

Coming to Terms with the Colonial Past: The French and Others

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In 1929 one of the key works of French colonial history was published by an Australian historian, Stephen H. Roberts. *History of French Colonial Policy (1870–1925)* was a version of Roberts's thesis at the LSE, published in the year that he took up an appointment as the second Challis Professor of History here. Roberts had gone from Australia to Britain, there to study French colonialism, after which he had the good fortune to move from a School of Economics to a Faculty of Arts. After eighteen years as Challis Professor, he served as Vice-Chancellor from 1947 to 1967.¹ Roberts's study of French colonialism comprises two volumes and 741 pages. He begins: 'This book is an attempt to cover an obvious gap in modern European history. It is strange that, despite the importance of the subject, nothing exists on it in English'. He then noted that his interest had derived from research on the French in the Pacific. The preface continues with a reflection on Roberts's experience of writing the study:

[T]he book does not pretend to be an interpretation based on actual colonial experience: it is a piece of historical research and analysis, the main colonial element coming from the fact that the author himself has lived for most of his life in a colony and thus has some capability of understanding the colonial point of view. It would be foolish to assume that actually living in the French colonies would not result in a more living presentation: but, on the other hand, one can write of the Middle Ages without having lived in them.²

Anyone who writes of another time and place does somehow feel

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foreign, but Roberts's last phrase gives us heart, and perhaps he developed that 'second identity', to use the title of one of Richard Cobb's memorable essays,³ which bonds historians of France with France itself. Roberts concluded with a somewhat ambiguous (and curious) judgment:

The French remain elaborate town-builders but not sewage-experts: and yet they keep their populations stable, except in Moslem lands. In the last four facts, jumble though they may seem, one perhaps gets as near as possible to the real nature of French colonization – a great work, but one more heroic than efficient, and one still full of faults and extravagances – and opportunities!⁴

Roberts was writing at the time that colonialism had attained its apogee. Only two years after *French Colonial Policy* was published, France celebrated and consecrated its achievements at a grand Exposition Coloniale in Paris. Eight million visitors toured pavilions of the colonies, to see a replica of Angkor Wat and the Djenné mosque of Mali, to be entertained by parades of Senegalese soldiers and performances by Cambodian dancers, to marvel at the arts and crafts of distant places, to wander around the 'black villages' reconstructed in the Bois de Vincennes, and to gape at Melanesians exhibited as specimens of primitive races receiving the benefits of the *mission civilisatrice*. On the other side of Paris, surrealists and Communists organised an anti-colonial exhibition, displaying the results of invasion, land despoliation, economic exploitation, cultural alienation, violence and massacres. The anti-colonial show proved less popular than the Vincennes exhibition. Here, after all, was French colonialism at its most triumphant and its most confident.⁵ *La plus grande France* covered 11 or 12 million square kilometres and counted 100 million citizens and subjects. The Tricolour flew over islands in the West Indies and Indian Ocean, over Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa, and an immense swathe of western and equatorial Africa, over Madagascar and Indochina, and over smaller colonies, from enclaves in India to New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and the Franco-British condominium of the New Hebrides in the South Pacific.⁶

On show at Vincennes, too, were the colonies of other countries

– though Britain, which had organised a colonial fair a few years before, politely declined to attend. Pavilions displayed the colonies of the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy and Denmark, and also the United States. Imperialism was not just a French project, but a European project – indeed, the vocation of all civilised countries, so imperialists claimed. Though Britain might rule the lion's share, France proudly possessed the world's second largest overseas empire. The imperial flags were flying, and few assumed that they would soon be lowered. Stephen Roberts, therefore, was writing about a history that was also actuality: colonial past and current events.

Despite the confidence of those years, the colonial edifice, within a generation, would come tumbling down. The effects of the Second World War, the rise of anti-colonialism, and changing international circumstances meant the end of empire. It was not a happy ending for France. The French managed to stifle an insurrection, though with great bloodshed, in Madagascar in 1947. Anti-colonialism in Indochina proved more difficult to suppress, and after eight years of warfare that began in 1946, Ho Chi Minh's nationalist Vietnamese forced France into an ignominious withdrawal at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The same year, an insurrection began in Algeria, a long colonial war that was in some ways also a French civil war, and that concluded with the retreat of France from Algeria in 1962, leaving the still angry ghosts that haunt both Algeria and France.

Meanwhile, the French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa gained independence, as did other parcels of French territory, including – though not without French reluctance – the New Hebrides, as Vanuatu, in 1980. As empire receded, discussion of the imperial past quietened. President de Gaulle promoted a modernising image of France, removed from an antiquated colonial past and the fractures that it had caused, and moving towards prosperity at home and engagement with Europe and the newly independent Third World. The relationship between France, the old colonies and other French-speaking countries was recast as the concept and institutions of 'Francophonie', a cultural commonwealth of nations. After the bitter Algerian War, most of the French agreed not to dwell on the past, a *pacto de olvido* about imperialism.⁷ Imperial history fell out of

fashion as historians studied the indigenous histories of the formerly colonised countries, charted resistance to invaders and the emergence of nationalist and anti-colonialist movements; they also denounced the neo-colonialism that seemed to prolong the old order. New political and historiographical concerns made pith-helmet history unfashionable, though such excellent scholars as Charles-Robert Ageron, Pierre Brocheux, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch and Marc Michel kept study of the phenomenon of colonialism alive.

In the mid-1980s, colonial questions unpredictably came to the fore with ructions in the backwater of the empire that had escaped decolonisation, the South Pacific. For some observers, this appeared to be a replay of conflicts in a different time and place. The pro-independence coalition in New Caledonia, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste, took a name inspired by the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale, while its opponents chanted *Calédonie Française* just as earlier settlers had chanted *Algérie Française*. Violence – destruction of property, kidnappings, killings – brought chaos to New Caledonia just as it had to North Africa. *Indépendantistes* and their supporters charged that France was intent on maintaining superannuated colonial rule, partly to safeguard geopolitical interests, especially nuclear testing in French Polynesia. Independence provided the only way, they argued, to throw off the shackles of racially-based domination and exploitation. Kanak *indépendantistes* found parallels with Algeria in such strategies as ‘nomadisation’ of French troops through the territory, efforts to form a ‘third force’ between proponents and opponents of independence, suggestions that the territory be cleaved into two states, and in muscular repression of nationalist dissent. *Anti-indépendantistes*, or *loyalistes*, as they preferred to be called, defended rights to land on which their families had lived for several generations, and their political rights as fully-fledged French citizens to remain so.⁸

It was during these years that I began studying French colonial history, examining the French presence in the South Pacific. This was an area on which, like Roberts many years before, I found ‘an obvious gap’ in the literature. I moved on to examine, in the company of a geographer, John Connell, the whole set of ten remaining French

overseas territories, and that led us to a comparative examination of the 'last colonies' of various European and other states – from the Falklands to Pitcairn, the Danish Faeroes to the Dutch West Indies, Puerto Rico to Guam, the Cocos Islands to Norfolk Island. Might decolonisation arrive too in these distant and small outposts? We were – rightly – cautious in answering that question, and it turned out that the most recent rounds of decolonisation occurred in the Soviet empire and in Indonesia's colony of East Timor.⁹ New Caledonia is slated to vote on sovereignty (though no one is quite clear what that means) in a decade; the current President of French Polynesia is a long-standing *indépendantiste* who seems to have no plans to move to independence. All is quiet, as it almost always has been, on the Wallisian front.

Despite the lack of further decolonisation in the 'confetti of empire', as Jean-Paul Guillebaud famously called the remaining French territories,¹⁰ paradoxically by the 1990s interest in colonial history revived in France (and elsewhere). The crises of Marxism and *tiers-mondisme*, and the manifest political, economic and social crises and tragedies in many former colonies, disoriented perspectives that seemed orthodox a few years before. The meta-narratives, whether colonialist or anti-colonialist, now appeared less certain. The 'cultural turn' in historical study prompted an interest in colonial iconography and literature, the artefacts of empire and the assumptions they seemed to incarnate, as well as in colonial cultural hybridity and trans-national exchange.¹¹ New international issues – the rise of Asia and the seeming fall of Africa into a spiral of misery, and the phenomenon of globalisation – sparked interest in old colonised areas. Anniversaries – the bicentenary of the French Revolution and its first (if temporary) emancipation of slaves, the quincentenary of Columbus' and Vasco da Gama's voyages, the 150th anniversary of the definitive abolition of slavery in the French empire in 1848,¹² the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Dutch East India Company,¹³ the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Franco-Indochinese War¹⁴ – all prompted reflections on Europe's colonising past. Meanwhile, veterans of the colonial experience, including aging soldiers of the wars of decolonisation, tried to secure their memorial heritage. New

migrants from the former colonies had an ever greater impact on French and other European cities. Communitarianism and identity politics pushed forward the grievances and demands of particular groups within a republic that nevertheless claimed to be 'one and indivisible'. The colonial empire, long relegated to the back of the stage of French public life, in its posthumous apparition became a more important player in the national spectacle.

Colonial history, and the heritage of colonialism, now began to rivet attention. In the public arena, attention increasingly focussed on the Algerian War of 1954 to 1962. This can be explained partly by the horrific civil war that plagued Algeria during the 1990s, with images of extreme violence – perpetrated by both rebels and government forces, according to analysts – that left perhaps 100,000 dead during a decade of turmoil. The new war in Algeria, a civil war, could not but provoke French reflection on an earlier, colonial war. The war of Algerian decolonisation had been a collective trauma for the French pushed into the recesses of memory. Images of violence in Algeria in the 1990s recalled images of Algeria in the 1950s and early 1960s. Eight years of fighting. Images of bombs exploding in the casbah and of the mutilated corpses of soldiers. Two million conscripts sent to serve in a conflict in North Africa, over thirty-two thousand of whom were killed. Algerian deaths of possibly half a million. Bitter conflicts about the war, with intellectuals calling on recruits to refuse to serve, and the diehard Organisation Armée Secrète carrying out scorched-earth tactics so that French-constructed roads and buildings, even the university library in Algiers (which they burned) would not fall into the hands of Algerian nationalists. Violence in the metropole itself: an anti-war demonstration in Paris on 17 October 1961 where dozens of Algerians died at the hands of a police force under the command of Maurice Papon; an attempt later to assassinate the French president. One million *piets-noirs* repatriated to a homeland in which many had never set foot, and several tens of thousands of *harkis*, Algerian Muslims who fought for France, forced into exile in France as well.

For a generation, the French had not wanted to talk about Algeria. What Henry Rousso famously called the 'Vichy syndrome' – refusal to face up to collaboration during the Second World War – had become

an 'Algerian syndrome'.¹⁵ Yet in the late 1990s, new revelations about the practice of torture by French soldiers in Algeria came to light, especially in admissions by a retired general, Paul Aussaresses. What he said to the newspapers was not new.¹⁶ It was, however, the context of Aussaresses' revelations that made them incendiary. They took place in a France wrestling with a highly fraught relationship with Algeria, a France facing questions about the place of the seven or eight million Muslims living there, a France already confronting issues of multiculturalism, as would be revealed by the *affaire du foulard* – the debate on whether Muslim girls ought to be allowed to wear traditional Islamic head-covering in public schools. And, of course, there was the persistence of Jean-Marie Le Pen's racist Front National. Aussaresses' revelations, accompanied and indeed preceded by accounts by Muslim women who had been tortured by the French, were a bombshell. The debate filled various arenas – newspapers were crowded with discussions, academics (such as Benjamin Stora, dean of the historians of the war) investigated the extent of use of torture and the culpability of the state and its officials, Aussaresses was put on trial (though not for torture but for apologising for war crimes). Many leaders, however, came to the defence of a military whose reputation seemed besmirched.¹⁷ Gradually, as Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora entitled a volume, France experienced the perhaps unwished 'end of amnesia' about Algeria.¹⁸

In what might be seen as a delayed response to the Aussaresses affair of 1999 and 2000, a conservative group of *députés* in 2005 put forward a bill that directly related to France's colonial record and the way that it is taught. The Act is now relatively well known, and in the current issue of *History Australia* I have discussed its import. One part of the law paid homage to the French men and women involved in colonialism. More controversial was an article in the Act that mandated the teaching in schools of the 'positive aspects' of colonial history. Unsurprisingly, this caused uproar among historians, who denounced the directive as an unwarranted interference in the exercise of their profession.¹⁹ Reacting strongly, too, were communitarian organizations: returned servicemen and *rapatriés*, a Bordeaux-based group called DiversCités, which promotes a reconciliatory approach

to the colonial past, and the more radical Indigènes de la République, which argues that France still treats its non-white residents as second-class citizens and that current policies perpetuate colonialist racism.²⁰ After much debate in the press and on websites, President Chirac, using a legal technicality, suspended the article earlier this year.²¹

Meanwhile, riots had broken out in the Paris suburbs last December. The law about the teaching of history, of course, was not the precipitant – issues of unemployment, marginalisation, and pent-up frustration provided the taproots. The riots cannot be related to colonialism in a simplistic fashion, but the French-style ‘history wars’ and contemporary social, political and cultural issues of French life cannot each be seen in isolation. The *affaire du foulard*, the Aussaresses affair, the debate on the February 2005 law, are part of diverse efforts to come to terms with the colonial past and its legacy. Studies of colonialism, a generation after decolonisation, have never seemed more pertinent.

What to do with, or about, the colonial past, however, is not an easy task. Memories and history collide. Individual, group and national memories, as Maurice Halbwachs pointed out in his seminal works on collective memories, are different though inextricably tied together. National identity, as the great theorist of nationalism Ernest Renan said in the 1880s, is as much about forgetting as remembering. National policy is not necessarily based on either memory or history.

However, looking at the colonial past, especially those events which left stigmata on the souls of the women and men affected by them, is a task of great moment. This is perhaps especially so in a country such as France where the study of history has contributed a major ingredient in the formation of national identity.²² In France, too, what Pierre Nora termed the *lieux de mémoire* – sacred sites where history is incarnated – are not only cultural monuments but objects of historical study and political action themselves.²³ The Germans have a word for coming to terms with the historical past, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, though that word, a colleague tells me, has fallen out of favour since it means ‘mastering the past’ and suggests that the past, once resolved, can be safely stored away. The Germans now, I gather, talk about ‘working through history (or the past)’, and

that is what their neighbours across the Rhine have to do as well.

For the remainder of this paper, I would like to discuss three vectors along which France, in particular, and other European ex-colonial powers, have tried to work through the colonial past.²⁴ My micro-histories are illustrative rather than encyclopaedic. It goes without saying that every group involved in colonialism has its own memories, histories and strategies for preserving memories and recording histories.

The points I would like to make are straightforward. First, colonialism was integral to the history of France, and the colonised made a major contribution – in war, in sport and in literature, for example – to modern French and Francophone civilization. Secondly, the memory of colonialism is fraught with conflicts: between the state and private groups, between those who colonised and those who were colonised, between residual pride in empire and vehement critiques of the colonial era. And thirdly, working through colonial history, coming to terms with the colonial past, is vital for France, and for other countries, to create their post-colonial future.

The state plays a prime role in commemorative exercises, and over the last six or seven years the state has begun, perhaps instigated by the resuscitation of collective memories, to address the colonial past. Laws are one way of doing so, and three stand out. One piece of legislation, passed in 1999, declared that the Algerian war was, in fact, 'a war'; previously, it was a 'conflict' or 'operations for the maintenance of order'. Everyone called it a war, of course, but even old soldiers complained that they had not received due recognition for their services because, officially, it was not. Naming the war a 'war' gave a parliamentary imprimatur to a clear historical fact. The other law relating to Algeria was the 2005 law that I have already discussed. The third concerned a different aspect of the colonial past, and a varying view of colonial history. On 10 May 2001, parliament unanimously passed a law declaring slavery and slave-trading crimes against humanity.²⁵ The Taubira law helped satisfy the demands of France's black and *métis* populations. Slavery for France and other slave-trading countries has long been considered a source of shame, though France has also trumpeted its abolition of slavery. A century

after emancipation, the remains of the man who promoted abolition, Victor Schoelcher, were transferred to the Panthéon, France's most sacred burial place, and in 1989, so too were the ashes of the revolutionary abolitionist Abbé Grégoire. Much more recently, in 1998, plaques were placed in the Panthéon in memory of black men who led rebellions, Toussaint Louverture and Louis Delgrès.²⁶ The name of one Paris street that had honoured a slave trader was also changed, at the behest of a group of Antillean students, to commemorate a *métis* eighteenth-century Guadeloupean composer, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Meanwhile, slave-trading ports, notably Nantes, organised ground-breaking exhibitions on their role in the enslavement of Africans.²⁷ In 2006, on the anniversary of the passing of the law, France held the first Journée nationale de commémoration de l'abolition de l'esclavage, to which I shall return.

Another way of recollecting and interpreting history is through monuments. As I wrote in *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France*, monuments – statues, memorials, such markers as street names – provided a way of imprinting colonialism on the nation's landscape.²⁸ Though many passers-by would now be unable to identify one or another colonial personage cast in bronze or carved in marble, or even link a decorative motif with colonial history, there has occurred a new vogue of monumentalisation of colonial history. In December 2003, for instance, President Chirac dedicated a monument to French soldiers who died in the Algerian war and elsewhere in North Africa.²⁹ Located on the Quai Branly, near the Eiffel Tower and the new museum of *arts premiers*, it consists of two columns with screens down which the names of soldiers scroll (Figure 1). It is notably uncelebratory – no flag, no inscription to the 'glorious dead' – yet in its form recapitulates and updates commemoration of earlier war dead.

On other Paris streets stand different recent memorials of the war, including some of anti-war protestors. Along the Seine, the municipal council in 2000 controversially placed a plaque in memory of the protestors killed in the 1961 demonstration against the Algerian War (Figure 2). On the Left Bank, the administration of the Mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, in 2004 named a square after Maurice Audin, a brilliant young mathematician, Communist and anti-colonial activist

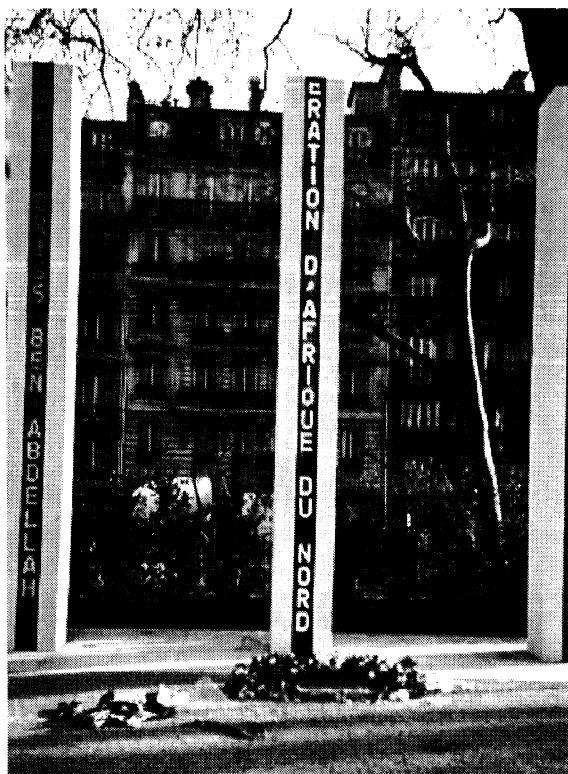


Figure 1: The memorial to the French soldiers who fought in the Algerian War and elsewhere in North Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s, unveiled in Paris by President Chirac in December 2003. Photo by Robert Aldrich.



Figure 2: Sign in Paris square named for an anti-colonial activist during the Algerian War.

who was tortured and killed, certainly at the hands of the French authorities, in Algiers in 1957. Yet in southern France, the National Front-controlled town of Marignane was the scene of a conflict in 2005 when a group of *pieds-noirs* built a monument in honour of several members of the diehard colonialist Organisation Armée Secrète who had been executed after being convicted by French courts for terrorism. Monument-making is therefore not devoid of historical and political conflict, as these examples show – some journalists pointed out that among the names on the Paris Algerian War memorial figure soldiers alleged to have practised torture. Conservatives and *pieds-noirs* protested against the plaque to those who died in 1961 and to the Place Maurice Audin; the Paris-appointed prefect forbade a public ceremony of inauguration of the Marignane monument.³⁰

Those monuments show the conflicting interpretations of various public authorities (and political parties), but also the difficulties of reconciling memory with history. For a war as divisive as that in Algeria, putting up monuments is, not surprisingly, a contested action. Yet monuments, such as recognition of the enslaved and those who fought for their emancipation, provide some recognition, and perhaps reparation, to individuals and groups neglected in commemoration and in history. They also bespeak changing interpretations of history.

Public events, and the formal speeches or informal comments that figure in them, are another vector or perhaps flashpoint for confronting the colonial past. I would like to mention four of them just from this year, proof of an ‘acceleration of memory’ (to use Benjamin Stora’s phrase) about the colonial past.³¹ To these, of course, should be added the opening of the Quai Branly museum.

I begin with soccer. One of the most memorable moments of the World Cup, at least for an historian, occurred when Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the Front National, criticized *les Bleus* for not singing the ‘Marseillaise’ with more vigour, and remarked: ‘I have the feeling that there is a certain basic uneasiness between France and this team. Perhaps the selector exaggerated the proportion of coloured players’. The most eloquent response came from Lilian Thuram, a Guadeloupean member of the team – and let us remember that

Guadeloupeans have been fully-fledged French citizens since 1848:

M. Le Pen must not be aware that there are black, white and brown Frenchmen ... What surprises me is that for years this gentleman has been a candidate in the presidential elections, but he doesn't know French history – that's grave [*il ne connaît pas l'histoire de France, c'est grave*].³²

The French team at the World Cup indeed embodied France's connections with the world, and of migration from the rest of the world to France. Three members were born in former colonies – Cameroon, Congo and Senegal – while five others were born in France of Algerian, Malian, Beninois, Mauritian and Argentine parents, and others came from territories – Guadeloupe and Guyane – attached to France for well over four hundred years.

A second incident concerns slavery. Last year the French president set up an official committee for the memory of slavery and slave-trading,³³ and on 10 May this year President Chirac unveiled a temporary monument in the Luxembourg Gardens of Paris. Called the Forêt des mânes – the forest of the *manes*, the ancestors who have passed to the other side – the installation is a long archway of bamboo trees, from which hang photographic portraits of anonymous people from the West Indies, as well as mobiles, textiles and other objects (Figure 3). The artist, Léa de Saint-Julien, whose father is Guadeloupean and whose mother is Breton, spoke about the Europeans, Africans and Asians who make up the population of the Antilles, and referred to her work as a 'filigree of our history', an 'arch of resilience, of the transcendence of pain through creativity'. President Chirac talked about the 'memory and justice' that must be rendered to the victims of slave trading, and he set out an historical challenge: 'To face up to all of our past. [*Regarder tout notre passé en face*]. This is one of the keys to our national cohesion.... We must look at this past without compromise but also without embarrassment.... We must struggle against ignorance and against forgetting [*il faut lutter contre l'ignorance, contre l'oubli*}'. He announced the setting up of a national centre for study of slavery, and he promised that a permanent monument to the enslaved would be erected.

The third of these 'memorial moments' alludes to soldiers. During the commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the battle of

Verdun, on 25 June, President Chirac unveiled a monument to the Muslim soldiers *morts pour la France*. Some 800,000 colonial soldiers were recruited to fight for France in the Great War. They fought on the Western Front, and 80,000 French colonial soldiers were present in the Dardanelles campaign. At Verdun, the president made specific mention of two African Muslims, Bessi Samaké and Abdou Assouman, and stated: 'All of the provinces of France were present at Verdun. Men of all origins as well. 70,000 soldiers of the former French empire died for France between 1914 and 1918. In this war, under our flag, were Moroccan troopers, Senegalese, Algerian and Tunisian recruits, soldiers from Madagascar and also from Indochina, Asia and Oceania'. When the foundation stone of the Muslim memorial was laid, the rector of the Great Mosque of Paris, Djalil Boubakeur, remarked: 'This is where French Islam was born. It took root in these fields of Verdun, Douaumont and Fleury where Algerian, Tunisian, Senegalese and Moroccan soldiers defended France in the midst of its travail. Today, when many young people in France are questioning their identity, it is important to say to them that their forebears took part in the defence of this country'.³⁴

My final incident took place on 22 June 2006, when the Académie Française held the official reception for the newest of its forty 'immortal' members, Assia Djebar. Born in Algeria, the daughter of a Muslim schoolteacher, Professor Djebar is one of the most highly regarded French-language authors originating from North Africa. Djebar, in her speech to the French Academy, spoke of colonialism: 'For more than half a century, France confronted the irreversible and global movement of decolonisation. In my native land, this brought a heavy toll of crushed human lives, with countless and painful private and public sacrifices on both sides. This was also a greater confrontation between Europe and the Third World'. Djebar continued with a history lesson:

In the era of the French empire, indeed for a hundred years, North Africa – like the rest of Africa under its British, Portuguese and Belgian colonisers – suffered the dispossession of its natural resources, the dislocation of its social structures, and – in the case of Algeria – the exclusion from schools of its two ancestral languages ... Colonialism was felt daily by our ancestors, over at least four generations, as an enormous wound!

A wound that certain people have recently scraped open, with too little thought, and in a derisory electoralist calculation. Yet already in 1950, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, the great poet Aimé Césaire ... showed how colonial wars in Africa and Asia had, as he put it, 'decivilised' and 'ensavaged' Europe.

Djebar went on to pay tribute to her French teachers of language and philosophy, to French Orientalists, to an historian of colonialism, and to the legendary Germaine Tillion, anthropologist of Algeria and firm opponent of the Algerian War.³⁵

Here we have colonial history as lived out in the public forum in France this year, but also areas in which the sons and daughters of the colonised – descendants of the enslaved, the soldiers of the Great War, Lilian Thuram and his soccer team-mates, and writers such as Assia Djebar – have contributed mightily to the French nation, to French identity, to French civilisation. Those examples, and the laws, monuments and gestures that I have discussed, might be multiplied. All emphasise the 'presentness' of the colonial past, the significance of the imperial legacies to both those who were colonised and the colonising, the necessity for investigation of the colonial era, the grappling attempts in a plurality of ways, with multiple perspectives and often unclarified meanings, to work through that past.

Before concluding, I would like to emphasise that this issue of facing up to colonial history is not just a French phenomenon. Many European countries and others besides were involved in imperialist expansion. A book that I am editing on *Age of Empires* includes chapters on the empires of France, Britain, Portugal and Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, the continental Russian and Soviet empire, the transcontinental imperialism of the United States, and the Austro-Hungarian empire.³⁶ In different ways, all of these colonising countries have been confronted with their imperial past, though they have sometimes tried to avoid coming to terms with it. My three vectors of monuments, museums and public gestures are not confined to France. Monuments: the Portuguese put up an un-triumphal arch outside Lisbon to soldiers who fought, as late as 1975, in wars of decolonisation in Africa. The municipal government of Lübeck, in Germany, made a signal revision of one of its sites,

when a statue of a colonial hero was rededicated as a monument to anti-colonialism. The Netherlands' Queen Beatrix in 2002 inaugurated a striking monument to the slaves in Amsterdam.³⁷ For its part, the Italian government, after many, many years of argument, prevarication and postponement, last year returned to Ethiopia the Axum column, a large 1700-year-old obelisk that Mussolini had captured in 1937. Some other projects have not yet come to fruition, but efforts big and small have been proposed – even to the renaming of the Beatles' famous 'Penny Lane' because Mr Penny was a slave-trader.

Museums have similarly been a site for reviewing the colonial past.³⁸ The French have created the Musée du Quai Branly to house the ethnographic exhibits of the Musée de l'Homme and the entire collection of the old Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, which began life in 1931 as the Musée Colonial – the building will become, somewhat ironically, a museum of immigration.³⁹ In 2002 the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum opened in Bristol, one of the major ports of the British slave trade. Some wondered whether Britain needed such a museum, but the Bristol institution provides a perspective on empire that is often in the background, though seldom in the foreground, of such other establishments as the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Pitt-Rivers Museum. In the Netherlands, a colonial museum opened soon after the First World War, the Tropenmuseum, and by the 1970s it had banished any exhibition of Holland's colonial past from its vast ethnographic galleries; however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Tropenmuseum opened new, and innovative, galleries on colonial history. The Africa Museum in Tervuren, outside Brussels, a grandiose museum established by the megalomaniac Leopold II, held a large retrospective on the Belgian Congo in 2005. It led to heated reactions on websites and in the press, including a debate between Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost*, and the organiser of the Tervuren exhibition.⁴⁰ Next year, the French will open a colonial museum in Marseille, the Mémorial national de l'Outre-Mer, which has similarly sparked debate, and it will be interesting to see how that museum presents the history of empire to a city that proudly claimed to be 'gateway to the East' and now

houses one of the largest Maghrebin and black African populations in France.⁴¹

As these brief examples of monuments and museums show, monumentalising and displaying colonial history is not easy, but doing so has been on the agenda. Public and political gestures in various countries have also played a role in working through colonialism. I will cite a single example. In 2004, the German ambassador to Namibia spoke about the massacre of the Herero people in what was then German South-West Africa; from 1904 to 1907, all but about 15,000 of a population of between 50,000 and 100,000 Herero people were killed, or died of famine and thirst after being herded into the Kalahari desert; the remainder were forced into slave labour for German entrepreneurs. Speaking at the tomb of the leader of a Herero rebellion, the ambassador expressed 'profound regrets' and spoke of the need to 'render to the victims and their descendants the dignity and honour that had been stolen from them'.⁴² Later in the year, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, the German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, visited Namibia and, to a stunned audience – including a Herero leader who had prepared a speech remonstrating against the Germans – she stated: 'The oppressors – blinded by colonial fervour – became agents of violence, discrimination, racism and annihilation in Germany's name. I ask you to forgive our trespasses and our guilt'. She subsequently commented: 'I want to make it quite clear that everything I said in my speech was an apology for crimes committed in Germany's name'.⁴³ This was an unprecedented – and still unparalleled – action.

The various public gestures, of course, are not innocent. Acknowledgement of colonial exactions earns political capital, and it can be credited in support of the South and anti-globalisation. It can also earn electoralist points among ethnic populations. (Denial of such excesses or avoidance of discussion, contrariwise, garners support from those worried about dangers to canonical national identities.) There is undoubtedly a note of self-righteousness in confessing to colonialist wrongs, with hope for redemptive forgiveness – the prayerful formulations of the German minister in Namibia are proof. In other cases, orations are carefully worded to avoid direct

acknowledgement of a country's culpability; such has been the case in President Chirac's carefully worded speeches, which avoid specific admission of French responsibility for colonialist exactions and do not apologise for colonial wrong-doings.

Fine words may not reparation or reconciliation make, especially with the tragic state of many former colonies and peoples still suffering from excruciating poverty, endemic illness, high levels of illiteracy and unfair terms of trade. Should the individual perpetrators of exactions be brought to justice, pardoned or forgotten? Do these gestures heal wounds and, indeed, should these wounds be entirely healed or rather allowed to remain painful scars of an injured past? These questions have been posed about the Shoah, and they are relevant, too, to colonialism. There is no consensus. South Africa gained fame for its cathartic Truth and Reconciliation Commission,⁴⁴ and a Canadian scholar in 2005 proposed a 'Truth Commission for Africa', whose purpose, she said, 'would be to contribute to reconciliation between Africa and the west by agreeing on a narrative "truth" about historic relations between these regions. This truth would constitute one aspect of western reparations to Africa'.⁴⁵ The Herero have mounted lawsuits to gain compensation for their ill treatment, and the International Tribunal in The Hague is prosecuting Serbian imperialists. Yet the East Timorese government has formally abjured both a 'truth commission' and a concerted effort to bring Indonesians and their militia supporters to trial.⁴⁶ Issues of judicial examination and prosecution, confession and cross-examination, reparations and compensation are of burning relevance, though they are outside the scope of this talk. All of this – laws and commissions, monuments, museums and political gestures – is good material for study and analysis, however, and that indeed is one of my current projects.⁴⁷

To conclude, I would like to turn to creative literature, perhaps the most powerful way in which a people faces its past – I am reminded of an anecdote about André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture under de Gaulle (who, it must be said, was briefly gaoled for souveniring sculptures from Angkor Wat in the 1930s). When faced with a pile of dreary official reports, Malraux is said to have

responded: 'But what do poets say about it all? [*Mais qu'en disent les poètes?*']'. I would like to finish with a poet, whose words, written during the colonial era, help to provide understanding of that period, and also voice words of reconciliation. It is also appropriate to invoke him because this year marks the centenary of his birth.

Léopold Sédar Senghor was born in Joal on the Atlantic coast of Africa, son of a well-to-do merchant, a Christian. Senghor was sent to the elite Lycée Louis le Grand in Paris, where he studied Greek and Latin, graduated from the Sorbonne, and passed the *agrégation*, the highest examination for university teachers, receiving his accreditation in grammar. In the 1930s, Senghor was part of the diasporic black intelligentsia in Paris, along with Aimé Césaire, René Maran, Léon-Gontran Damas and the Nardal sisters, and he became a leading poet of his generation and a father of *Négritude*, the literary movement that valorised Africa's cultural heritage. A socialist, Senghor at that time hoped for a political metamorphosis in which African culture might attain *droit de cité* even within the constraints of French colonialism, and in the 1930s he was granted French citizenship.⁴⁸ After the Second World War, he was elected to the French parliament and briefly served as a minister in the 1950s, while coming to the forefront of the West African nationalist movement. When Senegal gained independence in 1960, Senghor was elected president, a position he held until his retirement twenty years later. An enormously esteemed political and cultural statesman – the first black man elected to the Académie Française and one of the originators of 'Francophonie' – Senghor stands as an outstanding figure of the twentieth century.⁴⁹

Senghor, lyrically evoking his African history and culture, but deeply imbued with French history, brings together the cultures of the colonised and the colonising. Senghor did not mince words in denouncing the 'barbarity of the civilised' [*barbarie des civilisés*]. One stanza of his 'Prière pour la paix' provides a searing critique of the colonialists who had taken African land and livelihood, but it also recalled a France that had twice during Senghor's lifetime suffered invasion, and it paid tribute to a France that had emancipated the slaves, brought the Gospel to the world and opened Senghor's own eyes to wider horizons.⁵⁰

Senghor's two uncles were killed fighting for France in the First World War. When Fréjus, the main garrison town for the colonial troops, in 1994 erected a monument to the black troops who fought in the Great War, and then played a key role in liberating Provence in the Second World War, the mayor asked Senghor to compose an inscription for the statuary group showing white and black *poilus*. Senghor wrote: 'Passer-by, they fell, fraternally united, so that you can remain French [*Passant, / ils sont tombés / fraternellement unis / pour que tu restes / Français*]'.

The words echoed a collection of poems, *Hosties noires*, written in honour of the African soldiers, but also a poem from Senghor's first collection, *Chants d'ombre*, published in 1945. 'In Memoriam', from that book, is a eulogy for soldiers, but soldiers who are buried in France, come from the Siné-Saloum of West Africa to fight near the River Seine. It reads in part:

O Morts, qui avez toujours refusé de mourir, qui avez su résister à la
Mort
Jusqu'en Siné jusqu'en Seine, et dans mes veines fragiles, mon sang
irréductible
Protégez mes rêves comme vous avez fait vos fils, les migrants aux
jambes minces.
O Morts! Défendez les toits de Paris dans la brume dominicale
Les toits qui protègent mes morts.⁵¹

[Oh, you dead, you who have always refused to die, who have known
how to resist Death,
Even in the Siné and unto the Seine, and into the unstaunchable blood
of my fragile veins,
Protect my dreams as you have your sons, these migrants on slender
legs.
O you Dead! Safeguard the roofs of Paris in the Sunday fog
Those roofs that protect my dead.]

How not to think of that poem when President Chirac unveiled the memorial at Verdun? And one might think of another of Senghor's poems when looking at Lilian Thuram and his soccer team, or seeing pictures of the Paris suburbs. The poem, also written in the colonial era, is full of promise for post-colonial France. The sixth stanza of 'A l'Appel de la race de Saba' paints a picture of Africans on the

battlefield but with a message of unification:

Car nous sommes là tous réunis, divers de teint – il y en a qui sont
couleur de café grillé, d'autres bananes d'or et d'autres terre des
rizières
Divers de traits de costume de langue; mais au fond des yeux la même
1313 mélopée de souffrance à l'ombre des longs cils fiévreux
Le Cafre le Kabyle le Somali le Maure, le Fân le Fôn le Bambara le Bobo
le Mandiago
Le nomade le mineur le prestataire, le paysan et l'artisan le boursier et
le tirailleur
Et tous les travailleurs blancs dans la lutte fraternelle
Voici le mineur des Asturies le docker de Liverpool le Juif chassé
d'Allemagne, et Dupont et Dupuis et tous les gars de Saint-Denis.⁵²

[Because we are brought here together, though different in hue – some
are the colour of roasted coffee, some of golden bananas, some of
the soil of the rice paddies
Different in features in clothing in language; but from deep in the eyes
under the shadows of feverish lashes echoes the same chant of
suffering
The Kaffir the Kabyle the Somali the Moor the Fante the Fon the
Bambara the Bobo the Mandiago
The nomad the miner the forced labourer the peasant the artisan
the broker and the soldier
And all the white workers in a fraternal struggle
Here are the Asturian miner the Liverpool docker the Jew chased from
Germany and the Dupont and Dupuis and all the fellows
from Saint-Denis.]

In this representation of soldiers in the war we see, too, their heirs, the men and women of our own nations. There is the response to those who do not know the history of France. And there, too, are perhaps lessons for other countries touched by colonialism.

Notes

- 1 See D. R. V. Wood, *Stephen Henry Roberts, Historian and Vice-Chancellor: A Short Biography*, Sydney, 1986, and D. M. Schreuder, 'A "Second Foundation": S. H. Roberts as Challis Professor 1929–47', in Barbara Caine *et al.*, eds, *History at Sydney, 1891–1991: Centenary Reflections*, Sydney,

- 1992.
- 2 Stephen H. Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy (1870–1925)*, London, 1929, p.v.
 - 3 Richard Cobb, *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History*, Oxford, 1969.
 - 4 Roberts, p. 679.
 - 5 See, among other works, Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris*, Cambridge, Mass., 2000, and my 'Le Guide de l'Exposition coloniale et l'idéologie coloniale de l'entre-deux-guerres', in Gilles Chabaud *et al.* eds, *Les Guides imprimés du XVIe au XXe siècle: Villes, paysages, voyages*, Paris, 2000, pp. 607–18.
 - 6 Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, London, 1996.
 - 7 The 'pacto de olvido' was the tacit silence that reigned in Spain about the Franco regime after the death of Franco and the transition to democracy in 1975.
 - 8 Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1940*, London, 1990, and *France and the South Pacific since 1940*, London, 1993.
 - 9 Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer*, Cambridge, 1992, and *The Last Colonies*, Cambridge, 1998.
 - 10 Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Les Confettis de l'empire*, Paris, 1976.
 - 11 On the new French colonial history, see my review essays 'Imperial *mise en valeur* and *mise en scène*: Recent Works on French Colonialism', *The Historical Journal* 45.4 (2002): 917–36, and 'Abroad and Home: Colonial Culture in France', *Modern and Contemporary France* 14.2 (2006): 235–42.
 - 12 See, e.g., Chris Bongie, 'A Street Named Bissette: Nostalgia, Memory, and the *Cent-Cinquantième* of the Abolition of Slavery in Martinique (1848–1998)', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 11.2 (2001): 215–57, and Nelly Schmidt, 'Commémoration, histoire et historiographie. A propos du 150^e anniversaire de l'abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises', *Ethnologie française* 29.3 (1999): 453–60.
 - 13 Gert J. Oostindië, 'Squaring the Circle: Commemorating the VOC after 400 years', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 159 (2001): 135–61; Leonard Blussé, 'Four Hundred Years On: The Public Commemoration of the Founding of the VOC in 2002', *Itinerario* 27.1 (2003): 79–91.
 - 14 See Alain Ruscio and Serge Tignères, *Dien Bien Phu, myths et réalités, 1954–2004: Cinquante ans de passions françaises*, Paris, 2005.
 - 15 Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, Cambridge, Mass., 1991 [published in France in 1987].
 - 16 Torture by the French had been denounced during the war by Algerians

and by the French, notably in a key text by Henri Alleg, *La Question*, Paris, 1958.

- 17 Neil MacMaster, 'The Torture Controversy (1998-2002): Towards a "New History" of the Algerian War?', *Modern and Contemporary France* 10.4 (2002): 449–60.
- 18 Mohammed Harbi and Benjamin Stora eds, *La Guerre d'Algérie, 1954–2004: la fin de l'amnésie*, Paris, 2004, one of the most comprehensive of a now considerable number of books and articles on the Algerian war in French memory. In English, see, e.g., Richard L. Derderian, *North Africans in Contemporary France: Becoming Visible*, London, 2004, ch.7, and Benjamin Stora, 'The "Southern" World of the *Pieds Noirs*: References to and Representations of Europeans in Colonial Algeria', in Caroline Elkins and Susan Pederson, eds, *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 2005, pp.225–41.
- 19 Many objected to an imperative seemingly favouring one interpretation, but there was also reaction against the notion that the legislature might intervene in this way in any similar pedagogical matter. Some called for other legal provisions on historical issues to be repealed, notably the law that declares denial of the Holocaust a crime because it, too, was argued to curb freedom of public expression; others demanded still greater intervention by parliament, with the proposal, for instance, that denial of the Armenian genocide during the First World War be made a criminal offence. For debates on this and other issues that illustrate the public role of historians, see the website of the Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l'histoire (<http://cvuh.free.fr/>) and the excellent *dossiers* on the website of the Ligue des droits de l'homme of Toulon (<http://www.ldh-toulon.net/>).
- 20 See the websites of DiversCités (<http://www.diverscites.org/>) and the Indigènes de la République (<http://www.indigenes.org/>).
- 21 Robert Aldrich, 'Colonial Past, Post-Colonial Present: History Wars French-Style', *History Australia* 3.1 (June 2006).
- 22 See Sarah Blowen, Marion Demossier and Jeanine Picard (eds), *Recollections of France: Memories, Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France*, Oxford, 2000. The importance of historical memory is underlined by Rod Kedward (in a chapter on 'Memory and Identity, 1990s–2000s') in his recent *La Vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900*, London, 2005.
- 23 Pierre Nora, ed., *Les Lieux de mémoire*, Paris, 1984–1992.
- 24 The concept of 'vectors' has been used notably by Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe*, Oxford, 1999.
- 25 The relevant article reads: 'La République française reconnaît que la traite noire transatlantique ainsi que la traite dans l'océan Indien d'une part, et l'esclavage d'autre part, perpétré à partir du XVe siècle, aux

Amériques et aux Caraïbes, dans l'océan Indien et en Europe contre les populations africaines, amérindiennes, malgaches et indiennes constituent un crime contre l'humanité'.

- 26 Laurent Dubois, 'Haunting Delgrès', *Radical History Review* 78 (2000): 166–77.
- 27 The issue of slavery continues to create historiographical controversy: last year, Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau was sued for apologising for a crime against humanity after publishing *Les Traités négrières: Essai d'histoire globale*, Paris, 2004, which suggested the complicity of Africans in the slave trade. Many fellow academic historians jumped to his defence. Articles concerning the case and historians' responses appear on the website of the Société française d'histoire d'Outre-Mer (incidentally, a fine place for discussion of recent publications and historiographical issues) (<http://sfhom.free.fr/>).
- 28 Robert Aldrich, *Vestiges of the Colonial Empire in France: Monuments, Museums and Colonial Memories*, London, 2005; on monuments in the former colonies, see the dossier I edited, 'Sites et moments de mémoire', in *Outre-Mers: Revue d'histoire* 350–351 (2006): 5–192. On other European countries' colonial monuments, see Ulrich van der Heyden and Joachim Zeller, *Kolonial Metropole Berlin: Eine Spurensuche*, Berlin, 2002; Ewald Vanvugt, *De maagd en de soldaat: Koloniale monumenten in Amsterdam en elders*, Amsterdam, 1998; Krystyna von Henneberg, 'Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy', *History and Memory* 16.1 (2004): 37–85; Yves Léonard, 'Le Portugal et ses "sentinelles de pierre": L'exposition du monde portugais en 1940', *Vingtième siècle* 62 (1999): 27–37; Juan José Martín González, *El Monumento conmemorativo en España, 1875–1975*, Valladolid, 1996.
- 29 President Chirac has shown considerable interest in 'monumentalising' the past. He previously unveiled several other sites connected to the Algerian War – including a plaque at the Invalides in honour of the *harkis* who fought for France – but has also monumentalised other historical events. In 1998, for instance, Chirac unveiled a memorial in the Invalides to victims of terrorism. Among other recent memorials in Paris is a 'Mur des noms', in memory of deported Jews, inaugurated in January 2005.
- 30 The conflict about the Marignane site is documented on the website of the Toulon section of the Lignes des droits de l'homme (see n.20).
- 31 Benjamin Stora, '1999–2003, guerre d'Algérie, les accélérations de la mémoire', in Harbi and Stora, eds, pp.501–14.
- 32 *Le Monde*, 1 July 2006.
- 33 The report of the Comité pour la mémoire de l'esclavage, and various documents concerning their activities, can be accessed on their website

(<http://www.comite-memoire-esclavage.fr/>).

- 34 Quoted in *Le Monde*, 23 June 2006; see also *Le Monde*, 21 February 2006.
- 35 'Réception de Mme Assia Djebar: Discours prononcé dans la séance publique, le jeudi 22 juin 2006', website of the Académie Française (<http://www.academie-francaise.fr/>).
- 36 Robert Aldrich, ed., *Age of Empires*, London, forthcoming in 2007.
- 37 Gert Oostindië, ed., *Facing up to the Past: Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*, Kingston, Jamaica, 2001.
- 38 See Dominique Taffin, ed., *Du Musée colonial aux musées des cultures du monde*, Paris, 2000.
- 39 On the rather contested issue of such a museum, see the dossier 'Vers un lieu de mémoire de l'immigration', *Hommes & Migrations* 1247 (2004): 1–66.
- 40 See the review by Adam Hochschild, 'In the Heart of Darkness', in the *New York Review of Books*, 6 October 2005, and the reply by Jean-Luc Vellut in the issue of 12 January 2006. See also the internet site of the International Action for Liberation, with its critical appraisal of the exhibition: (<http://www.ptb.be/scripts/article.phtml?section=A1AAAGBB&obid=27195&theme=2005>).
- 41 See my 'Le Musée colonial impossible', in Pascal Blanchard, Sandrine Lemaire and Nicolas Bancel, *Culture post-coloniale*, Paris, forthcoming.
- 42 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 2003.
- 43 *Le Monde*, 21 August 2004.
- 44 And also for the way in which it has addressed the issues of colonialism and apartheid in museum displays; see Annie E. Coombes, *Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa*, Durham, N.C., 2003.
- 45 Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, 'A Truth Commission for Africa?', *International Journal* 60. 4 (2005): 999–1016.
- 46 'East Timor – Justice Denied', on 'Foreign Correspondent', ABC TV, 16 May 2006.
- 47 This research examines the ways in which France, and other European countries, especially Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal, have been working through their colonial past in recent years; if possible, I would also like to compare the views in the former colonial powers with those in the formerly colonised countries, and also look at some non-European colonial powers – the issue of the Yasukuni memorial in Japan is particularly interesting. Laws, public gestures, monuments and memorials, museum exhibitions, historical publications, the activities of private associations and public institutions, and cultural expressions (art, literature, cinema) provide some possible vectors for such an enquiry, and issues of official apologies, restitution of artefacts, and reparations or compensation for past actions all provide material for discussion. Such issues relate pertinently to

Australia, as seen in the 'history wars' of the past few years, and the ways that they have been fought in scholarship, the press and museums; see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne, 2003.

- 48 On this point, see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars*, Chicago, 2005.
- 49 See Janet G. Vaillant, *Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, Cambridge, Mass., 1990.
- 50 Léopold Sedar Senghor, 'Prière pour la paix', 1945, from *Hosties noires*, 1948, in *Oeuvres poétiques*, pp.92–95; quotations from pp.93 and 95. Translations of Senghor's poems are my own.
- 51 'In Memoriam', from *Chants d'ombre*, 1945, p.11.
- 52 'Al' Appel de la race de Saba', 1936, from *Hosties noires*, pp.57–62; quotation from p.61.