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When the past becomes a problem:

Nantes' memory of slavery and the local politics of emotions

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Many subfields of political science have explored the role of emotions. The study of political communication (Edelman 1977), electoral campaigns (Ballet 2012), mobilized groups and militancy (Goodwin, Jasper, Polleta 2001) or the constructivist approach of social problems (Gusfield 1981, Spector and Kitsuse 1977), to quote only a few, have all discussed the role of affects in political relations. Yet, public policy specialists have generally been more reluctant to take their role into account in their studies of the policy process. The long dominant view that public policies were driven by rationality, interest and strategic thinking and the difficulty to measure empirically emotions (Latté 2008) may account for this lack of attention. One consequence is that public policies often appear in scholarly accounts as devoid of affects, a vision that clearly departs from the influence many other approaches have recognized to emotions.

Yet, it would seem reasonable to think that a significant proportion of public action decisions are either influenced by (personal or collective) emotional interpretations of a given situation or geared toward some form of (public) emotions management. While many kinds of affects could possibly be influential in the policy process, or could be set as targets, we will concentrate in this article on a specific pattern of intertwining between emotions and public action, namely the situation when public action is designed to provide symbolic recognition to social groups, thus contributing to setting their social worth, feeding collective pride, fighting stigmatization or countering social feelings of shame, lowliness or inhibition. Policies of memory are a good example of such form of public action. When nations build public narratives about to their past they traditionally seek to excite a sense of glory and uniqueness, with the view to making nationals feel pride or worthy. Such narratives are made to strengthen feeling of belonging among community members (Citron 1987, Thiesse 1999). However, in Europe and in the US particularly, recent public memory initiatives have been guided by more complex attitudes and affects: acceptation of guilt for some violent collective deeds, respect and recognition for the victims of state power, compassion and pity for the suffering historically imposed to some minority groups have become growingly central in commemorations, museums and memorials. (Lefranc, Mathieu et Siméant, 2008 ; Michel 2011). Such attitudes have usually been adopted in response to mobilizations and struggles led by minority groups claiming for more respectful and more inclusive representations of the past. As a consequence, there was a shift in public memory regimes, which became more and more geared toward providing minority groups with the kind of symbolic recognition they have called for.

Public memory making has rarely been studied at the local level. In this paper, I will take the city of Nantes, located on the Loire's mouth on France's Atlantic coast, as an example. This port was once the national capital for slave-trading. Ships from Nantes sailed to the African coast, exchanged various goods against captives sold by local slave traders and then set sail to the Caribbean Islands or the Americas where captains sold their human merchandise to planters. Nantes' merchants slave-trading activities stopped in the early 19th century, but this practice started to remembered through local official memory initiatives only at the end of the twentieth century.

Emotions can appear in a triple manner in policies of memory. They can trigger policy making by being part of the public problem construction process. This is the case when for instance, an emotional representation of the past guides public action (angst, fear, pity etc). They can serve as instruments of policy making, when symbolic tools able to induce emotions (eg. Memorials, commemoration rituals) are used to achieve political goals of a larger scope. Finally, emotions can be the direct goal of policy making when public action seeks to provide recognition. Fundamental collective affects, indeed, are at stake when a public policy contributes to building symbolic borders among groups, for instance by stigmatizing or humiliating minorities, or on the contrary, fighting social contempt and enhance social worth.

Taking into account this triple presence of emotions, my goal in this paper is to untangle the various factors that suddenly made the long neglected issue of Nantes' troubled past appear onto the political agenda, and more particularly to assess the role played by emotions: what kind of emotions have been at stake ? When and how did they trigger a change in the policy process ? To what extent are they instrumentalized for other purposes ? Or are they a definitive goal of policy making in the field of memory ? In the first part, I review some of the literature in order to clarify theoretical assumptions about the relations between emotion, recognition and public action. In the second part, I suggest that a feeling of shame and discomfort with Nantes' historical image as a slave-trade port prompted the first public policy initiatives at the end of the 1980s. The memory problem, at this early stage, was mainly geared towards reputation management concerns expressed by the city's white elite. In the third part, I analyze how, at a later phase, alternative emotional interpretations of the past arose and took importance in the framing of the local memory problem. Identification to the victims by Black memory entrepreneurs presenting themselves as "memory descendants" introduced compassion and affliction into the memory frames. They also brought about a "minority" perspective more focused on racial stigmatization and the socio-cultural legacies of slavery – that is symbolic borders making. These new meanings of memory were integrated in the local policy process, but they superposed to the older ones rather than replacing it. This dual perspective – instrumentalization of memory for territorial marketing *and* recognition of the black minority – resulted in a complex, multilayered regime of memory, marked with different emotional appropriations. On the one hand memory politics remained guided by the goal of highlighting the city's "courage" to cope with the past, thus providing Nantais people with some reason to esteem their community. On the other, the policy process partly matched the objective of satisfying the emotional and moral needs expressed by the Black minority, by designing a more inclusive local narrative of the past. In the fourth and last part of the paper, taking May 10th official commemorations of slavery and Nantes' Memorial to the abolition of slavery as examples, I analyze in more depth how city leaders have strived to manage this cohabitation.

Emotions and public policy

It is largely recognized that public agenda setting partly depends upon emotion-ridden collective mobilizations and emotional accounts by the media (Boltanski 1993). Collective fears and moral panics (Cohen 1972), angst and indignation, compassion for the victims and vilification of the guilty have been identified since long as powerful resources for public attention. The frequent use of "sensibilization

devices" ("*dispositifs de sensibilisation"* – Traïni 2011) by mobilized actors looking to incite emotional adhesion to their cause among the general public and politicians has been documented. The persuasion power of discourses and framings involving victims and other directed affected parties has also been noted (Walgrave and Verhulst, 2006). Criminal law (for instance pedophilia : Boussaguet 2004), public health policies stemming from sanitary crises (for instance asbestos : Henry 2007) are examples, among plenty, of the way agenda setting can be reconfigured under the influence of emotional framings of a situation.

It would be misleading, however, to restrict the role of emotions to the sole stage of public attention raising and agenda settings. Emotions can be found at other phases of the policy process and , in some cases, even appear are the main rationale for which one specific public policy is set in place. In the 1960s, for instance, pioneering work by Joseph Gusfield (1966) demonstrated that prohibition laws in the US were rooted in the WASP elite quest for social legitimation and symbolic worth. The passing of the alcohol ban would underline their spiritual and social virtues while stigmatizing the supposed moral deviance of the more recently settled catholic immigrants. With this research, Gusfield paved the way for a sociology of public action that would be aware of the importance of legitimation struggles, the construction of social prestige and the symbolic delimitation of social groups' borders. And because pride, shame, consideration and recognition were at stake in this particular policy, the emotional dimension of policy processes was made evident. Other examples could be mentioned, insofar as in any society laws serve not only to maintain public order and organize the distribution of material goods and burdens. They also set borders between groups defined by symbolic or moral attributes, elevating some as respectable, downgrading others as condemnable.

In her vast exploration of cultural stigmatization and destigmatization, Michèle Lamont (2018) has highlighted how social structures and institutions set standards of moral virtue against which group worthiness is constantly assessed. She takes Blacks or Gay people as examples, noting that the problem of recognition they face is not secondary to material issues, as classical works in political science may consider, but rather lays at the core of their social experience. In her view, public policy can greatly contribute to "destigmatization" processes by upgrading the social worth of groups. Gay marriage is a convincing example in this respect: laws promoting same-sex marriage not only open new rights of the gay. They also recognize and express that gay men and women are a part of the community. Conversely, public policy can also contribute to stigmatization processes: Islamic veil bans in schools or the public space, restrictions on migrants' rights and other limitations imposed on specific communities liberties go the other direction : they place these groups at the bottom of the social status ladder. Although the role of emotions is not investigated in depth in Lamont's works, her insistence that contempt and stigma crucially matter in social life (and therefore in politics) is a fertile ground from which one can think about how much affects, recognition and public policy are intertwined. Such a reading of public policy as a symbolic enterprise ridden with affects could have been extraordinarily inspiring for public policy scholars. Yet very few have pursued this line of research.

Laws are not the only policy instrument at stake. In any state or political community, official speeches by leaders, cultural goods, material or rituals symbols can also be used to draw moral borders between those at the center and those at the margins. The past is a frequent vehicle for this type of identity delimitation. Political powers have historically devoted considerable resources to write narratives, build memorials and establish rituals aimed at creating, framing and supporting an emotional relationship to the community's past – and their present. Social groups, correspondingly, also use symbolic instruments to express dissent, foster alternative feelings of belonging or subvert established powers through instrumentalization of the past. Historians have known and studied such processes for long. But during the past decades, the field of "policies of memory" called some political scholars'

attention as well. They advocated the necessity to look at these practices through the methods, concepts and theorization modes of the sociology of public policy (Gensburger 2010). These efforts resulted in a better understanding of the interrelations between social memory (Halbwachs 1994) and official memory, the profile, role and objectives of "memory entrepreneurs" (Pollak 1993, Hourcade 2015), the greater social attention devoted to national wrongs and the rehabilitation of the victims of state power (Michel 2011), or the instrumentalization of official memory as a way to govern majority-minority relationships (Nobles 2008, Hourcade 2014). Official memorialization processes in post-war (Schwartz and Bayma 1999, Ollick 2007), post-communist (Mink and Neumayer 2013) postslavery (Araujo 2012) or postcolonial contexts have been studied under this light. These researches teach that while the past has been and remains a valuable resource for legitimation processes, dominant actors are growingly challenged by counter-memory initiatives. More often than before, memory policies follow a bottom-up pattern, with various social groups exerting considerable influence upon the way the past is narrated and its relevance for the present framed in public, official discourses and symbolic settings (ie. memorials or commemoration rituals).

What is at stake in these struggles is to recognize that the victims and their descendants belong to the legitimate community, to recognize that they deserve to be valued and treated as such, and to state (anew) which common values hold the group together in the present. In other words, official memory has often become a mean to the recognition of groups once marginalized. Examples of such processes abound: the new African-American Museum in Washington doesn't make racial oppression and antiracist struggles a Black matter. On the contrary, it anchors the black experience at the heart American history and identity. Governmental apologies offered to First Nations in Australia and Canada are also meant to destigmatize them (Nobles 2008). Such decisions have often been accompanied by heated political debates which by themselves indicate the importance that social agents give to symbolic gestures. Apologies – and the policies of redress that can come along with them as in the Canadian case – serve not primarily to provide deprived communities with new material resources. They are explicitly designed to provide moral and social consideration to social groups that have desperately lacked them for decades, with massive underachievement in all aspects of life as a result. All this makes policies of memory resonate strongly with affects: the sense of contempt, recognition, pride, humiliation or shame is what makes people claim for – and governments sometimes endorse – a rewriting of official narratives about the past.

In the remaining sections of this contribution I propose to shed light on similar processes from the point of view of a *local* policy of memory. I will base on the case of Nantes, once the most important port in France for the Atlantic slave trade to explore in more details the interconnection between public policy of memory, emotion and recognition. The case of Nantes is interesting because city leaders decided to put an end to the hitherto unquestioned tendency to silent the slave trade past at a time when no other community in France lend attention to this episode. To what extent emotions – and which ones – played a role in this pioneering attitude ?

Pride of place : stigma and shame as drivers for a new policy of memory

Nantes was once a glorious city. A door to the Empire, the port developed steadily in the 18th and 19th century when liners and cargos sailed the Atlantic on their way to Africa, Asia or the American continent. They brought back sugar, cacao, cotton, tea, porcelains and plenty of other goods which enriched the city's mercantile class and provided a living for thousands of seamen, dockers, ship-builders from the 18th century to the years 1930. But when the 1970s came, this period had faded since long and it was no longer evident what Nantes citizen could be proud of. The Second World War bombings had turned historic districts and the vast majority of the 17th century *hotels particuliers* to ruins. Rivers that used to run through the city had been filled up during the 1930s and replaced by new

streets and parking grounds. 1960s Modernist urbanism had also built motorways that encircled the city centre. Quite at the same time, local industries started to decline: fisheries, canning factories, shipyards, sugar factories, textile plants closed down. Morosely contemplating this evolution, the famous writer Julien Gracq came to describe its native city as unsightly, insular, disharmonious[1]. Nantes' future was unsure, its image depreciated. The city had become marginal on the political, economic or cultural scene. During the 1970 and 1980s, this sense of depressing provinciality became a matter of concern for some groups of citizens, clubs of notables and cultural actors. For instance, the Club Kervegan – a group of progressist notables – engaged in a reflection about the best way to revive Nantes' entrepreneur spirit, reverse negative clichés and enhance attractivity on the national and international scene. The souvenir of the city's maritime grandeur was a central reference in their reflections (Petaux 1982).

When the socialist mayor Jean-Marc Ayrault got elected in 1989, the issue of Nantes image and identity was also high on its personal agenda. At the time, image and communication had become a major concern for many regional capitals in France. The 1970-1980 economic crises had accentuated centralization and tended to provincialize most of them. As a response, many cities adopted plans to rebuild entire districts, attract investment, positively portray their history, highlight their amenities, with the view to positioning themselves as frontrunners in the attractivity competition that was unfolding between local territories (Nay 1994). Many « sleeping beauties » - as communication agencies used to portray Montpellier, Bordeaux, or Nantes at the time – were thus trying to awake through different strategies. Right after its election in 1989, Jean-Marc Ayrault contracted an image audit with Saatchi and Saatchi. In line with the thinking of the Club Kervegan and other elites circles, the report praised the "maritime vocation" of Nantes, highlighted the importance of historical symbols and *lieux de mémoire* that were reminiscent of the city's glorious maritime past. The port history was then quickly instrumentalized in order to build a new, positive narrative that would portray Nantes as an open-minded, creative and open-minded "Atlantic capital". A series of international festivals of culture and the arts were launched, using maritime references as their background in a decided effort to depict the city as a cradle for avant-garde creativity. Massive investment in communication campaigns was made to pass this message through nationally and internationally.

Among JM Ayrault's team, however, some held the view that one particular issue cast a cloud on this strategy, and more generally on the city's capacity to turn toward the future: the slave trade. During the 18th and 19th century, public discourses about the local past were pervaded with what historians called "persistent embarrassment". This resulted in a strong temptation to "obscure the past" (Bodinier and Breteau 1994 : 120). The twentieth century didn't show a comfortable relationship either. In 1985, the then mayor had cancelled a commemoration of slavery proposed by historians of Nantes University and cultural actors. Fears of stigmatizing the city – particularly its economic and social elite – were instrumental in this "censure", as local memory militants named it (Lastrucci). In some intellectual circles of the city, this event triggered a more profound introspection about Nantes' "ghosts" and the extent to which this unsettled relationship to the past could be the source of an handicapping collective neurosis. They convinced the new mayor that coming to terms with the slave trade past was to be made a priority should he wish to provide Nantes with a "strong and harmonious identity" (Chotard 1988). This effort was not only directed at image building and external communication. For his main promotor, a leftist lawyer familiar with psychological theories, a strong move about the memory of the slave trade would help Nantes' inhabitants feel gladder, prouder, more

[1] Julien Gracq, *La forme d'une ville*, Paris, José Corti, 1985, quoted in Guyvarc'h, 1994.

supportive and more enthusiastic for their local community. Their personal self-esteem would also be strengthened.

As a consequence, facing the past, instead of denying it, became the new political strategy under mayor JM Ayrault. Benefits were not expected only on the psychological side. As no other city in France at that time had set up official commemorations or exhibitions about slavery and the slave trade, Nantes would have the opportunity to show off a pioneering and courageous attitude that would help boost its press coverage, reputation and attractivity. In 1992, the city opened a temporary exhibition that lasted until 1994. Set in the Chateau des Ducs de Bretagne – one of the outstanding historical settings in Nantes – the exhibition recalled the history of slavery and the slave trade and situated the attitude and role of the city's merchants in this global network. Organizers and city leaders were at pains to emphasize what this exhibition meant to them: that the Nantais, who came numerous to see it, were collectively casting out "haunting ghosts", that pride of facing the past was replacing the old embarrassment and shame, and that this new positive attitude was contributing to the rebirth of the city as cosmopolite, liberal and a human rights champion. Adopting a new attitude about slavery was then in complete harmony with the more general strategy aiming at boasting the city's new identity.

Memory entrepreneurs, affects and racial destigmatization objectives

What is striking about this sequence is the absence of slave descendants, and more generally any perspective about race and racism, in the process that set the local memory of the slave trade on the agenda. Emotions imbued this policy process but entirely with respect to place belonging and what could be called local nationalism. Destigmatization, recognition, symbolic value boosting had to do only with Nantes as a local community, and not at all with race or blackness. Yet, during the 1980s, the collective memory of slavery underwent deep transformation in France and came to be seen by increasing numbers of Blacks, and particularly people of French Caribbean origin, as a defining part of their identity.

In territories were a dominant part of the population is of slave ascendance (mainly Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyane, La Réunion), traditional public memorialization used to be limited to praising the Republic for freeing the slaves (1848) and making them formally equal to any other French citizen, in coherence with the Republican ideology. Commemorations of Victor Schoelcher, the hero of the parliamentary abolition, embodied this regime of memory. The enduring and popular cult of Schoelcher since the 19th century suggested this egalitarian perspective highly resonated with aspirations of slave descendants communities. After the abolition, the new local elites, composed mainly of former freemen and mixed-race people, chose to exalt faith in the Republic, gratefulness and a looking-forward attitude, while discouraging collective and public memorialization of the slavery past (Chivallon 2012). From the 1970s, however, autonomist and independentist movements confronted these traditional memory frames. For these movements, the formal pledge of equal treatment was being betrayed in concrete facts by the persistence of racism and discrimination in the local society. Moreover, racial groups cleavages inherited from the slavery times continued to fashion the social structure, with a small white elite ruling the economy at the top and a mass of black people struggling with deprivation at the bottom. Many young people had to migrate to the Metropole (through a national migration program until the 1980s) to find a living. Yet, once in mainland France, notwithstanding their full possession of French citizenship, they often experienced racial stigmatization, unrewarding jobs and economic difficulties that irremediably confined them to the lower sections of the social ladder.

Since the Republic was not delivering its promises, glorifying Schoelcher and the abolition made little sense, according to autonomists and independentists. Those who were to be honored and

remembered for identity building purposes were the slaves themselves. Slavery itself had to be fully recognized as the founding, shared, experience of the Antillean people, in lieu of the embarrassed silence that had traditionally pervaded intra-family transmission (Chivallon 2012). Marroons, Black and mixed-race people turned resistant fighters (Toussaint Louverture, Louis Delgrès) were therefore presented as the real heroes to be proud of – not only in political spheres but, perhaps even more powerfully, in the literature and cultural movements (Jolivet 1987). This led to a new memory regime, more centered on the suffering of the victims and their various forms of resistance than on the top-down, parliamentary abolition process. This regime become more and more popular during the 1980s.

This renewed relation to the slavery past had some echo in Nantes when a local Antillean association, created in 1983, started to focus its activities on slavery related activities and commemorations. They invited voices of the creole cultural movement like writers Chamoiseau and Glissant to exchange views with their members. They also started to commemorate slavery publicly in the mid-1980s. Each year, on the day of the abolition, they gathered on the banks of the river Loire, on the *Quai de la Fosse* in the city center, where transatlantic ships were once moored. They used to threw flowers at the river to pay tribute to "victims with no grave". The emotional ceremony frequently involved traditional music and dances. The commemoration was also an opportunity to call upon Nantes leaders to cope with the city's past, at a time when authorities tended to favor silence and avoidance of the subject. Such memory activism was unusual at the time in mainland France, were Antillean groups mainly organized folkloric activities and didn't wish to engage in more politicized activities (Célestine 2009). The adhesion of some community leaders in Nantes to autonomist movements explain why the Antillean movement there went beyond the habitual folkloric dance and creole banquets. As a result, during gatherings and in the group's newsletter, the association's leaders used to regularly argue for the need of "a conscious process of accepting [their] heritage" with the view to making people from the *Outre-mer* see themselves differently and stop deny the Black part of their genealogy : "yes, the *Outre-mer* people have received their origin in legacy: we are both children of slaves and slave-traders"[2].

> " When my brother came to visit me in Nantes, in 1999, I was strolling around with him. And when we arrived on the *Quai de la Fosse,* I told him "hey, we are on the *Quai de la Fosse.* It's the place from where your colon ancestors left to fetch your African ancestors to take them to Martinique !"[3].

The same woman recalls that it is her encounter with the association and other Antillais militant when she arrived in Nantes that made her "open her eyes" about who she was. It dawned on her, for the first time in her life, the strong relationship between her experience of racism in daily life (including her own family in Martinique) and slavery:

> « In my own family, I am one… with the highest melanin levels. But my family, they've always said we did not to do things like Africans, or as Antillais. Everything was related to skin color ! So I was asking some questions to myself… It was like this in the schoolyard, in relationships with adults. It's only a few years since I can look at a someone Caucasian into the eyes ! When I was a child, there were like gods… I felt so small, so tiny. When I arrived in France, I experienced racism but, well, for me it was normal. I was Black. It was normal that people wouldn't like Blacks. I had no problem living like this. Until I came to Nantes. Here it's been another story (…).

[2] « Où est l'intérêt général ? », *Dom Tom Com*, n°6, 3e trimestre 1993, p. 1.
[3] Interview with Isabelle, Nantes, December 2008.

> They told me that if I was "black", and if I behave like this it was because of this and that [*meaning : slavery*]… And indeed it revealed things that I had deeply concealed"[4].

Experience of racism, both in their native society or in mainland France, is widespread among members of this association. Nearly every account of how they came to be interested into slavery starts with the narration of a scene of racial oppression and stigmatization.

> " I was revolted against my parents. Because they were colonized people. My father, I used to see him, he was ready to go in his orchard and pick the most beautiful fruits to give them to the *gendarmes* when they passed by. And so they came every week to get food for nothing ! He would do that with white people, yet he wouldn't have given a single orange to our neighbor, because he was black ! I felt that revolt in me, I was saying to myself, one can't live like this… And when my father spoke of Césaire, he simply couldn't understand that a Black man would speak with such a language. He couldn't understand ![5]"

In this context, mobilized actors in Nantes felt a very sensible relation to the city's slave-trading past. As slave-descendants, and as victims of stigmatization attitudes that have their into slavery, their position was of course different from the sole dimension of guilt-management that was being put forward by the official framings of memory since 1989. Calling for a public memory of slavery, for this group, is seen as a strategy to fight prejudices about race. But it is also, following Césaire and the Créolité theorists, a way to regain the sense of a unique, valuable, identity based on the pride of having their origin in a "rhizomatic" genealogy[6] made of an incomparable mix of origins. In other terms, the memory of slavery serves to counter feelings of shame and lowliness through a more glorious appropriation of the past. To set up public policies of memory, in this context, is seen as an essential contribution to destigmatization efforts.

Right after JM Ayrault's election, the memory entrepreneurs perspective seemed to converge with local strategies. "Nantes open to the world: we say yes ! We wholeheartedly agree. And we want, through our own identity quest, to help renovate the negative image built upon several centuries of slavery and colonization"[7] red an article in the group's gazette, when the city was preparing the *Les anneaux de la Mémoire* operation. However when the exhibition closed its doors in 1994, the group felt strongly disappointed that nothing was planned that could recall or symbolize *permanently* the relation between the city and the slave trade. In particular no memorial or museum was in project. Nantes municipal leaders estimated that the city had completed its "duty of memory", that the public problem was set, and therefore didn't want to go further. As a consequence, although they were generally supportive of the political majority at the city council, the Antillean movement started to lobby more actively in favor of a permanent *lieu de mémoire*.

In 1998, taking opportunity of the national commemoration of the 1848 abolition, they decided to build a statue right on the *Quai de la Fosse*. The iron and concrete statue, made by a local artist, was inaugurated before a large crowd on April 27th, the day of the emancipation decree anniversary. It was meant to be temporary, as the memory militants advocated the construction of a larger, permanent monument by the municipality. The statue represented a liberated slave raising his arms, looking up to the sky, with broken chains dangling from its wrists. However, a few days later, the statue was discovered knocked down. One arm had been severed from the body and thrown into the river. The chains had been winded up around the ankle. The damage was readily interpreted by members of the

[4] *Idem*
[5] Interview with Jules, Nantes, January 2009.
[6] Edouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1981.
[7] *Dom Tom Com*, no 17, 2e Trimestre 1996, p. 3.

group as a "profanation" intended to "dishonor the slaves"[8]. Before the press, who covered the story extensively, they spoke of their shock and indignation. In their views, this act seemed to reawaken Nantes' pathologic relationship to the past. The knocking down of this small memorial indeed contradicted the optimistic narrative about "ghosts casted out" and a pacified, generous, collective confrontation with the slave trading past that had dominated the past decade. The local press, as if to offset this disappointment, related "the very positive reactions of solidarity" received by the association[9]. Politicians, on their side, deemed the act "unspeakable"[10], "an insult to the slaves' memory"[11] or "a shame and disgust for all the democrats"[12]. Meanwhile, the memory entrepreneurs astutely took profit of this compassional climax by leaving the destroyed statute lay down on the spot for three weeks. They also gathered for a silent ceremony around the collapsed concrete body.

The affective dimension of memory as a public issue in Nantes reached on that occasion a level it had not yet known. It pushed authorities into seriously considering, for the first time, building a permanent memorial on the *Quai de la Fosse*. It would be, in the words of one city council member, a "symbol for Nantes people and the next generations". The Memorial was indeed built and inaugurated in 2012 , after long delays.

Under the influence of Antillean activists well implanted in the city, the meanings associated with slavery and the slave trade were being slowly complexified. While slavery was seen in the 1980s only as a defining part of Nantes identity, in the next decade slavery and the slave trade were increasingly perceived as a defining part of Creole and Blacks people living in the city, who were growingly recognized as the ones really bearing the burden of the past. While it developed locally, this new perspective was also progressively adopted at the national level with the passing of the Loi Taubira, in 2001, which stemmed from similar claims by Antillean memory entrepreneurs at the national level. The law recognized slavery and the slave trade as "crimes against humanity", set a national date (may 10th) for an annual, official, commemoration and changed school curricula on the matter. In this context, Nantes leaders could not any longer focus their action policy on the sole destigmatization of their city or consider the problem solved with the now closed exhibition. Under the new definition of the memory problem, local symbolic policies also had to address the emotional and recognition needs of slave-descendants communities. However, cohabitation between the two perspectives didn't prove easy to manage.

Memory policy or memory police ? Official emotions and the symbolic order

From 1998, Nantes adopted public memorialization instruments that gave an essential role to emotions. These symbolic devices were designed to *display* public, official emotions, in connection with the suffering of the slaves, which was not the case with the 1992-1994 exhibition. However, not all emotions or affects were deemed appropriate. Affliction appeared as the most legitimate and took center stage in official rituals and in the memorial project. Angst, resentment, guilt or shame, on the contrary, have been constantly dismissed through various forms of disqualification. In this last section, the cases of the Memorial and of 10th may commemoration rituals will help illustrate how public authorities strive to set – and patrol – a border between what would be an acceptable, publicly

[8] Les nantais choqués par le saccage de la statue en mémoire de l'esclavage », *Presse Océan*, 4 may 1998
[9] « Esclavage : un symbole fracassé », *Ouest France*, 4 mai 1998
[10] « Statue saccagée quai de la Fosse : "Un geste inqualifiable" pour Jean-Marc Ayrault, *Ouest France*, 7 may 1998.
[11] « Fosse : sculpture monumentale en projet », *Ouest France*, 5 may 1998.
[12] Press release by the Socialist Party, quoted in *Dom Tom Com*, n°25, 2e trimester 1998: 8.

displayable, emotion related to Nantes' slave trading past and what would be symbolically sanctioned as (politically) illegitimate affects.

In his work about social movements, Christophe Traïni highlighted that mobilized actors frequently set up material or symbolic devices aimed at raising emotions among the public. This strategy is meant to raise awareness and adhesion to the cause. He coined the notion of « sensitization devices » [*dispositifs de sensibilisation*] to account for these tactics. Such categorization can be used also in the public policy sphere: (local) governmental action sometimes involves the use of material layouts, or staging practices designed to trigger emotions from the public. This is precisely the role devoted to Nantes' Memorial to the Abolition of slavery, which was decided in the wake of the 1998 incident. Following an international competition, the project was attributed to American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. This choice had one important advantage in city leaders' view: Wodiczko had proposed an architectural piece that would not only subtly address Nantes' collective relationship to the past, but that would also, given the fame and ambition of the artist, single out the city on the international contemporary art map. Yet the choice also had a flip side. Taking a respected, international artist on board would make things more complicated in terms of framing and controlling the meanings conveyed by the memorial.

Inspired by the "counter-memory" movement (Young 1994), Wodiczko designed a Memorial based on meditation and reflexivity. The main part is a tunnel that is literally dug into the *Quai de la Fosse,* right along the Loire river from which the visitor is only separated by the concrete structure of the old quay. On the surface, a "meditation path" leads the visitor to the Memorial entry. The path winds between hundreds of plaques set in the ground that mention the names of slave ships, trade posts on the African coast, and other evocations of the slave trade. There is no figuration of the slave trade or slavery in this monument. Rather, it is the uncomfortable passage in the dark and humid channel, with the river and ocean nearby, that are made "the only physical presence of the slave trade". This experience is designed to trigger emotions through the visitor's personal sensations, thinking and reflexivity:

> "This is a place that is rather gripping. It raises images and sensations. You can imagine the ship's departure, what the slaves endured, being locked in the old of a ship… You are beneath the city, in place that is hostile, very cold in winter, very clammy and as you are in direct contact with the Loire, you can feel the wind, the waves slapping the dock... You are in an extremely rough place"[13].

This concept had been chosen by the city's authorities because "on a topic like this, about the relation between history and memory, a mere statue wouldn't have been symbolic or evocative enough". But not all sectors of the cities agreed. The meditative, abstractionist, twist of the monument didn't please much the local memory groups who would have favored a more direct and easily readable evocation of the suffering of the slaves. Other complained about the "commiserate" attitude of this "American" monument – "we're made to cry, we're made to empathize.. and then we erase it all" which didn't fit, in their opinion, the rationalist nature of French culture[14]. These critics would have favored more direct language, historical facts and pedagogy… and less emotions. Among the city council opposition, critics also voiced their opposition. To them the monument tended to stigmatize Nantes, with its insistence on the dark, the hollow, the rough materiality. Instead of this "gloomy monument buried underground"[15], they would have preferred a more visible, more positive artwork that would better

[13] Interview with Lucy, project manager for the Memorial, Nantes culture department, may 2011.
[14] « Monument contre l'esclavage : le mauvais procès », Nantes-Forum, *Ouest France*, 25 may 2004.
[15] « Le Mémorial échauffe toujours les esprits », *Ouest France*, 15 février 2008.

reflect the city's pioneering attitude with regards to coming to terms with the past and the fact that "reconciliation had been achieved with the *Les Anneaux de la Mémoire* exhibition".

This argument stroke a chord amongst the political majority. Whereas the main philosophy of the Memorial was accepted, its political promotors were at pains to setting limits and conveying interpretations that would ease the shame-inducing, or guilt-inducing potentiality of the monument. For instance, they asked the artist about adding a vertical element, like a lighthouse, that could nuance the extremely humble materiality of the place. The artist initially accepted but the idea was abandoned for budgetary reason. The mayor's entourage also readily barred a proposal made by Wodiczko at the beginning of the process. He would have liked the city to raise a local tax on coffee, as a way to remember the historical debt Nantes owes to slavery. The steering committee in charge of the memorial straight away made clear that "punishing the Nantais" wouldn't be an option and that local memorialization processes shouldn't play with feelings of guilt, repentance, or reparation" (Chérel 2012). Repentance, the mayor and vice-mayor confirmed, had no place in this process, because "one can't be held accountable for something that was not done by oneself" and because memorialization of a difficult past shouldn't mean looking for the guilty. In order to make this "positive" perspective clearer, the theme of the memorial was clarified in 2004. Officially, it is not dedicated to slavery nor its victims but to the *abolition* of slavery, which is of course a motive of joy and pride more than regret and meditation.

From 2006, the municipality has also organized an official commemoration of slavery on *Quai de la Fosse*, each May 10th. Various local groups related to the memory of slavery, human rights, African cultures etc. take part to the two-days program with their own activities and conferences. The official part of the ceremony, on May 10th, takes the form of a tribute to the victims of the slave trade and slavery. The ritual borrows its symbolic codes from the traditional public commemoration framework, with flowers laid at a monument by the highest authority present and a minute's silence. In that case, the monument is the Loire, which, as with Wodiczko's Memorial, is made a living *lieu de mémoire*. This kind of ceremony is intended to induce emotion among the participants: flowers make the victims present and the minute's silence calls for meditation, compassion, empathy. The attitude of the crowd is respectful, dignified, as one can expect for a ritual akin to a mourning ceremony. As the minute's silence stops and people disperse, some stay longer, adopting meditative attitude. But inducing emotions is not the only goal, and perhaps not the most important. A ceremony like this one also serves to display affliction as the official, legitimate, politically validated emotion.

Yet, the suffering of the victims is only abstractly suggested. No details are given. Persecutors don't feature in the narrative. And social consequences of slavery and the slave trade are obscured. Thus, the consensualness of the ceremony is attained at the cost of taking out all contentious elements related to slavery and its heritage. The affliction ritual is instrumental in this respect : concentrating on abstract victims, through a ceremony that calls for dignified mourning, discourages contenders to voicing claims or adopting a more political attitude. Paying tribute to the victims this way means symbolically integrating them into the community – the common patrimony. But as Johan Michel (2010) remarks, patrimonialization also involves sterilization. Victims, in that case, are depoliticized.

Such depoliticization of the local public policy of memory has not been well accepted by all parties in Nantes. The institutionalization of May 10th in the mid-2000s attracted a number on initiatives from civil society organizations. Among them was a group called "Passerelle noire". It was mainly composed of Nantais of African origins involved in the cultural sector (musicians, playmakers, comedians, writers). This group was also connected to Nantes Pan-Africanist milieu, which has been quite lively since the 1980s. In 2007, they set up a kind of open air theater play that proposed a frank alternative to the conformist ceremony endorsed by the municipality. The "March of the slaves" as it was called,

travelled along Nantes city centre on the day of the ceremony. As opposed to the abstract and meditative official ritual, the march was a rough reenactment of slavery. It featured a "slave procession", with comedians made up and dressed in rags, some with their hands chained, who progressed falteringly along the city streets. White guards shouted at them and whipped them along the way. At some points shorts sketches were played out. In one of them, a young woman tried to escape Nantais slave-traders but was recaptured and beaten to death. With this emotionally challenging and sometimes violent street theater, Passerelle Noire tried to "show what slavery was like", because they deemed images and direct representations "more pedagogical" than speeches or rituals. They offered a cultural object that plays with compassion and sympathy, but also angst, disgust, indignation, revolt. The march thus offered an alternative affective experience that directly confronted the restraint – and sanitized dimension - of the official ceremony. It was organized each year from 2007 to 2017.

This program matched a specific political purpose. It was made, essentially, to recall that slavery was a matter of oppression of Black people and that Black identity and achievements should be at the core of slavery memory initiatives. In 2008, organizers invited Amelia Boynston Robinson, a comrade of Martin Luther King, to sponsor the procession. In 2010, "Resistance" was set at the theme of the march. On this occasion, parallels were drawn between the Resistance to the nazis and that of the enslaved, under the form of *marronage* and revolts. In 2011, Malaak Shabazz, one of Malcom X's daughters, sponsored the march and walked alongside the slaves. That year, the procession was also flanked by a group of Black activists from Paris, the *brigade anti-négrophobie,* a newly created movement that fought racism and discriminations against black people. With this politically loaded references and messages, the march appeared as an attempt to reconfigure the orientation of the public problem of memory: not territorial marketing, nor consensual humanistic tribute to faceless victims, but a vehicle that should be designed to bring blackness and Black people more respect and recognition.

Can the two visions cohabite ? Nantes city leaders and the main memory entrepreneurs converged to dismiss Passerelle Noire perspective. The aesthetics of the procession, its figurative, straightforward representation of slavery cruelty were heavily criticized. "One can't ape such suffering" judged one prominent Antillean memory group leader[16], while the vice-mayor in charge of culture complained about the "disastrous images" that the march produces[17]. This latter judgement reveals how much reputation management goals have remained at the core of Nantes' public memory strategies. This perspective pushes politicians to set clear limits to the instrumentalization of emotions associated with slavery. Abstract and neutralized affliction are acceptable, but not the vilification of the guilty, nor any representation of the past that, in their views, could induce angst or resentment.

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In this paper I have tried to untangle the very complex set of emotions that have been influential in a particular policy making process: Nantes' policy of memory related to its slave-trading past. I've identified three levels were emotions have played a role. First, emotions contributed to public problem construction. During the 1990s, it's because Nantes city leaders felt that the slave-trading past – and even more so, occultation of the slave-trading past – ashamed the city and contributed to what they identified as an inferiority complex that the issue of Nantes memory made its way onto the local political agenda. Later, it's because they had, as "slave-descendants" a very sensible relation to the city's slave-trading past that Black memory entrepreneurs stepped in and tried to change the meaning

[16] La fille de Malcom X à la *Marche des esclaves* de Nantes », *Ouest France*, 5 may 2011
[17] Interview with the vice mayor in charge of cultural affairs, may 2011.

of memory making in Nantes, which they managed partially. It is also because the knocking down of the 1998 liberated slave statue provoked, shock, angst and sympathy that local authorities decided to launch the process of building the Memorial to the abolition of slavery. In this perspective, emotions and emotionally marked actors prove influential in territorial policy making. Secondly, emotions can be made policy instruments. The Memorial and the official commemoration of slavery are symbolic tools that represent a certain kind of collective, legitimate affects related to the past (compassion and affliction) and which try to induce the same affects from the public. However governing emotions has not been easy : the Memorial meanings were disputed between the artist and city leaders, who held partly different views on which emotions had to be favoured. The official commemoration of slavery by the city council promotes "soft" and largely depoliticized emotions that have been challenged by the more straightforward approach of the March of the Slaves. Lastly, emotions, seen from the wider perspective of recognition and destigmatization appear as the ultimate goal of public memory making. In the first phase, it's Nantes stigma as a city reluctant to remember the past which is at stake. Territorial marketing is a central goal. In a second phase racial stigma and the recognition of the Black minority are introduced as another policy objective. However, the two perspectives tend to cohabit throughout Nantes policy making process rather than excluding each other. Blackness and the fight against racism could indeed become policy objectives in the late 1990s, but not at the expenses of Nantes territorial marketing goals, which have remained high on the agenda throughout the last three decades of memory policy making. The complex intertwining of these two destigmatization goals and the constant oscillation between corresponding emotions, both as drivers for action and as instruments, might be, in the end, what best characterizes Nantes local policy of memory.

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