was fantasised as ‘being like the French’ were now the goals of the middle class. Within a few decades, the island went from being dominated by an economy inherited from the plantation economy where sugar cane reigned supreme to an economy of services with an unemployment rate of 36.5 per cent (the female rate was nearly five points higher than the male rate), and with 60.8 per cent of under-twenties being unemployed. Exports were less than 10 per cent of imports. The population tripled while the economy crumbled. The rate of unemployment has stayed around 37 per cent for decades (60 per cent among the young); 21 per cent of the population is illiterate; the island imports more than 3 million tons of goods from France and exports 300,000 tons, mostly of sugar. It is highly dependent on France; more than 50 per cent of the population live below the poverty line (800 euros per month in an island where the cost of living is equal to that of Paris, the most expensive city in France). People travel abroad more and more, and an important middle class has emerged which sends its children to universities in France and elsewhere. Few graduates want to come back. The signs of the politics and culture of consumption abound: commercial malls, cars, cell phones; the island has its own celebrities, its own gossip, its own social networks, its own private radios. Many worlds cohabit, often blind and deaf to each other.

New cultural identities have been reclaiming the colonial categories to transform, subvert and modify them to their own ends. These new identities serve to diversify the nomenclature of society by calling for a unique origin and a special place in the historical narratives of Réunion Island and its contemporary society. To be of African (Kaf), Indian (Malbar), Chinese (Sinwa) or European (Pti Blanc) descent takes on a new dimension, with each ethnic group laying claim to its own history as part of Réunionese history, recalling the impact of slavery and of the colonial orders in their lives.

The Object of the Intangible

The history and culture of the vanquished and the oppressed is rarely embodied in material objects. They bequeath words rather than palaces, hope rather than private property, words, texts and music rather than monuments. They leave heritages embodied in people rather than stones. Songs, words, poems, declarations, texts

often constitute the archive through which to evoke their past. Their itineraries retrace the history of struggles, of migrations, of the global organisation of the workforce rather than the accumulation of wealth. It is a world of the intangible, of the unexpected, of what has been untimely, sorrowful, hopeful.

The ideological fabrication of the noticeable and unnoticeable, of the visible and the invisible, of what matters and does not matter, obeys rules and laws that are constantly being elaborated, reconfigured, deconstructed, reconstructed. Narratives become significant when they enter a field of recognition, constructed through a series of legitimised gestures (grants, works by ‘recognised’ authors, conferences, construction of a vocabulary that acquires prestige and wide currency – such as hybridity, in-between, creolisation). Marginalised groups have always understood the importance of making their vision of the world, rituals, traditions, practices, *noticeable*. Scholars have explored the processes whereby continents, regions, practices, groups are ‘discovered’, questioning the very notion of *discovery* in the humanities and social sciences. What is discovered? What makes the gesture of unmasking, unveiling so attractive? Can we read in the continuous use of the notion of ‘unmasking’ the desire to unveil a ‘true core’? What can we learn from the representation of the explorer? The gesture of ‘discovery’ remains a potent trope and has gained new value in what Barbara Christian has called the ‘race for theory’.

Hence we asked how practices and processes that belonged for the most part to ‘immaterial’ or ‘intangible’ culture could be expressed visually without falling into a reductive ethnology. How could the maps of exchanges, contacts and conflicts in the Indoceanic world, where seven worlds converged (African, Chinese, European, Indian, Muslim, and Malagasy and Comorian), render the contact zones, the cultural interactions, the modes of interpenetration, diffusion, dissemination and dispersion? How could the processes and practices of creolisation at work in the creation of Réunionese unity be expressed visually? How could yesterday’s routes of slavery and indentured labour and today’s migrations, power relationships, inequalities, discriminations be depicted, concurrently with the resistances, struggles and collective imaginations? How could we make the museum a space of discussion open to reinterpretations, to local and global transformations?

The study of Réunionese society has all too often been reduced to drawing up a chronological order that arranges interlocking temporalities, neglecting singularity in favour of generality, repeating the eternal opposition between elite culture and popular culture, between written and oral, between reality and representations. One of our aims was the *critical contextualising and transmission* of Réunionese culture that, we insist, is outstanding for its intercultural character. We did not want to merely safeguard the heritage; naturally, the desire and need to preserve are justified, but we did not want this to rule our thinking.

We wanted to call attention to the contingencies, the accidents of history, challenging the fiction of a linear course presented as inevitably progressive, marked by a modernism defined by Europe in which every event could be explained by a structuring causality. We used ‘Europe’ to designate a historical

and cultural construction that can be better seen from the colonial world but which has had consequences on the Continent itself. To us, the museum was not a space for dead cultures, pretending to represent 'truth' or marketing itself as 'heritage' sites and theme parks; it would be a space for social change, a transformative space where stereotypes were countered and alternative narratives suggested and discussed. We had to invent a space that did not fossilise history or memory, that remained open toward revisions and reinterpretations, that showed creolisation processes and practices while restoring the spaces and histories that led up to this creolisation. The spirit was that of a nonlinear interpretation where the viewer would be invited to 'dialogue' with what she saw, where she would be able to suggest other meanings for things and events.

The MCUR was designed to reflect on the *issues of a museum of the present time*, a space that would display episodes where violence, brutality and poverty prevail, without becoming a space of expiation. We had few examples of visual representation of Réunion's culture and history to examine, analyse, counter or challenge. Réunion's culture did not even belong to the infamous genre of 'primitivism'. At colonial exhibitions, the island's culture and history were shown through goods (sugar, coffee) or through the *Creole art de vivre*, an imagined gentle way of life in the colony, masking its brutality. French universalism invented an abstract aesthetics to refigure the empire, which concealed the social and historical context. Rather than looking at what had been done, we concluded that it was by *starting from the present* that another future could be imagined.

The Economy of the Museum

We have no oil, diamonds, uranium. We have no palaces, statues, great works of art. We said that Réunion's economy is fragile and there are important inequalities. We did not want to live beyond our means. We shared the criticism of an economy of squandering and wastefulness geared towards the destruction of local economies of vernacular culture as 'ethnic chic'. It would be absurd to build a space that would prove too expensive; it would be pure madness. In fifteen, twenty years, on what economy would the project rest? If we turned to multimedia techniques, was it necessary to dazzle the visitor with high technology, or was it better to mix bits of high technology with *bricolage*, to have an economy of recycling and recuperation? A reflection on economy proved inseparable from our reflection on content.

The economy of the MCUR rested on a reflection of the island's economy seen in relation to its environment and the ways in which inequalities had been widening throughout the world and the region. We had to confront the logic of catching up, with its vocabulary that stemmed from anti-colonial struggles and the discourse of progress. They were based on an acknowledgment of the wretched condition of the infrastructures, non-application of labour legislation, extremely brutal employers, racist schools and churches, malnutrition. In 1946, the anti-colonial

Left denounced the state of neglect of the population and the rule of the colonial oligarchy and its henchmen during the debate on the end of the colonial status at the National Assembly. Equality was the key notion in the struggle for social and political emancipation. This notion, drawn from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, assumed a special dimension in the colonies where inequality was an organisational principle based on race. The demand for emancipation was a demand for social equality (application of the social and labour legislation) and for civil rights (the end of electoral fraud, of censorship and repression). It went hand in hand with a demand to catch up, and the anti-colonial movement was the first to emphasise its urgency. In the 1960s, under pressure from unrest, the state adopted and adapted the expression 'catching up'. Since then, that notion and its representations have become the framework and central issue of public discussion. The economy of making up for lost time met several demands – of the state, of elected representatives, of the population. In just a few years, 'providing' became the key issue. The gap between the different worlds in Réunion – the haves and have-nots, those who have a permanent job and those who have a temporary one, those who work and those who do not – the legacy of a colonial system, a deeply unequal development, all this legitimised a policy of 'catching up'. But the notion has also imposed a rhetoric of urgency within the economy of consumption.

The goal of the MCUR was not to begin by searching for lost origins, trying to restore an imaginary authenticity, to defend a nostalgia that 'things used to be better'. We claimed that there was nothing in our heritages, no matter how painful they were, that gave us the right to claim a moral superiority. What should be preserved? How? Why? Confronted with heritage, one often has an impulse to preserve, reassert, defend – that is, to preserve from forgetfulness, from denial, from the policies of silence and amnesia set up by the authorities who seek to impose *one* story, *one* tradition; to reassert what happened; to defend heritages because they gave rise to stories, myths, because they constitute landmarks that we need. But we also need to choose, because not everything is worth preserving, because we have to preserve and reassert, but without melancholy, without nostalgia. We have to *reinterpret our heritages, subject them to a critical appraisal*, so that something new can happen – that is, history. *Rather than be victims of our heritage, we have to reclaim it from a critical position and be able to pass it on.* We have to give meaning to our heritages, to be active heirs, because to quote René Char, 'no testament precedes our heritage'.

But why use the term 'museum'? Usually, cultural centres are for the 'South', museums for the 'North'. We wanted to break this dichotomy and suggest that a new kind of museum was possible, and that a small island was capable of doing it. The reappropriation of the term was for us a political gesture. The colonised and the oppressed have always seized what the West invented, to transform and adapt it. When it is blind imitation, it leads to tragic consequences, but when it is done to engage critically with the tools, it can be inventive and creative. I remember Aimé Césaire telling me that it is important to grasp all the tools available to transform the world. Telling Réunion people that they deserved a museum with all the elitist

representations associated with this space was a very important gesture: 'Yes, your "poor" lives deserve a museum, your creations and practices deserve a museum.' Some people opposed to the project understood it intuitively when they claimed that there was nothing in Réunion that could justify a museum, no culture worthy of such space.

A Museum without Objects

We considered the archive not as a talisman or a fetish, but as a *document*. The archive is meaningful in its context, it is not 'truth', it belongs to an entire social environment. Thus the notarised deed of the sale of a slave is meaningful when it is placed in a social and historical framework; the deed itself is merely a notarised deed. The *Code Noir* ('Black Code') has to be presented in a context where the foundations of law in France and Europe are explained, and put in perspective with other codes regulating slavery. It must not become a 'sacred' text that cannot be discussed, but a testimonial to specific laws, on the justification of exclusion.

Rather than looking for the lost object, trying to fill a gap, we started with the following challenge: if there are no objects, how do we imagine a museum without objects? The object could not be central to the MCUR. We knew how important it has been for non-Western countries to impose a new reading so that objects (African masks, Inuit sculptures, Aborigines' paintings) were seen as legitimate as a sculpture or painting by a European artist. The importance of that movement is still being tested. Yet we thought it was better to start with an *accepted absence*. No vernacular object before 1848 has survived, and we wish to underline that: there was *no* collection of testimonies of slaves after the abolition of slavery. No one (emancipated slaves, abolitionists, writers) thought of collecting oral testimonies of the freed slaves. The desire to forget and a policy of silence prevailed.

Starting from an absence led to revisiting the notion of the object and then integrating what exists – the memory of the object, its reconstruction – within that approach. Thus the object was treated as a trace whose meaning emerges from a *landscape*, whether social, literary, imaginary, musical or whatever. We were not partisans of the sacralisation of the object as the authentic marker of human action. We thought that violence and resistance, passions and interest had also to be shown through sounds, images, plays, narratives. The object was a tool among others, and it did not have to be authentic. When the Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in 1498, they brought with them the violence of the brutal religious wars in Europe. Negotiation was not an option. Peoples construed as enemies had to be crushed, massacred, destroyed. The Portuguese imposed their monopoly on trade in an ocean where free mercantile capitalism was the rule. How could we show that moment? The object was not the only reference; we worked from an installation of sounds, images, objects and acting to *evoke* a moment.

The Creole language was to have a major role in the MCUR as an itinerary of a constantly vivified archive. It is a *vector of knowledge about practices and people's imaginations*. It is the space of a common heritage constantly enriched by practices and contributions. In the very heterogeneity presiding over its formation, the Creole language necessarily bears the stamp of the languages, dreams, imaginations that presided over its birth – unconscious, underground, cryptic. But one way or another, it surfaces in the everyday speech of exchange, in poetic speech, in the texts of the *ségas* and the *maloyas*, proverbs, puns, riddles. It does indeed surface, but altered by encounters that shape the image of the place; it surfaces in crossings and appropriations. A legend, 'Granmer Kal', was developed by blending myths from India, Madagascar, Africa, with the ongoing and changing popular oral traditions. This memory is linked to the slaves' fear of the master and his powers, a specific perception of the supernatural.

Immaterial culture could not be limited to memory or tradition. Along with past practices, it was important to take in new ones like hip-hop, rap, contemporary dance and so on, the transformation of older existing practices (christenings, wakes, weddings, carnival) and the creolisation of imported practices (table manners, French cuisine, world music). We chose the path as the metaphor of exile that crosses routes of trade and empire. It evokes the trails of the maroons and their resistance, the appropriation of the territory by the trails of fishermen, farmhands, market women, vagabonds. These paths and trails outlined another cartography, another archive of the island. The path drew the ancestor's course: the one leading from him to us and the one leading us back to him. The display of the itineraries of persons, objects, rites, culinary practices, ingredients of recipes, of sounds, show the routes of multiple levels of culture. Reality is polymorphic, formed by multiple identities and constant metamorphoses. From the place of origin, whence the ancestor came, to the world she contributed to build and bequeathed to us, the itinerary brings back a life. The richness of a world is restored, and the neutral category ('Slave', '*engagé*', 'Kaf', 'Malbar', 'Muslim'), one that negates singularity (How old? What gender? What place of origin: city, country, coast?), fades away before the combined individual *and* collective experience that shaped the Réunionese world.

The Museum Without Objects would have been a space where other cartographies of the world could have been evoked, other futures imagined. Réunion's history emerged within the history of the organisation of a racialised workforce on a global scale, within the history of rivalries among European powers to grab the riches of the world, but also within the history of South–South exchanges of the Indoceanic world and its dynamics. Thus, temporality and spatiality were those of the millenary space of the Indoceanic world. We did not idealise this world: by inscribing Réunion within that space, we wanted to unmask the lie of European cartography, to question the fact that the only meaningful link of the island with the world was the link to France. We wanted to remind Réunion society of its environment. By inscribing the island within the long history of the organisation of the workforce and exploitation, we wanted to denationalise the history of colonialism.

Going back to the history of labour and looking at the figure of the body as a commodity to exchange, sell, exploit, own and kill (colonial slavery, forced labour, indentured work) meant examining the predatory economy. It was an economy based on the raw exploitation of resources (human and others) that linked networks – financial, cultural, political – across borders. The predatory economy fabricated people who did not matter. It had a destructive force which in order to be constrained must meet an organised counter-force. As Machiavelli wrote, it is an illusion to believe that those who dominate would ever be satisfied with what they own, that their superiority warrants wisdom. The avidity of the powerful is limitless, and is only contained by the resistance of others. It was an economy whose ‘processes inevitably interact with systems for the governance of national economies’ (Sassen 1999, 214). It constructed a ‘transnational geography of centrality consisting of multiple linkages and strategic concentrations of material infrastructures’ (Sassen 1999, 214).

We were wary of a narrative that situated slavery and postcolonial status in a foreclosed past ignoring its contemporary traces. The narrative of linear progress contained in the abstract rhetoric of human rights that had prevailed in the discourse of French abolitionism and paternalistic republicanism was cutting Réunion off from the history of regional emancipation, from the circulation of revolutionary ideas. It reinforced Réunion’s dependency on France: all that was meaningful and progressive had come from France. Yet, by looking at the ways in which Réunion had featured on the map of a predatory economy, the island’s history was no longer contained within the narrow borders of the French national narrative. A cartography of South–South struggles, circulations, migrations and movements of goods, ideas, beliefs would inscribe the island within complex networks. Further, a reflection on the predatory economy would lead to an exploration of the culture of terror and a rhetoric of protection from barbarism that seeks to humanise what cannot be humanised. When a predatory economy sets up rules of protection, they are put in place to enforce submission: the protégé *always* lives by the rules imposed by its protector. The protégé must insist on its victimisation and embody powerlessness. In *Inhuman Conditions* (2007), Pheng Cheah has analysed how the discourse of human rights follows that logic and seeks thus to ‘humanise’ what cannot be humanised: capitalist exploitation. Human rights do not seem to offer the grounds for conceiving of a new humanism.

Concretely, these remarks meant that, rather than start in 1663 when the French took possession of the island, Réunionese history would stretch back to the fifth century AD, when the Indian Ocean became a cultural and commercial space linking cities along the eastern coast of Africa with the Arabic Peninsula, India, Indonesia and China; that its space would be the Indian Ocean; that the lives of the poor, settlers, enslaved, indentured, migrants would be evoked; that the languages that had been spoken on the island throughout its history would be heard – Malagasy, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Bantu, Shigazinge, Chinese, seventeenth-century French; that ideas that had sprung up here – republicanism, fascism, communism,

anti-colonialism, and politics of assimilation – would be explored; that the library would be dedicated to poetry; that spaces for oral exchange would be integrated within the visit; that silence and meditation, looking at clouds, at the ocean would be possible, but also noise and laughter; that plants and ‘Nature’ would be taken as actors of history; that part of the garden would be left to the care of visitors; that there would be workshops on video and films so that the Réunionese would develop their own visual culture; that the permanent exhibition would conclude with ‘Réunion in the present’, where visitors would construct the ever-changing present. The object of the museum was the moment of encounter, of exchange and conflict. It required mobilising the ‘necessary intellectual and existential resources enabling us to confront the indescribable agony and unnameable anguish’ (West 1997, 56) that has been unleashed on the world.

The Notion of Creolisation

Heterogeneity and unpredictability characterise the process of creolisation. For Edouard Glissant, ‘creolization requires that heterogeneous elements that are put into contact enhance each other, that there is no degradation or diminishing of the being in the contact and mixing’ (Glissant 1996, 18; my translation). Creolisation occurred in a situation of deep constraints, under the yoke of slavery, colonialism and racism, involving deep inequalities, forced circumstances and survival strategies. Outside the United States, slaves were largely men – data show that cargoes of slaves generally amounted to two-thirds men and one-third women.³ Creolisation was the creation of a world of men, of a majority of men enslaved by a minority of men. These elements – deportation, forced exile, a world of men, a deeply unequal and violent society, institutionalised racial hierarchy – contributed to the creation of Creole *worlds*: plural, since no Creole society is exactly similar to another. Creolisation was an unexpected, unpredictable consequence of the colonial slave trade and slavery. It was not a return to ‘roots’, a re-creation of a lost world, but a creation. As an expression of groups who experienced brutal exploitation, creolisation reflects an ethos of resistance. Creolisation can thus become ‘a tool capable of challenging nationalist projects, forging a more supple theory of non-essentialist identity formation and transnational belonging’ (Ahmed et al. 2003, 279). If the outcomes of creolisation are unforeseeable and if current contacts could be said to lead to processes of creolisation, one must be aware that creolisation is not the only foreseeable outcome of a contact zone.

3 On the ratio of men to women among the enslaved in the Transatlantic and Indian Ocean trade, see Bush (1990) and Morrissey (1989). Roughly one African woman was carried across the Atlantic for every two men. European slave traders preferred to buy men. The captains of slave ships were usually instructed to buy as high a proportion of men as they could, because men could be sold for more in the Americas. On the situation in Réunion, see Vergès (2006).

In March 2009, in response to the largest social mobilisation in the French Caribbean, Edouard Glissant et al. published *Manifeste pour les 'produits' de haute nécessité* ('Manifesto for the "Products" of High Necessity'), arguing that the legitimate demand for better purchasing power could not be understood without an articulation with a new poetics. Their title mirrored the unions' demand that the government fix the price of the products deemed highly necessary for day-to-day life – oil, rice, bread – and intervene if distributors exceed the fixed price. The authors declared that besides the 'necessary products of living' (*les produits de première nécessité*), there were other products of high necessity that appeared just as important: political responsibility, criticism of the free market, a radical contestation of contemporary capitalism, rethinking work as a place for self-accomplishment and social invention (Breleur et al. 2009). If the amount of despair and resentment among the populations of the Antilles was underestimated, the hopes of intellectuals and activists were also hindered by social and economic reality. To Patrick Chamoiseau, the ambivalence of this 'post-capitalist movement' lay in the tension between the illusion that consumption gives meaning to life and the desire to go beyond consumption as giving meaning (Chamoiseau 2011, 155). The poetics deployed with chants, dance, gestures, reactivation of tradition, were the expressions of a fraternity, of an aspiration for new relations on the island and between the island and France that did not find a place within the social movement. There were many obstacles to a radical movement. Chamoiseau argued that there had not been enough engagement by local intellectuals, too much cowardice, a lack of democratic culture inherited from slavery and the fear of a future without France (Chamoiseau 2011, 173).

It is important to bring back the slave as a *political* figure – not just as the figure of suffering, exile, deportation, but as a figure that radically contests with 'his' life an economic, cultural and political system that fabricates fragile and precarious lives for profit. If the plantation, as Glissant reminds us, is the womb of creolisation, we need to bring back the plantation as a site of economic and political power. The slaves challenged an economy based on a geopolitics of brutal exploitation, on the transformation of the human body into a mere object, on laws and regulations that justified the racialisation of work, that gave a minority the right to punish, maim and torture enslaved women and men. Creolised expressions and practices radically questioned a world which sought to organise society according to rigid and fixed identities based on skin colour. It showed the capacity of the oppressed to create meaning in intra-cultural exchanges. We uncritically adopted the narrative of loss of native languages, of creolisation as a hegemonic process through which every one would become 'Réunionese'. The publication in 2009 of research by Pier Larson deeply challenged this approach. Larson questioned the ways in which creolisation has been seen in the Indian Ocean. African and Malagasy slaves did not look to 'sociocultural integration into the societies of their forced migration', but rather sought to maintain 'separated identities', he convincingly argues (Larson 2009, 19). The emphasis on 'hybridity and cultural mixing has marginalised the ancestral languages of "enslaved persons" from colonial histories' (Larson 2009, 19). Larson

insists on the 'simultaneous processes of ethnic distinction' and creolisation because 'Francophone *créolité* and Malagasy identity were entangled in each other, sometimes mutually constituting' (Larson 2009, 19).

The longest social mobilisation in the French overseas departments in 2009, the end of the museum project, the increasing emergence of 'Blackness' in hexagonal France, the entry of Aimé Césaire into the Pantheon, the debate on national identity, led me to explore anew the notion of creolisation. I concluded that creolisation was a subversive concept if it remained linked to the subterranean struggle and resistance of populations confronted with brutal and raw power, with monolingualism and monoculturalism. Creolisation must enhance vernacular practices and solidarity among the oppressed. Its roots in slavery and plantation economies imply an ethics of responsibility for fragile lives, seeking common ground. Creolisation means inventing new forms of radical subaltern heterogeneity, undermining the hegemonic space from within; not a nativist nostalgia, but a radical critical position and practice; no mere cultural translation, but political practices and movements. Beyond the emptiness of declarations about the values of multiculturalism, a form of soft management of diversity, creolisation can lead to the invention of a new radicalism, whose inspiration could be found in subversive anti-slavery politics. This is what was lost in Réunion when the petty bourgeoisie chose the current form of French assimilation, allowing for an expression of regional culture in so far as it does not challenge the superiority of French language and culture.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, in a Europe undergoing massive upheaval, the German poet Hölderlin pondered the question, 'Why poets in times of distress?' Today, we may reformulate the question, and ask, 'Why culture in times of distress?' The MCUR was deemed useless and unnecessary, a waste of money when housing and jobs were urgently needed. Even though no money has been invested in housing or jobs since 2010, the argument was powerful. It described the museum project as elitist and egotistic; the project was also derided for its idea of being a museum without objects. What was the point? We were accused of being 'intellectuals', unable to comprehend the 'people', lost in our narcissistic dreams. Were our propositions merely rhetorical claims devoid of pragmatism, mere intellectual reveries?

We thought that the hegemony of economic discourse, the hegemony of ideas inspired by Ayn Rand's belief in the superiority of the individual, was destructive and had to be countered by a space where the intensity of mutations that Réunion had experienced over four decades and the changes produced in the world by an economy that posited infinite resources, by the belief in endless progress and in the total domination of man over the environment, would be questioned.

References

- Ahmed, Sara, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller. 2003. *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Oxford: Berg.

- Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Breleur, Ernest, Patrick Chamoiseau, Serge Domi, Gérard Delver, Édouard Glissant, Guillaume Pigeard de Gurbert, Olivier Portecop, Olivier Pulvar and Jean-Claude William. 2009. *Manifeste pour les 'produits' de haute nécessité*. Paris: Institut du Tout-Monde, Éditions Galaade.
- Bush, Barbara. 1990. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650–1838*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. 2011. 'Il faudrait dire: les "temps impensables" ou "les temps de la relation"'. *Les Temps Modernes* 662–3: 154–88.
- Cheah, Pheng. 2007. *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1996. *Introduction à une poétique du divers*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Larson, Pier M. 2009. *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morrissey, Marietta. 1989. *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1999. *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York: The New Press.
- Vergès, Françoise. 2006. 'L'énigme d'une disparition'. In *Racines et itinéraires de l'identité réunionnaise*, edited by Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou. Saint-André: Océan Editions, 78–105.
- West, Cornel. 1997. 'Black Striving in a Twilight Civilization'. In *The Future of the Race*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr and Cornel West. New York: Vintage Books, 53–114.