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**Genocide, Slavery, and Violence: Imagining Reparations in the Francophone Indian
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Slavery is “genocide by substitute,” famously declares the Martinican poet and politician Aimé Césaire in the 1970s, in reference to the historical institution of slavery in the Caribbean (Rothberg 2009). His allegation raises a pressing question that continues to create contention both within and outside the field of genocide studies: how to constitute what is and is not genocide? The unresolved question of slavery as genocide plays a pivotal role in the debate, as indicated by work done by genocide scholars such as Adam Jones, with references to the well-established field of the Atlantic Slave Trade often offered as supporting evidence. This paper demonstrates the need to imagine reparations for historical violence in the less visible field of Indian Ocean slave trade to consider the ways in which the use of the term *genocide* could foster the conditions ripe for reparations. By focusing on the multicultural, multilingual island-nation of Mauritius as a microcosm of slavery in the South-Western Indian Ocean (even as I acknowledge the particularities of each island system and their discrete histories), I suggest that slavery under the French (1715-1810) could constitute genocide and that British colonial practice (1810-1968) continued to maintain conditions that did not reintegrate slaves into colonial society, upon abolition of slavery in 1835, leading to the current marginalized place of today's descendants of slaves in Mauritius. By considering the possibilities of the term “genocide,” I envision the ways in which reparations could foster new directions forward, particularly for female descendants of slaves who were often double victims of the masculine slave society (Vergès 2001).

Following historian Benjamin Madley's methodology in *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*, I use the 1948 United Nations General Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNGC) as the guideline that outlines the conditions that define genocide. Despite the proliferation of definitions for the atrocity since the 1980s, the UNGC is the only legal code that allows for prosecution for this crime against humanity through its ratification by a number of nations. Article 2 of the convention outlines that genocide is “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such” and outlines several acts, including “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” and “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” By focusing on two possible genocidal moments of the slave ship and plantation conditions, I aim to demonstrate how the French Empire caused “serious bodily or mental harm to the group,” actions that were furthermore institutionalized by the Code Noir.

The historiography of slavery in Mauritius is rife with conflict and contradiction. When describing conditions in the Indian Ocean, historian Gwyn Campbell softens the plight of women, in line with traditional historiography. Yet, he does acknowledge that, in contrast to the male-dominated Atlantic Slave trade, “the majority of slaves traded in the IOW were female, notably girls and young women, valued particularly for their sexual attractiveness and reproductive capacity: young female slaves generally commanded higher prices than male and older female slaves” (Campbell xi). Depending on the scholar’s perception of the issue, the magnitude of the violent conditions seems to vary widely. Historian Veejay Teelock of the University of Mauritius, in her seminal text *Bitter Sugar* that signals a break with traditional

historiography, argues that there is a “myth of ‘mildness’” in the historiography of slavery in the Indian Ocean. Even with the establishment of UNESCO’s Slave Route projects, there continues to be a lack of studies concerning not only the Indian Ocean, but also Mauritius in particular. We turn to two possible genocidal moments to further consider the question of slavery as genocide.

GENOCIDAL MOMENTS

I focus on the locations of the slave ship and the plantation to depict the ways in which slavery could constitute a case of genocide in the Indian Ocean. The journey across the Atlantic has been well documented (Miller 2007), but less attention has been paid to the inhumane boat conditions in the Indian Ocean. Depending on the season, for example, 20-30% of the captives died en route (Moutou 67). A prominent historian, Auguste Toussaint contends that mortality rates were 21% for 64 vessels that travelled to Mascarene Islands from East Africa from 1777 to 1808 (Heuman 39). On the plantation, the death rate usually exceeded the birth rate, at times by significantly high margins. Current research points to high mortality rates in both the slave ships and on the plantations. While the numbers show extreme levels of neglect, to be considered a case of genocide, the French Empire would have had to demonstrate an “intent to destroy” a part or the whole group: there lies the difficulty of labeling slavery as genocide and why scholars have yet to reach a consensus on this pressing issue.

When analyzing the Code Noir in conjunction to the UNGC, it is arguable that official colonial policy created conditions for genocide, because the Code Noir fostered a policy of cultural effacement, which historian Benjamin Moutou refers to as a “cultural genocide” (Moutou 180) in Mauritius (and it must be acknowledged that while Raphael Lemkin wished to

include cultural genocide in the UNGC, it is not currently part of the definition). Slaves, for instance, did not have the right to have a name as an individual, but could have a first name based solely on the master's decision. Another historian argues that the Code Noir created the conditions of the “inflicted effacement” of the total memory of slaves’ identity to create a new “servile” identity. The high mortality rates and the institutionalized policy through the Code Noir suggest that more work needs to be done in examining French colonial practice in Mauritius with regards to slavery to be able to use the term “genocide.” It is clear nonetheless that the slaves were in difficult, often dire conditions, which continued even after abolition.

At the eve of British abolition of slavery, Mauritius had the third largest slave population, after Barbados and Jamaica. Historians such as Moutou blame the British for the current state of descendants of slaves, despite abolishing slavery, because they did not have a “*master plan*” to offer a place in society to the newly liberated slaves (Moutou 73). Indeed, the British opted to implement a system of indenture that created different, yet also difficult conditions of labor as they imported workers from India.

Although extensive archival work in the Mascarene Islands, as well as in imperial holdings in Europe, would further make a more compelling, definitive case for genocidal moments in Indian Ocean slavery, it is my contention in this paper that one could consider the conditions of possibility of genocide that unfolded in the Indian Ocean. Yet, even without assigning the term genocide, the reverberations of the violence of the institution of slavery continue to resonate in contemporary Mauritian society, pointing to the importance of fostering a context of understanding favorable to the idea of reparations.

CONTEMPORARY MAURITIUS

With 70% of the current Mauritian population descended from Indian indentured servants brought to the island from 1835 to roughly 1920, the national motto of “unity in diversity” obscures the problem of the Hindu-dominated government that leaves African slave descendants with virtually no political representation. They live rather in *cités ouvrières* (municipal housing estates), constructed in 1960 after the infamous and destructive cyclone Carol, creating problems of ghettoization (Moutou 78). They are kept out of agriculture, commerce, public functions and politics. The pervasive idea of descendants of slaves is that they were “gens sans terre” (people without a land), indicative of a general effacement of identity and belonging as a result of the violent conditions of slavery.

By employing the term genocide to describe the historical violence that characterized slavery, the possibilities of political representation and financial compensation offer obvious solutions. Public reference to creoles (that is, descendants of slaves) also often uses the term “malaise creole” to refer to the social, economic inequalities experienced by the creole population. Yet such a term refuses to imagine reparations or a way forward to fix the historical wrongs.

On a deeper level, reparations could allow symbolic remembrance of historical trauma, translating into better maintenance of Le Morne, the Mauritian UNESCO site that commemorates slavery and global *marronage* (Teelock 2005), where escaped slaves would hide upon escape of the plantation. There is currently no data on maintenance because Le Morne opened up as a hiking spot in May 2016, but a recent archival trip to Mauritius confirms that it is covered in trash with a lack of clean up, contrasting sharply with the nicely maintained Aapravasi

Ghat, the UNESCO site commemorating indentured servitude in the capital Port Louis that offers an inundation of information to educate the visitor. Le Morne, on the other hand, currently does not offer any pamphlets or visual media. Education of the role of slavery at Le Morne and better educational opportunities in general for descendants of slaves could furthermore offer another form of reparation. An increase in educational opportunities could also enable descendants to flourish in creative scholarship, as slavery is not frequently depicted in novels, despite the growing body of work by Mauritian authors, many of whom are being recognized by prestigious international prizes (Ravi 2013).

POWER OF “GENOCIDE”: CONCLUSION

Using the term genocide will mobilize action in Mauritius as it evokes a certain legal and social status. Whereas the term cannot be used retroactively in the legal sense, it can be applied anachronistically to confer the correct designation upon a violent event (Kiernan, “Is Genocide an Anachronistic concept?”). By thinking through the concept of genocide in conjunction with slavery, I envision reparations as a way forward for the creole descendants of slaves in contemporary Mauritius to gain political traction and advocate for themselves in the economic and cultural spheres. The reparation itself would begin with the recognition of that violence as “genocide.” The affective dimensions of conferring a weighed term such as genocide are immense. The link between economics and culture is a difficult one to point out; but political power could lead to better maintenance of Le Morne. Port Louis is the wealthiest capital in Africa and Mauritius has been referred to as the Tiger of the Indian Ocean for its booming sugar exports and textile production. It also has a burgeoning tech industry, with many “cyber cities”

being built in the coming years. Descendants of slaves could therefore benefit from the wealth that is beginning to pour into Mauritius by gaining political and economic traction.

Dirk Moses, in quoting Raphael Lemkin, argues that the study of genocide ultimately offers a way of rearranging one's view of history, not as wars among states, but rather among people. These questions of history and of imagining reparations of historical violence inevitably harken to a reimagining of historiography. As Teelock indicates about the history of the sugar plantation under the British Empire, traditional Mauritian historiography operates under several myths and generalizations with regards to slavery. I conclude by referring back to my more general question: Is slavery a form of genocide? If so, should descendants be offered reparations? More archival, archeological and oral research in the South Western Indian Ocean will help answer these questions, which are pressing and pertinent not only in Mauritius, but also in many other former slave societies, such as our own.

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